WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 37, Number 1, Fall 2013

When the Writing Requirements Went Away: An Institutional Case Study of Twenty Years of Decentralization/Abolition

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Abstract

While composition scholars have long discussed the theoretical benefits of replacing the traditional first-year composition model with "decentralized" writing instruction, few have examined the long-term consequences of decentralization for writing programs and the undergraduate students they serve. This article presents the story of writing instruction at one public urban university over nearly two decades of decentralization. In an institutional case study that draws on the administrative and teaching experiences of several writing program administrators, as well as a range of quantitative and qualitative assessment data collected since the early 2000s, we discuss the promises, the profits, and the pitfalls of decentralization as it played out at our university. In our context, widely varying writing abilities among incoming students met insufficient institutional resources and a lack of clear programmatic responsibility for students' writing development, resulting in broad inconsistency in both the writing instruction that undergraduates received and their writing abilities by the time they reached upper-division courses. In recent years, our university has attempted to address these issues in a variety of ways. Here, we share our lessons learned (too often the hard way), and offer suggestions for other writing programs considering decentralization in their own institutional contexts.

In 1991 Sharon Crowley provocatively called for the abolition of required composition courses. Her manifesto set off a vigorous debate in rhetoric and composition circles that continued through the mid-2000s—discussions that continue to crop up on the WPA-L listserv, at conferences, and elsewhere. Even as the so-called "New Abolitionist" debate raged (Brannon; Connors; Goggin and Miller; Miller), reformers were also proposing vari-

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ous models for decentralizing writing, including linked courses, writing in the disciplines, first-year seminars, and writing repositioned as part of general education reform (Bamberg). Change was in the air, and these ideas were advanced to great fanfare; indeed, judging from persistent posts on the WPA-Listserv, such models are still being discussed at many institutions, although members of the WPA community have become considerably more wary of potential problems (for an online bibliography on the issue see Howard). But how do decentralized programs fare long term? And what are the difficulties and benefits—both expected and unexpected—that emerge along with way? Our article provides answers to these questions by offering a case study, including both quantitative and qualitative assessments of student writing abilities,[1] of how one such program has played out over nearly two decades at Portland State University, a public university serving a large metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest.

In 1994, with compositionists pondering abolition and many institutions decentralizing their writing offerings, our institution embarked on its own experiment in decentralization. As part of a broader program of general education reform, the University ended its traditional two-term first-year composition requirement, opting instead for a more integrated four-year interdisciplinary curriculum housed within its own unit, "University Studies." When Sherrie Gradin joined the faculty that same year, decentralization was already "a done deal" (55). Three years later, she published a rather harried article in *WPA* about her experiences as a writing program administrator under this new curriculum, an essay that exudes frustration with both her own role and the position of writing in the early years of the University Studies program.

Sherrie identifies several areas of administrative difficulty at the outset of decentralization, namely: gaining faculty cooperation for writing instruction and assessment; securing and maintaining funding for writing instruction once it is dispersed across programs and units; and addressing the needs of staff as both TA and contingent and fixed-term faculty roles become increasingly heterogeneous. In her "Post Script" to the article, dated January 1998, Sherrie cites continued problems with funding, placement, and assessment under the new curriculum, but expresses a tentative optimism about the changes that decentralization appeared to be fostering in relationships between literature and composition faculty within the English department, as well as the growing interest in composition theory among disciplinary faculty now charged with writing instruction. Recognizing that the program was still fairly new, she concludes that the "story" of decentralized writing instruction at Portland State "is still being written" (66).

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As we approach the end of our second decade under a decentralized writing curriculum, it is an opportune moment to pick up the story where Sherrie left off. Twenty years ago, decentralized writing programs were heralded as an innovative approach to writing instruction. To date, however, there has been little discussion of how such curricula play out over time: whether they live up to their early promise, what kinds of problems they encounter over the long run, and how students fare as these curricula go from pilots and reform initiatives to established, mature programs. In following up on Sherrie's early report, we are helping to fill that gap in the literature. What we offer, then, is not a position on the abolition and decentralization debates, but rather, as Kevin Brooks has called for, a detailed account of the process of reform at one institution (38–40).

As co-authors, each of us holds a different piece of this story. Duncan Carter, WPA at Portland State from 1987 to 1993, and then Associate Dean for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences from 1999 to 2010, was an important advocate for writing during the development of the University Studies curriculum in the early 1990s. First, he describes the process by which the dismantling of first-year composition took place, and the hopes that composition faculty had for decentralization as a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) initiative. Christie Toth, a graduate student in English from 2006 through 2008, taught in both Writing Intensive (WIC) and University Studies courses while working with Duncan and Hildy on an institution-wide assessment of upper-level student writing. Christie wrote her master's thesis on Portland State's decentralized writing curriculum, and after graduating, stayed on as a staff researcher, where she continued to work on writing assessment and placement until she left to pursue a PhD in 2009. She presents a portrait of student writing experiences at Portland State based on a range of assessment data and her thesis research. Finally, Hildy Miller took over the WPA position from Sherrie in 2000, and served in that position until stepping down to develop the department's graduate-level rhetoric and composition offerings in 2008. She describes her experiences with the challenges of administering a decentralized writing program—one that, in her estimation, turned into an experiment in abolition—and offers suggestions for other institutions contemplating similar curricular reforms.

Duncan's Story: Our View in 1994

When we launched University Studies in 1994, our point of view was one of "guarded optimism." First, the optimism. The general education program in place prior to our reform efforts was archaic. It featured a two-term writing requirement, a one-term health and physical education requirement, and the typical "distribution requirements": sixteen credits each in the sciences, the social sciences, and arts and letters. If one asked, "Who benefits from such an arrangement?" the answer would have to be "the departments," who could count on a steady flow of tourists passing through in order to check off distribution requirements. It is hard to argue that the students themselves benefited. They experienced general education as a kind of incoherent smorgasbord: "Here, we'll give you one dollop of Geology 101 and one dollop of Political Science 101, and you figure out how they fit together." Nor was there any assurance that students graduated with the knowledge and skills we might reasonably expect of a college graduate.

