What Happens to the Writing Program Administrator When the Writing Requirements Go Away?

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Recently, sweeping reforms within general education have brought radical changes to traditional writing requirements at many institutions around the country, extending even, in some cases, to the elimination of those requirements. Portland State University, a comprehensive urban university with an FTE of about 15,000 but an actual head count of 31,000 students, currently finds itself at the forefront of these reforms. When the change became inevitable, faculty at Portland State decided to be in charge of their own reform. (When I arrived in 1994 the changes were a done deal.) Through a process of faculty interaction and research, they decided on a program that completely dissolved the previous structure that consisted of distribution areas. The result is that everyone who teaches and studies at PSU is or will be affected by this change.

Until the new reform, our students were required to pass, with a C- or better, our lower-division writing requirement (WR121) and our upper-division requirement (WR 323). With the new program in place, only those who entered the university under a catalogue prior to 1994 are required to take these, or any writing classes. Let it be said that we did not lose the writing requirements without a fight. Nonetheless, the newly configured general education curriculum at Portland State does not include a required writing course at any level. The crux of the changes is that writing is now to be the province of those teaching in the new general education program. Four major elements are expected to be common to all courses in the program, with an emphasis on four educational goals:

1. Communication with writing at the core but also including numerical, graphic, visual, and oral communication.
2. Critical thinking and inquiry skills.
3. Human experience with special emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism.
4. Ethical issues and social responsibility.

The first and second goals are particularly relevant to the Writing Program although all of them relate to a certain degree. The first goal is communication defined to include writing as the core and the third goal is inquiry and critical thinking. (See Figure 1.)

There are many issues raised when writing instruction and general education merge—or, as it may be, collide. Several transformations caused by the absorption of our writing requirements into the new curriculum are already
### Old Requirements

18 credits from two departments from each of the three academic distribution areas.

18 upper division credits must be earned in the distribution areas with no more than 12 in one department.

Two courses (6 credits) of diversity coursework from the approved list.

Courses must be taken from two different departments. These credits may be included within the above distribution requirement.

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### New Requirements

#### Freshman Inquiry

- One 15 credit course taken over a year.

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#### Sophomore Year

- Three 4-credit courses selected from different interdisciplinary programs or general education cluster.

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#### Junior and Senior Years

- Complete one interdisciplinary program or general education cluster (four 3-credit courses).

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#### Senior Capstone Experience

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With the elimination of the writing requirements, I find myself wondering what our mission is as a writing program and what my role is as an administrator. I knew that my job as Director of Writing would be different from the way it was constituted prior to the changes in our program, but I wasn't sure what those differences would be. Since we are currently sustaining both the old and the new program, I remain somewhat unsure as to further transformations once
the old writing requirements are completely phased out. We have thus far introduced the Freshman, Sophomore, and Junior courses into the curriculum. Currently we are scrambling to put in place enough interdisciplinary capstones for the fourth year of the program. While the entirety of the new four-year program will be in place by 1997-98, I will continue to balance both the old and new programs through 2001 since the life of the catalogue at Portland State is seven years.

When I first asked myself the question, "what does a writing program administrator do when there are no writing requirements?" I was able to imagine some probable scenarios. As most of us probably would, I foresaw myself acting as consultant, leading workshops on integrating writing into the general curriculum for those now responsible for teaching writing, looking for ways to ensure that sound and appropriate writing instruction continues, creating new writing electives within my home department, teaching more graduate-level courses in composition and perhaps even teaching in the new program itself. No surprises here; I have been doing most of these things. I also retain administrative responsibility for a thriving writing-intensive course (WIC) program, professional writing minor, and writing center, though I do have help from three compositionists who coordinate these programs for me. What I'd like to highlight here are some of the things that have come as a surprise or that have warranted more time than I would have thought, things that I had not so readily imagined I'd be struggling with or doing. I have faced enormous challenges and many frustrations, but from these have also come unforeseen and promising consequences. I don't necessarily have answers or clearly framed plans of action for all of these challenges or consequences; thus, in this essay I narrate a story that I hope adds to the cumulative wisdom that we might share as WPAs.

