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ABSTRACT

In a period of great change in higher education, proponents of the traditional Freshman English program must be sensitive to the symptoms which can easily lead to its demise. These consist of (1) permitting programs to be out of phase with the general policies of campus higher administration; (2) assuming that expertise and long experience can withstand an outside, statistical attack; (3) failing to keep up on the program's cost versus sure value features; (4) maintaining objectives not clearly consistent with course content; and (5) settling for less than the best composition teachers. The symptoms are interrelated and completely dependent upon different factors on each campus. However, it is often difficult to rationalize the rightness of the program unless there is sure evidence to counter any attacks, especially those requiring proof that writing students benefit from this expensive program. Ultimately, the ideals of the university should prevail, with monolithic programs able to yield to both change and budgetary pressures. (JM)

Concerning Freshman English Programs, "To Die--Takes Just a Little While"; It's Spotting the Symptoms that Takes all the Time

by Ron Smith

I must admit at the start to having succeeded only partially in avoiding a temptation I vowed I'd not give in to. That temptation is akin to the one the late Charlie Dressen gave in to back in 1951 as manager of the then Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team. Leading the National League, and specifically the New York Giants, by something like 13 games late in August, the Dodgers seemed secure in their quest for the pennant. The warm glow of that security prompted Charlie Dressen to pronounce, much to the happiness of grammar-loving sportswriters, "The Giants is dead." Sportswriters, also feeling the warm glow of the Dodgers' security, failed horribly to see the implication of the pronouncement for its grammar and proceeded to parse it to death--until, that is, the Dodgers began frittering away their mammoth lead over the Giants. The Dodgers in fact ended up losing the pennant in a spectacular playoff with them. As Charlie and the sportswriters came to realize, it was, after all, the Dodgers, having experienced prosperity and turned it into quick demise, who "was" dead.

The example of manager Dressen had made me vow never to give in to the temptation to prophesy, never, for example, to say anything resembling "Freshman English are dead" (or even "is dead"); even though Freshman English in recent years--at least according to college and university administrators contemplating continued student displeasure with monolithic, coercive composition programs and their own displeasure with the cost of those programs--has been frittering away its lead, first to the teaching machine, then to television, then to computers, then to equivalency tests, and now possibly to some Cubist conception involving all four,

along with a few teachers of course. The lead of Freshman English, although often challenged, was something like 13 games just a short while back. Twice-cursed Charlie, cursed in grammar and in failing to appreciate that the best prophecies come only from California earthquake buffs, should have taught me to be wary of even the safest prophecies (like "Freshman English is dead") and he indeed did. Well, sort of.

What I've done, thanks in part to Emily Dickinson and in part to my being a super impeccable example of the typical conservative from academe, is I've so thoroughly revised the prophecy, so altered it that no one will mistake it for a prophecy at all. It now is simply a compound statement about Freshman English programs made by one who has experienced its meaning: "To die--takes just a little while"; it's spotting the symptoms that takes all the time. Like Prufrock, "I am no prophet", but perhaps after having lived through a great and instructive collapse I can offer you some wisdom even if it appears I do so with "the bottoms of my trousers rolled."

"To die--takes just a little while"; what a sad mistake it is to think otherwise--expecially about Freshman English programs. Were we perceptive enough to see the symptoms early, particularly when the monolith seems unshakeable, and remedy them soon--as the A. M. A. and Heart and Cancer societies keep telling us--there might be no demise at all (or even a "Tradition of Complaint", as described by Leonard Greenbaum in College English, 31, Nov., 1969, pp. 174-183).

The symptoms I have in mind are not absolute. They will not apply inevitably. Conditions must be right for them. For that reason, I've used but a single pervasive example as the elaboration of these symptoms, the case with which I'm most familiar, and will leave it up to you to intrude your own instances as applicable. I urge you, though, to be honest in interpreting the applicability to your own program and to the conditions that surround the program. I can assure you first hand that

it'll be easy to see only the beneficent purpose in your own program while others around may see only the questionable procedures and dubious outcomes.

The symptoms, in no particular order, are:

First: permitting programs to be out of phase with the current philosophies of education and/or the general policies of the higher administration on campus.

Second: thinking, mistakenly, that expertise and long experience will alone withstand a well organized statistical attack by those outside the program.

Third: failing to keep up on the cost versus sure value added features of the program.

Fourth: having program objectives that are not clearly consistent with each course's content.

Fifth: settling for less than the very best teachers of composition in the program.