The Provost tasked a "General Education Working Group" with studying this problem and making recommendations for change. From the outset, the Working Group sought something more integrative. They also wanted to improve student retention. Because Portland State is an urban campus with large numbers of part-time students, older students, and community college transfers, there weren't many centripetal forces pulling students together. If students were going to form a sense of community, the reasoning went, it would have to happen within the curriculum itself. Finally, the Working Group wanted to capitalize on our urban location by building community engagement into the general education requirement.

What the Working Group ultimately proposed was a radically new general education curriculum—University Studies—which began with the year-long, thematically focused FRINQ course. These interdisciplinary courses were built around four goals: critical thinking, ethics, diversity, and communication. This last goal focused primarily on writing, but also included oral, visual, and numerical communication skills. The pedagogy would be student-centered, with breakout sessions led by undergraduate student "mentors," and would make frequent use of technology. These FRINQ courses were intentionally broad in their framing, with titles like "On Democracy," "Ways of Knowing," and "Design and Society."

The four goals of University Studies and the emphasis on interdisciplinarity would extend through the entire undergraduate curriculum. Sophomores were to take three SINQ courses, each on a different theme, taught by faculty who were supported by graduate student mentors teaching additional weekly breakout sessions. These SINQ courses served as the gateway to thematically focused clusters of courses from different disciplines at the junior and senior level. So-called "Upper-Division Clusters" included courses grouped around themes such as "Environmental Sustainability," "Sexualities," "Professions and Power," and "Understanding Communities." Finally, seniors would complete a two-term, six credit-hour Capstone

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course, which would be interdisciplinary and community-based. Importantly, all forty-five credit hours of the University Studies program, from freshman inquiry to senior capstone, would be "writing intensive."

In one fell swoop, this reform addressed at least four problems inherent in the old general education model. One, it permitted students to experience general education in an integrated, rather than fragmentary, fashion. Two, it addressed the problem of retention by forming learning communities. Three, it rested on four clearly articulated learning outcomes. Four, it featured forty-five credit hours of writing intensive courses. And, to top it all off, the new curriculum challenged students to deploy their knowledge and skills to, as our motto has it, "serve the city."

A heady mix. A bold experiment. In fact, University Studies *has* had an impact on retention (although not as much as hoped). Furthermore, thanks to the Capstone program, Portland State now has more than 400 partnerships with area schools, businesses, government agencies, and non-governmental agencies, and sends more than 8,000 students a year into the community. Finally, the University Studies program has put this institution on the national map. It has attracted external funding and curious visitors from all over the country. For the last seven years, *US News and World Report* has cited Portland State's general education curriculum under the section "Academic Programs to Look for," listing it as among the nation's best in five categories: first-year experiences, internships, learning communities, senior capstone, and service learning. It would seem we're doing something right.

But what happens to writing instruction in this brave new world? Even as we were designing the new curriculum, I wondered how this could be an improvement if it meant nonspecialists teaching writing. What kind of preparation or training would equip disciplinary faculty to be effective teachers of writing? Given that service on an interdisciplinary team would, by itself, push faculty outside their comfort zone, how much time or thought would they give to writing, even if we trained them? Were we taking a giant step backward, to some kind of current-traditional, grammar-across-the-curriculum program? What provisions would be made for at-risk students? Would our writing center end up serving a safety net function, and be overrun by struggling students whose instructors and mentors did not know how to respond to their writing? Were we dealing a fatal blow to our efforts to professionalize writing instruction?

Then, too, there were the practical issues facing the English Department. Even though the department chair served on the Working Group that designed the new program, University Studies threatened the department in several ways. What would happen to our budget when we handed

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our writing requirements over to this ill-defined juggernaut? What would happen to our curriculum? What would happen to the army of instructors and TAs who taught writing? Losing most—even some—of our TAs would undercut English graduate programs, literature and composition alike. And the greatest paradox of them all, or at least so it seemed to me in 1993, was that over there in University Studies we would have nonspecialists teaching writing, while over here in the English Department we would have all these veteran writing instructors sitting idle—or worse, unemployed.

We had some clues that there would be problems. When my department chair, a member of the Working Group that designed the new program, showed me an early draft of the overarching learning goals for the program, writing was listed under "Communication" but not under "Critical Thinking." To his credit, he sensed something was amiss. He was right: The draft goals embodied an instrumental view of writing, writing as a mere conveyor belt for information that was discovered somewhere else, rather than any sense that writing is itself an act of discovery, an understanding that is a staple of post-process composition theory. But the Working Group responded to our cries of alarm, and we got this problem fixed—at least temporarily.

Then in the fall of 1993, one year before the new program was to be implemented, the Working Group staged a daylong faculty symposium to solicit reactions and criticism to the proposed program. The Working Group responded to the ideas generated by the symposium in a document entitled "General Education Working Group: Revisions and Clarifications" (October 1993). This document was seventeen pages long, four of them devoted to writing, and included several promises—in retrospect we should have seen them as aspirations—from the Working Group:

1. "Through our discussion we came to understand writing as integral to learning as well as to the communication of what has been learned." (This addressed the question of how writing fit into the University Studies goals.)
2. "Writing and other forms of communication will become integrated into and part of the subject matter focused upon by different general education courses through *all four years* of the program."
3. There will be mandatory assessment and, for at-risk students, mandatory placement in writing courses at the same time as they are participating in FRINQ.
4. "Faculty offering general education courses [as well as peer mentors] will be required to complete training on communication

across-the-curriculum which will have writing as the central theme."

5. "Guidelines will be developed outlining the expectations for communications experiences for courses at different levels of the program."
6. Some writing faculty would be assigned to the University Studies program as "writing consultants" to assist faculty in various ways, including the design of writing assignments. Given the Balkanized nature of writing instruction in the program, there would be some form of writing proficiency measure, probably in the junior year.
7. "Several have expressed concerns that because the proposed program ends the two course writing requirements . . . [they fear] there will be a decreased emphasis on writing . . . [but we have sought] to develop a program which will substantially increase student writing over what is already required."

