Reflections/Projections

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AGAINST THE WRITING MAJOR

Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic. Both alike are concerned with such things as come, more or less, within the general ken of all men and belong to no definite science.

—Aristotle, Rhetoric (Book I)

Despite my claim in the title, I am not against the writing major per se; that is, done right, a writing major can be a valuable resource for both students and faculty at colleges and universities. But it is the "done right" that matters. I appreciate the opportunity to reflect on what happens when a writing major comes into existence as a result of good will and good fortune but is compromised by bad planning and bad execution.

I write this with the full disclosure that the writing major I have most direct knowledge of is the one that I proposed, ushered through departmental and college approval, taught in, and loved, is the major that I am now no longer involved with. It is my hope that others can learn from the mistakes I made.

A writing major, especially at a small liberal arts college, with a dedicated but overworked faculty, can be a challenge. The writing major I was involved with from 1995-2005 is a case in point: it began with nine tenured/tenure line faculty, including seven literature faculty, one creative writer and one rhet/comp person, which was never enough staff for a proper writing major. Even as the department grew to have seven literature faculty, two creative writers, and three rhet/comp faculty, there were not enough faculty and/or courses to create a major that was ever really anything more than what one faculty member finally called it: "English without books."

In other words, our major was not "done right" from the start. It was done with the best of intentions, and it succeeded in some small measure, but it was flawed and compromised as a result of our desire to have a writing major without much thought about what having a writing major might mean to the department.

So what might I mean by "done right"?
Good question.

If there were a chance at a do-over, I would argue that there need to be two specific conditions in place for a writing major to thrive: proper staffing and proper attention to faculty strengths and weaknesses.

For a writing major to truly work as an equal to an established literature major, there needs to be staffing adequate to the task. For instance, the department at the time had determined that it took seven faculty to properly staff a literature major with both depth and breadth requirements. By contrast, a writing major, especially one attempting to be co-equal with an existing literature major, staffed with just one faculty member, created both departmental tension and an inferiority complex.

Related to the staffing issue is the strength and weakness issue. As the writing major grew, the department and college created two new tenure lines for the program. In what seemed like a good decision at the time, efforts to revise the program were put on hold while we hired new faculty, the argument being that we would wait for the faculty to arrive, assess their strengths and weaknesses, and revise the major accordingly. I now see the flaw in this argument: while the literature major and literature faculty stayed the same, the writing major and writing faculty were in constant flux. With each new hire, the major underwent extensive revisions. It was unsettled from year to year as the faculty stabilized. In hindsight, the better move would have been to first design and revise the major and then to advertise and hire faculty that would fit our program.

My final caveat about a writing major is that it is made far more difficult by writing's complex mission in the academy. As Aristotle recognized, writing is not necessarily a discipline of its own, and that, indeed, it is part of all disciplines. So a writing major, especially at a small college where writing is often taught by tenured or tenure-line faculty, can conflict with expected service missions that writing and its faculty often have at such colleges. Add to this the often significant administrative workload that most writing faculty have, and you find that staffing becomes an even more complex issue.

None of these examples indicate that creating a writing major is impossible. What they should indicate is that there needs to be careful planning and consideration when building a writing major, and that merely wanting one, while part of the battle, is not enough.
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