Assessment

It is in the troublesome area of assessment that I will spend the most time, for while it may not be accurate to say assessing writing in the new program has taken most of my time, it certainly has been a continuous worry. I see a very important part of my job as conducting ongoing assessment; indeed, I have been formally asked to do so as part of a program-wide assessment by the Dean in charge of general education. When I first took over as Director of Writing in 1994, I was immediately asked by the Chair of English and the immediate past Director of Writing to think about assessing writing in the new program. Assessment, then, was from the beginning to be part of this newly configured WPA position, and at their bidding, I drafted a naturalistic research protocol that called for interviews and surveys, as well as the examination of syllabi and assignments, student portfolios, and observations of actual classrooms.1

Making headway with this protocol has been torturous. Perhaps the most unforgiving barrier to our hope to begin the naturalistic study has been the general education faculty themselves. Our attempts to look at what is going on with writing in their courses have been met with resistance and a certain degree of hostility. It took several weeks of asking (it felt at times like pleading) before
we were granted an audience with the Freshman Inquiry Council—a group made up of one representative from each Inquiry team (the first-year program is made up of five interdisciplinary faculty teams) that works as a liaison between administration and Inquiry faculty. In part, they see themselves as a clearing-house for all persons wishing to have any sort of communication or dealings with the Freshman Inquiry teams. This group is fiercely loyal and clearly wants to protect those teaching in the new program, whether it be from criticism, extra work, or assessment.

The posture the Council strikes is easy enough to understand if one wants to be charitable. Frankly, these teachers are exhausted and very stressed. Those of us in Writing Program feel charitable only up to a certain point, however. My chair suggests that we have lost a writing requirement and gained a program, but it is also true that in that equation we have yielded control over writing instruction at Portland State. On top of all of the concerns this raises for placement procedures, provisions for at-risk students, writing development of the students, among others, we also have to deal with the reality of dislocated instructors and graduate assistants. When even our attempt to apply for grants to assess was met with hostility by the Freshman Inquiry Council, our charity was at its limits.

For any of you facing similar issues in your own universities, I can not stress enough how important it is to lay the groundwork, to touch base with everyone involved, for even the most limited research or assessment. For me, this included apprising the dean of general education of our plans and receiving his support, connecting with the team charged with the task of assessing all aspects of the program, and making as clear as possible to faculty teaching in the program what we wanted to accomplish.

We initially started our assessment by asking five faculty members to respond to a questionnaire. We also asked those five faculty to choose, with no specific criteria for the choice, three of their students to fill out a questionnaire designed to get student perspectives on writing. The five faculty that we chose were faculty who had some understanding of the teaching of writing before beginning to teach in the new program. Three of them, for example, are English Department faculty and two—one from anthropology and one from theater arts—have experience, either formally or informally, with using writing as a main curricular component in classes. It might seem strange to look first to those who would most likely exhibit success if our goal is to find out more broadly what is happening with writing. We had three reasons for our choices. First, we knew that these five would be less resistant than other faculty. In our frustration with the protectiveness of the Freshman Inquiry Council, we felt the need to get information in any way we could. Second, if nothing else useful came of starting here, we could at least pre-test our questionnaires. Third, we felt that if we identified problems and issues for those most experienced in the teaching of writing, we could assume that those less experienced would be facing some of the same problems. We also realized that if we could identify specific ways in which these five instructors were using writing successfully, we could share...
those successes with others. If, as we try to address particular problems and issues, we face comments like “you just don’t know what it’s like down here in the trenches” (and we have), it will be very useful to point to particular instances of how their colleagues are making it work. Of the initial surveys we conducted, we received responses from three faculty and one student. It was a disappointing start indeed.

Perhaps the most fruitful research has been the two classroom observations we have participated in spring and winter quarters of 1996. These studies have shown us that at least Freshman Inquiry (the first year of the new program) is a rich literacy experience for students. It looks very different, though, from what goes on in the writing classroom. Both of the studies make it clear that students were engaged in reading, discussion groups and other kinds of collaboration, oral presentations, peer review, personal writing, email writing, and storytelling. However, these studies also suggest that there is little or no attention paid to the metarhetorical aspects of writing and to revision. The writing seems most to resemble writing-to-learn. What we don’t know yet is whether these rich literacy environments produce competent writers. But then again, we don’t really know, finally, whether the traditional writing requirements produced competent writers. In fact, as is the case in most colleges and universities, we would be hard put to agree on a definition of competent writing across schools and disciplines.