What complicates matters devilishly for would-be spotters of symptoms is the times. As well we know, higher education is and has been in recent years somewhat wildly in the process of change, or at least in the process of trying to change. It is thus relatively easy to permit programs to be out of phase with the current philosophies of education and/or the general policies of the higher administration on campus. If the trend on campus is toward allowing students, through advisors, to bear the burden of responsibility for what goes into their lower division education, if students can freely choose when they will take courses and choose teachers when they do, potential trouble looms for the compulsory Freshman English program that is ordered on the old model of rigidity--unless it is openly sanctioned in its rigidity around campus. (You know the type of program I'm speaking of: designed in the fashion of Gothic cathedrals--the soaring edifice,

vaulted high and pinnacled higher, and needless to say, buttressed at its weak points to forestall collapse.) Where all else seems freedom and choice to students, the coercion inherent in the Freshman English program which demands that students proceed in an orderly way through a six or nine-hour requirement, frequently without choice of time or teacher due to the magnitude of the program, will surely lead to the kinds of criticism, first from students and then from others, with which most of us are familiar. The tendency in the past to dismiss all criticism, for whatever reasons, just doesn't work well in an atmosphere of change--particularly when that change is budget inspired and engineered with all eyes glued to the figures. And if all the change that has been brewing means what it seems to me to mean--a new face for higher education, and soon--dismissing all criticism or doing nothing about it will work even less hereafter.

Where programs are out of phase with the prevalent ideas on campus of how the business of education ought to be conducted, most often, it seems to me, the defenders of the out-of-phasedness rationalize the program's "rightness" against all odds because of beneficent purpose, but with their heads in the clouds. They know in their hearts (that's beneficence) how desperately students need writing help and the more the better (that's heads in the clouds). Chances are excellent that others on campus will agree, too, but not without a murmur at least about the quaint means and gruesome rigor used in achieving the "noble" and expensive end. It is only when the murmurs become a clamoring that this particular symptom of demise begins to look that way, but even so, there will be those in the program who will see no way of redesigning the machinery to eliminate the torture under the circumstance of an annual input of most if not all of the entering Freshman Class. They will say things like: "What can we be expected to do with so meager a budget and so large a task to be shouldered?" or, worse yet, "If we make a concession and give them this, they will soon want that. And we surely don't want to give them

that!". . .Oh, my god, I can hear the deadly voices. . . .And they will fight against all innovations, if my experience and what I've heard and read are any indication. They will reject whatever threatens whatever it is they consider to be "essential" in the means--particularly the sacred frills and the holy number of credit hours required.

Forgive me, though, for assuming so much so far ahead of my plan in this talk. I know it is entirely possible that nothing I've thus far said applies to you and yours. Peace be with you. The best or worst, as you choose, is yet to come.

The magic phrase to administrators is "so meager a budget." The word "budget" alone turns grown administrators these days into "basket cases," let alone a phrase like "so meager a budget" in reference to what is likely to be two percent or more of the entire operating budget of a school, which is what budgets for Freshman English programs are bound to be where a requirement for all or most of the entering students has been deemed necessary. Just imagine how that two percent inflates at the local level--where it is a part of a College of Humanities and Arts budget, say. The budget itself is a symptom of demise if there is any reason at all for suspecting the quality of or necessity for the product.

One must remember that budgets can be inspirational, in times of tight money as well as in times of seeming abundance. Inspiration for change can come to the administrator who sees in a budget for Freshman English something of the "fat cat." (Whether or not the cat is fat is irrelevant if it looks that way to someone outside the program who can put wheels in motion.) All he needs is some input otherwise, like murmurings around campus from faculty and/or students about the horror that is Freshman English. That horror can be students who flunk, irrelevancies in the so-called writing course (like non-composition skills subject matter in the name of something to write about or to motivate students), excessive credit hour require-

ments, too little long-range (or, better yet, "permanent") improvement in student writing for the cost involved, reports of poor teaching (especially likely where T.A.'s can be pointed out), coercive enrollment, restrictive programming that excludes choice of class hour and/or teacher, and so on at length. A program that costs 2% or more of the operating budget of a school should not have as its most obvious outcome complaints. If the right administrator has such input to go along with the usual budgetary woes, the figuring begins.

What if there were only half the budget allocation for Freshman English? What if there were more students per teacher? What if there were test-outs made available to students? What, better yet, if equivalency tests were required of all entering students to assure more exemptions from the requirement and fewer teachers? What if there were alternatives to teachers alone to cut the expenses over the years, like computerized learning assistance, effective teaching machines, television? What if there were fewer credit hours of writing course work required of students? If any or all of these were to come about, the administrator could ask, would there be a significant difference in the writing ability of students after all? If there's no concrete proof one way or the other in the hands of those who run the program, symptoms #2 and 3 are possible: (2) Thinking, mistakenly, that expertise and long experience will alone withstand a well organized statistical attack by those outside the program, and (3) failing to keep up on the cost versus sure value added feature of the program.