Such were the promises. They went a long way toward allaying the fears my colleagues and I had. If I seem too easily persuaded, it is probably because I wrote most of these promises myself. But at least we got them in writing, and as we all know, nothing is real if it isn't in writing. Of course, some of the things that *are* in writing are not real, either, but I leave that part of the story for Hildy.

To summarize: There was a list of promises. There was the willingness of the Working Group to talk with us, to adapt and change in response to our recommendations. And finally there was the promise of forty-five credit hours of integrated writing-intensive courses, versus the six isolated hours of writing requirements they would replace. How could this not be an improvement?

As Sherrie details in her 1997 article, the first several years of the University Studies program turned out to be a mixed bag for writing. Amazingly, we did not lose many instructors or TAs: we simply found new roles for them. But there were early indicators that the Working Group's good intentions would not be enough. We did do assessment and placement, but it did not include all incoming students and the placement became "recommended" rather than mandatory. Sherrie and I did WPA grant-funded research on the kind and quality of writing instruction taking place in FRINQ, and concluded that, to our delight, there was a good deal of writing to learn, but to our dismay, not much learning to write, both in terms of seeing papers through multiple drafts to a level of polish, and in terms of metacognition. Worse still, those teaching FRINQ seemed to keep us at

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arm's length. The last thing they wanted was writing specialists critiquing their every move. We had become "outsiders."

By two years into the program, our guarded optimism was beginning to wear a little thin—we became more guarded, and less optimistic. Of course the program would evolve, but would the promises be honored, or would the program evolve away from solid instruction in writing? Would writing instruction cease to be a low-status enclave, or would its low status simply follow it into this new program? We very much wanted this bold experiment to work, but by the time Sherrie left in 2000, we had enough doubts that her successor Hildy and I decided to embark on an assessment of our students' writing experiences, which forms the basis of this institutional case study. This, we hoped, would give us a better sense of how well students were being served by Portland State's decentralized composition curriculum. Two years in, we were fortunate to be able to add Christie, a graduate student at the time, to our team.

Christie's Story: Assessing Decentralization

Since 2007, I have worked with Duncan and Hildy, as well as assessment staff in University Studies and the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP), on several different projects designed to measure the impact of Portland State's undergraduate curriculum on students' writing abilities. As it turns out, however, assessing the effectiveness of our writing curriculum is a remarkably challenging task. Although the university has opted to decentralize writing instruction, the institution's mission, student demographics, and role in a regional transfer network with area community colleges mean that the actual introductory writing experiences of its students are heterogeneous to a degree that seems almost to defy measurement.

As a diverse urban campus with an access mission, Portland State admits students with widely varying levels of preparation for college-level coursework, and it does so at all levels of its undergraduate curriculum. Despite recent efforts to tighten standards, the university still has relatively open admissions requirements for first-year students, which means that many enter with gaps in their academic preparation; at the same time, Portland State's appealing urban location and well-known sustainability programs also attract high-achieving students from across the country. Furthermore, we admit more transfer students than any other university in the state—over 60% of our students transfer in from other institutions, the majority from community colleges. Thus, while students who enroll as freshmen experience our decentralized writing curriculum from day one, our many community college transfer students come to us from the more traditional

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introductory writing curriculum mandated by statewide transfer degree requirements. Trying to assess the cumulative impact of our decentralized writing curriculum is therefore complicated by the fact that students have experienced a bewildering array of curricular pathways, with varying levels of exposure to both direct and decentralized writing instruction in multiple institutional contexts.

These complexities led us to adopt a variety of qualitative and quantitative assessments as we have sought to better understand our students' writing experiences and outcomes. Such measures included faculty and student surveys, student interviews, and an evaluation of student writing samples from upper-division courses across the disciplines. Taken together, the results of these studies suggest the following findings:

1. The amount and kinds of writing instruction that students receive in their lower-division University Studies courses are very inconsistent, varying widely from instructor to instructor and mentor to mentor.
2. The amount of writing that students are asked to produce at every level of the undergraduate curriculum varies, but is, on average, disappointingly low.
3. Perhaps as a consequence of instructional inconsistency and a lack of opportunities for practice, as well as the diversity of their individual academic paths, students' demonstrated writing abilities at the junior and senior level also vary widely. On average, however, our students are achieving lower levels of writing proficiency by the time they reach their upper-division courses than we would hope.

Thus, at least when these data were collected at the tail end of the 2000s, it would seem that our decentralized writing curriculum was not doing enough to bring students onto "the same page." Recent changes—both within University Studies and as part of a larger effort to establish and assess campus-wide learning outcomes—may lead to greater consistency in instruction and more attention to writing across the curriculum, and there is reason to hope that these changes will improve student writing outcomes. However, we offer our findings here to help other institutions avoid learning these lessons as we have: the hard way.

Methods

Surveys: In the second half of the aughts, we conducted two rounds of surveys with both students and faculty. During the 2005–2006 academic year, we collected 1453 student surveys and fifty-five faculty surveys from

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courses across a wide swath of disciplines at all levels of undergraduate instruction. Then, in 2007, researchers in OIRP asked to use our survey instrument as part of an institution-wide assessment of student writing at the junior level, and over the course of the 2007–2008 academic year, we collected an additional forty faculty surveys and 721 student surveys from a total of forty-seven Upper-Division Cluster and WIC courses in twenty different academic disciplines. The student surveys included thirty-one multiple-choice questions and six open response items. In 2008, I (Christie) worked with fellow graduate students Elizabeth Harazim and Jon McClintick to qualitatively code all 5,199 open responses. Because we conducted surveys only in courses that were volunteered by faculty, our survey samples were opportunistic rather than representative, and our findings cannot be generalized across the institution. However, we can make useful comparisons between the responses of different groups *within* the dataset, and the survey findings helped us develop additional research questions.

