

## RECRUITING, TRAINING, AND SUPPORTING VOLUNTEER BASIC WRITING INSTRUCTORS: A WORKING PROGRAM

Five years ago, Stockton inaugurated a basic skills competence requirement. Since then, freshmen unable to prove their competence in writing, reading and critical thinking, and basic mathematics on a placement exam have been required to take courses in their areas of deficiency. In outline, nothing in Stockton's program distinguishes it from hundreds of others trying to guarantee that students have the basic skills needed to take advantage of a college education.

When devising the program, Stockton acted on the premise that the requirement would succeed only with a major institutional commitment to teaching and reinforcing basic skills across the curriculum. Not only the common sense of "practice makes perfect" underlines this premise. Long ago Albert Kitzhaber described the consequences of the "message" institutions send through their requirements. His analysis of the curriculum of Dartmouth College indicated that freshman English, whether it taught freshmen how to think, read, and write or not, did convince freshmen that writing was important--but only for a little while and in particular courses. Students learned their lesson so well, in fact, that many would apply only what minimal effort they believed was required when writing in subsequent courses. In many courses, therefore, samples indicated that students were writing with less proficiency than before the required English course. The English requirement taught students how to manipulate language, but the curriculum did not require them to perform at any consistent level of proficiency.<sup>1</sup>

The whole of Kitzhaber's analysis of institutional efforts to teach writing merits attention, but his greatest contribution is illustrating the importance of the "message" sent through the requirements. Total institutional commitment allows a requirement to have power. Students must practice the required skill regularly across the curriculum. Faculty must consciously reinforce the requirement by demanding frequent performance at a consistent level of proficiency.

When Stockton devised its basic skills requirement, the institution was sensitive to this problem of "message." Certain features, including a policy to dismiss students unable to reach competence, were included to reflect

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*Christopher C. Burnham was Director of Writing at Stockton State College (Pomona, N.J.) from 1975-81. He is now Coordinator for Writing at New Mexico State University.*

<sup>1</sup> Albert Kitzhaber, *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).

institutional commitment. The college believes that with intensive instruction, extensive support, and extraordinary commitment, severe deficiencies can be remedied in a short time. Instruction and support are provided by the institution, and the dismissal policy serves to enrich student commitment. Students invest great effort in the program since they have so much to gain--or lose--as a result of their performance.

In addition, as a young institution, we were free to deal with basic skills in new ways. Foremost among these innovations was a plan to staff basic skills courses with faculty from across the college. Such staffing would show students that basic skills are fundamental to every discipline. More important, faculty participating in the program would return to discipline courses with a practical understanding of basic skills and how to reinforce them in their discipline courses. While such a staffing plan might cause problems, the college believed the outcome justified the effort.

At Stockton, basic skills courses are not staffed by overworked skills faculty, underpaid adjuncts, inexperienced teaching assistants, or discipline "retreads." We staff the courses with volunteers from across the college. These faculty are trained by a small core of skills specialists and supported by a Skills Center staffed with trained peer tutors. We call these volunteers "rotating faculty." After training and with support, they teach in the program on a semester-by-semester basis. A volunteer contributes a course every year or so on a rotating basis. Volunteers range from dance instructors to chemists, and both junior and senior faculty participate in the program. The program depends on the idea that faculty members are professional writers, having generally earned their credentials through research and writing. Our training program raises these skills to consciousness and develops them so they can be channeled for instruction. The balance of this paper will outline our program for recruiting, training, and supporting rotating faculty for basic writing courses.

## RECRUITING FACULTY

One of our tasks while recruiting is providing rotating faculty with a description of Stockton's basic writer. Not only does this help volunteers decide whether to participate or not, it also begins to prepare them for the task.

Roughly a third of all entering freshmen take a basic writing course. We use the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test to determine which students will take the course.<sup>2</sup> Placement depends largely on a holistically scored impromptu writing sample. All who score below the state-wide median automatically enter basic writing courses. In terms of verbal SAT

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<sup>2</sup> Two publications describe this test in detail, especially the writing sample. *Interpreting Scores on the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test* (Princeton: E.T.S., 1980) and *Scoring the Essays* (Princeton: E.T.S., 1980) are both available from the Basic Skills Council of the New Jersey Department of Higher Education, 225 West State Street, P.O. Box 1293, Trenton, N.J. 08625).

and high school class rank, however, our basic writers do not differ radically from our regular freshmen.