Whatever the cause or causes for any organized statistical attack on a Freshman English program, the attack, having been as keenly motivated and thought out as it must be, will succeed unless there is sure evidence to counter it. Needless to say, that evidence is not easy to come by. Proof that student writing really does improve for the long haul ahead--from Freshman through Senior years--thus warranting the program's cost? What proof? How do you prove these things?

There are too many intangibles, too many variables, and certainly too little writing after Freshman English by students to keep the skill fully intact one, two, or three years hence. If we say so many students start out as "F" writers, so many as "C", and so on, and go on to say that because they ended up "B" or "A" writers there was improvement that will endure, we prove nothing to ourselves or those who attack us. Do we administer a post-test of skills improvement? Do we have a panel of "experts" pass on each student's writing, thereby assuring unchallengeability? To me, none of these is satisfactory. Things should never arrive at this pass. The added expense of trying to prove the cost-worthiness of a cost-heavy program would only add fuel to the fire that we're trying to put out. When the question is asked by the administrator "would there be a significant difference in the writing ability of students ofter all, for the long haul and after many reasonable streamlining measures are introduced?", all things being equal there just wouldn't--not in terms a budget-minded and statistically oriented person would understand. I hate like hell to say I've been there, but it's a fact that I have. And after much anguishing, thought, and realizing I now know too well that the price of a three-quarter (nine-hour) sequence of required Freshman English was too high, that something closer to half the budget and a third of the credits would've done the job the university wanted done, that there was so much waste and irrelevance built into the traditional program that it begged attack, and, hardest to take of all, that there was too much consideration given to too many idiosyncratic opinions of what Freshman English should be and too little to how really unknowledgeable, even vapid, many of them were. I now know, the result of personal experience with a program's collapse, that it's possible to rationalize everything from God to the stone atop a pyramid without being able to prove a damned thing.

What you can by now see, the symptoms around which I've thus far been wandering are in fact inter-related, often interchangeable, and totally dependent on triggering factors that may or may not now be a bother at your place. I trust,

however, that you're sitting there out of more than idle curiosity and that my slip into total autobiography during the past few minutes possibly has you wondering how the isolated instance--the one I've experienced--can possibly relate to the situation where you draw your paycheck. It can because budgets are problems nearly everywhere. If schools in the City University of New York can experience a growth in the number of students per teacher, schools anywhere can; and if financial woes can be experienced at some of the prestigious private colleges and universities, they can be and are likely to be experienced anywhere. Such woes make Freshman English programs conspicuous for their expense since in programs there has been more than a tendency to dilute numbers of students per teacher figures in the wrong direction. The total number of credit hours generated per quarter or semester by teachers in Freshman English looks pale next to the mammoth numbers of hours generated by teachers in large lecture classes. Maybe it is taken for granted at your school that it will cost more per student to put him through three hours of Freshman English than it will through three hours that can be handled in a large lecture-taught class. Maybe at your school it's even taken for granted that the very nature of Freshman English prohibits such comparisons. Maybe so, but be very careful it is also taken for granted that six or nine credit hours of writing course work are necessary and that the quality of the outcome is equally taken for granted. My experience is that it is best not to have to face statistical proof that writing students weren't receiving all that much benefit for the expense involved and then try to prove that they were. Suddenly the quality of the teaching in that expensive program is suspect and all those frills used in teaching students to write (like thematic course descriptions and content, fiction, poetry, essay readers even) are challengeable as evasions of the primary and only objective of Freshman English--improvement to first-year-college level of the writing of students who enter the program. Why wasn't the objective achievable in less time than it was, and therefore at lower cost, the question is asked? The teachers were

less than competent, too much of the course content extraneous, the program untenable--that's why, the reasoning goes. Symptoms number four and five are thus uncovered: (4) having program objectives that are not clearly consistent with each course's content and (5) settling for less than the very best teachers of composition in the program.

