

Crabgrass and Gumbo: Interviews with 2011 WPA Conference Local Hosts about the Place of Writing Programs at their Home Institutions

Shirley K Rose, Irwin Peckham, and James C. McDonald

At its March 2010 meeting, the Editorial Board of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* decided to begin devoting space in the spring issues of the journal to a feature related to writing programs in the area where the summer conference would be held. In these interviews with the local hosts of the 2011 WPA Summer Conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Irvin Peckham at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge and James C. McDonald at University of Louisiana at Lafayette, I explore the ways they see the writing programs at their universities reflecting their institutional and regional cultures. —SKR

November 15, 2011: Conversation with Professor Irvin Peckham, Louisiana State University, Local Co-Host for the 2011 Summer Conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators in Baton Rouge, Louisiana

SKR: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me, Irv. What I want to do in this conversation is to explore the ways the writing program there at LSU reflects the place where it is. With all of us coming to Baton Rouge this summer for the conference, it seems like a way to help us all start thinking about the conference and also to be thinking about the ways that in fact our own writing programs are placed. They do reflect the places where they are. That's what I had in mind as I developed these questions, so let's just see where this conversation takes us.

Let me begin by asking you about some basic demographic information about writing programs at LSU. What are the various writing programs, how are they organized, who leads them, and does the organization reflect the larger institution?

IP: There are basically three programs. The required writing program includes the basic writing program, a first and second year writing program—that's your ordinary required writing program, with a writing program director and with an associate writing program director, and now we have a graduate assistant who is an assistant director. Probably one of the most notable things about the required writing program is that it has historically resisted the use of adjuncts or part-time teachers and I think that's a long-time thing. That might go back to the 1970s or 1980s when they insisted on hiring fulltime renewable Instructors. They created a model for evaluating Instructors and giving them something that is *de facto* tenure. That's the primary one.

About five years ago we developed a communicating across the curriculum program that Lilly¹ came in to get going and she did a marvelous job, but last year she resigned. The Director of Communicating Across the Curriculum is charged with spreading writing and communication systems with a strong focus on multi-media in the different programs across the campus. The emphasis on multi-media took hold pretty solidly. Sarah Liggett is now directing it.

The third part is the creative writing program. That's a historically important part of LSU's English department. It's been an important part of our identity, and I can't speak as authoritatively as others in the department, but it goes back to the creation of the *Southern Review*² and the various luminaries, like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, who were brought in. Huey Long brought them here. He had an emphasis on bringing in big names—mostly literary writers—to start the creative writing program. The Director of the Creative Writing is basically the sub-chair of the department and right now Jim Wilcox is the director.

SKR: When was it that the creative writing program got its start?

IP: Early 1940s.

SKR: That's a long time in higher education.

IP: The luminaries' names are all over the halls. They're famous. Try to think of literary scholars of the South and they were here. That heritage has still been with us. I would say that the creative writing program reflects the larger institution. It's a large part of our heritage and is a large part of our identity. So Southern literature is a very big part of our program. It's grounded in Southern culture. There's an immense pride in our Southern

culture. It maybe helps us to raise our heads above the kind of press that that we get as Louisianans who have somebody like Bobby Jindal³ leading them.

Within the culture of the creative writing program there is an external program that's part of the creative writing program—it's the Readers and Writers at LSU. It's an organization that links the creative writing program with the community. It's a very important community program. It was actually started by three or four people, one of whom is my neighbor right now. Louise and Charles Prosser were instrumental in starting it about twenty years ago. Readers and Writers brings in very big names; they ask various readers and writers to read their work and then they ask them questions. It's definitely a very well recognized community organization.

SKR: How do students and teachers in your writing programs reflect the local culture and economy?

IP: Who comes to LSU is in many ways determined by the economic situation of LSU. The one important thing to remember is that essentially there is free tuition for students with a high school 2.5 GPA. This is the TOPS⁴ program. It was initiated maybe twenty-years ago by a wealthy oilman who then moved to Texas; I can't remember his exact name.⁵ He left a good part of his fortune to generate income so that the tuition for all our students from the lower social class or working classes could attend the LSU for free. Our legislature got a hold of that and maybe about ten years after the original program was started they argued against this discrimination against the wealthy people so they expanded that program so that no matter what your income level if you had a certain grade point you would be able to go to LSU essentially for free.

The legislature then takes the local taxes and a portion of or certain amount of state income to fuel that TOPS program. So that's an important part of LSU's culture. It's our economy—we are trying to of course keep these students in Louisiana; that's part of the idea, but the other part was to offer free education.

It would be hard to explain all the dynamics of the difference between private schools and public schools here. This has been historically a socially and a racially segregated community and that segregation feeds into social class-racial segregation. That is, the black people are most of the poor people and most people in prison are African American. All of the private schools are largely white while public schools are largely black and there's a kind of *de facto* method of trying to make sure that the wealthier whites do not lose this kind of financing that other people are entitled to, if you see

what I mean. And so the large number of the tax dollars in Louisiana definitely are going to a private school system because that's where all the kids of people who are state legislators go to school. So that's certainly in many ways a reflection of local culture. I wouldn't call it a positive reflection.