Stockton's basic writers fall into two categories, the unskilled and the untrained. Our unskilled writers show little awareness of the structure of written English sentences and paragraphs, little sense of purpose of their writing, few strategies for making a statement or representing an idea in writing, little familiarity with words, little reading experience, dialect interference--the list can go on. Within this group are the basic writers studied in Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*.<sup>3</sup>

Unskilled writers, however, represent a small percentage of Stockton's basic writers. As a service to rotating faculty and to students, the unskilled writers are homogeneously grouped into enriched sections taught by professional skills faculty.

Most of the other students taking basic writing are untrained. These students cannot develop paragraphs or arguments. They sometimes write irregular sentences primarily because they have received little instruction or practice with sentence boundaries or punctuation. They will spell poorly because they don't recognize certain English spelling quirks, like the *y* to *i* plural change. They can't use apostrophes because they've not been made to use them since grammar school. Our untrained writers are the victims of poor backgrounds where writing was used infrequently or where content was stressed without requisite attention to the structure and conventions of standard edited American English. More significant, many of these students are unaware of the process of composing. They are without strategies for inventing, arranging, or expressing ideas. Often these students like to write; they keep journals and write letters to friends and poems for themselves. But they lack practice in the kinds of writing college will demand of them. Given direction and practice, however, they can become proficient writers. These are the students we prepare rotating faculty to teach.

A characteristic of many basic writers at Stockton is lack of motivation. Many view school, and especially writing, as tedious. Their first response to even the most exciting material is boredom. Their most common attitude toward writing is boredom, but this boredom generally serves as a defense. Their boredom conceals a fear of writing rooted in previous failure. One of my students described paper corrections as "bulletholes." She resented having her papers shot-up. Other bored writers reflect the attitudes of previous teachers who did not read or respond to papers. One student admitted that she directed an obscene comment to her teacher in the middle of each of her papers. The comments went without notice. Why should she write, she asked, when her teachers aren't reading. These are only some of the reasons why students dislike writing. Since these are the students rotating faculty will encounter, the primary criterion for recruiting is enthusiasm. Basic writing instructors must be able to excite students, to

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<sup>3</sup> Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

involve them in their own education, to show them the joy of learning and the power that comes with assuming interest and control of their academic experience.

We get information about prospective teachers in many ways. Students know faculty reputations, and they are not reticent when asked about a particular teacher. Formal student evaluations are also available. Finally, coffee talk in lunch rooms and at parties can help identify instructors with the skill to motivate students.

Once the best instructors are identified, core faculty approach the prospects personally, asking if they've considered teaching a basic writing course. We start with a compliment. Potential rotating faculty respond favorably to positive reports about their reputations. Next we appeal to program purpose. One of our goals is to maintain the integrity of the whole curriculum by guaranteeing the competence of all our students. A good way to increase the effectiveness of upper level instruction is to bolster the strength of the foundation. Participation in the program is service to the institution.

Faculty will participate for reasons other than service to the institution. Often good teachers are interested in becoming even better teachers. They view teaching basic writing as a means to acquire greater awareness of the role of writing in their content courses and to gain increased confidence when evaluating writing or reinforcing skills in content courses. Several faculty have taught basic writing courses because they wanted to improve their own writing. What better way to improve writing than by teaching writing? These faculty report success and cite published articles as proof of the positive effect teaching writing has on an individual's writing. Some faculty participate from a genuine sense of mission. Our basic writers are students clearly in need of quality instruction. As a state college with basic skills and critical literacy among our expressed missions, many Stockton faculty view participation as a right and a duty.

This three-pronged appeal--service to institution, self, and students--is reinforced by faculty and administrative support. Participating faculty feel themselves part of an elite corps. In addition, they are members of a network supporting each other as they teach. Administrative support comes in various forms. The administration recognizes teaching a basic writing course to be a significant contribution to general education. At Stockton, most faculty owe a third of their contractual workload to general education through the General Studies curriculum. Teaching basic writing helps meet this requirement. Administration also supports faculty by paying \$50 stipends to participants in training workshops. Most important, however, both faculty and administration illustrate their commitment to the program by considering participation in tenure and promotion actions. In general, the program maintains a high profile in the institution, receiving the implicit and explicit support needed to make it attractive to faculty and thereby successful.

