1

WHERE DISCORD MEETS DIRECTION
The Role of Consultant Evaluation in Writing Program Administration

Deborah H. Holdstein

Over the last fifteen years there have been numerous, often successful, attempts to define and theorize the role of the WPA and the place of writing programs, Writing Across the Curriculum, and the like on campus. For instance, in "Ideology, Theory, and the Genre of Writing Programs," Jeanne Gunner writes,

> Examining writing programs as a genre, a social and institutional genre, yields some fairly familiar answers to questions about program purpose. In their social and institutional setting, writing programs as a genre serve both an ideological and hence also epistemological function; they help structure a relation of language and culture. (2002, 11)

Further, Gunner elaborates, writing programs "help establish the cultural rules for language use, what its cultural work is: how we are to form categories of language users; how we are to hierarchize discourses; how we are to correlate specific discourses with ability and social worth; how we are to validate the differences produced" (11).

The same can be said, however, for the larger institutional context in which the WPA and the writing program do their work: the administration of an institution is local, influenced by its own, larger context of often vexing state mandates, accreditation bodies, and boards of trustees. A given institution, too, has its cultural rules for language work, its sense of what the important cultural work of the institution is and how (in the best circumstances) it is to be carried out. It, too, correlates specific discourses with ability and social/hierarchical worth.

Within this complex and often conflicting set of contexts and interactions is the legion of work regarding the relative powerlessness of most WPAs. Gary Olson and Joseph Moxley's "Directing Freshman Composition and the Limits of Authority" (1989) articulates the negligible value of WPAs to the English department. But as Edward White puts it, department chairs "appreciate us principally for our accessibility

and ability to communicate, that is, for our ability to keep things nicely under control without exerting any real authority" (2002, 108). As White notes, he had been a "statewide administrator in halls where nobody pretended (as they do on campus) that everyone is powerless" (106). Indeed, White

> absorbed from the atmosphere certain lessons: recognize the fact that all administration deals in power; power games demand aggressive players; assert that you have power (even if you don't) and you can often wield it. (106)

All this is well and good. However, as Richard Miller posits, "[I]nstitutional life gives rise to a *general* feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness" (1999, 8; my emphasis). Miller's is an important point: that these feelings are pervasive throughout the academy, which

> guarantees that anyone involved in this business can easily be prodded into sharing his or her vision of some better world where the work wouldn't be so alienating, the bureaucratic structure so enfeebled, the administration so indifferent. (8)

Therefore, the pervasive rhetoric of WPAs that often describes the work as "eating our livers in anger and frustration" (Malenczyk 2002, 80) can be transformed, in the words of Jim Corder, through an "emergence towards the other" (1985, 26), a move from internalized tension to outside support. As Rita Malenczyk writes, this tendency toward self-reliance (or mutilation?) coupled with the daily variety of administrative work indicates the "physical and too-often-abused self as an inescapable component of WPA life" (2002, 80). While we do not forget the working conditions of many writing faculty and WPAs—the reason for many a consultant-evaluator (C-E) visit, by the way—we must as WPAs concurrently turn our attention elsewhere.

As WPAs, we often embody a postmodern condition: we work as individual persons but must function within part of an institution. We attempt to navigate and thereby enact on campus the near-universal truths of the discipline and profession in contrast to what campus administrators will allow and what they promote, most often than not, for economic reasons. We operate in a discipline and academic context that reveal the incongruities of postmodernism and writing programs: we want to operate in ways that defy hierarchies, but in the interest of our students and programs we must work productively and well within those hierarchies.

If we are ready to accept that many aspects of a WPA's plight reflect similar administrative or quasi-administrative struggles throughout the academy—as I'm certain our Director of Student Development, for instance, would attest—where, then, do we go from here? Recognizing and enacting our roles through the structures of our institutions (and the structures outside the institution that, in turn, structure us) provide the strongest opportunity for WPAs to effect change (or, if you prefer White's take, wield power).

Unlike programs in nursing and education, for instance, that garner the leverage and benefits provided by outside program accreditation (this in addition to the foundation of larger, institutional accreditation), we in composition and rhetoric (and our usual departmental home, English) have no such leverage. While program accreditation might seem to be a nuisance, it does get programs what they need: for instance, if the university values physical therapy and the outfit that accredits physical therapy has determined that doctoral level will be the entry point for the physical therapist by 2008, then the program will get the faculty, equipment, and other resources to make that possible.

Consequently, WPAs and their administrative and faculty allies must tap into this system, pure and simple. Most institutions will allow for, if not demand, outside consultant evaluations toward program review, particularly in the absence of formal program accreditation. In English, having a secondary teacher-education program helps: National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation of education programs can have a beneficial trickle-over effect for the English major. However, such benefits often barely touch the concerns of writing and rhetoric programs.