Writing samples: As part of the 2007–2008 survey, we also asked students whether they would be willing to let us collect a sample of their writing. With the help of instructors, we made copies of a major written assignment from each consenting student. Over the course of the academic year, we collected 401 writing samples, 228 of which met our criteria for inclusion in the evaluation portion of the study.[2] In summer 2008, Hildy and I worked with a team of trained graduate student composition instructors to score those writing samples holistically. Over the course of two days, a team of nine readers worked in pairs to assess the papers on a six-point scale, based on a rubric that the group developed inductively by reading and discussing pre-selected anchor papers representing a range of writing abilities, genres, and disciplines. This rubric took into account complexity of thinking, facility with academic forms of expression, and mastery of disciplinary discourse conventions, as well as more technical aspects of writing, such as grammar, mechanics, and organization.

Interviews: Finally, as part of my own master's thesis research, I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with upper-division students. Using a combination of University Studies listserv announcements and snowball sampling, I recruited five undergraduates and seven community college transfer students from a wide range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, ranging in age from twenty-one to thirty-eight. While these students were fairly representative of the Portland State student population in terms of gender, age, parenting status, and socioeconomic status, they were less diverse than the overall student population in several other ways: all were native speakers of English, and ten of the twelve self-identified as white. This means that some particularly vulnerable student populations were underrepresented in the interview portion of the study.

While these multiple forms of data inevitably yielded more findings than we can discuss in the scope of this article, taken together, they suggest three key insights into students' experiences in our writing curriculum:

Finding 1: Lack of Consistency in University Studies

Both the student surveys and my interviews with upper-division students affirm what we had long suspected: there is enormous inconsistency in the amount and kinds of writing instruction that students receive in their FRINQ and SINQ courses. This inconsistency springs in part from variability in instructor background. Some faculty have a relatively strong grounding in composition theory and a laudable commitment to preparing their students to be successful college writers, and their students' learning experiences reflect those orientations. Others, however, bring different disciplinary backgrounds, pedagogical training, and instructional priorities to their teaching, and their students receive fewer writing assignments and little or no direct writing instruction. While our students enter the university with widely varying writing abilities, and some clearly need more help than others, whether they end up with a FRINQ or SINQ instructor who prioritizes writing is really luck of the draw.

The student responses on the 2007–2008 survey suggest that many students were not receiving what they perceived to be useful writing instruction in their FRINQ and SINQ courses. On this survey, students were asked to indicate whether they had taken FRINQ and/or SINQ, whether they had taken a writing course at either Portland State or a community college, and whether they had taken a WIC course. They were then asked, "Which of these courses did you feel prepared you *very well* for the kinds of writing you do for courses at Portland State University?" Only 51.5% of respondents who had taken FRINQ indicated that the course had prepared them very well, and just 35.9% said the same for SINQ.[3] Clearly, respondents' experiences with writing instruction in their University Studies courses was a mixed bag. Based on my own experience as a SINQ mentor, I can attest to the variability of the writing instruction in those courses: in one class I mentored, students spent a month and a half collaboratively writing a 12-page research paper through multiple drafts with both peer and instructor feedback; in another class, there was no writing assigned by the instructor for the entire term.

The following open response questions on the student survey elicited commentary about writing in University Studies: "In your opinion, what change or additions to your education would improve your writing skills?"

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Thirty-five (3.4%) of the 1030 students who responded to this question specifically recommended changes to University Studies. The following are just a sampling of these respondents' critiques:

> Writing should be a required course. WR 121, 223 should, somehow, be worked into the current University studies general studies requirements. Or the FRINQ teachers must be taught how to effectively teach writing.
>
> I took a writing course as an elective and it was much more helpful than the writing that is taught (jumbled with everything else) in the University Studies classes.
>
> No University Studies. The writing part of it becomes too inmeshed [sic] w/all the other topics.
>
> In University Studies writing needs to be taught not assigned. Everyone expects you to already know how to write a paper.

While a few students made a point of complimenting University Studies (e.g., "I believe the UNST program is helping our writing skills"), far more took the open response question as an opportunity to air their grievances. As one student wrote, "Someone at this school needs to teach students how to write. FRINQ does not do this sufficiently! It needs to be improved or another class must be added!" While it's important to note that 95 respondents (9.2%) stated that no changes to their writing instruction were needed, at least some felt strongly that the amount and kinds of writing instruction they received in University Studies were not meeting their needs.

Five of the students I interviewed had taken FRINQ, and eleven of the twelve had taken at least one SINQ course. The writing instruction in their courses seems to have run the gamut from exceptionally well done to almost completely non-existent. Two students were very positive about FRINQ's role in developing their academic writing abilities: one credited the instructor for assigning a lot of writing, both formal and informal, and responding to that writing with substantive feedback; another raved about the amount of feedback and help with revision she received from her mentor. A third student said he had received a lot of help with academic writing from his FRINQ instructor, but emphasized that he approached the instructor individually for this assistance. "Help with revision was something I sought out," he said, "not something that was built into the program." The other two students who had taken FRINQ remembered completing writing assignments in the course, but could not recall receiving much writing instruction beyond learning about library research and going over occasional grammar exercises in mentor sessions. As for their SINQ courses, students reported notably different amounts of writing—and writing instruction—from course to course. Most had taken at least one SINQ that involved a major research paper, but two had taken SINQs with almost no writing component at all. A few had done peer review sessions in one or more of their SINQ courses, and some received feedback on their writing from SINQ faculty, but in general, as one student put it, "There was no writing instruction in my SINQs. It was assumed that you knew how to write by then."

Taken together, these survey and interview responses suggest not that writing is a problem across the board in University Studies, but rather that—like our incoming students' abilities—writing instruction in these courses is all over the map. Decentralization has not caused writing instruction to disappear entirely, but neither has it resulted in an even or predictable diffusion of writing instruction across the lower-division general education curriculum. As it turns out, this problem is endemic in our upper-division courses, as well, both within and beyond University Studies.

Finding 2: Lack of Writing across the Curriculum

The inconsistency of writing instruction in lower-division University Studies courses is compounded by relatively little required writing in most other courses students take during their time at Portland State. Few upper-division courses seem to demand much in the way of writing, even in the disciplinary Upper-Division Cluster courses that the Working Group intended to be writing-intensive.[4] So while we might wish to see more writing in courses that purport to fulfill general education requirements, we see the lack of attention to writing in those disciplinary courses as part of broader lack of commitment to student writing across the university.