The breadth of faculty participation illustrates the success of the program. While the basic skills competency requirement went into effect in 1976, 1977 was the first year of extensive rotating faculty participation and

the beginning of the training program. Since then rotating faculty account for 40 percent of our basic writing instruction. Generally, they teach six of the fifteen sections offered each fall. Currently, more than ten non-writing faculty are prepared to teach basic writing. No one division of the college contributes more rotating faculty than the others; volunteers come regularly from business, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the arts and humanities. Rotating faculty offer one section for two consecutive fall semesters and then take a year off. We add an average of two new recruits each fall. Perhaps as a result of effective recruiting or successful training, no rotating faculty have indicated they will never again teach a basic writing course.

On an experimental basis we are recruiting volunteers to teach intermediate writing courses. In addition, we use the rotating faculty model to staff advanced composition courses in particular disciplines. For example, a rotating basic writing instructor offers an advanced business writing course each spring. Finally, the atmosphere initially established by the rotating faculty concept has allowed an extensive writing across the curriculum project to develop, ensuring reinforcement of writing skills throughout the college.

Our experience with rotating faculty has generally been positive. But as exciting and rewarding as teaching writing is, so is it challenging. Good teachers of basic writing make their students grow, sometimes after great resistance. Even under the best conditions, with optimal preparation and training, there is the potential for failure. Thus, not all faculty may be appropriate for the task. But careful recruiting can minimize failure. Nothing could be worse than dealing with an instructor who has thrown in the towel half way through a course, especially since the failure may be blamed on inadequacies in the program. Should the disgruntled instructor criticize the program, recruiting becomes more difficult.

Several aspects of the recruiting program maintain quality control. Since the professional skills faculty are ultimately accountable for the success of the program, we are concerned with the quality of our recruits. The professional skills faculty act as primary recruiters, and recruiting begins only after an instructor's reputation has been checked. Nevertheless, some faculty will volunteer themselves--or be volunteered. These volunteers deserve special attention. Stressing the commitment necessary to take full advantage of the training program and explaining in detail all the elements of the program often eliminate those volunteering for purely extrinsic reasons -- for a tenure commitment or similar internal political reason. Advising volunteers that there is a common pre/posttest writing sample used both for advisory grading and program evaluation also steers the less-than-committed elsewhere. The demands of heart and soul made of rotating faculty require their commitment to be genuine.

## TRAINING FACULTY

Three training activities prepare rotating faculty for their task. The first involves a set of reading materials delivered toward the end of the spring semester. Generally, rotating faculty teach in the fall semester, giving them time during the summer to prepare their courses. The readings discuss the nature and function of writing, the relations between writing and learning, and various writing pedagogies.<sup>4</sup> Core faculty select and reproduce articles and excerpts from books, adding marginal notations to draw volunteers' attention to particularly relevant points in the reading. A short annotated bibliography lists specialized articles and texts available in a teachers' library in the Skills Center. The texts in the teachers' library are selected for their accessibility to non-specialists and for their practicality.

Two important considerations govern the selection of assigned readings. First, they must be reasonably brief. Our volunteers, since they contribute extra time to our program, have already assumed quite a burden. Second, the readings must help them solve the immediate problem of preparing to teach a basic writing class and reflect the philosophy of the program. Thus, many readings emphasize the importance of paper feedback when composing or identify invention as a skill at least as important as editing and proofreading. The readings illustrate the importance of developing an authentic voice in writing, further stressing that basic writing teaches much more than correct writing. Their purpose is to introduce rotating faculty to writing as a holistic skill, not a collection of independent manipulated discrete skills.

In addition to representing the philosophy of the program, the readings also introduce rotating faculty to the variety of ways of teaching writing. Thus, they learn there is room for their individual styles. They have general skills for teaching writing; the readings show them how to apply these skills in the classroom. They can pick and choose among the readings, incorporating specific strategies that reflect their individual styles as teachers. The readings also serve to get them thinking about the task. Their minds are set to "cooking," as Peter Elbow would say.

