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FUNDING AND SUPPORT FOR BASIC WRITING: WHY IS THERE SO LITTLE?

ABSTRACT: Knowing how higher education is organized and how it functions can enable basic writing teachers to improve both the status and the funding of their programs. This paper describes those features of higher education which organizational analysts consider crucial to the budgeting process and suggests actions which teachers can take to revise the reputations and the budgets of basic writing programs.

Originally, I wrote the proposal for this discussion in response to the first question in the call for proposals for the National Basic Writing Conference, which read, "Are our institutions reneging on their commitment to at-risk students?" And my initial answer was, "Yes." As I began to write, however, I also began to wonder. When, exactly, had this commitment to at-risk students occurred?

Maybe, I originally thought, it was during the mid-70s when there was so much spirited and excited discussion of *Errors and Expectations* and I was teaching basic writing at a state university which encouraged enrollment by inner-city, at-risk students. But then I remembered my inner-city basic writing students who had enrolled in an accelerated medical school prep program because

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they could not afford four years of college and another four years of medical school. These students were told, immediately after the English placement test, that they had one quarter—2½ months—to pass the basic writing exam or they would be eliminated from the Bio-Med program, which they had not even yet begun.

Or maybe the commitment existed during the early 80s. Those were the years when some of my basic writing students had to come to campus at 7 a.m. to see me, if they needed help, because I was a Southern California freeway flier, teaching six writing classes at four different campuses. I needed to leave immediately after the 7:30-8:30 a.m. class to drive to my 10 o'clock class on another campus, and many of my students began work at 9 a.m. No Writing Center existed to help them during the evening and so, in order to adapt to their schedules and mine, we tried late-night telephonic tutoring, a method I recommend to absolutely no one.

Or maybe, I finally thought, there was a commitment during the mid-80s when college after college publicly stated its belief in the value of "diversity" and wooed Black and Hispanic students, and returning adults to offset the anticipated decrease in "traditional students." But then I remembered being told in 1987, in a community college, that the administrative response to a financial emergency was a plan to eliminate the salaries of all of the professional Writing Center tutors in mid-March because, "most students have probably been helped by then."

I'm sure that all of you have your own war stories. The point of mine is that in 15 years of teaching basic writing from California to Virginia, I missed the commitment, whenever—or wherever—it was. And although the recession has certainly decimated many of our budgets, I suspect that this has occurred because we never did have support within our institutions.

In looking through the tentative program for the National Basic Writing Conference, I was fascinated by the number of architectural metaphors: David Bartholomae's tidy house, William Lalicker's basement, and Richard Siciliano's bridge reminded me of my own long-standing metaphor for basic writing: the top shelf in the closet of the spare room.

This metaphor originated in Ernest Boyer and Arthur Levine's 1972 comparison of the college curriculum to the rooms in a house in an article entitled, "The Spare Room." They described the portion of each student's program devoted to study of a major (approximately 1/3) as the faculty room: the faculty furnish the

major with courses, keep it clean of unwanted intrusions, and enjoy it, because the major provides them with an opportunity to duplicate themselves, surely an ego-fulfilling endeavor. The portion of the curriculum, about another 1/3, which the students own, love, and sometimes invent, are electives.

General education, the final third, "does not belong to anyone in particular—not the faculty, not the students, not the administration"; hence, Boyer and Levine call it the "spare room." In my mind, basic writing, with other developmental studies, does not live IN the spare room but rather is hidden from almost everyone's view—including most of those who teach general education courses—on the top shelf of the infrequently opened spare room closet.

Living in a closet, as gay men and lesbians discovered long ago, is unpleasant: it necessitates the constant pretense of being something else, of identifying ourselves as teachers of "English" or "literature" or "composition," rather than basic writing. By using the closet as a metaphor, I do not mean to imply that our problems are as severe as those of gay men and lesbians, but I do think that there are similarities. The closeted existence intimates that what we do—teaching students who have somehow fallen through the educational cracks—and what we are—dedicated professionals who do among the most demanding jobs in the institution—are, somehow, shameful, and that recognizing our presence, let alone our value, will destroy traditional "educational values" which seem more and more, to me, like the recently much-touted traditional "family values." It would be fairly stupid to spend much money on a closet—for faculty positions, for facilities, for improved assessment tools—and the people who make budgetary decisions in higher education may be unfair but they are not often stupid.

I would like to suggest that part of our problem is that we know so little about the house we inhabit: higher education, and that, if we are to jump from the shelf and pry open the closet door, we need to know about the ways our institutions work, and to gather support among faculty and administrators who live in other rooms in the house.

