

May 6, 2004

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

Dear Brenda:

Thank you once again for inviting me to visit your school and talk with your colleagues in the University Writing Program and across the campus. I was impressed with the commitment of the undergraduate council, the lecturers, and the non-English faculty to the improvement of student writing and the development of a strong central program. I understand that you have already moved forward with some changes; I hope my observations and suggestions can still be helpful to you in your efforts to build an excellent program for everyone concerned.

As others have indicated, what is primarily at stake in the further development of the University Writing Program is how location, staffing, and credit hours will impact the English department, particularly the size and strength of the graduate program. The demand for required writing courses makes possible numerous stipends and aids recruitment in the PhD program. However, the relegation of undergraduate writing to non-tenure track lecturers with no voice in department matters and little interaction with literature faculty indicates a certain forfeiture of rights and authority over the delivery of instruction, the requirement of which presumes a transferability of skills learned to other disciplines and professions. The impression is such that other disciplines and professions outside of English have a stake in writing instruction that English has taken for granted.

One possible obstacle I see to developing respect for the UWP as both a research and teaching enterprise is the current absence of faculty specializing in rhetoric and composition studies within the English department. The authority tied to specialization does not seem to have a presence in the department. I was told at one point that graduate teaching assistants in the English department resisted the methods suggested to them by their lecturer advisers with years of experience teaching the writing courses. The fact that the last director of composition hired in the department was not a rhetoric/composition specialist might indicate a lack of respect for the field that is not conducive to attracting faculty in rhetoric/composition. However, having neither a graduate concentration in rhetoric/composition nor a tenure-line composition specialist as a writing program administrator could actually be advantageous for the UWP's forging a strong identity apart from English across the entire university.

Here are my suggestions:

1. Establish a university-wide writing program that will deliver writing course instruction, train writing teachers, and also offer discipline-specific one-on-one writing

tutorials and consulting with faculty across the curriculum wishing to incorporate or assess writing in their courses.

2. For such a program to succeed and endure, its staff cannot be continually worried about their value in the departments that would evaluate their scholarship, perhaps more than their contributions to the program itself. If the UWP is to be considered a research center as well, the research it conducts should advance the further development of the program and the knowledge of the faculty across campus who may have their own questions about the use of writing in their courses; the research should not merely advance the careers of its scholar/director(s). To that end, I do not envision your developing a Ph-D granting research program, but a self-reflective, developmental one.
3. Try not to make acceptance by the English department (with its concerns for scholarly profile and “people we can talk to”) the chief criterion in hiring the Director of the UWP if you truly want someone whose specialty is interdisciplinary discourse and writing instruction and whose experience will help you develop a state-of-the-art program that serves the entire campus. The supervisory board comprised of faculty and administrators from the whole campus indicates to me the value UC-Davis places on this program and its work; needless to say, this value cannot be categorized using the traditional scholarship/teaching/service breakdown characteristic of other faculty members.
4. While, in addition to the director, several “associate director” tenure-track lines are highly desirable for the UWP, similarly, carefully consider what expertise in interdisciplinary writing the candidates have to offer before considering what department on campus will be willing to give them tenure. Perhaps these associate directors do not need to be tenure-line positions, if they can be permanent and well-compensated.
5. Consider capitalizing more on the UWP lecturers’ expertise. A number of them have considerable experience with discipline-specific writing course design and with the challenges in writing for particular disciplines—knowledge far beyond what interchangeable comp instructors know. In a center devoted to consulting, assessment, and research as well as instruction, the knowledge these veteran teachers possess is gold. Mine it.
6. If English department TA’s and post-doctoral fellows are to work for the UWP, this assignment should be considered an opportunity and not a given, a liability, or a less than desirable assignment. Otherwise, you will be ham-stringing the director and risking serious damage to the program. Candidates from all fields, not just English, should apply for the positions and demonstrate relevant experience, interest, and strong course evaluations. Regardless of their primary doctoral specialty, individuals working for the UWP will expand their expertise considerably. Additional experience in interdisciplinary writing instruction, team-teaching, and consulting will be an enormous asset for UC-Davis English PhD’s (or non-English PhD’s) facing the job market.. Anyone who does not think so has not taken a look at the job listings lately.

Lastly, let me say what a pleasure it was to spend a few days with you, Brenda, talking frankly about the complex practices and politics of writing instruction at a large research university. UC-Davis is fortunate to have someone as wise and concerned as you overseeing this operation. I wish you and your colleagues the best of luck in all your negotiations.

Sincerely,

Christine Farris
Director of Composition
Associate Professor