IS THERE A MISSION IN THIS UNIVERSITY?

One of the central ways to indicate a writing program's centrality to the institution is to prove its congruence with the university's mission statement, out of which has most likely grown the institution's strategic plan. Usually, language in these documents is critical for determining an institution's priorities—and out of priorities, naturally, come budgeting priorities. Rarely, if ever, has there been a mission statement or strategic plan that does not at minimum imply the importance of thinking, critical analysis, and communication or writing. Can an outside program evaluation assist WPAs and their colleagues as they argue for resources and curricula for their programs? Most emphatically, yes. An outside evaluation can assist WPAs who attempt to move beyond

departmental, college, or university-wide discord—and the rhetorical discord that often pervades our own stories—into constructive and (it is hoped) ultimately productive action, taming to a great extent the postmodern indeterminancies of writing programs. At their best, these visits foster collaboration and participation, reconciling forms of difference and academic policies toward a multivalent yet constructive path for WPAs, their programs, and (most importantly) for their students.

THE CONSULTANT-EVALUATOR SERVICE OF THE COUNCIL OF WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS: SOME BACKGROUND

Since the early 1980s when it was initiated with a grant from the Exxon Foundation, the Consultant-Evaluator Service of the Council of Writing Program Administrators has sent teams consisting of two highly experienced and well-published (often well-known) former or current WPAs to evaluate writing programs within their own, indigenous institutional contexts.[1] A capstone experience for all those who do the work, the consultant-evaluator (C-E) team is charged with expertise and circumspection regarding the issues and concerns of the particular campus they are visiting. The C-Es must attend a workshop every year at CCCC. Here campus reports are discussed and evaluated; each C-E, in roundtable format, leads the group in a brief discussion centered on a particular topic related to writing program administration and evaluation (program and curriculum assessment, technology, English as a Second Language, and the like). Despite each person's area of interest—or set of interests—the members of a given team must to a great extent be generalists in composition and rhetoric. They must also have expertise in and familiarity with English departments in general (where most programs are housed), administrative systems and idiosyncrasies, issues related to contingent faculty, tenure and promotion decisions, budgeting processes, various state mandates, higher levels of administration, and so forth. C-Es must be comfortable talking with (and, as is appropriate, educating) students, faculty, and administrators—whether adjuncts or, for that matter, the college president.

The C-E service is modeled after the procedures of regional accreditation agencies. The codirector of the C-E service sends, after an initial inquiry, a packet with the following documents: a general information sheet regarding the service, its usefulness and purpose, and its fees; the "Guidelines for Self-Study to Precede a WPA Visit"; and three articles—Peter Beidler's "The WPA Evaluation: A Recent Case History" (1991); Susan McLeod's "Requesting a Consultant-Evaluation Visit" (1991);

and, in manuscript form, Laura Brady's "A Case for Writing Program Evaluation" (2004).

After the campus representative has received the materials, he or she discusses with the codirector the other parameters for the visit, realizing that the original impetus for the visit ("We want to look at the writing center") inevitably leads to investigations and discussions about first-year writing, WAC, assessment, and other related areas. After the dates and team are set, the codirector forwards a "Sample Schedule for a WPA Team Visit" to help the campus as it arranges the two-and-a-half-day schedule so it is as productive (and exhausting) as possible. The C-Es will spend considerable time after the visit preparing the report, which is due to the campus within six or seven weeks after the visit itself.

A C-E visit heightens the importance not only of decisive leadership in writing program administration, but also of the highly collaborative, institutionally complex nature of successful writing programs. The WPA at a given institution, having consulted with the C-E codirector, will have first determined who the "key players" are in the fate of writing on campus. This type of buy-in (or, to use the more overwrought term, "sense of ownership") is crucial to the success of the evaluation and to the hope that the campus will eventually implement the recommendations in the final report.

A broad-based sense of ownership also helps tremendously as those on campus begin to prepare the self-study—ideally, another collaborative affair—which is based on a set of questions sent by the co-director to the contact person on campus after discussion (or extensive e-mailing). However, the overwhelming impetus for many ultimately successful campus visits has been less than desirable circumstances and vexing (or unclear) relationships among programs and administrative roles; even then, campus contacts are encouraged to include what I like to call "naysayers" and other skeptics in the schedule. Clearly, most situations on campus are problematic, sparking the need for a visit to begin with.