The positive part of the local culture is just basically southern culture. You recognize that as a professor when you come from the north as I did. The local culture is very friendly. People are generally very polite. Kids are very polite. They're much more polite here than you see in other parts of the country, and it's "Yes, Sir" or "Yes, Ma'am" everything—they're taught to do that. It's kind of unique. It hits you in the face as soon as you come here.

The teachers mostly grew up here. The students grew up here. They just absolutely love the South. You tell graduate students that they actually have to look someplace north of Tennessee for the job and they just look at you like you're crazy. They do not want to leave the South. It's very extended-family-oriented—more so than you would see in another part of the country, certainly than in California.

I can't really give you the demographic figures, yet I'd guess that maybe 15% of our LSU students are African American. We have an extraordinarily prevalent Cajun culture—not as much as at the University of Louisiana Lafayette, but Cajun culture is very important here. It's the Anglo-French that came down I believe from Nova Scotia—I think that might have been in the 1850s and 1860s, but it might have been earlier than that—and they settled on the western side of the Mississippi, south of Lafayette pretty much in the swamp lands and became fishermen and swamp farmers, so this is a very strong French culture. There's a French culture and then there's a French Cajun culture and on the other side of the Mississippi there's a Spanish culture still very much intact. Baton Rouge is actually an area where you're sitting right in middle of Native American culture, the French culture, and Cajun culture, the Spanish-American culture and the African American—brought by the Africans who were brought here as slaves from Africa. But a little bit to the south from here towards New Orleans you get the Caribbean black culture and many were free blacks. I didn't know anything about the free black culture before I came here, but it's been an important part in the Louisiana culture that centers in the New Orleans area but that comes up to the Baton Rouge area as well. It's a very rich and diverse culture. Of course there's the Anglo culture, but that doesn't count. If you go about maybe thirty maybe forty or fifty miles north of Baton Rouge and then the north part of Louisiana there is considered Anglo culture.

SKR: Are most of the LSU students from Baton Rouge?

IP: No, No—they come from across the state. We do get a lot of Baton Rouge students, without question. If people from Baton Rouge are going to go to college then many are going to go to Louisiana State if they can. But we definitely get kids from across the state. Out of state is about 20%.

SKR: How is this diversity reflected in your writing programs, or is it?

IP: I don't think it's reflected in the writing program. It's just what you see. If you're a teacher you respond to individual students as individual students. I think most people are very happy with the diversity. It seems like a rich diversity. I think most of us are fairly clear we'd like to see a much larger African American population in our classes. Since I've been here, which is ten years, that's increased significantly. I remember when I first taught a first-year writing class here there might've only been one or two African Americans. I'm teaching one now, and out of twenty-two, I might have six or seven. That's quite a change. Now one of the problems is that we have a historically black college—one of the important historically black colleges—in northern Baton Rouge, so that draws an awful lot of the African American students. The college is called Southern University.⁶ That's largely all black. There are a few Anglos that go up there.

SKR: I was reading about LSU's "Flagship Agenda," and it's my understanding LSU is the premier research university in Louisiana. This is on the University's website, and the Agenda is introduced with this paragraph:

Since its beginnings in 1860 LSU's history has been a story of growth and transformation. As the flagship institution for the state LSU has long been recognized for a rich intellectual environment and distinctive educational programs that are rooted in the unique culture, history, and geography of Louisiana.⁷

So in what ways do you see the writing programs at LSU being rooted in the unique culture, history, and geography of Louisiana?

IP: Well, that really reads to me like an act of rhetoric, not a reality. It says nothing. Certainly not about the writing program. But at LSU you will see a lot of programs that are concerned with water, swampland, forestry, coastal erosion—things of that sort. We're very heavy into that and of course into oil. The portion of the Engineering Department that is devoted to a petroleum engineering is heavily subsidized and an important part of the institution. Nobody's actually offered me \$1 million so I'm not really into that very much but you can definitely sense that people know here that

Louisiana politics work in the way that the culture works: the dominance of the oil industry seeps through everything—has its fingers every place.

SKR: Is there very much influence from Middle East oil interests?

IP: No. I would say you don't sense that at all. It's the people who work here, who have jobs here. Probably one of the best ways to describe the oil influence is that we have a Shrimp and Petroleum Festival and—yeah, the Shrimp and Petroleum Festival—it's down in Morgan City in the southernmost part of Louisiana. It's a very important fishing area. That juxtapositioning of the shrimp and the petroleum for a festival, that pretty much says it all. The people who live there work part of the season as fishermen and women, part of the season in the oil industry. When the season is out, they're out on the platforms or going out into the Gulf working in the oil industry. So those two things are just linked. Now they're linked in another way, with the last oil spill.⁸

SKR: Well, talk a little about how the oil spill has affected the university and the writing program. I would expect that there would be of course expertise from the Petroleum Engineering Department and elsewhere as far as the ideas about how to deal with the oil spill and so forth.