One researcher/observer noted that the only place revision was not a perfectly normal event was in the written work because “imagining how things could be different was integral to the most mundane aspects of the class—reimagining the furniture every week—as well as to the most visionary—creating a utopia or thinking about a society without racism” (Zenger “Discussion” 11).

Briefly, we have also found that there are very few formal or longer writing tasks; and there is a wide disparity among classes as to the amount and kind of writing assigned. Almost all instructors are struggling with basic readers and writers and they are particularly at a loss as to how to teach writing to ESL students. Faculty have suggested a need for mandatory testing and placement because of their struggles with ESL and basic readers and writers. An analysis of our first two years of non-mandatory testing and placement reveal that in 1994-95, 15% of the students did not take our recommendations and that 35% did not take our recommendations in 1995-96.

While I have spent a great deal of time with assessment, then, for the past two terms things have come to a standstill. Faculty have been so resistant to assessment that I no longer attempt any that is not directly set in motion by the assessment advisory team and the Dean of general education. This is, perhaps, as it should be. But while we have many research plans, those responsible for getting them started have, for whatever reasons, dropped the ball. And while I continue to try and get the ball back on the playing field, I have not been successful, thus far. Assessment seems to have been derailed by faculty resistance, burnout, and stress, and to a certain degree, my frustration with the
faculty. What I need, then, is to find ways assessment can be negotiated to minimize faculty resistance and my frustration.

Funding

Perhaps, when the traditional writing requirements were abolished, I should have been prepared for the chaos I would be facing regarding budgetary resources and commitment, but I wasn't. With the loss of an overarching concept of writing instruction, we are facing a rather bizarre fragmentation of our budget. The previous Director of Writing, like many of us, was already in the less than perfect situation of having responsibility for the program but no authority over the budget. Resources for the required writing courses were allocated from a stash of soft money, term by term, to the Department Chair through the Dean's office. Every term the Chair, sometimes with (but usually without) the Director of Writing, would walk down the hall to the Dean's office to plead for money. While it was never adequate, we would get enough money to limp along from term to term. This unfortunate situation continues, but this time with a twist.

There is no longer one lump sum given to cover the Writing Program. Instead, our budget is cobbled together from the various constituencies that we are now serving. For example, in the summer following the first full year of the new program, our work with placement was paid for by student services, our work with faculty development by the Center for Academic Excellence, and the Writing Center was funded by the School of Extended Studies. But it was not until the summer session was over that we knew there would be at least some pay for those helping me in these areas. One colleague, in fact, did not get paid until October. Even now the various controllers of funding sources continue to quibble over who is paying for what and when. There are power plays taking place that we have no control over but that definitely have important consequences for us. One result is that I spend more time than before trying to convince deans that someone needs to take responsibility, tracking down elusive money, and generating budget proposals.

One budget proposal that never needed to be done previously and that has taken a great deal of time and attention is a comprehensive budget that expresses the needs of the writing program in its entirety. This is a new move for us precisely because of the fragmentation mentioned above. While the writing courses may have been eliminated, our resource needs have shifted but most certainly not been eliminated. If anything, our needs have increased. For example, the comprehensive budget asks for funding for faculty development and training, placement and courses related to placement needs, the professional writing minor, a growing WIC program, and a now over-burdened writing center that has had to turn students away because of inadequate staffing. My attempt to curb the fragmentation in this way has been virtually ignored, however. While the budget makes its way up the chain of command from me to my Chair, from Chair to Dean, and Dean to Vice Provosts, and finally to the Provost, there has been little acknowledgment of the comprehensive budget and
the Writing Program's expanded needs.