As would be the case with other consultants brought to a given campus (and we see all the time consultants for enrollment management, the registrar's office, and so forth), the usefulness of this consultancy cannot be overemphasized. It can bring issues and possible resolutions to the attention of those too overwhelmed within their own spheres to remind themselves of the centrality of writing to the educational goals of their students. While no visit is perfect—nor can outcomes be guaranteed—it is one of the ways to tackle discord.

CONSULTANT-EVALUATOR VISITS AND SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

While the C-E service does not promise miracles it has, more often than not, improved conditions for writing programs and administrators—and more importantly, for students. It's important to note, again, that not all visits stem from negative circumstances, but that ultimately the goal is constructive validation, accountability and process, initiative, and change. As Susan McLeod delineates, the reasons for requesting a visit at Washington State University involved her new position as WPA and helped her to take stock of what had come before and what was hoped would come in the future. In McLeod's case, the goals included these:

> To highlight the strengths of the existing program
> To give external sanction to planned changes
> To learn a new job as quickly as possible
> To document how things worked—or didn't
> To start a faculty conversation that went beyond matters of procedure
> To matters of curriculum and articulation of courses. (1991, 74–75)

At West Virginia University, Laura Brady made sure to "give as clear a sense of our local context as possible" by concentrating on "broad categories" and formulating "three key questions":

> What are the most important points/purposes that we want to convey about our program?
> What specific details will help readers understand our particular writing program?
> How might headings and tables help us organize information and highlight key points? (2004, 84)

Note that Brady also "followed Peter G. Beidler's advice in 'The WPA Evaluation: A Recent Case History' and consulted broadly as we wrote our self-study and enlisted our administrators as allies" (Beidler 1991; Brady, 2004). A significant piece of advice given to all campuses is to take the guidelines and articles as starting points, not as documents with biblical-weight inerrancy. Brady and colleagues did just that. Since a successful C-E visit represents the collaboration of the local, the national, and the institutional, she writes,

> [W]e chose to add a final step that was not included in the guidelines for self-study: a reflective cover letter. The purpose of this letter was three-fold: It let us reflect on what we learned about our program in the process of the self-study; it provided an executive summary in less than two pages and drew

our readers' attention to our original goals and questions; it introduced us to the consultant-evaluators by locating the self-study and the supporting documents within the unique context of our institution. (2004)

Keep in mind that West Virginia University's visit was not prompted by particular sets of discord or problems; direction is possible without the precondition of discord. Rather, as Brady notes, "I hope our experience with the WPA consultant-evaluator service will illustrate why a national perspective on a writing program's local context can be valuable, and how the processes of self-study and evaluation can foster conversation, collaboration, and change" (2004, 80). Note, too, how evaluation visits can fit into an institution's all-important investigation of program outcomes, often encouraging campus support for adjustments where the institutional outcomes are negligible at best.

Laura Brady's article concerning the C-E visit at West Virginia University also provides a local answer to an important question: what are the short- and long-term effects of an evaluation? Brady's documentation of the evaluation's outcomes are encouraging: the writing program colleagues have "acted on every recommendation [made by the team in its final report] in some way, have achieved most of our initial goals, and we continue to develop two remaining areas [in Professional Writing and Editing and a writing tutorial center]." Most significantly, "We've even made some progress in additional areas now that we have a well-articulated and collaboratively structured program to improve conversation among the current writing faculty and various stakeholders in the Center's projects" (2004, 87). The C-Es were able to add a national perspective to the faculty's own arguments, thereby boosting the greater likelihood of revised curricula and training, new hires, and new programs.

Other visits are as idiosyncratic as one might imagine. On one campus visit, the C-Es were highly uncertain until they arrived on campus that administrators would even be receptive to the goals and purposes of the visit and any potential recommendations that might come from it. Attempting to bolster the beleaguered and committed WPA, the C-Es nonetheless offered constructive commentary while on campus, actually meeting with the provost. Among the surprising, constructive results was the agreement by the provost while the C-Es were still on campus to change a WPA line designated as staff to a tenure-line position instead. In yet another visit one year before the arrival of the current WPA (who has now been at her institution for five years), the C-Es recommended

that a professional WPA be hired—"not just literature faculty slumming, people who can't wait to get back to their 'usual' jobs."[2] As this WPA recalls, "Administration and faculty complained a bit about the recommendations, but agreed to just about all of them and implemented them, to boot" (2003).

In recent memory, only one visit seemed less successful than most, one in which there was only lip service on the part of the campus, its administration, and faculty to begin with concerning the fate of writing. It is almost impossible to determine these conditions before an actual visit. Given the C-E's customary, near missionary intent, difficult campus conditions will not in and of themselves prevent the visit from taking place, and, in fact, usually provide the impetus for validation, discussion, collaboration, debate, and eventual change. Where these types of conversations and collaboration do not already occur, the C-E visit can, quite often, transform "vexing" and "debate" into acceptable concepts for productive discussion.

