

HOW TO ORGANIZE A CROSS-CURRICULA WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Speakers: *Gail Hughes-Wiener, Susan Jensen-Cekalla, Gerald Martin, Mary Thornton-Phillips, Minnesota Community College System*

Introducer/

Recorder: *Julienne Prineas, University of Minnesota*

The speakers began the session by describing how, with the support of a Bush Foundation Grant, the Minnesota Community College System (comprised of 18 two-year college scattered across the state) has been engaged in a three-year project to assess the effects of their Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program on faculty and students, especially on student learning. The four speakers described their separate but overlapping roles in the project, with a view to communicating the complexity of implementing this type of project. Mary Thornton-Phillips' role has been to design and establish the broad structure of the project. Susan Jensen-Cekalla, as the WAC Program Coordinator, has served as a bridge between the evaluation project and the faculty out in the colleges. Gail Hughes-Wiener's role as Evaluation Coordinator is to ensure that all of the components of the evaluation-- such as surveys, interviews, essay exams and such--are designed, coordinated, implemented, analyzed and communicated. Gerald Martin, as research analyst, is in charge of processing the data.

Hughes-Wiener pointed out the need to budget for an immense amount of administrative, interpersonal, and program development required prior to any actual data analysis or report writing. Her experience has been that no one, including consultants prominent in the field of program evaluation, anticipated the amount of work and time needed for this preparatory work. The scope of the project demonstrates its complexity: data must be collected on faculty attitudes, student attitudes, and student learning. The project required the careful development of questionnaires and surveys, the effective training of interviewers, and the preparation of holistic scoring terms. In addition, the project leader had to build credibility and trust among program participants and become knowledgeable about all needed information.

Thornton-Phillips commented that their progress has been aided by a clear sense of direction, despite uncertainty as to how to achieve their goals. Allowing for flexibility and change within a general framework has proved necessary and productive. For example, faculty involvement was essential to the success of the project. Faculty had to become trained, knowledgeable participants who understood the research and their role in it. Thus, Thornton-Phillips' first challenge was to assess the needs and interests of faculty in an attempt to generate strong staff commitment and to develop a core faculty able to

provide leadership for the program. The task was hindered by the voluntary nature of staff development in the Community College System and by the tendency to cut funds for such development during budget crises. Thornton-Phillips found the catalyst for the change needed in a dedicated Joint Faculty/Administrative Staff Development Committee and in a small group of faculty who had worked together for several years on implementing "Writing Across the Curriculum." Jensen-Cekalla joined the team as program coordinator, leaving Thornton-Phillips free to work on budgeting, staffing, and scheduling aspects. Together, they refined the assessment component and developed reliable approach to reassure faculty.

In her role as the most direct connector between faculty and the evaluation project, Jensen-Cekalla's foremost concern has been that all participants work together and coordinate their efforts. A cornerstone of the project is a summer workshop, which brings together faculty from all eighteen colleges. Follow-up meetings during the year provide the support and opportunity for exchange of information needed to maintain a united WAC teaching approach, and the grant provides all teachers with funds for a variety of supportive measures such as tutors, materials and supplies for the Learning Centers, and outside and in-house consulting. Jensen-Cekalla has also had to organize the data flow of information and resources from the evaluation out to people in the colleges.

Martin's roles have included data analyst, data processor, in-house statistical research consultant, and resident skeptic. With the project now in its fourth year, the time has arrived to renew the research grant and inform the granting agency of the progress made. Martin noted that a project of this type raises many issues along the way. Its original purpose was to look at student outcomes, such as specific changes in writing proficiency and the learning of subject matter. However, several other desirable outcomes not in the original proposal have become obvious. Hughes-Wiener noted that they have learned, for example, that faculty enthusiasm for WAC can be generated and that inroads into the organizations at both campus and administration levels can be made.