IP: With respect to the writing program, I haven't really seen any particular effect. There were certainly a lot of teachers who used those topics and, as a matter of fact, our semester assessment at the end of the semester was based on the topic of the oil spill. There are a lot of people who make hay out of topical issues in all fields and there were a lot of grants of course that came out. The same thing with Katrina—Hurricane Katrina—there were all sorts of grants. Tragedy is a huge employment market supported by grants. None of us in the field of writing really tried to get into that that I know of although there are other people, say for instance in folk studies, who applied for grants to go down and get the stories of people in the wake of Katrina. And there were people interested in film in the department who were interested so they went down to make documentaries in New Orleans. They also got grants as well.

SKR: I'm interested in different ways that things that are happening locally get felt in the institutional culture. You said that writing people have not really gone after any of the tragedy-based grants.

IP: In creative writing maybe, but those of us in rhetoric and composition—there are five—I don't think any of us applied for grants. One of my friends makes TV documentaries and another one of my friends in creative writing thought she should keep collected stories of people and tell them. You know there's another issue about the flagship agenda. I think it reflects Mark Emmert's⁹ idea of the flagship agenda. Emmert started it and I think he probably tried to get it going about 1999 and 2000. He's since left and is now the head of NCAA. The flagship agenda was Emmert's agenda to bring LSU up in its national ranking. We were not in the first-tier then and Emmert was talking about how we were going to be one of the top fifty state universities in the nation. I think we have now reached the top tier, but the purpose was to try to haul LSU up to a top ranking and by the way, that's what led to the dismissal of all the Instructors. You probably heard all about it when I first came here. We had to release many of our instructors, from about seventy-five down to thirty-eight. As I interpret it, that whole notion of a flagship agenda could be related to an insecurity about Louisiana—rural Louisiana—and our perceived lack of culture. The flagship agenda may be a way to push us into mainstream America. I may have expressed it badly, but you get the drift.

SKR: Tell me about the issue with the instructors. I don't quite understand the cause and effect.

IP: Emmert was using as his benchmark or his way of marking progress the rankings by the National Research Council. One of the important indicators of the National Research Council ratings is the ratio of tenured faculty to untenured faculty or tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty. We had a very high ratio because we didn't hire adjuncts. When you're a university and you hire a high ratio of part-time teachers in your first-year writing program you're going to have a lower ratio of instructors to professors because part-time teachers don't count; but the instructors who are hired as full-time employees of the university do count. So the consequence was that we had that high ratio. Also, the provost before Emmert came in had tried to raise our rankings in *US News and World Report*. In *US News & World Report* they use an opposite kind of ranking; they use the use class sizes in ranking. So actually the year that I came here we were in the middle of hiring massive numbers of instructors. I had to hire in my first year eighteen new instructors in order to lower the class size from twenty-two down to nineteen. Emmert came in with his program and reversed that process because he was no longer looking at *US News and World Report*; he

was looking at the National Research Council, which had a different criterion. So the order just came down to us in the department that we had to go from seventy-five full-time instructors to thirty-eight within three years.

SKR: That really helps to see these effects on the writing program of something happening at the institutional level. You think that was motivated by his feeling that LSU as a university in Louisiana—in the South—already had some things against it because of perceptions about the South? Top fifty is pretty ambitious.

IP: I'll say. Emmert definitely was aiming at the top tier—more than the top tier—the top tier of the top tier. Emmert kept saying this and he pointed out which ones the top tier schools were and he wanted us to be in that group. And then he left and became the President of the Washington State University system. He's been there and he's now just left there and is at the NCAA.

SKR: Do you want to talk about Katrina?

IP: Okay. That had a momentary and a radical effect on the writing program on and the university because we just had an immense increase in population with the refugees from the New Orleans area and from the area to the south. I don't know the number but the increase was close to 150,000 and there was a radical increase in the number of students who came in. Let's see, Katrina happened in the end of August and the spillover started in September—about the third week of September—and we suddenly had a huge influx of new students coming in from the various universities in the southern portion of Louisiana. So basically that increase caused a radical adjustment of the writing program. We created classes like mad. It was basically mildly controlled chaos. We made a lot of new sections and then hired additional people and teachers would take overloads of ten people. A lot of students actually did end up staying so it took the student population maybe a couple of years past that to settle down and still Baton Rouge did increase its population by maybe over 100,000 people.

SKR: And that's been a permanent increase?

IP: Yes that's been a permanent increase. I would say, culturally, there were still quite a lot of complaints about increasing crime because the theory is

that a lot of the people who came to Baton Rouge were the dispossessed in New Orleans and so on. There were a lot of quite wealthy people who came as well. I think there was quite a conversation about increased criminal element for a couple of years as well. But on top of that, there was a huge increase in the tax base, so actually the city enjoyed quite an increase in income for maybe three or four years, actually just up until the last economic crisis.

SKR: Are there ways that that had any kind of long term impact on the writing program in terms of curriculum?

IP: No. I wouldn't say so. As I think of the curriculum, I would say a curriculum has a kind of base to it that is not going to be swayed or pushed in another direction as a consequence of a sudden natural disaster. Certainly people wrote about the issue but that didn't change the nature of the writing program.

