

Team #8: Administrative Rearrangement

To: Department of English
From: Administrative Rearrangement Team

Introduction

The Administrative Rearrangement Team thought it could best serve its function by building models and formulating hypotheses rather than by analyzing empirical data and drawing concrete conclusions. The following report, therefore, is more general than specific; it attempts to ask relevant questions rather than provide substantive answers.

Report

I. What arguments may be made in favor of departmental structure for an administrative and instructional unit we might call the Department of Writing?

A. A quantitative argument: the sheer number of students who take applied writing courses suggests that the semi-autonomy departmental status allows would make for a smoother running, more effective bureaucracy to better serve these students.

B. A pragmatic argument based on the economic metaphor of supply and demand; the large and growing enrollments in writing courses do not stem solely from University course requirements. Optional courses in technical and creative writing are also in great demand--as are upper-division courses in expository writing. Since the demand is there, we should match it with the most complex "supply mechanisms" available. The economic image is not metaphorical only; by formula funding rules, such a department might even turn a profit!

C. A social argument: the decline in literacy is a serious social problem. If universities are supposed to satisfy social needs where appropriate, then it is our duty to erect the most sophisticated structure we can to best meet those needs.

D. A qualitative argument: effective writing is a unique skill, one difficult to master and one difficult to teach. A Department of Writing would have the autonomy necessary to determine its own basic premises; its own bureaucracy; its own coherent course types, contents, structures, and sequences; and the makeup of its own professionally trained faculty. The complexity of departmental form would best match the qualitative complexity of the department's function.

II. What would be the range of subject matter taught in a Department of Writing? The three broad possibilities are:

A. Writing skills necessary for efficient literacy: freshman, sophomore, and upper-division expository and persuasive writing. Presumably, such a Department of Writing would have no majors, offer no degree.

B. A full range of applied writing skills, several of which could be the student's chief entree into professional life--expository, technical, and creative writing, among others. Under this system a degree granting department is possible but not necessary.

C. Not only the applied writing skills of IIA and IIB but also broadly developed conceptual skills. The curriculum of such a department might include upper division courses like Discourse Theory, History of Classical Rhetoric, Communication and Culture, and whatnot. This would be a true departmental system as conventionally defined, in all likelihood offering graduate courses and degrees in addition to undergraduate.

III. What arguments may be made against departmental structure for an administrative and instructional unit called the Department of Writing?

A. Arguments against IIA (efficient writing skills only):

- (1) The complexity of an administrative structure should be directly related to the complexity of its task. Complexity does not stem from sheer numbers but from heterogeneity within the population served and the tasks required. If these two are fairly homogeneous, and thus relatively non-complex, then a complex administrative structure would be dysfunctional.
- (2) The current decline in literacy may be a short term phenomenon. A department set up to serve mostly first semester composition students may within a decade, say, be faced with seriously declining enrollments.
- (3) It may be difficult to hire fulltime faculty to teach only courses in efficient writing skills.
- (4) There is little precedent for the existence of a university department offering courses in efficient skills only and no major.

B. Arguments against IIB (applied writing skills only):

- (1) If the department be a non-degree granting one, then argument IIIA(4) above can be made.
- (2) If the department offers a major, is there sufficient job demand for its graduates? Even if there is sufficient job demand for applied writing majors, do the curricula of other existing departments already supply the training required for most such employment? For instance, the School of Communications--especially Radio-Television-Film? (e.g., J312, Writing for the Mass Media; J314, Copy Editing; J321J, Intensive Writing and Editing; J322, News Reporting; J327, Feature Writing; J375, Magazine Editing.)

C. Arguments against IIC (a Department of Rhetoric rather than of Writing):

- (1) While this system would be a true department as conventionally conceived, may it not be too close to the existing system with its English Department hegemony? Lumping such courses as freshman composition, creative writing, and Platonian and Aristotelian Theories of rhetoric into the same administrative category may create a department riven with internal dissension. Our existing problems would be reconstituted, not solved.

D. Arguments against all three, IIA, IIB, and IIC:

(1) If all other variables such as class size, teaching load requirements, number of compulsory English courses under Plan I degree, and others remain constant, then taking even just freshman writing courses away from English Department jurisdiction would require a major change in that department's faculty needs. A significant number of English faculty would be redundant. One obvious solution (employing redundant faculty in the new Department of Writing or Rhetoric) would do not much more than perpetuate problems of the existing system (teaching staff non-specialists, overwork, faculty teaching mostly courses they consider of small intellectual stimulation, etc.). Even if firing of faculty were to be mitigated by reducing teaching loads, and so forth, no new English faculty could be hired for many years to come. Result: stagnation of English studies at the University.

IV. What possible solutions are there that offer a minimum of problems and a maximum of advantages? Again, three broad possibilities suggest themselves:

A. Create a Department of Rhetoric of the IIC type with its own governing council. The Department will hire enough specialist faculty to serve its upper-division and graduate course needs. For lower division and some upper-division courses, the Department of Rhetoric could draw upon English Department faculty on a systematic basis, thus allowing English faculty to meet their teaching load obligations. Staff remaining freshman writing sections with Assistant Instructors and Teaching Assistants drawn from pool of both Rhetoric and English Department graduate students. If the number of graduate students in English Department remains constant and Rhetoric Department attracts a goodly number of new graduate students to its specialist program, eventually the need for a floating "pool" of temporary Instructors (a reliance on whom, some think, is a serious problem with our existing system) may be eliminated.

B. Keep the existing system as is, with all instruction in writing and rhetoric in the English Department's charge, but make a systematic effort to involve English faculty more deeply in the teaching of writing/rhetoric. For instance, increase substantially the size of the Freshman English Policy Committee; be less selective in appointing members to that committee; encourage team-taught courses which integrate literary criticism and applied writing; institute seminars for non-writing specialists in order to sharpen their skills as instructors; make writing/rhetoric expertise a major criterion when hiring new English Department faculty.

C. Leave the existing system as is and allow it to follow its evidently current path of natural evolution, adaptation, selection. As more new faculty are hired who have significant training in writing/rhetoric, and as existing faculty willy-nilly teach more writing courses, we will all come to see that teaching writing is worthwhile, challenging, and professionally satisfying and all become more effective instructors of writing. Continue in our quest to make the higher administration more aware of the relatively unique nature of writing instruction so that they may adjust accordingly their criteria for evaluating faculty achievement, workload, worth, and so forth.

Team members: David F. Beer; Roger dev. Renwick (Ch.); Sue Rodi; Richard K. Simon; John A. Walter.