Among the 1446 juniors and seniors who responded to the student survey, 69% reported writing an average of ten pages or less per term in their courses, and their answers to the open response questions are even more revealing. When asked, "What changes or additions to your education would improve your writing skills?" 90 respondents (8.7%) said they needed more writing practice. Seventeen (1.7%) called for longer or more in-depth writing assignments, 54 (5.2%) wanted more opportunities for structured idea generation and/or revision, and 83 (8.1%) wanted more feedback on their writing. Thirty-one (3%) noted a need for more discipline-specific writing instruction. Taken together, these responses signal a constellation of unmet writing instructional needs among upper-division

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students at Portland State. As one student wrote, "My community college teachers have taught me more about how to be a good writer than my PSU instructors. I wish teachers would feel the need to continue to teach about writing in upper-division classes." Or, in the memorable words of another respondent, "More writing, more writing, more writing and then feedback, feedback, feedback."

Although many survey respondents were clamoring for more writing, as well as more instruction and feedback, we also suspect that the lack of attention to writing across the Portland State curriculum makes it easy for some of our weaker writers to avoid the kinds of challenging assignments that would give them opportunities to learn and grow. Our students are often pursuing their degree amidst many other life demands and pressures—most work, and many are parents or caretakers for other family members. The ease with which writing can be dodged in our decentralized writing curriculum likely contributes to our third finding: a broad heterogeneity in student writing abilities by the time they reach their upper-division coursework, and lackluster average student performance.

Finding 3: Disappointing Student Writing Achievement

Faculty surveys revealed a pervasive dissatisfaction with student writing abilities. While faculty are notoriously disgruntled about student writing at almost every institution, a startling 94.3% of respondents said they were moderately, somewhat, or not at all satisfied with their students' writing abilities, and 95.3% said that that their students' educations had given them only moderately, somewhat, or not at all adequate writing preparation. In the eyes of faculty, the problem resided largely with the curriculum: 30.6% of respondents said they were "not at all" satisfied with writing instruction at the university, and not a single faculty respondent indicated that she was "extremely" satisfied with the writing instruction her students were receiving. Of course, given how little writing many faculty are assigning, these survey responses suggest a chicken-and-egg conundrum: are faculty disappointed with student writing abilities because they aren't assigning enough of it, or are they not assigning much writing because they are so disappointed with students' abilities?

Students also expressed relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with their own writing abilities: 44.4% of junior and senior respondents indicated that they were only moderately, somewhat, or not at all satisfied with their ability to write school assignments, and 45% believed that their education to this point had been only moderately, somewhat, or not at all adequate. In the open responses to the question "What changes or additions to your education would improve your writing skills?" students identified a number of writing-related areas in which they felt they needed improvement, including spending more time writing and revising, increasing their range of writing styles or genres, expanding their vocabulary, and, most commonly, improving their spelling and grammar. Likewise, in response to the question, "Is there something important about learning to write that we didn't ask?" many students also specifically mentioned grammar or mechanics. As Harazim suggests, the level of student concern with grammar, spelling, and mechanics in these questions "reflect[s] a common understanding of writing as first decoding language according to rules, then buttressing with the appropriate considerations of style and content" (2). Harazim also notes that students' preoccupation with memorizing citation styles and APA or MLA formats—mentioned by nearly 10% of the respondents—might also reflect a rule-bound, arhetorical conception of writing. This instrumental attitude toward writing could be the consequence of current-traditional pedagogical approaches among the disciplinary faculty charged with teaching writing under decentralization, or it could be the result of little discussion about writing: students may simply lack the meta-language that more direct, sustained writing instruction could provide.

Finally, our assessment of upper-division student writing samples paints a disappointing portrait of student outcomes under our decentralized writing curriculum. On a scale of 1 to 6, the mean writing score for the entire corpus of 228 student papers was 3.67. In other words, the majority of writing samples fell between a 3 (characterized in our rubric as "simplistic": has an identifiable thesis, although it may be weak; some organizational problems; is "reaching" for original ideas or analysis) and a 4 ("serviceable": uneven quality; structure not optimal; might deal with complex concepts but is difficult to follow in some places).

The mean scores by class standing are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Average Writing Sample Score by Class Standing

Class	**Cases**	**Mean Score**	**Standard Deviation**
Freshman	1	4.0	
Sophomore	13	3.04	1.35
Junior	98	3.76	1.00
Senior	104	3.68	1.11
Post-bac	8	3.94	1.24
Graduate (Master)	1	2.0	
Other	3	3.33	1.53

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These scores suggest two interrelated interpretations:

1. Given the rubric descriptions of a 3 and a 4, *the Portland State students sampled in this study demonstrate mediocre writing performance at the upper-division level.* These scores are particularly disappointing given the large number of seniors in the sample.
2. The large standard deviations for each class level indicate that *there is a great deal of variation among students of the same class standing.* In other words, at each grade level, the students demonstrate a broad range of writing abilities, suggesting that instructors teaching upper-division courses are working with students who have widely varying degrees of preparation for upper-division writing.

Implications

As of the end of the first decade of the 2000s, then, it would seem that there were serious problems with Portland State's decentralized writing curriculum: the promised forty-five credits of writing-intensive courses were not in evidence, and students seemed to be suffering the consequences. The university's relatively nonselective admissions requirements, as well as its socioeconomically, academically, and linguistically diverse student population, might suggest a need to provide explicit, consistent writing instruction, and many opportunities for practice. However, at least in its first two decades, the institution's experiment with decentralization has created conditions in which many students receive neither. The result seems to be a kind of chaos across the board—a chaotic writing curriculum, chaotic student writing abilities—and this chaos, we fear, has resulted in inconsistent achievement of writing standards. How, we worry, will our students be able to use their knowledge to serve the city if we haven't equipped them with the writing abilities expected of college graduates? And if we continue to send our graduates out into the community without these abilities, do we risk devaluing the degree that has been so hard-won, particularly by our many first-generation college students?