SKR I can't expect you to know what happened with the New Orleans colleges and universities, but what's your sense of the differences in how they have been affected long-term?

IP: Well, it was a much longer effect. They were really struggling for, I would say, maybe three more years than we were. It really affected our program in the sense of a different kind of population, an increased population that we weren't prepared for maybe for two or three years. But for the New Orleans area, there are probably still schools that are still reeling and I'm talking about colleges. I think they just had a very difficult time adjusting due to a difference in population and a significantly different culture.

SKR: I have another question that's about the flagship agenda. The flagship agenda states its desired outcomes as these: "As a national flagship institution, LSU will advance knowledge and intellectual inquiry by promoting groundbreaking research; produce enlightened citizens by fostering critical thinking, ethical reflection, historical understanding, and cultural appreciation; enhance Louisiana by converting scientific and technological discoveries into new products and processes, by preparing an informed and creative labor force, and by applying university resources to solve economic, environmental, and educational challenges."

My question is, what part do the writing programs play in achieving those outcomes?

IP: In the first place, that whole paragraph is like somebody raising a flag and everybody saluting. It's just a mouthful—everybody believes those things. I can't take it too seriously. I think that we in our writing program—at least while I was working in it—I can't say how the new WPA is going to imagine the writing program—but we were just trying to help kids do well in their undergraduate courses. We were paying attention to what kind of writing assignments they would meet. We did a lot of work looking at those writing assignments and we were trying to imagine instruction to help them get through their undergraduate year, so that feeds into the “enlightened citizens” or “critical thinking,” “ethical reflection,” and “historical understanding” agendas. I think we had a more pragmatic goal.

SKR: You mentioned this earlier, but I want to go over it again. You were WPA at University of Nebraska Omaha before you went to Baton Rouge.

IP: I went back to graduate school when I was forty years old and I went back to UC San Diego. I took my first job as a WPA at Nebraska and I think I did that for three or four years. I should also mention I was at Wisconsin and also at a Canadian university. University of Wisconsin Madison—I went there for undergraduate and a Master's.

SKR: Are there ways—comparing different places and schools and their writing programs—are there ways that you see that those other programs reflected their places or that showed their differences?

IP: I wouldn't say geographical or cultural; I would say the nature of institution, actually. It was a metropolitan institution at the University of Nebraska Omaha and it catered to a lot of nontraditional students, a lot of working-class students as opposed to middle-class students and upper-middle-class students. So there was a more pragmatic focus—or a more recognizable pragmatic focus—a larger recognition of the role of technical and professional writing in the programs than at LSU. As a matter of fact, to a certain extent, because of the *Southern Review* heritage at LSU, there's a—let's call it cultural snobbishness—about technical and professional writing here that was not the case at Nebraska.

There was a link between the kind of writing program that we were running in Nebraska and professional writing, with the purpose that the

kids who came through our writing programs would actually be able to take many of the jobs available in technical and professional writing in Nebraska. And there was also a much larger emphasis on teacher education and teachers coming into the English department and therefore the writing program. We had a Master's program that we liked—we liked having teachers come into our program and work on a Master's with the certain knowledge that it was going to take several years for them to complete their degrees. We felt they were a very rich part of our environment in the English department. I would say the opposite is true at LSU—there's a negative attitude—and it's part of that literary culture—a negative attitude towards these part-time students. We really don't accept the people who are not full-time graduate students in our program. We don't accept people unless they get fellowships or scholarships to be in the graduate program because we don't want to create a two-tiered program, but it might be something else as well. By two-tiered program, I mean there was one social group of people who had fellowships and the other social group who don't have fellowships. There is a large-scale resistance to that that is a cultural construction. You know I can't help but think in terms of the kind of elitism that goes with the scholar as opposed to the worker. Some people just don't want the teachers to come into the English department. On the other hand, that prejudice is changing. Certainly the chair of the department doesn't think that way at all. He is very much in favor of trying to open up the program to Master's students who take a course during the summer and a course during the year while they are teaching. And there are a good many of the rest of us to do that, particularly the younger teachers, who are forging stronger connections with the Department of Education.

SKR: Do you think that those differences—the differences you are noting between an English department that does see or is very aware of the roles that English Education is playing and the role technical writing and professional writing are playing versus one where it might be there but is ignored, it's not mentioned—do you think those who think that way in the English department reflect the larger institutional contexts as well?. There's a whole history that those attitudes come out of.

IP: Yes, it's the difference between a research institution and a metropolitan university. It's certainly not surprising. I would say I do think that the literary heritage of LSU makes it a little more resistant to a newer way of looking. It's very powerful.

SKR: I have a metaphor for the writing program at ASU: the ocotillo. They're just amazing. When they're thriving, they're stunning and when they're not, they're pretty grotesque looking. I see some features of the ASU writing program that I think are grotesque that I think are the outcome of lack of resources. Do you have a metaphor for LSU writing programs?

IP: I had an image. The plant that came to mind is crabgrass.

SKR: Tell me about that.

