5
THE ROAD TO MAINSTREAMING
One Program's Successful but Cautionary Tale

Anthony Edgington
Karen Ware
Marcy Tucker
Brian Huot

At the University of Louisville (U of L), we have thought about mainstreaming our composition courses since at least the mid-1990s. A combination of factors raised the possibility that mainstreaming might be the best way to structure our mandatory writing courses, including the success of mainstreaming in other English departments and composition programs nationwide, the educational reform throughout the state of Kentucky and its attendant focus on writing, and the continually rising admission standards of the university. Our story takes place within this climate. In the fall of 1995, two composition professors—one of whom was Brian Huot—taught special sections of English 101 (the first of two courses required by the university for graduation as part of its general education program) whose enrollments had been reduced to eighteen and consisted of at least five students who might normally be enrolled in a remedial pre-English type of class often called "basic writing," remedial English, or the like. Both instructors who taught these special sections found them to be successful in providing learning experiences for all students, and both professors—to this day—are not sure who the so-called mainstreamed students were. Although this "pilot" certainly proved successful, the resulting cost in reducing first-year writing classes from twenty-six to eighteen was prohibitive, and the idea of mainstreaming was shelved (at least for the time being). However, when mainstreaming became a real possibility, these issues of enrollments and costs were once again important issues that were addressed and understood in different ways. More specifically, even though the WPA, the dean, and the provost wanted to mainstream first-year writing courses, they had different priorities and concerns.

In telling this cautionary but successful tale of how we eventually mainstreamed our first-year writing courses, we hope to continue the efforts that have been accomplished in previous work on mainstreaming (Adams 1993; Gleason 2000; Greg and Thompson 1996; Soliday 1996),

contributing information on how incoming students are currently being mainstreamed into first-year composition classes at U of L, and how we as a program arrived at mainstreaming. Our goal is to outline the potential pitfalls involved in any major program change, focusing on how the administrators involved in the decision-making process had different agendas for and understandings of what it meant to mainstream first-year writing. We also hope to delve into areas that past studies have not focused on, namely, to offer our situation as another possible route towards mainstreaming while also highlighting what problems may be encountered and what advice we can offer to programs that are currently considering or questioning a move to mainstreaming. While we doubt that our particular route toward mainstreaming will be followed by any specific institution, we hope that our experiences help others as they move toward or away from mainstreaming, depending upon their institutions and students.

One problem our experience highlights is that a major programmatic change like mainstreaming is defined and valued in different ways by those who occupy different administrative roles. Thus, one focus of this narrative presents a more postmodern view of power, not depicting the actions as a static, one-way exchange (i.e., the administration exerting its power onto the program), but rather as a more fluid process where each participant held various levels of power and control throughout the process. While we would still argue that the power differential in this narrative greatly favored the upper administration, we have begun to realize that the WPA possessed certain levels of power and control that allowed him to influence the final decisions. However, we have also realized that before one can utilize this power, the WPA must recognize it is there. Unfortunately, in this case, our WPA did not always immediately recognize these power issues nor the power he possessed, resulting in problems in the negotiations with upper administration concerning mainstreaming.

Looking more closely at the different agendas allows for a more elaborate view of how power works in discussions about mainstreaming. For the WPA, the major issues cluster around the integrity of the instructional experience for the teachers and students. Questions concerning whether or not the range of writing ability and potential are close enough to foster a productive learning experience for all students are the WPA's paramount considerations. A WPA might assume that a mainstreamed learning and instructional environment requires more attention from the teacher, and this focus is consistent with practices

endorsed by national organizations like the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), which require that remedial or mainstreamed classes should be capped at levels below that for regular sections of first-year writing courses. This concern for enrollment caps might be of special consideration to a WPA (like the one at Louisville) whose enrollment cap was twenty-six prior to mainstreaming, six more than that recommended by the CCCC.

For a dean or provost, mainstreaming can be seen as a cheaper alternative because basic writing courses are usually even smaller than mainstreamed courses. Mainstreaming was politically desirable for an institution that had already outsourced its remedial education to the local community college system. The interest lies in the bottom line for these administrators, since they control the budget for first-year writing courses. As we recount the story of how we mainstreamed, we encountered different conceptions of what mainstreaming can mean to an institution, highlighting the politically perilous position of most writing programs. Since mainstreaming means something different to a dean or provost than it does to most WPAs, and because the WPA in this situation did not understand that the administrators above him were working with different priorities and values, he was unprepared in certain ways for the events that propelled his program toward mainstreaming and was unable to enact the power he had to help make the writing program stronger.