Hildy's Story: What We've Learned

Christie has reported on our major concern: the troubling effects on student writing of nearly two decades of decentralization in an academic climate quite changed from that in which the curriculum was initially envisaged. I pick up the story from a WPA perspective, where Sherrie and Duncan left off, reflecting on what became of their administrative hopes and fears. And I do so for the same reason that Sherrie did: "to tell a story .

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. . that may help others in similar situations anticipate what they might face within their own institutional transformations" (66). Here is what we've learned at our institution.

Money, Money, Money

As Duncan described, the original plan to decentralize writing instruction meant trading six credits of writing courses for 45 credits of writing-intensive courses. However, in the end, all those promised credits never materialized, thereby turning what he called a "bold experiment" in decentralized writing into what David Schwalm would call an experiment in "de facto abolition" ("Re: Choose"). Perhaps the most important contributing factor in this transformation was, quite simply, money. Though early committees made their needs known, in retrospect, those needs were not attached to actual costs. Once the writing requirement was abolished, no permanent funds were immediately reallocated for ongoing faculty development, mentor training, curriculum building, placement, assessment, an expanded writing center, and a WIC program to support writing in the disciplines. In other words, the money saved by cutting the required writing courses—roughly $435,000 in today's figures—was not directly reallocated into the extensive administrative structure needed to make decentralized writing work. In 1997, Sherrie wrote, " . . . I spend more time than ever before trying to convince deans that someone needs to take responsibility, tracking down elusive money, and generating budget proposals" (60). My early experience was much the same.

Why wasn't the money reallocated? I suspect that those in upper administration did not realize that a decentralized administrative structure is likely to be far more complex and therefore more expensive than a traditional two-course writing requirement. Perhaps they had a simplified view of writing as a skill, one in which anyone who could write could teach others to write; so changing the location of its delivery appeared to them as an even exchange, perhaps even a great savings. It may be too that, several decades into the neoconservative ideological stance that has produced the corporate university, as Edward White puts it, " . . . [E]ducation [is] perceived by political bodies as an expense rather than an investment" (76). So there may have been little incentive to fund the effort fully, and no framework for attaching such an idealistic set of literacy goals to adequate funding. And, finally, Portland State itself, though it is in the enviable position of being recently ranked 10th by U.S. News and World Report's Up-and Coming Schools, was struggling financially. Once funded generously by the state, the University's state support had shrunk significantly, and it was

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only belatedly developing the endowments and other private resources that it needed to sustain its programs. As at so many other public schools, yearly rounds of budget cuts had become an ongoing institutional stress.

Whatever the causes—likely all of the above—our would-be decentralized writing program came to resemble, in many ways, Schwalm's hypothetical "bad scenario": "The . . . resources are gone, thinly distributed, never to be returned" ("Re: Choose"). In other words, it became more like abolition. It is therefore not surprising that those schools often mentioned as ones in which decentralized writing has been most successful—Cornell, Duke, University of Minnesota, and even University of Albany—are comparatively quite well heeled. If we had it to do over again, we would insist on frank discussions at the outset about the cost of such an ambitious program, and try to whittle it down to something smaller that could more realistically be supported. As Shirley K Rose observes, institutions often "go about it backwards," launching huge programs instead of starting with small pilots ("Re: Choose"), and ours certainly followed that pattern. Then again, perhaps that argument was advanced, but simply wasn't heeded in the excitement of the planned educational reform.

The Importance of a Workable Administrative Structure

We've learned a lot too about the complexity of the administrative infrastructure compositonists actually need in order to manage a decentralized writing program. It will require *more* faculty attention to oversee the process and *more* administrative time than a traditional writing requirement. Like housework, the "women's work" of teaching writing and writing program administration can too easily be discounted as unnecessary, and thereby rendered invisible (Miller). Because of this tendency, it was not just the original Working Group planners or University Studies itself who could not see the work; we ourselves have often discounted what we do and have been far too willing to take on too much invisible work. Generally speaking, in a large university of our size, attempting to embed writing in a unified general education program would require several full-time faculty to manage all the different facets. Yet here, the director of writing, in addition to running the writing program in English, was positioned as the sole writing consultant to University Studies, expected to advise on writing from outside the unit actually delivering it. In practice, this proved to be an awkward arrangement. Both Sherrie and, later, I used the gamut of standard faculty development practices—workshops, one-to-one consultations, mentor training, shared website materials, joint committees, arranging quarter-long student tutorials in the writing center—and the sheer

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amount of support we needed to provide proved to be what Shelley Reid once characterized as "boggling" ("Re: Choose"). These efforts all helped, insofar as they could, and facilitated worthwhile discussions about writing. However, as outsiders, Sherrie, Duncan, and I also found over the years that our efforts could be easily misconstrued as interference or criticism; moreover, our expertise in writing was increasingly questioned.

Duncan had wondered at the outset what would happen when non-specialists took over teaching writing, worrying that they would turn to outmoded models: indeed, some of those worries materialized. Instruction too often reverted to the current-traditional approach, the model with which faculty from other disciplines are generally most familiar. For years, scholars have suggested that this approach is one of the most limited and least effective (Berlin and Inkster; Connors; Crowley "Methodical"). The gap between these methods and the ones we advocated certainly added to our credibility problems. Ironically, the charges Crowley levies—that FYC is often taught by "haphazard pedagogy," which contributes to the deprofessionalization of writing instruction ("Personal Essay" 156)—happened here in many of the FRINQ courses that replaced writing courses. As Christie's work suggests, the amount of actual writing varied from one course to the next, though with average class sizes of 40 students, hardly first-year seminar size, it is not difficult to see why that happened. In addition, as Robinson observes, whatever the first-year course, it seems to become "the repository" for all study skills and institutional goals ("Re: Choose"), and that certainly proved to be the case here. And though some faculty were enthusiastically committed to the University Studies enterprise, a good many more were not particularly invested in it, and only taught in the unit reluctantly, an oft-predicted problem in decentralized writing programs (Bamberg; Roemer, et al.; Schwalm). So it was no wonder that writing suffered and that faculty found little time for the sorts of WAC workshops and materials we offered. What was most regrettable about the administrative structure of our decentralized curriculum is that it sometimes seemed to set English and University Studies at odds with one another. Whenever we overcame that barrier, we all recognized that we were struggling together in an underfunded enterprise, a mismatch between an ambitious and otherwise successful reformation of general education and a student population whose writing needs were greater than what the institution had anticipated or could afford to address.