The second stage of the training program is a one-day workshop just after spring semester. Volunteers receive \$50 for their participation in

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<sup>4</sup> Representative readings include James Britton, *The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18* (London: Macmillan Education, 1976); Kenneth Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1980); Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1971) and "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *College Composition and Communication*, 28:2 (May 1977); Roger Garrison, "One to One: Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition" in "Implementing Innovative Instruction," *New Directions for the Community College*, 2:1 (Spring, 1974); Thom Hawkins, *Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing* (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC/NCTE, 1976); Ken Macrorie, *Telling Writing*, revised 2nd ed. (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Books, 1976) and *Writing to be Read*, revised 2nd ed., (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Books, 1976); Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968).

workshops. The sum is a modest but tangible institutional reward for their contribution. The money is provided through faculty development funding since the skills and attitudes volunteers acquire in writing workshops generalize themselves to all their teaching. The chemist teaching basic writing for a semester begins to emphasize writing skills in chemistry courses. As a result of the program's writing-as-learning philosophy, rotating faculty are likely to use writing more effectively in their content courses, making them better teachers.

The one-day end-of-semester workshop indoctrinates volunteers to the purpose of the basic writing course. We aim to help needy students acquire basic writing skills, and also to guard the integrity of the curriculum at large through the competency requirement. We devote the morning to a discussion of values in writing and the formulation of course objectives. To help volunteers understand the difference between competent and incompetent writing at the freshman basic skills level, we spend time reading and discussing samples of student writing. We begin with holistic scoring, reading for a general impression, and ranking by overall quality of the writing. As discussion continues, we assign values to the various elements of writing including content, structure, and mechanics. As we discuss these elements, rotating faculty develop a working vocabulary. They begin to understand coherence, for example, not as an abstraction, but as a set of linking operations in writing. As they understand the linking--how it works in competent writing and is absent in incompetent writing--they begin to develop strategies for helping students write coherently. Developing a vocabulary is an important function of the discussion.

Our discussion of the samples is purposefully non-directive. That is to say, values are not imposed. Volunteers are encouraged to vent pet-peeves. This instructor's hostility to the comma fault merges with that instructor's horror at poor spelling and with another's absolute intolerance of vacuous writing. In the process, instructors become aware of the incredible variety of values. Then the important work of the day begins. First, we make the point that not any single fault characterizes incompetent writing. Second, we begin to develop a view of good writing. Competent writing is writing in which skills are integrated. The key point is integration. The discrete manipulation of a skill is not in itself sufficient to create good writing. We consciously move instructors away from a workbook, grammar drill mentality. Finally, we generate a list of characteristics of competent writing and form these into objectives for the course. Typically these objectives include writing grammatically correct sentences, using a variety of sentence structures, structuring and developing paragraphs and writing short papers. These are broad enough for all to agree upon while vague enough to leave room for all to maintain their idiosyncrasies. And they are specific enough to describe an outcome, competent writing, which is distinguished by these features.

During five years of workshops, the objectives have not changed much. Still there is value in devoting the whole morning of a workshop to forging objectives. Providing volunteers with a working vocabulary and a holistic sense of writing is crucial to their success in the program. Lately, however,

we have added to the objectives a set of goals. Unlike our objectives which can be quantified and measured, the goals are qualities. The goals further emphasize the philosophy of the program, especially the relation between writing and learning and the importance of peer interaction. They also include "soft objectives" like wanting students to feel comfortable and confident when writing and making students understand that writing has a variety of functions.

The purpose of the morning workshop is to encourage rotating faculty to take an active part in program and course design. Imposing objectives would take less time and be less demanding, but would neither enhance teachers' understanding and commitment to the task nor increase their potential for success. Rotating faculty involved in the morning workshop stand a greater chance for success than non-participants, as we have learned by comparing rotating faculty performance with that of adjuncts hired late and without the experience of the training workshops. Though adjuncts may have more appropriate credentials and more experience in teaching writing per se, they are generally not as effective as rotating faculty. Measures of effectiveness include student evaluation of teaching and analysis of pre- and posttest writing samples.

We devote the afternoon of the first workshop day to beginning the process of realizing the goals we established in the morning. First we distribute a set of syllabi previously devised by core and rotating faculty. The syllabi include not only the schedule for the semester, but also the mechanics of the course including policies on attendance, late papers, supplemental skills lab requirements, and so forth. All instructional concerns are represented. Each syllabus shows the style of an instructor fitting itself to the philosophy of the program and the objectives for the course. Distributing and discussing existing syllabi illustrates that teaching writing on any level is largely related to individual style. During the discussion we emphasize that there are diverse ways of accomplishing the same goal--that there is no one magical way to teach writing. Instructors use different strategies according to their own teaching and writing styles. Instructors are encouraged to personalize their syllabi to take advantage of their own strengths and weaknesses -- but always in service to established program goals and objectives. The discussion of syllabi not only helps new rotating faculty begin to shape their own syllabi, but it also almost always results in changing existing syllabi. My syllabus has gone through three radical revisions as a result of these syllabus-sharing sessions. The syllabus sharing is not a service to new faculty alone.