Most substantial programmatic changes in writing administration are supported by local contexts and situations. For this reason, we provide basic information about the program leading up to the decision to mainstream first-year writing courses at a particular institution. While the WPA focused on issues like verifying placement decisions and regular faculty development opportunities for teachers who would be working in a new instructional environment, the dean and provost were interested in and intrigued by the low number of students who were being placed in remedial writing courses. So as the possibility of mainstreaming became more likely, the WPA suggested that class size could be reduced and permanent full-time instructors could be hired to lessen the program's dependence on contingent labor. However, as the dean and provost realized that mainstreaming was a possibility, they thought instead of how cheaply it could be done. With the double whammy of being able to reduce the costs associated with remedial writing courses and bringing recognition to the university's increasing academic standards and stature, mainstreaming seemed like a good idea to various administrators for significantly different reasons.

PLACEMENT PROCEDURES PRIOR TO MAINSTREAMING

In 1997, then president of the U of L, John Shumaker, announced plans for the university to gradually begin "getting out of" the remedial education business. This move solidified the university's ambitions to be a research institution and to improve its reputation as a serious place for higher learning and research. Initially, the move away from remediation entailed the development of a partnership that led to the relocation of remedial classes in subjects such as English and mathematics to Jefferson Community College (JCC), the local campus of the state's community college system. Under the Pathways Program, several of these classes were still staffed by U of L faculty and several of the courses were still held on U of L's main (Belknap) campus. In the fall of 2000, these basic classes fell under the jurisdiction and supervision of JCC, effectively "removing" the U of L from the "remedial business."[1]

This move away from remedial education brought about changes to the ways students were placed into freshman composition classes. Traditionally, students who scored nineteen or above[2] on the verbal component of the ACT test were automatically admitted to English 101 with those scoring thirty or above having the option of enrolling in an honors section of composition that satisfied the two-semester composition sequence in one semester. For those scoring below nineteen, two placement options were instituted. The first was a timed placement essay, usually administered in a large lecture hall for 75–125 students during summer orientation sessions. Up until the 1999–2000 school year, placement essays were read by members of the Transitional Studies Division who were responsible for remedial education before the institution of the Pathways Program. Placement was done in 2000–2001 by Resources for Academic Achievement (REACH). During the 2001–02 year, the assessment of placement essays was shifted to the Composition Program, where composition instructors were responsible for reading and scoring the essays. The figures below show the number of sections of basic writing offered during the last four years it was an option at the U of L.

- Fall Semester 1998 35 Sections
- Fall Semester 1999 32 Sections
- Fall Semester 2000 8 Sections
- Fall Semester 2001 5 Sections

Clearly, a dramatic drop occurred between the 1999 and 2001 academic school years. Of possible significance is that three different

groups (Transitional Studies, REACH, and composition instructors) were responsible for placement in three subsequent years (1998–2000), although most of the readers remained the same between 1999 and 2000, the years of the largest decline in basic writing sections. The decline may also be attributed to an increased focus on writing studies within the Kentucky elementary and secondary education system, along with rising admission standards at the university. Regardless of the reason, the point is that fewer students were being placed into remedial classes.

In 1994, the Composition Program at the U of L instituted a pilot project allowing students to submit the portfolios required by the Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA)[3] for placement in composition courses. Under this option, students could be placed in all three freshman composition courses (English 099, English 101, and English 102). The first year of this project, we worked with only five schools in the Louisville area but within two years the option was open to all high school seniors from Kentucky.[4] Each portfolio contained three to four pieces of writing; a reflective cover letter that discussed the process of creating the portfolio; and a sheet signed by a school counselor, principal, or teacher verifying the authenticity of the work.

Initially, the readers from Transitional Studies and REACH used a modified holistic scoring approach when assessing placement essays, which utilized a rubric but allowed teachers to assign course designations rather than numerical rankings. When the portfolio project was initiated (and subsequently, the reading and assessment of placement essays was moved to the composition program), we used a scoring system adapted from procedures William L. Smith developed in opposition to holistic scoring at the University of Pittsburgh in the late eighties and early nineties. In Smith's system, instructors with recent experience in English 101 read and assessed student writing based upon their knowledge of the courses and students they taught. Smith found that teachers with recent experience instructing the classes that students were being placed into produced more accurate and reliable decisions than the same readers employing traditional holistic scoring procedures. In addition, several measures were enacted to ensure that the placement procedures were both reliable and valid (Cronbach 1988; Messick 1989; Moss 1992, 1994; Shephard 1993), with rater reliability consistently scoring about 70 percent and feedback from instructors (through the use of a survey) signaling that approximately 90 percent of students were being placed appropriately into the English 101 course.