WHAT THE CONSULTANT-EVALUATORS MIGHT FIND

The WPA C-E service protects the privacy of institutions requesting visits and the contents of the reports written by C-Es. As a result, these examples (and any others mentioned throughout this article) are of necessity anonymous, except where they represent quotations from publications written by faculty or administrators for a given institution.

For instance, at one institution the C-E's recommendations included suggestions about placement assessment, suggesting abandonment of the ACT as a placement device in favor of a written test. The recommendations were geared specifically for first-year writing and toward the goals for outcomes assessment mandated by the university. Furthermore, the C-Es recommended how the load on TAs could be reduced, again, within realistic university constraints. In another visit, an institution was persuaded—using terms that stemmed from the institution's own, particular context—to transform adjunct positions to full-time lectureships. While some might argue that these positions—temporary as they are—are not ideal, these full-time, renewable lines were far preferable to the previous part-time, semester-to-semester hiring practice. Each of these examples indicates the importance of a C-E's balancing disciplinary knowledge and expertise with national trends and local conditions. There is no "one size fits all" approach, and it is the proverbial kiss of death for a C-E to say "This is how we do it on my campus, so that's what you should do here." While the work of a WPA represents the

postmodern, disjunctive nature of writing programs and the incongruities of their departmental contexts, the work of a C-E is, even in these contexts, to determine *sets* of local (if often complex) universal truths for a particular campus.

Most visits also address writing-intensive or writing-across-the-disciplines initiatives on campus—or such initiatives are often recommended where they do not exist. At one institution, however, the history department seemed far better prepared and committed to the teaching of writing than did other departments; they took the lead in WAC initiatives, essentially bringing the English department and writing program faculty along with them.

In another report, the C-Es quote the self-study, in which colleagues wonder "what form a WAC program might take on a campus such as ours." The C-Es then outline three possible models for WAC development, beginning with a faculty development model of reasonable, manageable scale for that particular institution. Furthermore, this particular institutional and programmatic context permitted reassigning some faculty members to enable development in the area of WAC, something highlighted in the report and its recommendations. And although it was not delineated as an initial reason for the visit, conditions in the Writing Center came into play through the inevitable, complex interrelationships of writing programs and their campus constituents. As a result, the report recommends additional support for the center, thereby freeing the director to work with students and faculty development. (And I've presented just a brief sample of the recommendations.) To date, most of the recommendations have been implemented, owing to the C-E's targeting their advice to the particular conditions and strengths of a particular campus.

FINAL THOUGHTS

C-Es can help WPAs become aware of the true scope of their work and the different, complex audiences they must address. Where this awareness exists, the C-Es can reaffirm or redirect the alternating strengths, discordant processes and policies, or other vexations inherent in a writing program—which, even with only first-year writing, is inevitably campus-wide. As Susan McLeod writes,

> Often, program directors see an outside evaluation as a threat—something like being graded when you are not sure exactly what the grading system is or what decisions will be made about you based on those grades. On the

contrary, program review is an essential part of any university's ongoing self-assessment; it should be treated not as a threat, but as a process we should learn about and then learn from. (1991, 77)

And again, as McLeod implies, self-assessment and the ensuing evaluations can at many campuses provide the leverage usually reserved for programs with external, formal assessment processes, such as nursing, physical therapy, and elementary education.

Much has been made of the WPA and the relative presence or lack of power inherent in that position. As Edward White has written, "Power is in some ways like money or sex; it is only of pressing importance if you have none. . . . Administrators, including WPAs, cannot afford the luxury of powerlessness" (2002, 113). In the words of Doug Hesse, and in an alternative view of WPAs and relative power, "WPAs cannot afford to act like composition studies centers in the academic galaxy, let alone the social, political, and economic universe in which that galaxy exists. They should not be surprised when matters of curriculum, policy, or assessment that strike them as self-evident do not strike others the same way" (2002, 299). C-E visits can help bring this level of awareness—and to some extent, a renewed sense of "power"—to campus writing programs and the myriad persons across faculty and administrative lines who might influence them.

Indeed, leverage and self-knowledge are power, particularly when accompanied by the potential for long-term collaboration and ongoing, evaluative processes and sets of accountability across these often-troubled and hierarchical "lines" of administration, faculty, and students. In fact, a successful C-E visit is not entirely about the empowerment of a single WPA or easy, predictable remedy to the postmodern condition of the WPA. Rather, it's most appropriately about using, in White's words, "the considerable power we have for the good of our program" (2002, 113) and, I would emphasize, to reconcile the necessarily contradictory nature of our work wherever possible for the good of our students.