Syllabus sharing takes the greater part of the afternoon. Near the end, however, faculty begin discussing texts. Again reflecting our basic philosophy that each instructor is best capable of determining how common objectives will be met, we do not use a standard text. Texts reflect the style of the instructor and the shape of the course. Here core faculty exert some influence. We discuss the texts we use and why we use them. After the range of possible texts and purposes of the texts are discussed, we move to the teachers' library where about seventy-five texts ranging from workbooks and handbooks to readers and rhetorics are available for inspection.



Core faculty supply these texts to the library by contributing examination copies. In addition, whenever publishers' representatives visit, I show them the library, explain our text policy, and encourage them to send two of whatever seems appropriate to me. These become library copies. Their cooperation has helped us establish a library representing the state of the art in composition/writing texts. Such a system benefits both core and rotating faculty. It can be developed anywhere as long as space exists to store and display texts. Rotating faculty leave this session with a few texts to work through before they make a final choice. They also leave knowing that the teachers' library is a source of supplemental ideas and exercises for teaching particular skills.

The final workshop day ends with two charges to participants. First, they are directed to choose their texts and to order them by mid-summer. Second, they are charged with drafting a syllabus. These syllabi become the first agenda item in the follow-up workshops scheduled for the week before school begins in the fall.

The third stage of training occurs the week before school begins. Intensive is the only word that can describe the fall workshop day. Volunteers are excited about the programs they have planned during the summer, but they are also anxious as they approach the threshold. The workshop concentrates on five specific activities, all save one of a purely practical nature. The time for philosophical rumination is passed. The computer is printing out class lists.

The first activity of the day seems not to be a practical one, but it is crucial. Faculty are forced to write under pressure, in an area for which they have not been academically prepared, in a less than comfortable place, for a purpose whose value they cannot absolutely determine. Finally, they must share that writing with strangers. The aim is to have faculty experience what their students experience. These exercises have included twenty-minute descriptions of the way individual faculty actually write papers and articles contrasted to how they were taught to write, impromptu considerations of the purposes of writing and the reasons faculty volunteer to teach writing, and descriptions of familiar places. One particularly effective exercise is having faculty write the placement sample required of students.

Since faculty, especially those volunteering to teach basic writing, are experienced writers, the approximation is inexact. However, the point is made. Most faculty experience anxiety. In the discussion that follows the exercise they become aware that anxiety may be the only thing most writers have in common. They are reminded of the gist of their readings. Composing is a complex and idiosyncratic act. There may be a single task, but there are myriad strategies for accomplishing the task. Most basic writers are without these strategies. In the discussion, providing a variety of writing strategies to students becomes the major theme. The volunteers have planned their syllabi and have structured their courses. The writing exercise reminds them that the course cannot be so rigid that individual writers are excluded.

Once we have all written, have shared our writing, and have been reminded of the complexity of composing, we turn to practical matters that often mean the difference between success and failure. First we review and critique the provisional syllabi designed during the summer. Since it has been some time since the syllabi were devised, the discussion often begins with someone explaining revisions already planned. Since the core faculty and repeating volunteers have taught the course already, they are particularly aware of potential hazards and can suggest solutions. Special attention is paid to chronology--what skills are generally best handled when. The debate over working with paragraphs before whole papers continues to rage among core faculty. However, we stress the folly of teaching sentence skills without the context of a longer unit of discourse. This debate often results in a revision in a volunteer's syllabus. Our goal is to fine-tune our syllabi. We emphasize the importance of having a sound structure as the foundation of the course.

After critiquing syllabi, we describe the support services attached to the program. While the training program represents the best preparation we can devise for rotating faculty, we know it is not sufficient.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we offer rotating faculty several on-going support systems to help them through the semester. These include formal and informal group problem-solving sessions during the semester, a mentor system, and Skills Center testing/tutorial assistance. Recently, I surveyed the rotating faculty to determine which elements of the on-going support were most helpful. Meetings were noted as least helpful, mainly because schedules prevented regular attendance. Rotating faculty found the mentor system quite helpful. The mentor system allows rotating faculty to formally designate one of the core faculty as chief consultant during the semester. Core faculty take the mentor system seriously, making a point to maintain personal contact to check how the course is going and if there are any problems. Since the core faculty are widely experienced writing teachers, it is rare when rotating faculty encounter new problems. The mentor system is a formal problem-solving network. Rotating faculty find having one core faculty person to trust with problems, insights, or complaints very helpful.