Since I have taken so much time and care to let the appropriate people know what the new general education program requires of the Writing Program, I have been surprised when the time comes to deliver that no one in the university has taken this comprehensive budget into consideration. A typical example of the various high-level administrators' lack of consideration and commitment to the comprehensive budget surrounds placement needs. Placement, and the newly proposed course I have recommended to support placement, are both needs created by new university requirements and requested by the dean of general education, but not a single dean in control of money for specific university requirements is willing to commit funds or acknowledge that this request would be forthcoming—funds I might add that would come to under $30,000 a year. To be fair, I now know that the new program faced a $100,000 cut this past year; however, the deans have even gone so far as to suggest writing placement and the corresponding courses should be an English Department budgetary issue. My latest stand has been a firm "no resources, no placement and no course." If we go this route the consequences should be interesting. Last year we did conduct non-mandatory placement and made recommendations for at least those 900 students who came to orientation. With this limited placement, faculty are deeply concerned over the students' reading and writing abilities. Their concerns are likely to magnify with no placement. The good (and the bad) news is that the Dean of general education wants to locate grant funds to support placement and subsequent courses.

Perhaps I have been naive to expect some response to the comprehensive budget that I had hoped would help mitigate the fragmentation of budget we have faced. Nonetheless, it is important that I continue to work on tactics for convincing administrators at different levels of the absolute need for a comprehensive budget. This will be crucial for me, as the WPA, to do my work to both my own and to their satisfaction.

Service

With the changes at Portland State I find myself spending more time than I had expected outside the department in university work and politics. While I could have predicted that more of my time would be spent outside the department at the university level, I had not imagined the numbers of requests I have had to do so—especially for committee work. Certainly I had expected to spend most of my time with faculty training. However, even though we have made repeated offers to do faculty development follow-up training throughout the year, no entity—not the general education teachers, nor the Center for Academic Excellence—have taken us up on our offer. In part, this is because people are unbearably busy, but also because the appointed faculty leader for the Freshman Inquiry teachers has said repeatedly that they all know how to teach writing. Basically, the message has been a not so subtle "we don't think we need you."

Interestingly enough, however, the requests for my time in other places
seem to belie the notion that writing instruction is going along swimmingly in the new program. (Counting working subcommittees, I worked on a total of seventeen committees during the 1995-96 academic year.) I have been asked to work on several ad hoc committees as well as the General Education Assessment Advisory board and the University Curriculum Committee. As I have mentioned, the Assessment Advisory board helps shape assessment of the new program and the University Curriculum Committee has final jurisdiction over determining whether the new program is putting together a curriculum that meets its own goals—including the communication goals of which writing is at the center. Additionally, I have been working on two other committees (called not by me, but by others across the university) specifically constituted to address reading and writing issues. One committee is working on writing placement and the other on what to do with the students who are failing in the new program from perceived lack of reading and writing abilities. Occasionally I succeed in getting these two committees to talk with each other. My reason for laying this out is simply to say that I spend between five and seven hours per week in meetings surrounding these issues. This does not include the time I spend doing other related things like writing new placement exams and creating new courses meant to ensure that struggling students have a place to go to get prepared for success in the program.

Staff and Staffing Needs

Finally, I have had to concentrate on staffing needs different from but just as demanding as those required by the traditional writing courses. I had not anticipated, for instance, the ways in which the transformation of my job would impact my work with teaching assistants in the department. I find myself spending more time than previously trying to meet the needs of the TAs. Certainly, supervising TAs always takes part of the WPA's attention. What I am finding, however, is that as their roles have become diversified, their needs have changed and grown. Rather than teaching only Freshman English, TAs now have several roles within the Writing Program, the English Department, and the university. The fact that they are no longer sharing the same teaching experience extends their training in valuable ways, but it also changes my approach to training and supervision. As we work together, we don't have the stabilizing factor of constructing teaching philosophies, syllabi, and core methodologies for a single course. Every teaching duty they are assigned has different expectations, different appropriate methodologies, sometimes very different time requirements, and almost always different power structures and hierarchies they have to traverse. I find myself doing a great deal more troubleshooting, in part because the TAs feel a great deal of angst around the centering of the writing program and their roles. As they find themselves in foreign territory they want more concrete directives from me, but I am rarely able to give them the kind of handbook response they feel they need. I am scrambling right along with them, trying desperately to prepare them for roles that are still creating themselves.

