

Department of English
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR 97331-5302

February 8, 2004

Brenda Deen Schildgen
Interim Director, University Writing Program
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA 95616

Dear Brenda,

Thanks very much for inviting me to come to UC Davis to talk with faculty members across the campus, as well as with Vice-Provost Pat Turner and Dean Elizabeth Langland. I enjoyed my two days on campus immensely—and I learned a lot. As you requested, I am writing now to convey some thoughts that I hope will prove helpful as you and your colleagues move forward. I will organize my thoughts according to the following categories: strengths, issues and concerns, and suggestions.

Strengths

I want to begin these comments by noting the many strengths that you and your colleagues can benefit from as you work to improve the University Writing Program (UWP). These include:

- The support of faculty across campus (particularly, of the Undergraduate Council), and of Vice-Provost Turner and Dean Langland;
- Recent financial commitments to the UWP on the part of Vice-Provost Turner;
- The support and involvement of English department chair David Robertson;
- A highly skilled and committed staff of continuing lecturers, who can mentor others who teach in the writing program and participate in curricular and administrative decision-making.

I want to add that in my short time on campus I can see how much you have accomplished as Interim Director. I was very impressed with the research you've undertaken on writing programs elsewhere and other issues related to the UWP. You have also clearly been an effective and insightful leader, one who has worked hard to ensure that all voices are heard and all feel part of the process of change.

Issues and Concerns

Whenever faculty and administrators attempt to effect significant change, issues and concerns arise, so it's hardly surprising that they should surface in ongoing efforts to improve the UWP. In that context, here are some observations that you and your colleagues may find it helpful to consider.

- Because of the diverse number of constituents who are served by—and invested in--the UWP, there is the potential for misunderstanding and for unnecessary

competition. Faculty across campus, for instance, have as their primary interest the improvement of undergraduate student writing. Quite reasonably, they are less concerned whether changes in the UWP might negatively affect the graduate program in the English department. This is, however, a central concern for English department faculty. Lecturers in the UWP have their own issues. When I had lunch with a group of instructors, they expressed considerable frustration about not being able to vote on curricular issues that directly affect their teaching and on related issues. Given the important role that lecturers play in the UWP, these concerns need to be part of ongoing conversations about the Program.

In this regard, it will be helpful if all involved in the process of change can: a) acknowledge the extent to which their perspective is grounded in their situation; and b) attempt to understand the perspectives of others, recognizing that others' perspectives are as legitimate as their own. Obviously, given the new vision for the UWP, negotiation and compromise will be necessary; it is easier to do so when those involved acknowledge the complex and situated nature of both their and others' concerns.

- This leads to a second observation. I noticed when I was on campus that there was considerable interest in the question of who “owns” the curriculum of the UWP. While I understand that the metaphor of “owning” the curriculum is a common one at UC Davis and that it grows out of faculty members' appropriate concerns for maintaining control of the curriculum, in the case of the UWP those involved in discussion about its future might find a different metaphor at times helpful. It's interesting to consider the implications of “owning” a curriculum. If you own something, you can do what you will with it. You can devour it (in the case of food), destroy it (in the case of an item of clothing), or neglect it (as in the case of knick knacks that, once placed in a room, are forgotten). The simple fact of owning something means that you have no responsibility to others—unless, of course, you can harm them in some way (as in the case of cars or other vehicles). What if the metaphor of caretaking or custodianship were at times substituted for the metaphor of “owning” the curriculum? This would emphasize the fact that developing, maintaining, and revising a curriculum is a responsibility. It is also a reminder that the UWP serves students across the curriculum and thus differs in key ways from the English department major or graduate program.

Suggestions

I do have one suggestion with regard to the UWP. In reflecting on my visit to campus, I realized that most of the discussions about changes in the UWP focused on the question of where the UWP should be located and what the Director's reporting lines would be. This is certainly a key issue, one that needs to be resolved. But there are additional questions having to do with the vision that is being articulated for the UWP. As you

know, this vision includes hiring an endowed chair in rhetoric and composition and four ladder faculty.

It seems essential that both Senate and Federation faculty in English have an opportunity to respond to this vision, and to articulate their own relationship to it. You may find it difficult to hire an endowed professor, for instance, if the English department's commitment to rhetoric and composition seems unclear or uncertain. As you may be aware, English departments in the UC system have been slow to embrace rhetoric and composition as a scholarly discipline. UC Davis has an opportunity to distinguish itself as a leader in both the teaching of writing and in research in rhetoric and composition. But any Director of the newly envisioned UWP will seek reassurance that the English department values this area and is willing to hire and tenure faculty who represent the broad range of scholarly and pedagogical work in the field—not just research that in some way grows out of or is aligned with such projects as literary and critical theory, cultural studies, and feminist studies. I say this not to question the importance of these projects; indeed, much of my recent research reflects engagement with them. There are other equally significant areas of research in rhetoric and composition, such as historical and ethnographic research on literacy, computers, composition, and digital communication, professional writing, collaborative learning and writing, writing program administration, etc. Diversity of research and teaching interests on the part of ladder faculty would strengthen both the UWP and the English department. This diversity already exists among lecturers and clearly represents a major strength of the UWP as it is currently constituted.

A related issue involves the role that tenure-line faculty in rhetoric and composition might play. Would they take on administrative responsibilities as part of their assignment? Would these be new responsibilities or responsibilities currently undertaken by lecturers? These are questions that need to be discussed by all who have something at stake in the UWP—but especially by the lecturers, who have given and will continue to give so much to the program. For some time now, the lecturers in the UWP have experienced considerable autonomy in their working situation—even if as Federation and not Senate faculty they have not been able to vote on key elements of the curriculum and on other important matters. They have clearly played—and should continue to play—a central role in the writing program at UC Davis. It is important that they not experience the hiring of ladder faculty in rhetoric and composition as disempowering. For this reason, they need to be fully involved in discussions not only about the future of the UWP as a curricular program but also about the impact of hiring tenure-line faculty in rhetoric and composition on their professional situations.

My own sense is that under the new vision for the UWP there will be a need for both ladder faculty and lecturers to participate in the development and administration of ongoing and new programs. Currently, lecturers play such a role in Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric and in the University of Michigan's Sweetland Center. The lecturers in the UWP at UC Davis have administrative and pedagogical expertise that is

central to the effectiveness of the Program, and they should continue to play an important role in its development.

These are exciting times for rhetoric and writing on your campus. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss these developments with faculty and administrators when I was on campus, and I hope you find these comments helpful. Thanks again for all you did to make my time in Davis so rewarding.

Sincerely,

Lisa Ede
Professor of English
Director, Center for Writing and Learning

CC: Patricia Turner, Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Studies
Elizabeth Langland, Dean of HARCS, College of Letters and Science
Joe Kiskis, Chair, Undergraduate Council
David Robertson, Chair, English Department