The most realistic description which I have read for how higher education functions is that it is an "organized anarchy," a phrase coined, again, by Cohen and March. There are two sources of the anarchy: ambiguity and individualism. A university is not a busi-

ness like an insurance agency with definite unambiguous goals. Nor is it a manufacturing plant with a clear, easily measurable technology; the closest we come to a technology is teaching, an activity that involves as much art as skill and that is fraught with ambiguity. Thus, although there are bureaucratic structures, hierarchies of decision-making, in colleges and universities, these structures often do not, as they would seem to, govern all decisions about funding in a rational way.

Although the AAUP, and many of us, would like colleges and universities to be consensus-bound collegiums, most are not that either. Faculty senates have varying amounts of power, but the larger the institution, or the more diverse its activities, the more the faculty senate, although retaining its role as a forum for debate, lacks the resources to implement decisions which depend on funding.

In this anarchical situation, decisions for support and funding are often the by-products, not of efficiently implementing unambiguous goals through a bureaucratic chain nor the result of a consensus reached by professionals, but of unintended and/or unplanned activity; and they are often only loosely connected to even an ambiguous goal such as developing the mind and character of the students. Grants come, and grants go, and interpretations of goals often tend to adapt themselves to the circumstances rather than the other way around. On paper, power may seem to be hierarchical or consensual, but universities are, in truth, places of extreme individuality. Most professors have a great deal of freedom to decide what, when, and whom to teach. Students have an enormous amount of freedom to decide what, when, and where to study. Legislators and donors decide, often without knowing or understanding the system, what, when, and whom to fund.

Anarchy results because of the constant conflict between bureaucratic structures and consensual ones and because of the confused perceptions of many of the people who work in higher education. Some people function as though their institutions were pure bureaucracies, becoming confused, frustrated, and angry when they encounter a situation in which ambiguity rather than clarity is the norm. In my previous example of cutting tutors' salaries, the plan was not initiated by a college business manager or by a dean but by a biologist on an ad hoc Cost Management Committee who told me for several years that tutors were superfluous because writing was easy to teach. As she put it, repeatedly, "Nouns

haven't changed in a thousand years."

Other people, functioning in the notion that shared governance is a reality rather than an ideal, believe that faculty always have the power to make and execute decisions; they become confused and frustrated when it becomes clear that the registrar, not the faculty, has the real power. Others function as though no rules exist at all, the muddle is hopeless, and they are totally powerless.

This anarchy, however, is an organized one, and analysts like Victor Baldridge and Cohen and March have studied it in order to determine the rules by which it functions. I rarely find the political lens through which these analysts view higher education comforting, but I do find that knowing the unwritten rules and customs clarifies the problems and makes personal goal setting more feasible and actions more successful.

I want to discuss six characteristics of higher education which Baldridge explains and state the implications for our actions if we are to be successful in increasing support and, subsequently funding, for basic writing.

The first characteristic is that, in decision-making in higher education, inactivity, rather than activity, prevails. Limited amounts of both time and energy mean that most faculty and most administrators, most of the time, dedicate themselves to their own projects, their own teaching, or their own research. Therefore, most decisions are made by a small number of faculty and administrators. The lesson here, for each of us, is to participate—both formally and informally as much as is humanly possible. We need to seek committee membership; and identify ourselves on committees as teachers of basic writing. The only way that we can gain legitimate status is for influential people within the organization to hear our names and our concerns—over and over again.

Informal participation is easier for some—particularly part-timers and nontenured faculty—than is formal participation. Luckily, it is still true in colleges and universities, that as many projects are begun around the coffee pot as at the conference table. We need to eat lunch with people from other departments. We need to have coffee one floor up or one building over—in the economics department, or with the physicists. If necessary, we need to invent errands which take us into unfamiliar territory, and again, introduce ourselves as people in basic writing.

An example: A very politically astute colleague of mine, a part-time tutor and part-time teacher at a small, liberal arts college, and

a very early riser, realized in October of her first semester, that the man with whom she was having coffee at 7:30 a.m. in the faculty room was the president emeritus of the institution, a man who still had enormous influence within the college. She began to tell stories about her students' backgrounds and their successes, and, occasionally, brought in a particularly interesting paper. The president emeritus became fascinated by how one taught, as he put it, "those impossible students," and so the basic writing instructor told him. Within a few months, the elderly man's respect grew, and he began talking to other administrators and to trustees about the wonderful job being done in the tutoring center and the basic writing classes.