Likewise, the fixed-term writing faculty have found the rug yanked
rudely from beneath their feet. No longer the captains of their own classrooms, they have needed pushing to reimagine themselves and their work for this new structure. We have been working on forming a network of consultants whereby we would work with individual instructors or faculty teams on their self-identified needs. I have urged them to become involved in other areas of the university, say community service writing through our serve and learn program. I have begun to offer development seminars on teaching writing through distance learning and other on-line means. I have had to find ways of sparking their transformations as well as working to curb their resistance and panic.

I need staff as much as ever, and my staff need support in ways never required of me before, not just emotionally, but budgetarily as well. For instance, one writing instructor has been asked to consult with the new general education program at the sophomore level and with a pilot capstone. The reality is that this consultation is as demanding (time and preparation wise) as an additional course; this pushes her well over her fulltime four-course load for the Department. Since her consultant work does not break down into simple FTE like it would if she were teaching a course, we’ve hit another budget snag: nobody is paying her for this work, and the Department can not afford to simply release her from a course.

What Next?

The standard workload for WPAs is almost always unbearable but also almost always fairly routine. The channels for the work of the WPA are reasonably well in place. The loss of writing requirements has transformed my job, but not done away with it. I survive through fluidity; I am in the position of inventing new channels as I go. While much of what I have written here might seem negative, it isn’t overwhelmingly so. Right now my job is a like wild ride at the carnival, about as predictable as the weather. But it is also exciting, enables me to be innovative and critically important within the department as well as the university. In fact, the transformation of my job and the elimination of the traditional writing requirements have opened up doors I would not have known to look for. I am thinking specifically here of an opportunity to change the relationship of the Writing Program to the rest of the English Department.

As difficult as the economic and political complexities that this program change has thrown me into are, I think I now have a creative space between current reality and program vision. Consider, for instance, how the abolition of writing courses decenters not only the traditional funding sources, but the Writing Program and writing instruction as well. Consider that this decentering may well create a number of exciting possibilities for reimagining writing within the department. In its more “centered” spot the writing courses include an almost universal construction of writing as custodial service courses disdained by the university at large and especially by many of my literature colleagues. This decentering, however, changes the relationship between writing and literature and gives us a chance to change that pervasive disdain about the
teaching of writing. For the first time I have had literature colleagues, in their
distress over losing writing and what that has previously brought to the depart-
ment, express a belief that there are theories and practices—an actual discipline
of composition and rhetoric—that would require disciplinary study.

While I know that I want to capitalize on this shift in the attitudes of my
literature colleagues, I remain unsure as to what moves I will actually make. I
intend, however, to consider the possibility of moving the Writing Program out
of the English Department into a Writing Studies Department. Aware of all of the
dangers involved in that move, however, I simultaneously want to examine the
potentials for working within the department on an extensive composition and
rhetoric graduate degree and other programmatic changes that would move
writing to the center of the department’s work.

The changes at PSU represent larger reconfigurations of the university
that many WPAs will need to grapple with, and how we do so is the challenge of
the future. We need to be proactive, to take charge as best we can within these
transformations. And while reconfiguration may remain localized with different
scenarios for each of us, it will require us to reimagine who we are and what we
do. At Portland State I may not have traditional writing requirements to shep-
herd, but my work as Director of Writing remains challenging, complex, and
very rich.

Post Script: January 1998

A year and some months after finishing this essay I find it necessary to
supply readers with a brief update. Some, if not many of you, are now undergo-
ing similar kinds of innovations in your institutions, and you may well wonder
what has transpired more recently.

Let me say first of all that as we move into the halfway mark of the
fourth year of the program my job remains both exciting and frustrating. Several
trouble spots remain and are likely to for quite some time. The budget remains
fragmented and a rather nightmarish endeavor for the chair of the department.
Money is supposed to be transferred to our budget for the various aspects of the
Writing Program, but as our chair found out earlier this year when he was told
the books show him as $100,000 over budget, it more often than not is forgotten
or placed willy nilly into a services and supplies or other inappropriate account.
The accounting system at PSU is such that it can take hours to track down where
the money might be hiding. The chair and I have, of course, learned to be much
more scrupulous in following up on the transfer transactions of our many
different funding sources.