What rotating faculty find most helpful as on-going support, however, is the Skills Center. Rotating faculty are informed of the Skills Center services and instructed in how to get students working the peer tutoring lab. All rotating faculty responding to the survey listed the Skills Center support as the most important support service.

The Skills Center functions as our testing center. We use a variety of pre/posttests in program evaluation. More important, we use the pretests as diagnostic tests. Performance on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test may suggest a student will have difficulty, so we will recommend supplemental

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<sup>5</sup> A helpful article describing a semester-long training course for full-time basic writing instructors appears in Constance J. Gefvert, "Training Teachers of Basic Writing" in *Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, Administrators*, eds. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoeber (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1980).

lab tutoring. If performance on the pretest writing sample, a process rather than impromptu test, suggests misplacement, we can sometimes move the student to a more appropriate section. These are testing services the Skills Center offers basic writing faculty.

The most important services rotating faculty see the Skills Center providing, however, is extensive one-on-one tutoring. Especially weak students can be mandated to work with a tutor on a particular task or through the entire semester. The work in the Skills Center becomes a requirement of the course. Tutors submit bi-weekly reports on a client's attendance, attitude, and performance to sending faculty. Sometimes extra peer support alone can help a weak student tremendously. Peer tutors understand certain problems students have that even the most informed and sensitive instructor cannot understand. Peer tutors can help untrained students with schedule-organizing and study skills which may be extrinsic to writing instruction but crucial for the basic writing student's survival. Sometimes the availability of help, even if not needed, enables the basic writer to succeed. Sometimes the praise and support a peer tutor offers is crucial to a student who hates the impersonality of school. Peer tutoring provides all these services to basic writers.<sup>6</sup>

The Skills Center functions as an important supplement to classroom instruction. Rotating faculty appreciate the support and value the service highly. However, they also understand the inherent limitations of a peer tutoring system. The Skills Center can only supplement the instruction in the course; it cannot supplant it. In addition, the Skills Center is effective only to the degree that it is systematic. Rotating faculty must understand the system well to take advantage of it. Several rotating faculty report that supplemental Skills Center assistance is crucial to the success of their weakest students. We allow time in the morning for discussion of the Skills Center and its role in a basic writing course.

At the end of this long morning, participants leave for lunch with two tasks. First, since lunch is an opportunity for some private social exchange, rotating faculty are encouraged to establish the mentor relationship then. Second, all instructors are requested to return prepared to share one particularly successful classroom strategy with the group.

We borrowed our first afternoon activity from the Bay Area Writing Project. Faculty share something they do that works. Core writing faculty generally describe particular strategies they use to introduce students to important writing concepts. Often these are games that extend the composing process, introduce categorizing as a means of establishing coherence, or use brainstorming to generate ideas and data to support ideas. We also discuss strategies for evaluating papers, including conference sessions and styles of marginal notation. Rotating faculty need to see a variety of styles

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<sup>6</sup> Most helpful on the topic of peer tutoring is Kenneth Bruffee, "Staffing and Operating Peer-Tutoring Writing Centers," *Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, Administrators*. The notes to Bruffee's article generate a comprehensive bibliography on the topic.

of paper grading. They must understand that paper grading has instructional implications.

Just as important, presenters discuss problems with the exercises and offer extended discussions to anyone contemplating their use. This, of course, results in identifying another resource rotating faculty have available to aid them. Over the years, one or two paragraph precis of the exercises have been collected in a file kept in the Skills Center. The file is available to all. So much of all the training is a process of making rotating faculty aware of resources and how to take advantage of them. On the same survey mentioned earlier, rotating faculty ranked sharing successful classroom exercises as the second most helpful workshop activity. The most helpful activity was the syllabus review and critique.

The final activity of the afternoon is often limited by the fatigue growing from such a long and intense day. Each veteran participant reports one success and one failure while teaching the course. The failures often involve pacing. At mid-semester half of a class disappears with illness or frustration resulting from trying to meet the level of expectation of the instructor. Around the table participants discuss strategies for dealing with such problems. The purpose is to bring us back to earth, to the reality of the classroom after the heights reached when we shared the successful lessons. We want all participants to leave with a balance of enthusiasm and realism.