When a proposal was made to convert the tutoring center into office space, he lobbied against the idea so successfully that the tutoring center was given other, much better, space and all new furniture. A small victory perhaps but a victory won by a part-time, untenured instructor.

The second characteristic Baldridge discusses is that participation in decision-making processes tends to be fluid. Thus, different people with different sets of concerns will be present each time a proposal is discussed. A chemist who comes to every curriculum committee meeting when a new science requirement is being planned may stay in the lab once discussion turns to the general education curriculum. The lesson here is to persist. An enormous number of decisions made in any institution affect some basic writing students; we need to be their advocates; to say who we are, and say it frequently. When we have projects and requests, and surely we have many, we need to get on every agenda every week or every month, so that the issues of basic writing and other developmental studies cannot be forgotten.

The third characteristic of "organized anarchy" is that conflict is natural. Partially because of the anarchic situation and partially because of academicians' love of discussion, argument is a constant part of the process of making decisions, particularly in a situation of limited resources. We need not be frightened by conflict but expect it and prepare for it by mustering statistics, arguments, and personal anecdotes; by analyzing the opposition; by remembering all those principles we tell our students about well-constructed persuasive argument.

As in national politics, interest groups are often more powerful than the formal structure would indicate. We need to think about

who, in our institutions, are our natural allies. Most of us are housed in English departments, but surely literature and composition professors are not our only allies; sometimes, they are not our allies at all. Possible other allies include a multicultural office or organization, the athletic office, developmental psychologists, the admissions office, the people who teach developmental math— and any discipline, from physics to philosophy, which requires writing. If we cannot serve on the committees which govern our budgets, we need as many people watching out for our health as we can gather.

Surely, the greatest untapped pool of allies is our students and their parents. Many of our students leave us to become very successful people: both as students in the university and as alumni. We can make sure that they remember us, and that they lobby for our work, in both the private and the public sector.

A system in which both time and energy for decision-making are scarce can be overloaded easily. Overloading occurs when there are more decisions to be made than there are time and energy to make them. And the result of overloading is that decisions tend to be made further and further away from the formal structure, which becomes bogged down with details. We can purposely overload our systems, and then gain, perhaps through oversight, by asking for multiple things simultaneously. We can ask for more staff, for funds for professional development, for more space, for funding for research—you can add to the list. Any one project may be defeated, at any one time, but some projects will, surely, be successful.

Finally, in a period of budget reduction, Judith Hackman, an organizational analyst, argues that budgeting is more a political than a rational process and that those departments which are perceived as central to the mission of the institution fare best. We are central to the missions of our institutions, but we are frequently not perceived that way. I believe that it is within our power to change that perception. When we talk to administrators and to other faculty, when we talk on committees, we need to use the language of the goals of our institutions and to explain over and over how closely those goals are tied to the work we do with at-risk students. Words like "diversity," and "multicultural" and phrases like "nondiscrimination based on age or race," and "commitment to fulfilling needs of individual students," need to become part of our everyday vocabularies. We need to revise the

histories of our institutions to include stories about our successful students: the basic writer who matured into a novelist, or the basic writer who became a congress person. Our stories of students overcoming adversity need to become part of the institutional lore which informally influences so many decisions.

I believe that we also need to examine our place in the structure of our institutions. Most of us are housed in English departments. We need to question whether we will ever be perceived as central to the missions of our colleges if we are a subunit of composition, which is a subunit of the English department. We need to think seriously about moving toward a structure, such as a Developmental Studies Department, which will be perceived as more central to the mission of the institution and which will give us more direct access to the sources of funding.

I want to conclude with four avenues out of the closet and into the entryway, where we belong. First, we need to study the power structures of our institutions, to learn what is, not what seems to be. We must find out who makes budgetary decisions, both formally and informally, when these decisions are made, and what people and what departments have discretionary funds.

Second, we need to publicize what we do, who our students are, what diverse segments of the population they represent, how valuable they are to the institution, and how integral our work is.

We need to organize for action: request or sponsor meetings of basic writing teachers on our campuses to figure out who has what knowledge, and what contacts, figure out what we need and who has the power to help us and then divide up tasks according to ability and interest. We need to formulate a conscious political plan.

Finally and most importantly, I think that we need to talk, something we love to do and something I think we do very well. But we need not to preach to the choir, but to those professors and administrators who truly do not know who we are or what we do. We can tell stories about our work; we can encourage physicists and sociologists to read Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*; we can comment about how much more challenging and how much more fulfilling it is to teach the underprepared than the already prepared. And when we reach the well-lit entryway on our individual campuses, we can make sure that we talk to each other in forums such as these about how we got there.

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