Assessment of writing in the new program continues slowly but steadily.
The dean of the program will report on assessment, including writing assess-
ment, to the faculty senate at its next meeting. Several discontented faculty are
prepared to launch an attack against the program at this meeting in hopes of
returning to the older program. Some may use the argument that students
coming out of the Freshman Inquiry sections can not read or write well. I neither
sanction nor support this attack; we simply don’t know enough, and the pro-
gram hasn’t had enough time to make such accusations.

Since the program was already conceived by the time I got here, one
simple but very useful step I have taken is to reexamine the original document
presenting the University Studies program to the university. This is the docu-
ment that the faculty senate voted to accept. Returning to this document has
allowed me to assess how well we have implemented faculty wishes regarding
writing. For instance, the document calls for a writing specialist on every team,
something that has never been enacted (mostly because some argue that if a
writing specialist is necessary so is a math specialist, a computer specialist and so
on). Pointing this out has given me a strong basis from which to argue for more
direct involvement from writing faculty. My report will be part of what is
presented to the faculty senate next month, making it possible that the faculty
will request that this original expectation be met. The document also states that
appropriate writing assessment and placement of incoming students will be
mandatory. This is an invaluable piece of information for me. The first two years
assessment was available only to those who attended orientation, and placement
into courses was merely a recommendation which only a handful of students
took. Bringing this disparity to the attention of the upper-administration has
resulted in a quasi-mandatory assessment and placement. While students have
been told that this is mandatory, there is not yet a system in place to enforce it.
The result is that I had to spend time hunting down individuals to take the
assessment, and 48% of the students placed in writing courses ignored the
placement. These dismal results, coupled with the fact that approximately 20% of
our students do not meet our already loose admissions standards, have startled
the right people into working with me to create a viable plan. They have realized
that this need is not based solely on the Writing Program’s self interest but on the
need to support a large percentage of high-risk students that had previously
received intensive writing instruction.

While things are still in the disruptive state that innovative transfor-
mation creates, much has fallen into place both for writing as it relates to the new
general education program and to my job as it has transformed itself in response
to this program. While I continue to serve on as many as fifteen committees, I am
now tenured. We have in place a variety of consulting models for those across
the university seeking support for the teaching of writing. As with most of us
who direct writing programs, the discussion about writing with colleagues from
across the disciplines is one of the most enjoyable parts of my job. Recently, more
and more faculty are seeking me out for ad hoc discussions on teaching writ-
ing—they are now interested in the theoretical background really needed to
teach writing. Writing faculty are branching out into community service writing,
distance learning, and other teaching now that the regular writing courses are
dwindling. They find themselves less panicked and more intrigued by the
opportunities that these changes afford them.

Within the department, along with others, I am focusing my energies on
strengthening the courses in composition and rhetoric, developing a center of excellence in writing at the MA level, and reconfiguring the English Department’s programmatic vision to include an integrative cultural studies approach that holds writing and rhetoric as central to its mission. My role as Director of Writing has changed drastically, but in spite of the many frustrations I remain challenged, excited, and more than willing to stay the course.

As I bring this postscript to an end, I’d like to caution that what is happening here at PSU is still in process, still unsettled, and thus what I have written here is not meant to stand as any final assessment of this new program, nor of the role writing plays in it. Rather, it is to tell a story, a story that is still being written, but one nonetheless that may help others in similar situations anticipate what they might face within their own institutional transformations. While we could all narrate our own stories of conflict, and mine may not be typical for everyone, it does reflect contemporary concerns of the field and the everyday (and not so everyday) stresses of being a WPA. This story like so many others of institutional and pedagogical change makes it clear that there is not one master narrative that represents our work. As participants in this community we are interested in its members, intrigued by dissimilar as well as familiar situations, and we need to listen to each other and help each other “read” the politics of our work. Our narratives may well mirror our postmodern world, and if so, your stories and my stories also are our key to surviving in it. In the ambiguity of postmodernism, one response is withdrawal. Another is oversimplification. But these responses will not make the ambiguity present in every situation, every text, every interaction, go away. We need to acknowledge the complexity of issues. Hopefully I have done that here, and in some small way have increased our ability to act wisely when conflict and transformation (inevitably) arise.

Note

1. Thanks to a generous grant from the WPA and a small faculty development grant from PSU I was able to take action on this research protocol.

Works Cited