THE MOVE TO MAINSTREAMING

While our placement procedures were seen as successful based upon departmental surveys and studies and comments from instructors, some questions began to arise. As noted above, the instructors teaching the first-year composition courses continually stated that the students in both their 101 and 102 classes were being placed accurately; thus, we knew that the number of students testing into basic writing did not need to increase. Only seventy-eight students had been put into a basic writing course through the program's placement procedures for the 2001–02 academic year. These numbers made us (and, as we would soon discover, others in administration) question the need for basic writing courses.

In hindsight, this question now seems very important and was basically neglected by the Composition Program leadership (Huot). Since the Pathways Program costs the university a considerable amount of money, this low number of remedial students would be of real interest to the upper administration: by mainstreaming basic writing, the university would really be "getting out of the remedial business" and cutting significant costs. It would also bring some attention and acclaim for the university to say it no longer needed remedial English courses—which was probably true. Although Huot thought that perhaps the remedial option and Pathways Programs were no longer necessary, he failed to realize the political import of the situation and took no action in either making a proposal for mainstreaming or devising the conditions under which the Composition Program would consider mainstreaming. In other words, what we want to stress here is that the move toward mainstreaming did not come from the individuals who should have been most involved (namely Huot and the composition program); instead, it was the administration who put the idea of mainstreaming in motion and it was the administration who tended to control the way it was implemented. As we mentioned earlier, Huot did not recognize the political importance of the situation because he failed to realize that he and the administrators viewed mainstreaming differently. Huot focused on how mainstreaming could positively affect the teaching and learning environment for teachers and students, and this focus did lead to the program receiving smaller class sizes for the first course in the first-year composition sequence—along with gaining more full-time faculty and part-time lectureships to help ease the pressure that would be felt from the increased number of courses that would be included with the move to mainstreaming.

However, the provost and dean had other ideas, focusing more on the political and economic issues related to mainstreaming, a focus that conflicted with future goals that Huot envisioned (such as decreased class sizes for the second course in the first-year composition sequence and better working conditions for all composition instructors—better work spaces, benefits, professional development, and so on).

During a meeting in which various issues about both math and English were being discussed, the Arts and Sciences dean—the chief academic officer overseeing the Composition Program—asked Huot if he thought mainstreaming for composition was a possibility. Huot replied that he favored mainstreaming but the current enrollment cap of twenty-six in composition courses was too much to allow successful mainstreaming. Huot presented the dean with evidence: the CCCC recommendation of twenty students in regular courses and fifteen in remedial. When Huot admitted that he thought eighteen was about right for mainstreamed courses, the dean asked Huot if he would accept an enrollment cap of twenty-two. Huot said twenty-two might be acceptable if it were just an increment and if eventually the number could be twenty or even eighteen. Not being completely politically unaware, Huot also emphasized that the increase in the number of sections precipitated by the smaller enrollment caps could not be absorbed by the current pool of part-time instructors and that these additional sections would need to be staffed by full-time lecturers, since reducing the Composition Program's dependence on part-time labor and its inequitable labor practices had been a long-term goal for the Composition Program. On the other hand, Huot had done the math and knew that even at twenty-two students in composition courses the Composition Program would need to offer thirty-two additional sections, requiring the hiring of four full-time lecturers (who would teach a 4/4 load). In addition, the program would need two additional full-time positions when the enrollment cap was limited to twenty and two more positions for the eventual cap of eighteen. That would be more money than the School of Arts and Sciences or the university could absorb at this time of tight finances and state budgetary shortfalls; thus, Huot left the meeting with a promise that he would forward the figures for the cost of mainstreaming (which he did), but without any real hope of being able to mainstream.