### SOME FINAL SUPPORT

From the beginning our goal is to give rotating faculty a realistic sense of their task and the preparation to allow them success. Earlier mentioned were ongoing support through Skills Center testing and tutorial assistance, the mentor system, and occasional group meetings. However, we devote quite a bit of energy to giving volunteer faculty guidance in their final evaluation of students, since a failing grade might result in dismissal from college. To aid them with this crucial decision, we offer one more service, a pre/posttest writing sample evaluation designed to give them information on student progress through the semester and a measure of their level of competence.

During the first week of class all instructors administer the pretest. The pretest is not an impromptu sample. Research indicated that one of the absurdities of evaluation in composition programs was the impromptu sample. Sanders and Littlefield theorized that the reason pre/posttest writing samples showed little or negative growth in student writing was the nature of the impromptu sample. Instruction in writing that emphasizes the composing process generally prepares a student for failure on an impromptu sample. The skills needed for success on the impromptu sample are the opposite of those taught in a good composition course. A twenty-minute sample requires an easy and superficial response, exactly what composition courses view as bad writing. Sanders and Littlefield suggested abandoning the impromptu sample for a sample allowing writers to use what they've learned in the course.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> S. Sanders and J. Littlefield, "Perhaps Test Essays Can Reflect Significant Improvement in Freshman Composition," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9 (1975) 145-53.

We use such a test despite its inadequacies from a tests and measurements point of view. We distribute the topic to the class before the sample is to be written, instructing students to prepare to write a paper on the topic during the next class. They can write for one hour. They can bring notes, dictionaries and whatever writing aids they use when writing papers. They must, however, write the final version on paper we provide. The special paper allows us some control of the testing situation and aids in blind scoring the samples later. Once completed, the samples are collected, coded and stored in the Skills Center.

At the end of the semester the same sample topic is given following the same procedures. These posttests are collected, coded, and randomly mixed with the pretests. They are holistically scored by trained readers, some teaching in the program and some drawn from the college at large. The reading is run with rigor. Each paper is scored twice on a 1-6 scale. Readers are instructed that a score in the top half of the scale represents competent writing, while lower half scores represent incompetent writing. Readers know the pre- and posttests have been scrambled, but they cannot distinguish one from the other.

The results of the reading are reported to each instructor by roster showing pretest score, posttest score and change. Instructors are advised to use these scores in an advisory fashion. They know what score signals competence, but they also know the inherent limitations of any one holistically scored writing sample. If the performance on the sample contradicts a student's performance throughout the semester, faculty are instructed to trust their own judgment. The pre/posttest system serves to foster confidence in evaluation or to provide a second professional opinion in cases of genuine doubt. Instructors, especially the rotating faculty, appreciate this second opinion and rank it as one of our most important support services.

In addition to the rigorous training and support outlined above, a successful volunteer basic writing program depends on several intangibles. First of all, it depends on extraordinary talent and commitment of core faculty. Not only must they teach their courses, they must also help train and support the rotating faculty. The program depends as well on the good will of the rotating faculty who volunteer to teach in the program. It depends on rotating faculty who have enough success in their first course to volunteer again. Effectiveness increases geometrically as rotating faculty repeat courses. Finally, the program depends on institutional commitment. Basic writing is valued enough that the best teachers in the college are allowed, even encouraged, to teach it. The administration supports the program and the volunteers who make it work.

But their support is repaid tenfold. Students receive high quality instruction in an area of clear need. Their increased competence protects and enriches the entire curriculum. Continuous reinforcement of the skill promotes writing proficiency. In addition, faculty are invigorated by their participation in a grassroots effort to improve the quality of the institution. Their participation makes them better teachers, thereby improving quality in upper levels of the curriculum. Finally, increased collegiality opens the

door for the other formal programs to increase student learning quality like writing across the curriculum.<sup>8</sup> Rare are instances where so little is risked while so much is gained.

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<sup>8</sup> Those interested in a helpful discussion of both the problems and potential of establishing formal writing across the curriculum projects should read Elaine P. Maimon, "Cinderella to Hercules: Demythologizing Writing Across the Curriculum," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 2:4 (Spring/Summer, 1980) 3-11. In fact, the entire issue is devoted to writing across the curriculum theory and practice.