IP: It spreads on its own and it's hard to get rid of. It's a creeper. It's great to hold the dirt.

SKR: It protects against erosion. It's fast growing.

IP: If you've got it, you'd better like it. I have a big lawn to take care of here so I know it intimately.

SKR: Say some more about how that's like a writing program.

IP: Well, it's the tendrils. It goes throughout the university. The writing program occurs in the required writing program. But the notion about writing and how we teach writing—it goes out like the creeper as the students go into their other classes. If we do a good job, that's a good growth. It's how you teach writing and the notion or illusion of carryover. The transfer factor has everything to do with what students feel about it and how they reflect on it and how it comes back; it has everything to do with how they move forward through the university. It's just there. That's the wrong notion. What I'm trying to get at is the plant doesn't exist in the classroom only. It moves out. It stays low. That's the secret.

SKR: You can't get it with the mower.

IP: No. Absolutely not.

SKR: Great metaphor. I have just a couple more questions. When we come to Baton Rouge this summer, what place on campus should we visit? Other

than the writing programs offices themselves, what places should we visit in order to understand how the institutional context has shaped LSU Writing Programs and why?

IP: You're not actually going to come to campus. You're going to be at a downtown hotel. We would love to have people come to campus because it really is a lovely campus.

SKR: If people wanted to get away on Saturday afternoon and come to campus, what should they see?

IP: I would say walk around in the area of the quad and in walking around, the most notable feature of the campus are the live oaks. They're absolutely beautiful. They're all over. Just try walking in these areas, particularly in the quad, which is in the central part of the campus by the union. That's where there are some gorgeous areas. There's another beautiful area if you go to the south end of the quad where there's a sculpture garden, with another quite huge display of live oaks. If anything distinguishes the campus, it's the live oaks.

The buildings themselves have the atmosphere that Huey Long¹⁰ wanted to create. He wanted to create LSU to be the Stanford of the South so he sought an architecture for the main buildings of the campus that would reflect Stanford. It's as if Stanford had been brought here.

SKR: Why did he choose Stanford?

IP: I couldn't tell you that.

SKR: Why Stanford of the South and not Harvard of the South?

IP: I think it's more agrarian. More country. You know, Harvard would reflect too much of elitist Eastern culture. Huey Long was a populist. There wouldn't have been any way he would emulate Harvard or Yale. If you've been to Stanford, it has that rolling kind of Salinas feel to it—the golden hills, the spread-out buildings. We don't have the golden hills—we have the swamps—but we have that kind of spread-out building. That's the really remarkable feature or feeling of the campus.

The feeling of the campus is south. It's a very southern campus. The foliage is southern, the buildings look southern. It has an old genteel qual-

ity to it. I don't know that there are particular buildings—oh yes, people should come into Allen Hall, where the English Department is located. Not because the Department of English is anything extraordinary, but in Allen Hall, particularly on the first floor, are murals that were painted on the walls during the WPA¹¹[Works Projects Administration] in the 1930s and 1940s by unemployed artists. They were painted over in the 1960s. People didn't even know they were there. About ten or fifteen years ago some paint came off and somebody saw them and totally restored them very, very carefully. It's a very folk-artist kind of painting. Very working-class painting representing the people who actually work with their hands. Those are kind of remarkable. They're fun to see.

Unfortunately, the stadium dominates. It kind of soars like the Empire State building. Ninety thousand people can fit in that stadium. So if people want to get the culture of LSU they should also go to one of those football games because it's a big deal here. The Library... we have a really strong online library; the physical reality of the library is not so much. Just walk around. The old library—it's a rare books library—is very beautiful and it's right by the Department of English.

SKR: What else would you like for other WPAs around the country to know and understand about LSU Writing Programs?

IP: It's focused on academic writing and on helping students try to manipulate their way through very difficult writing situations in their undergraduate courses. We don't have any question about that. We developed a program by looking at a large swath of writing tasks in other disciplines and really developed our program as a consequence of that research. One of the consequences of that investigation was a serious appreciation of the kinds of writing tasks that people in other departments were giving to their students. Many of the people were sophisticated and serious about their assignments and they wanted their students to write—particularly in the Engineering and Agricultural departments.

The other thing that we think is a model is the way in which we don't hire part-time teachers. Unfortunately, we still have the two-tiered classification of the non-tenured and the tenure-track teachers, but nevertheless we have moved in the right direction. The social network within the English department, are just all people who've lived here a long time and it's more of a social group rather than a professional group, or a tiered group. The friends I play with in my band, which is called the Musicians of Mass Destruction, are mostly people who work in the writing programs. And finally, we have institutionalized the culture of assessment in a productive

way such that the way we assess writing always comes back and feeds into how we are seeing our students' writing and what's working and what's not working and how we consequently adapt instruction.

SKR: I'm looking forward to being in Baton Rouge this summer. Thanks in advance for being a local host for the WPA Workshop and Conference and thanks you so much, Irv, for talking with me about the writing programs at LSU.

IP: My pleasure, Shirley.

November 15, 2010: Interview with James C. McDonald, English Department Chair at University of Louisiana Lafayette, and Local Co-Host for the 2011 WPA Summer Conference in Baton Rouge.