A few weeks later, after receiving a surprising request from admissions for a statement about the new mainstreaming policy for composition courses, the Composition Program informed the English Department chair of the rumor afoot about mainstreaming, and the chair (present

at the meeting with Huot when mainstreaming was discussed) agreed with Huot's account of what happened—we were just talking about the possibility of mainstreaming. Shortly thereafter, the department and the program were informed that the administration had committed to mainstreaming the Composition Program as long as the enrollment cap for English 101 was reduced to twenty-two (without mentioning at all an incremental reduction to twenty and eventually eighteen). Furthermore, English 102 would remain at twenty-six, since once students were mainstreamed into English 101, the regular enrollment cap would suffice. Important to note here is that when Huot talked about lowering enrollment caps, he assumed the administration would understand that he meant both courses in the two-semester first-year writing sequence (English 101 and English 102). In contrast, the dean and provost thought Huot meant just the first course in the composition sequence (that is when the mainstreaming would actually take place). In their minds mainstreaming was something that could be accomplished in one semester. It was a simple administrative decision, but for the WPA it was a crucial decision, impacting the teaching and learning environment for over two thousand students and over seventy instructors. The WPA believed in the potential of mainstreaming and the ripeness of the Louisville program for such a change, but he also knew that mainstreaming should be done in certain ways. Clearly, the upper administrators' assumptions were not informed by the literature on mainstreaming first-year writing classes (Greg and Thompson 1996; Gleason 2000; Soliday 1996) or writing development in which certain students can take several years before being able to write acceptably in college (Herrington and Curtis 2000; Sternglass 1997). In retrospect, it seems particularly short-sighted to have assumed that the dean and provost would share a similar understanding with the WPA about the ways students learn to write in college. In addition to lowering the enrollment of English 101 from twenty-six to twenty-two, it was also agreed that the Composition Program would receive its first two full-time lecturer positions.

We thus moved to mainstreaming without the conditions we thought necessary: specifically, lower enrollments and a reduction of the program's dependence on contingent labor. On the one hand, this chain of events highlights that, while the WPA does possess some power when involved in negotiations with administrators, how the WPA recognizes and uses this power plays an important role in how much influence he or she will have. Huot did manage to obtain a reduction in class size for the first semester course (moving from twenty-six to twenty-two

students) and the program received new full-time lecturer lines in the process, something that will greatly benefit the program as a whole. Yet, while Huot realized that lower enrollments in the basic writing courses would be appealing to administrators, he did not utilize his full power here by taking the initiative to propose mainstreaming on the program's terms, and was subsequently caught in a bind when the administration made the first move. In this case, Huot missed the opportunity to inform his various supervisors about the complicated nature of mainstreaming and the often-protracted nature of some students' acquisition of literacy in the academy; if he had made the administration more aware of these issues, it is possible that the program would have received more assistance in the move to mainstreaming.

On the other hand, had Huot been more politically aware, he would have also realized that placing only seventy-eight students in remedial courses the previous year had cemented the inevitability of the move to mainstreaming. With the above information in mind, he would have steered any conversations with higher administration in different directions, and Huot could have been more upfront about what was needed. In other words, realizing that mainstreaming was inevitable would have guided Huot to understand the importance of his conversation with the dean and would have prepared him to build a stronger case for the program's needs. We think it is also important to note that although the program was very careful in designing placement procedures and in researching the accuracy and appropriateness of placement decisions, the program's leadership misunderstood the importance of certain political realities, their influence on eventual policy, and their consequences for the Composition Program. Because of our lack of awareness of the political ramifications of a move away from remedial education and toward mainstreaming, we were not prepared when the administration approached us with the idea. While we did our homework in terms of researching the best ways to place students accurately and the resources needed for mainstreaming, we did not adequately understand the political and financial realities that eventually made the move to mainstreaming inevitable. In other words, the WPA and the program possessed power and authority in this discussion, but failed to fully realize and use this power for our best intentions.

CONCLUSIONS AND ADVICE

So what can be learned from our winding road toward mainstreaming? First, it is vital for composition programs ripe for or interested in a move

to mainstreaming (or any other major program change) to be prepared: as our experience and our monitoring of the WPA listserv can confirm, substantive programmatic change can be introduced or mandated at any time. Compiling and analyzing enrollment data, discussing current enrollment practices with instructors, and keeping up to date on current research into mainstreaming and other possible substantive changes are all important ways of staying knowledgeable and prepared for any change.

