

NWP Welcomes Mary Ann Smith as Full-Time Co-director

After ten years of dividing her time between two writing project networks, Mary Ann Smith has retired from her role as executive director of the California Writing Project (CWP) to become a full-time co-director of the National Writing Project. The transition, which took effect October 1, 2001, will expand Smith's role within the national network, and immediately it will give her more time to collaborate with the rest of the National Writing Project management team, which includes Executive Director Richard Sterling; Co-directors Judy Buchanan and Elyse Eidman-Adahl; and Finance Director Michel Mathis.

Smith began her association with the writing project at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974. There, as a junior high school English teacher, she took part in the first summer institute of the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP)—the gathering from which, under the direction of founder James Gray, the National Writing Project took shape. Smith stepped into site leadership in 1984, becoming first a co-director of BAWP and then, two years later, its director. She held this position for five years before simultaneously taking on the roles of CWP executive director and NWP co-director.



Mary Ann Smith

When this dual role was established, many people involved in the networks, including Smith herself, saw the wisdom of having a CWP director who had a foot in two worlds. Through this unique position, she has had the opportunity to help expand the national network while fostering a strong state network. In regard to the state network growth, Smith is quick to credit other members of the CWP leadership team, including former co-directors Laura Stokes, Jo Fyfe, and Jayne Marlink, all of whom she calls “phenomenally smart and talented” people.

As both the NWP and CWP networks continued to grow, Smith began to see the need for the roles to become independent again. “The demand of serving two projects was a gift,” she noted, “but both networks have become too large and too important for one person to claim two spots.”

Smith is excited about the expansion of her leadership role in the national organization. As well, she sees her departure from her CWP post as an equally positive move, saying it was “time for the network to make room for a new director and a new era for CWP.” Toward that end, Jayne Marlink, former associate director of NWP and co-director of CWP, has given up her dual roles to serve as interim executive director of the California Writing Project.

Despite the win-win situation that Smith sees for each network, the decision to make the transition was not an easy one, and choosing between the two roles was almost impossible. “I postponed [the choice] as long as I possibly could,” Smith said. “But I chose the NWP spot because it . . . offered me some new opportunities to write and to make writing itself more visible and vital in this country.”