SKR: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me, Jim. Let's start with basic demographic information about writing programs at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. What are your writing programs, how are they organized, who leads them, and how does their organization reflect the larger institution?

JCM: We have a first year writing program of four courses: English 101 and 102, which is the usual sequence; English 115, which is the honors course for which students have to qualify; and English 90. We have a small developmental English course—that's English 90—that students with ACT scores below 18 get slotted into unless a writing sample shows they should be in English 101. In addition, we have an advanced writing courses, English 370 Academic Writing, and a technical writing class, English 365. We have an extensive creative writing program with an Introduction to Creative Writing class at sophomore level, in which students write in three genres and additional sophomore level classes, one in each genre. We have some senior level creative writing classes at the 400 level in which there are likely to be some graduate students.

We have Clancy Ratliff as the Director of First Year Writing, and she has an assistant director, Garnet Branch, who specifically helps the adjunct teachers and now included in that are the dual enrollment classes. Clancy also has an assistant director who is a graduate student, and the writing center director also reports to her, and she reports to me. For the technical writing and advanced composition we have two separate faculty commit-

tees which are in charge, and for the Creative Writing Program we have a director.

We are in the midst of changing our advanced composition program. We'd been trying to make some changes and hadn't been successful for various bureaucratic reasons. When I became Head I asked the chair of the Advanced Composition Committee if I could sit down with the committee and have them tell me what their dream program would be. They came up with a program very much like Brigham Young University's, with writing in the disciplines—writing in the humanities, writing in the arts, writing in the social sciences—and they looked at who's required to take our advanced comp class right now and they are developing separate classes in each of these courses. They're just beginning. They gave me a written proposal recently and we're going to take it to the Curriculum Committee and at same time get started talking with the deans and department heads in those disciplines that would be affected. We can have some kind of collaborative arrangement and they can have input into these classes and take some responsibility for what we're teaching and take advantage of that. I'm hoping that we might be able to use that as the basis for a writing across the curriculum program that we've never really been able to get going.

SKR: You mentioned that the developmental writing program was getting small. Has ULL made an effort to raise the admission requirements?

JCM: Oh yes. Definitely.

SKR: Is that part of what's shaping the developmental writing program?

JCM: In a big way. The history of all Louisiana universities was that they were all open admissions, including LSU, and that goes back to Huey Long. As a result, Louisiana did not have a community college system. But a number of universities lobbied for years to be able to establish admissions standards. LSU was the first to do that in 1989, I believe. Southwest Louisiana Community College opened in the late 1990s, and in the year 2000 ULL ended open admissions and put in admissions requirements and a number of universities around the state did that at the same time. Now we have a community college system set up so that all state universities have admissions requirements and we now have pressures to increase admissions requirements. As a result, while we used to have a large English 90 program that had its own director, and we were offering maybe twenty or more sections in the fall, now we have maybe four or five. It just isn't a big enough

program to have a director anymore. In its time, it was considered a model program, particularly in the 1970s and we were trying to work with some of the things Mina Shaughnessy was doing. That really was part of the Huey Long tradition, that everything in the universities was open rather than having admissions requirements, and as a result, Louisiana was late getting into the community college movement. LSU had a couple of two- or three-year campuses and New Orleans had Delgado Community College. There were five two-year campuses in the whole state until the late 1990s.

SKR: Some of the first community colleges in the country were started in the 1960s weren't they?

JCM: Yes. I remember that when I was going into college, in Southern Illinois they were opening up community colleges. Louisiana wasn't a part of that because we were already admitting all high school graduates into universities and everybody had to have extensive developmental programs. We may have had at one time a two-level developmental writing program. I know LSU had a two-level developmental program. We had two classes for math. Some community colleges still have some students who have to take two courses. That wasn't unusual then, though, for state universities to do that.

SKR: You mentioned that the First Year Composition has a director and assistant director and a Writing Center director, but that the 300-level classes have a committee, not a director. Why is that? Does that reflect department culture?

JCM: Part of it was that the President we had for thirty-four years resisted creation of administrative positions even at the department level so it took a while to negotiate getting any released time for additional department-level administrators. The administration always prided itself on keeping administrative costs well below the average—we're at 62% of the average university's expenditure on administration. For that reason, we haven't had administrative releases for a single director of advanced composition courses.

We actually had someone who for many years was in charge of technical writing and I'm not sure if she had released time for that. We had an advanced technical writing class at that time and had a very active internship and then she died and we weren't able to hire someone to take over technical writing in that way and as a result the program just dwindled to having just one course and occasionally we could find someone to set up

an internship for somebody with a strong desire. We had a program we were proud of in the 1980s and 1990s, but it was driven by one person who really was dedicated to that. We're talking about, with the advance composition course proposals, making a request to create a director for advanced comp, and it would include technical writing. If we're going to have it, it would include a whole range of writing in the disciplines classes and there will be a need for administrative oversight for that. The course history has been that people can do pretty much whatever they want to do in that class. That has tightened up and the committee has created more structure for that class. Our accrediting agency has required assessment that has encouraged standardizing. The history has been you could teach it from many different approaches, so it didn't seem to need much administrative oversight. The university has moved into greater assessment—we're just about to receive our report from our ten-year SACS¹² visit next month. In the last few years, SACS has pushed us into more assessment and I think the institutional culture and English 360 in particular has been affected by that.