So, for all these reasons, our influence was limited and the awkward administrative structure remained problematic. Though David Smit recently proposed sending the entire field on just such a course, envisioning future compositionists not as English professors but rather as writing

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consultants to departments, we found that position rather untenable at our University. Like it or not, the present-day academy is still structured around professorial rank and department affiliation. Fortunately, four years ago, I was able to help remedy that longtime administrative problem by successfully convincing University Studies to hire a compositionist to oversee writing from within. In 2010, Annie Knepler, a faculty member with a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition and expertise in team-based composition programs, assumed the newly created position of University Studies Writing Coordinator. She not only helps oversee writing within the unit and adjacent programs, but also collaborates with those in other units that share responsibility for writing. Though we wonder whether her job really includes an adequately funded support structure around writing, we are more hopeful now that we see writing beginning to get the expert attention it deserves.

Awkward Divisions of Labor May Create Challenges

We learned too about the division of labor that can take place when writing is decentralized. Past WPA-Listserv discussions suggest that this problem is one often associated with linked courses or WID courses with an English teaching assistant, in which a lower status assistant becomes responsible for writing while the faculty member teaches content (LaFrance "Re: Choose"). Though decentralized schemes for writing are designed precisely to reconnect writing with content, it seems, ironically, that these intentions can come undone, in part because of the awkward power differential. Both mentors in University Studies and teaching assistants in the WIC program have had to contend with these traditional problems. In University Studies, a select and well-trained cadre of undergraduate and graduate students assist in FRINQ and SINQ, providing both general support to help allay student anxieties and specific support for writing instruction and other learning goals. In the WIC program, well-trained English graduate students assist with writing in disciplinary courses. As writing directors and designated experts, both Sherrie and I certainly had more power than a teaching assistant, yet we too were administratively divorced from the unit delivering content, thereby essentially separating writing from content.

Yet another division of labor in writing and content emerged with the writing center. Once a small service unit, the center's size and reach expanded considerably when writing was decentralized. It began running full-steam with over 5,000 sessions per year, and, even so, had to turn away at least 800 students every year because the demand was so great. At least a third of this demand came from University Studies. Some overburdened

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faculty fell into what amounted to an outsourcing model for teaching writing—they simply depended on the writing center to do it. Need to teach revision in your class? Call the writing center to do a presentation for you. No time for students with weak writing abilities? Send them all to the writing center. On the positive side, however, the center, located in the same building as University Studies, interfaced with it very effectively: faculty often stopped in for a quick consultation on a student writing problem, or to ask for a writing handout to use in class; writing consultants even joined teams of faculty working on specific FRINQ course to assist them in developing writing assignments, peer workshops, and in-class writing activities. University Studies helped shoulder the cost of this increasing reliance on the writing center by contributing substantially to its budget. However, overall funding for the writing center remains a problem, as it did for the studio-style supplemental writing courses we proposed (see Grego and Thompson). Here, too, I imagine that some institutions can better afford what amounts to rather expensive one-to-one writing instruction as a way of supporting decentralized writing; but for a public institution like ours, this costly solution has not been financially sustainable.

Different Student Populations Require Different Approaches to Decentralization

As Christie noted, our urban, public university serves a very diverse student population, including English language learners and "Generation 1.5" writers (Harklau, et al). Many of these students come from a secondary system compromised by seemingly endless budget cuts. We simply do not have a student population that can get by with little or no writing instruction. Bamberg aptly warns that the most successful abolition experiments have been at those institutions where students were well prepared before enrolling there (13). In fact, our inability to effectively serve this diverse mix of student writers evokes White's contention that abolition is elitist, and we feared that we were perpetuating such elitism ourselves (75). A good many of our students needed a place to practice writing, to get the sort of sustained attention a writing course provides—and they needed more of both than the writing center could provide (Bamberg 15).

In order to encourage students to enroll in writing courses if they needed them, we developed a directed self-placement instrument in 2005, which was successful in helping some students place themselves into needed courses. However, unlike most institutions that adopt DSP, we had no anchor course to serve as a reliable and consistent entry point, particularly because the amount of writing instruction in FRINQ varied so widely. We

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continue to tinker with DSP in order to improve it, but without an anchor course, it remains problematic in this context. Nor were we able to develop a university wide assessment, since it too was prohibitively expensive. University Studies has its own internal assessment, a successful and much admired electronic portfolio, which has been used to measure FRINQ learning goals and is now expanding into the other levels of the program. However, in the midst of so many other learning goals, the assessment of writing in these e-portfolios often seemed weak; fortunately, with Annie collaborating with University Studies' new director of assessment, writing is now receiving increased attention.

Writing Programs May Face an Identity Crisis

Finally, we've learned that composition specialists and writing programs undergo an identity crisis when the writing requirements go away. Crowley predicted that, with abolition, compositionists might gain more respect, since FYC is seen as a low-status course, and some assume these introductory courses are all the field is or does ("Comments" np). For us, ironically, the case was the opposite; without the requirement, we became for a time nearly invisible. For a long time many people—faculty, administrators, and advisers, from both within and without the English department—didn't know we were still open for business. So sometimes we were the last to hear of various writing initiatives that popped up in balkanized corners of the university whenever someone wanted to "do something about writing" because "they don't teach writing anymore in English."

