From the Desk of Sheridan Blau

HOW LONG SHOULD THE WRITING PROJECT CONTINUE?

The question comes from an earlier perception of the Project—one which most of us shared—as a fixer-up program for composition teachers, a program using a cadre of specially trained teacher-experts to train their own colleagues. We knew that we needed to retain contact with teachers in follow-up programs, but what we didn’t know was what sort of collegial community was being created and how important this community would become to the professional lives of many of the best teachers in our schools. The Writing Project must continue for the same kinds of reasons that the university must continue—not merely as a degree-granting institution but as a seat of learning, a center for inquiry, and a continuing resource for the intellectual renewal of members of the academic, artistic, and professional communities.

The Writing Project has enabled teachers to become part of a professional community centered at the university, but thriving in every place where Writing Project teachers come together. Teachers are the most eminent members—all equally eminent—in this community where they function as learners and as contributors to each other’s learning merely for the sake of their own personal and professional growth. Their reward for their professional development is the additional expertise they acquire as classroom teachers—their enhanced ability to do the jobs they are already doing, plus the satisfactions that come from being appreciated by professional colleagues whom they also appreciate. It is the absence of additional rewards that may account for the fact that Project Fellows find such sustenance in their collegial relationships—much more sustenance, I have found, than most university academics get from their colleagues.

Collegial relationships in the Writing Project are particularly nourishing because when Writing Project teachers seek to develop themselves professionally they do it without ulterior motives. They don’t get promoted or paid more for their enhanced expertise nor advanced in power or rank for their professional publications. They are not in competition with one another nor improving their professional mobility. They can therefore remain more open to learning from one another, more appreciative of each other’s efforts, and more generous in sharing their expertise.

The Project has created a professional community of colleagues that nurtures and sustains our best teachers in a more satisfying and productive way than any program of bonus pay for identified master-teachers is likely to achieve. The Project needs to continue in order to sustain and renew this professional community. We must also continue to add new teachers to our body of Fellows to keep new ideas flowing into our community and to continue to

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validate the work of excellent teachers not yet identified as Project Fellows. It is important, moreover, that we continue to select only outstanding teachers as Project Fellows, or else the Fellows themselves will not be able to look to the community of Fellows as a meaningful source of professional validation and knowledge.

And this brings us again to the question of whether the Project will eventually come to the end of its useful life because it will have run out of truly excellent teachers to draw from in selecting new Fellows. This has been a particular concern for Project directors in areas where there is a relatively small population of teachers to begin with. Fortunately, we have found that there are simply more outstanding teachers working quietly in our schools than any of us had anticipated. In addition, we have extended the horizon of our expectations about where to look for the most promising teachers for our Project. We are now recruiting more actively and successfully than ever before among elementary teachers and college and university teachers as well as among the secondary teachers whom we may once have imagined to be the core group for our invitational institutes. Also, as we have come increasingly to appreciate the importance of writing as a discipline for learning all across the curriculum, we have drawn increasing numbers of our Fellows from the ranks of teachers in the natural and social sciences and in the vocational arts as well as in the humanities and language arts.

Not only have we seen no decline in the professional excellence of the teachers who continue to be selected as Fellows, but most sites are finding that the teachers who arrive for the invitational Summer Institutes are now noticeably more sophisticated in the teaching of writing than those who became Fellows in previous years. This is largely a consequence of the success of our inservice programs in regions where the Project has been active for some time. Most teachers now selected as Fellows have already completed some school-site inservice program under the leadership of Writing Project Teacher/Consultants from previous Summer Institutes. Hence our institutes are now conducted from the beginning of the summer at a level of professional sophistication with which teachers from earlier summers would not have been comfortable until several weeks into their work together. Our institutes now also progress to more advanced levels of inquiry into composition theory and research and tend to yield more sophisticated and publishable writing than they did in earlier years.

The developing sophistication of our Summer Institutes is not wholly a function of the increasing sophistication of the selected Fellows. It is also a reflection of our collective professional knowledge as a Project. That is to say, while one Summer Institute is much like the previous ones in most of its features, each institute builds on the experience of all previous summers, while the Project itself—at its local sites and as an international network—constitutes a kind of reservoir for the cumulative professional knowledge shared and discovered in all previous institutes and in the field of composition at large. Thus, in an important sense, each Summer Institute begins where the previous one left off, so that each summer program becomes both a recapitulation of the previous summer's experience for the new Fellows and an additional step forward in professional growth and knowledge for the Project itself as a continuing collegial community. This helps to explain how it is that Project directors can continue to find intellectual and professional nourishment in Summer Institutes year after year and why year by year it becomes increasingly important for Teacher/Consultants trained in earlier Summer Institutes to remain active in our follow-up and continuation programs.

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