We did make a change in the First-Year program a few years ago that's probably worth mentioning. The second semester class, English 102, used to be a writing about literature class, and the research paper would always be in the first semester. There wasn't much of an emphasis on research in the second semester, so we decided to make the second semester class a research writing and argumentation class and really see that the big research papers that students read and write in first year would be the culmination of the second semester class. That was not popular with our literature and creative writing graduate students who enjoyed teaching literature in the 102 class and now they found they couldn't do that. It was an important move for us to make and a lot of the newer faculty in literature as well as rhetoric were behind making this move but it brought out some of the tensions between literature and composition and we've made extensive use of the WPA Outcomes Statement in designing those two classes.¹³

SKR: Tell me something about the teachers and students in the program and whether and in what ways they reflect the local culture and economy.

JCM: This institution has an interesting history in that way. We were the first university in the South to desegregate. Thurgood Marshall¹⁴ was one of the attorneys, though not the lead attorney. I did a little research on this. University of Louisiana at Lafayette opposed the students who were trying to get in. We lost the initial court case and lost the appeal and at that point decided to accept African American students into the university in fall of

1954. It was not like what happened at University of Alabama and the University of Mississippi in the next decade. That meant we have always had a substantial African American student population—25% at one point. Since we put in admissions requirements, that's down to 20% and we're trying to be more aggressive in recruiting African American students.

At the same time we're the Cajun university. Cajun is a distinct ethnic group. They're descendents of French Canadians who were kicked out of Canada after the French and Indian War and were a belligerent group who couldn't fit in back in France or in the Caribbean and eventually many of them ended up settling in southwestern Louisiana, which didn't have much of a white population. It had a Native American population. Unlike in New Orleans, there was a lot of land that could be had. This was more of a French-speaking part of the country than an English-speaking part until the first generation or two after World War II and there was a real effort to change that. Students who in the 1960s went to public school would be punished if they spoke French on campus and that hurt the French language. Now we've put a French immersion program into the public schools to try to strengthen the French. We still have a lot of French radio programs in the French and Cajun music and Zydeco music in French. A lot of that is in the French language so it's very much a part of the art and music

French, along with English, is the state language of Louisiana. That's not just because of the Cajuns but also because of the Creoles coming out of the Caribbean culture who are represented by a lot of the blacks as well as the French immigrants to New Orleans. Cajun French is one dialect; in fact, Cajun English is too. The dominance of that ethnic group has shaped the character of the university. There are only two universities in Acadiana, ULL and McNeese State University in Lake Charles.

SKR: What does it mean to be a Cajun university?

JCM: It means we have a very significant folklore program as well as the French department. It's one of the reasons Marcia¹⁵ and I did the Zydeco book.¹⁶ There's a lot of pride in the local culture and we had a desire to educate ourselves about it and keep it going and pass that culture down to the next generation.

Of course Mardi Gras is a big celebration. We get three days off for Mardi Gras. Cajuns don't celebrate Mardi Gras in the same way that New Orleans does. It's the small towns around Lafayette that celebrate it. There aren't kings and queens, but people ride on horseback out to the farms after drinking all morning. They descend down onto farms that are prepared to

greet them. They perform tricks and the farmers throw chickens into the fields, then people from the parade run down the chickens and the chickens are sent back into town for the gumbo. The town has a party going on and a Cajun band is pulled around in a wagon that's pulled around all day from one farm to another. It's a more democratic kind of Mardi Gras. There's no royalty, although we have that in the Lafayette parade and the Lake Charles parade with kings and queens and courts, which are more like New Orleans parades.

We have a Lagniappe Day—Cajun French for “something a little extra for free.” They used to give students a Lagniappe Day holiday in spring semester on a Wednesday just for no reason. That's gone—we couldn't manage that holiday with other state holidays. But there's still a celebration where we have crawfish races among other things that take advantage of the culture. The history department has a Saturday celebration where they sponsor a big boudin¹⁷ cook-off.

Also, many of the Cajun musicians around here are people who have majored in French or English in folklore and are developing their French skills but also are really exploring the traditions of Cajun culture. Of course that makes our Louisiana literature class an important class as well. We've tried to bring nonfiction readings about Louisiana culture into the writing class.

SKR: So in part the Zydeco book is designed as a reader for composition classes?

JCM: As a reader in a writing class but also in Louisiana folklore classes as a set of readings.

SKR: Is it used in ULL composition classes?

JCM: Used to be, but eventually fell out of use after ten years. The textbook I did for Pearson called *The Reader* has several Louisiana readings in it and that's being used in a number of classes. It has readings about Mardi Gras and readings about Katrina. I think that has some popularity in our program because it has ten readings or so that people in Louisiana can particularly connect to.