Meanwhile, although the writing course requirement was abolished in 1994, the actual writing courses in the English Department never entirely went away as was expected. In fact, two decades later, they are offered in roughly the same numbers as they were when we had a two-course writing requirement. First-year writing, which, in the writing program's heyday, stood at 60 sections per year, dwindled to 12 in 1997, but as of 2012 they have climbed back up to 76 each year. The upper-division writing courses, which once stood at 85 sections per year, also declined initially, but have rebounded to 54. So it seems that, at least in this respect, Crowley was right: some students do enroll voluntarily in writing courses when they are no longer required. In our case, however, these numbers are also influenced by the DSP, as well as the fact that many departments began requiring their majors to complete one or more of our courses. Interestingly, not only do more and more individual units require composition courses, but the institution itself, under our leadership, recently passed a requirement that transfer students (the majority of our student population) complete at least two writing courses. So, while the top-down university-level writing requirement was abolished, in its absence, new requirements have emerged over time from the bottom up, forming a sort of patchwork of different writing policies.

With so many students enrolling in writing courses, shouldn't this increase have improved student writing and faculty perceptions of student writing? Not exactly—the answer is complicated. Yes, the number of courses rebounded to previous levels: however, the overall number of students has also increased dramatically over time. So the courses serve a smaller portion of this current population than under the traditional writing requirement. In addition, the "chaos across the curriculum" approach, as Christie termed it, seems to have interrupted whatever developmental arc exists for students taking a sequence of writing and/or WIC courses, a sequence carefully designed to build from one course to the next by increasing in both intellectual complexity and expectations of more sophisticated writing abilities. Now we regularly see students in their final term of senior year who are writing at freshman levels. As an upper-division instructor once put it: "It's hard to develop any goals or assignments for the class because half my students are writing at FYC levels and half at the level for which the course was developed." Concomitantly, some instructors of FYC report having as much as a third of their class populated by seniors actually writing at upper division levels; the students say they are taking the class because "it's an easy 'A.'" Therefore, we assume that some of the problems with student writing in our decentralized program result from the way it is structured, which prevents us from forming a coherent sequence of writing instruction. Simply adding more writing courses to the mix does not in itself solve the problems.

Counter to Crowley's predictions, providing fewer composition courses over the years for the current student population has not allowed us the luxury of staffing the remaining courses with full faculty lines, or at least something other than adjuncts and teaching assistants ("Personal" 171). The sheer number of courses to be taught makes that simply impossible, due to the demand and other responsibilities that tenure-track faculty must fill. Given the claims that abolishing the composition requirement would mitigate the reliance on non-tenure track instructors, it is ironic that, for a time, the low-status problem simply followed the first-year students into FRINQ. For many years, FRINQ was predominately taught by non-tenure line faculty with heavy teaching loads; in recent years, however, University Studies has remedied this problem by encouraging more tenure-line faculty participation, often by helping departments to fund new lines. Even so, they continue to contend with some full-time faculty's reluctance to commit fully

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to those courses. (Thus, it seems to us that, as Marjorie Roemer, et al. predicted, the low status issue is less a matter of FYC being held in low regard and more a problem shared by first-year introductory courses in general.)

As for the identity changes of the compositionists in the English department, Crowley was right in our case about the long term effect of abolishing the requirement: We have found ourselves freer than before to devote our energies to developing a rhetoric and composition curriculum rich in scholarship, research, history, and pedagogy. Over the last decade, we've begun teaching a greater variety of writing courses, some with theory-based topics and others with a disciplinary focus. And since I stepped down as director, I've helped oversee an expansion of a full slate of courses in research methods, historical surveys, and special topics such as digital rhetoric, theories of style, and composition and postmodernism. Student interest is high, and we have further plans to develop the curriculum into official tracks at the graduate and undergraduate levels. A new talented director of writing, Susan Kirtley, joined us last year. Therefore, as Sherrie predicted, we may have lost a writing requirement but, over time, we gained a writing program.

Conclusions

So this concludes our part of the nearly twenty-year story in which Portland State's experiment in decentralized writing became an exercise in abolition. As with any case study, all we can do is tell our story. We recognize that all administrative outcomes are local, and that scenarios can vary drastically from one institution to another. Certainly, we have experienced a "perfect storm," as it were—budget cuts, less-than-prescient administrative planning, and new populations of students with new needs—that often foiled our institution's best-laid plans. Yet, along with the problems, there have been notable successes: strengthening writing expertise in University Studies; discovering new, expanded roles for the writing center that made it a true center of decentralized writing; and developing a more sophisticated disciplinary identity within our department. This chaos across the curriculum, with all its apparent shortcomings in meeting the writing needs of our students, has indeed at least provided a varied set of locations and opportunities for writing for our increasingly varied student population. Our wish at this point would be for a broader institutional acknowledgment of the role of writing and commitment to funding the various units that support it. Based on what we've learned, to anyone considering decentralization, I would say, make sure your venture has sufficient funding, plenty of faculty, and a workable administrative infrastructure. If any of these components are not available, take a step back and look for a less drastic model. Reconsider whether a traditional writing course requirement might be a more workable option, or, consider combining writing courses with writing-intensive courses. As Sherrie said in her 1997 article, "This story is still being written" (41). Perhaps in another decade, our new colleagues Susan and Annie will continue the story.

Notes

1. We secured approval from the Human Subjects Research Review Committee for all phases of this multi-year project, including Christie's thesis research.

2. The assignment needed to be at least four pages in length, be written in English, and fall within the essay, research paper, or lab report genres (broadly defined).

3. At 54.3%, PSU writing courses didn't fare much better than FRINQ. However, 79.2% of those who had taken *community college* writing courses reported that those courses had prepared them very well. Although we can only guess at what might be driving this difference, it seems likely that both PSU and community college writing courses would be as uneven in their delivery of instruction as FRINQ, since both sets of writing courses are staffed primarily by adjuncts. However, the community colleges require two to three sequenced courses, so perhaps that concentrated instruction has more impact on students than anything we can offer through either English or University Studies.

4. Under Duncan's leadership, the English Department launched a small WIC program in 1994, with the overall goal of expanding writing into the disciplines or departments themselves. This program now includes twenty-five courses, but its growth has also been stymied by lack of funding.

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