Second, composition directors and staff should understand the political issues surrounding a move like mainstreaming. If the impetus for the move comes from administrators, a director should begin to question why the move is coming at a particular point in time and be able to use this information to address important issues in the current program. This is not to say that we feel the composition program at the U of L was weakened through this move to mainstreaming. We did see a decrease in English 101 enrollments from twenty-six to twenty-two, our current staff received its first two full-time positions, and (most importantly) students are no longer required to take a semester-long noncredit basic writing course. However, we would be lying if we said that the move was perfect and that we could not have done more. Currently, no further discussion concerning a further decrease in enrollments has occurred (for either English 101 or 102) and, as individuals who have recently finished scheduling classes for the upcoming semester, we find the increase in 101 courses greater than the addition that only two instructor positions can satisfy; thus, we have (at least for now) been forced to do the one thing we originally thought a move to mainstreaming would decrease—namely, hiring more part-time and adjunct instructors to compensate for the increased number of courses.

Along with understanding the political ramifications, WPAs should also be knowledgeable about the economic conditions surrounding a move to mainstreaming. It is important for program administrators to be more aware of exactly how much various costs affect, even tangentially, the operation of a writing program. For example, we discovered after the fact that the Pathways Program, in which remedial classes were taught by community college instructors, was an expensive program for the university. Had Huot been more aware of the potential importance of such information, he could have obtained information on the cost of the Pathways Program, preparing himself and the program for the ways in which the university might defer the considerable cost of the program. Being more aware of the costs associated with the Pathways

Program would have made our WPA more sensitive to the need to reduce or cut those costs.

Third, even though this article has focused on what we experienced in our move to mainstreaming, we feel it is vital that a program keep up to date on how successful (and unsuccessful) mainstreaming is (after it has been implemented). At the U of L, we continue to survey instructors about the students in their classes while workshops and informal discussions are continually held with instructors about mainstreaming. In addition, we have discussed the possibility of talking with students about mainstreaming in the future (especially those students who may have been placed into basic writing courses originally). Thus far, we have discovered that mainstreaming is working at the U of L; our instructors have stated that students are writing at similar levels as they were before mainstreaming and the decrease in class size has been continually cited as a positive aspect of the English 101 classrooms.

Why is it important to mention this need to evaluate one's program in a text focusing on writing program administration? For two reasons—first, if programs hope to make more changes in the future, they will need data showing that mainstreaming is working. At the U of L, if we have any hope of achieving our desired goal of an enrollment cap of eighteen in first-year courses, we will need data supporting the fact that mainstreaming is working and that a lower enrollment can produce an even better learning environment.[5] This knowledge can increase a WPA's power when negotiating with upper administration. Second, as other programs across the country prepare to investigate whether a move to mainstreaming is possible, they will need information to support them. This information needs to come from programs that have already successfully mainstreamed. By offering not only information on the pitfalls and successes we experience moving into mainstreaming but also discussing the success (or lack of success) of our mainstreamed programs, we offer other programs some useful information to consider when contemplating and studying whether or not a move to mainstreaming is possible.

In a book chapter on program assessment, Richard Haswell and Susan McLeod (1997) script a dialogue between an assessment researcher (Haswell) and an administrator (McLeod). This dialogue illustrates the different kinds of information researchers, faculty, and administrators want from each other about programs, students, and faculty. While the scenarios Haswell and McLeod describe and work through are based upon changing local conditions, one overriding factor seems to

be a critical awareness of the different purposes and rhetorical situations that administrative audiences pose for those of us who work more closely with teachers and students. In other words, had Huot been more critically aware of the needs and concerns of the administrators who hold power over the Composition Program, he would have been better prepared for the push toward mainstreaming. The so-called surprises the Composition Program faced in its move toward mainstreaming were only surprising because of the lack of understanding of the financial and political realities of the university administrators who ultimately hold power over our educational programs.

Casting administrators and program directors in some sort of adversarial role would be easy, but doing so would be both simplistic and counterproductive. Instead, we urge WPAs to become more aware of the financial aspects of their jobs, to know what the university has budgeted and how such costs might eventually impact their programs, and to be aware of what power the WPA may have during discussions. Who should have thought that the price of the Pathways Program would come to be so important to the Composition Program's move to mainstreaming? We hope that our tale about the kinds of factors that can influence the administration and structuring of a writing program are helpful to those who are faced with similar problems and challenges in their own programs. We hope that others can learn from our careful implementation of writing assessment theory and practice as well as from our mistakes and oversights.