"To die--takes just a little while"; it's spotting the symptoms that takes all the time. For us demise came quickly after we had for a couple of years failed to see or agree on the symptoms a few others around campus brought to our attention in the form of complaints or proposals for change; in fact, there were rationalizations by people in the program of the rightness of the program, complaints be damned, and slogans like "Freshman English, the last frontier of the humanities" became current. (One well above and certainly outside the program told me when he heard that, "Frontier living was never that expensive!") The coercive nature of the program was defended by its purveyors on the basis that staffing problems would be too great if we didn't know how many students to anticipate each quarter. And the worst of all rationalizations, as administrators above viewed them, were those in defense of the teaching involved. The budget wasn't large enough and tenure requirements were relentless, hence a large turnover in staff and an easy target for those who attacked the program. How could a program they asked, that relied on T.A.'s, part-timers, and instructors who were looking upward to the day of lighter composition loads (while they were diverted by working on advanced degrees, by the way) ever be effective? As hard as I myself now find it to believe, the program remained essentially unchanged during all of this--although it did eventually go "vertical". However, because it had floundered into virtually absolute indefensibility against its attackers, their statistics, their reasoning, demise came relatively quickly thereafter. Sixty-two percent of the Freshman English program disappeared in one smooth stroke. 1,697 entering Freshmen a year and a half ago were required, by administrative decision, to take the CLEP

(that's the College Level Examination Program) test in English Composition--just the short answer portion--and 1,037 passed it with a score of 390 or better and had their entire nine-quarter-hour Freshman English requirement waived. Sixty-two percent of those who took the test passed it; Sixty-two percent of the Freshman English program disappeared. The cutoff score has since been raised and not all entering students take the test nowadays, but the thinking behind the attacks persists. The nine-hour requirement in Freshman English is now a nine-hour requirement in communication skill, with the entire requirement fulfillable with various combinations of credit from Speech, Composition, Languages, and Journalism.

While you and I know that not all can be well--especially within that group of sixty-two percent who passed with no writing requirement--all is not wrong either. The program--what is left of it--is in the process of becoming what the university at large wants it to be, and I'm first to admit (after much stubbornness) that it is a good thing for the most part. The ideals for students and university held by members of the English Department surely should not prevail over those of the school in general any more than they should be totally ignored by those outside the department, regardless the stimulus of budgetary problems. However, I disagree strongly with such budget-inspired thinking as that right now the effectiveness of a writing program or of an individual student's writing is measurable with some sort of short-answer test--even though I'm inclined to agree that if budgetary difficulties continue at enough schools effective measures will be developed. Thus far, none of the measures I've seen for judging either student writing ability or program effectiveness will do--including those with student writing samples included. Regardless their supposed validity and reliability, the ones I have seen are, to my thinking, flawed at base with the premise that everything is testable and measurable, therefore writing. Possibly it's my own flaw that I see no way at all

of proving with statistics and measurement that a pig will yield or has yielded pork chops. If I were the one devising the measure that will do it, though, which I'm not likely to be, I'd be sure to know more about pigs than the butcher does.

My slender message is clear, I hope. The symptoms must be avoided if there is any chance at all they can work against a program. There's not much hope of avoiding demise if they aren't and if the right conditions should conspire. Programs cannot with impunity be out of phase with the current philosophies of education and/or the general policies of the higher administration on campus. Intractability, for whatever reason, is absurd in times of change and budgetary pressures; coercive, monolithic programs should yield to both and can do so. Programs cannot be expensive for the old reasons without results that warrant the expense and without being openly sanctioned on campus. It is irresponsible to think that economy is impossible without sacrificing "quality" and <u>then</u> turn around and use teachers in the program whose experience is short or whose desire is questionable. If there is no way of keeping up on the <u>sure</u> value added features of the program, be certain that the maximum result is achieved with minimal budget. The surest way to cut the budget is knowing the school's standard (as very possibly opposed to the standard employed in the program or the standards of individual teachers) and getting the students to that point, no further, as quickly as possible. Test-out options and valid equivalency tests, ones that <u>assure</u> the standard, should be readily available for students. Work to tear down the quarter or semester boundaries if possible, do away with letter grades if they aren't as useful as they were in a day gone by, let the students graduate from the program as soon as they've achieved the course objective with the accepted level of proficiency, don't hesitate to utilize computer assisted learning or television

or teaching machines, and by all means get rid of all in the program that has nothing to do with its stated objectives. Consider workshops open to all at convenient hours and even give some thought to allying composition and other subject-area courses on campus. Cultivate the very best teachers for the program and find a way of keeping them. And above all, reject none of these in the best interest of the English Department or the Freshman English program unless you know you've done so in the best interest of the school and its students!

With those recommendations the end of what I've intended to say and infer is at hand. If in fact I did resist the temptation to prophesy the demise of Freshman English, and it's not clear that I did, I have Charlie Dressen to thank I suppose. Don't you thank Charlie, though. It's Emily Dickinson and "To die--takes just a little while" you want to thank and remember. Otherwise, I'm likely to regret, in a few years, having blown my one real chance so far at being a prophet of doom who was right.

--Ron Smith

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