

March 10, 2004

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Dear Brenda,

Thanks for inviting me to talk with your faculty about the teaching of writing at UC-Davis. You have a critical mass of people who are committed to strengthening undergraduate teaching at Davis, you and Joe Kiskis are doing a terrific job of responding to their often competing views, and I strongly believe that you are on the right track in establishing the University Writing Program as a separate academic unit with its own Director. Indeed no one that I spoke to while I was on campus voiced any serious opposition to this move, so I suspect that you are now poised to make real strides in improving how writing gets taught at Davis. Here are some of the issues I'd encourage you to consider as you do so:

- *Work towards the practical enfranchisement of the lecturers in the University Writing Program:* It is clear that as a group the lecturers feel angry and alienated. They spoke with me for 90 minutes in clear and eloquent detail about what they see as the unfair conditions of their work. I am not in a position to arbitrate who is right or wrong in the ongoing set of disputes over job security, workloads, and the like, but I did leave this conversation thinking that Davis would have an exceptional resource if you could redirect the considerable intellectual energy that the lecturers are now expending in the close analysis of their working conditions back to the actual work of teaching. I understand that Faculty Senate procedures restrict the rights that can be granted formally to the writing program lecturers, but the more they are meaningfully consulted in practice about matters of curriculum and personnel, the more valuable a resource they will be to the Program.
- *Reach some clear if flexible decision about which departments will house and support regular-rank faculty associated with the Writing Program:* The Clark Kerr Chair offers you a chance not only to reaffirm your commitment to undergraduate education but to establish Davis as a key site of work in the emerging field of rhetoric and composition. Unfortunately, the English department does not at present show much interest in supporting scholarly work in this new field. As a tenured English professor and compositionist, I myself would hesitate to consider moving to a department, which seemed to view my role in service-terms alone. I would be even more reluctant to do so if I were a junior faculty member without tenure. Faculty members in the Writing Program should have the chance to teach graduate and advanced undergraduate courses in their field of specialty, and they should feel sure that any scholarship they do in composition will be evaluated without prejudice. For these reasons, I would suggest that, if possible, the first two or three faculty appointments to the Writing Program be made with tenure,

so that the scholars coming to Davis to lead this initiative can feel sure that both the university and their colleagues welcome and support their efforts.

- *Begin to develop a plan for the meaningful assessment of teaching in the University Writing Program:* Few if any of the competing claims I heard at Davis for the desirability of hiring one category or the other of writing instructors—lecturers, postdocs, graduate students, *et al.*—seemed to be based, so far as I could determine, on any direct evidence concerning the quality of their work in the classroom. As a result the debate over directions for the Program often tended to appear more political than intellectual in character. To remedy this situation, you need to develop a current and reasonably detailed view of the sorts of work going on in Davis writing classrooms. In addition to tracking standard student course evaluations, I would suggest requiring instructors to submit teaching portfolios for review when they come up for reappointment, as well as conducting some sort of text-based analysis of student learning outcomes in key courses. As examples of such work, I am attaching here a copy of the Guidelines for Teaching Portfolios and a Report on a recent writing assessment project we conducted at Duke.
- *Limit staffing through entitlements:* In order to teach college writing, you should have to be good at doing it, or at least show a strong promise of becoming so. Teaching writing should not be simply a means of buying time in order to prepare to do something else. It can be enormously destructive to faculty morale when committed teachers begin to suspect that some of their colleagues are indifferent to the goals and intellectual work of the Writing Program. And certainly undergraduates (and their parents) should know that that they are being taught by instructors whose work has been trained and supervised by experts in teaching writing. For all these reasons, you want to have as many courses as possible in the Writing Program taught by instructors who have been carefully screened before being hired and whose teaching is meaningfully and regularly reviewed.

I hope these comments prove useful. I'm sorry to be a little slow in delivering them to you, but I was called out of town last week by an illness in the family. Please don't hesitate to let me know if I can be of any further help to you.

Sincerely,

Joseph Harris, Director

**Enc:** Guidelines for Teaching Portfolios  
Report on Writing 20 Assessment Project

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