SKR: The University of Louisiana at Lafayette started out as Southwest Louisiana Industrial Institute in 1900, the beginning of the twentieth cen-

tury. Are there ways that you see ULL at the beginning of the twenty-first century reflecting those origins?

JCM: I'm not sure that I do. Eventually they dropped the "Industrial" from the name. Within fifteen years it was just SLI, then in 1960 it took the name of the University of Southwestern Louisiana. Then we dropped the "Southwestern" ten years ago and it became University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Those name changes represent a desire to move away from the origins in some ways, although the "Southwestern" remains important even though not in our name. We see ourselves serving the culture and promoting the culture and literature and it also goes on in the sciences with the interest in the wetlands. Many of our students in technical writing end up working for the Wetlands Institute, so we see ourselves as serving the region and representing the region in that way.

But there's also been a desire for us to move away from being a regional institute to being not the flagship but the number two research institution in the state. That was the reason for changing the name and getting rid of the "Southwestern" and becoming University of Louisiana at Lafayette. There was a big push starting in the 1970s when the President who was here for thirty-four years¹⁸ took over and wanted to make this a PhD-granting university and to move up to Research II. Now they're hoping to move up to Research I and to represent ourselves as a university that represents the whole state. So that meant moving away from "industrial institute" origins, where there were courses on knitting and things like that in the 1900s.

SKR: We heard a lot about college and universities in New Orleans that were obviously affected by Hurricane Katrina. It also affected colleges and universities that were further inland. What are some of the differences in the ways ULL was affected and what are some specific ways it affected the writing programs?

JCM: Katrina struck the weekend after our first classes. We ended up adding eight hundred and some students in the aftermath of Katrina from New Orleans universities and colleges who were displaced. I would say—I'm guessing—two hundred of them went into first year comp classes. Only about half lasted the first semester. A lot weren't able to focus on college or realized this wasn't where they wanted to be. They wanted to be at Tulane or at UNO. At the same time we had our own students from New Orleans, many of whom had their family coming to them living for a few days in their dorm rooms and apartments. The university had to be in business of helping their parents and other family members find places to live. While

we were closed in anticipation of Katrina for one day, we didn't have any bad weather. We had to close later when Rita came through. McNeese State University in Lake Charles—Rita closed down that university for a whole month and we got a whole new group of evacuees right when Katrina evacuees were moving into more permanent places. It made a permanent increase in the Lafayette population and it also meant an increase that continued in our enrollment. The New Orleans schools all reopened in January, but to much smaller student enrollments. They laid off a number of faculty. Some of them had to cut numerous programs and that re-defined their universities.¹⁹

In fact, Tulane eliminated all its PhD programs after Katrina and decided to focus on its undergraduate mission more. Many universities also got more involved with service learning where students were part of rebuilding New Orleans. It had a huge effect on New Orleans schools and they're still recovering from that, but they have not reached the numbers that they were pre-Katrina. The University of New Orleans dropped their basketball program for example. The University of New Orleans, among others, has compiled an archive of stories, many of them from their students, so in many ways that has changed the mission and character of those universities.

Our university's desire to be the number two university was helped by Katrina and Rita because we didn't have to shut down programs and we've been able to withstand the last two years of budget cuts that other universities couldn't. Part of that was due to fiscal conservatism of our previous president. We've been able to add some programs or add to programs, even as other departments were cutting. That was a big difference for us.

SKR: How were writing programs affected?

JCM: Obviously there was a lot of writing about Katrina and after that a lot of people were tired of talking about Katrina. Melissa Nicolas is writing a book about this. We opened one or two sections of 101 entirely of students who were evacuated from New Orleans, starting one or two weeks late. Melissa ended up interviewing that teacher and all of those students and some other students. She has continued to work on that.

The hurricane changed the way Louisianans think about themselves and the state. There's a lot more nervousness about safety and the future and whatever you build, will it remain, and there's less complacency about surviving hurricanes and it's affected us financially. Insurance rates have gone way up. It's harder to get mortgages south of Interstate 10. Probably the BP

spill and budget cuts and recession have all combined to make Louisianans less sure about themselves and the future.

SKR: Let me ask about the other big disaster, this time man-made, when the Gulf region was hit with the BP Oil Spill. I know ULL has a department of petroleum engineering. Besides being a source of expertise for responding to the spill how has the spill affected the university? Has ULL's connection to oil shaped the writing programs at all?

JCM: A lot of that is yet to be played out. There were predictions of great job losses because of the BP spill. At first, because of the damage to fishing and later because of the moratorium on deep sea oil drilling. But the immediate loss of jobs wasn't nearly as great as people expected partly because BP was hiring a lot of the people who were laid off or whose businesses were hurt to do the cleanup. A lot of the companies hunkered down and tried to see if they could avoid layoffs and they seemed to have done that to some extent. I'm not sure what the lingering effects will be.

I know in my first-year writing class the spill comes up a lot in discussions about various economic issues and environmental issues. Discussion comes back to the spill. It highlighted a longstanding tension in Louisiana where we have a lot of jobs dependent upon the environment in fishing and tourism. Louisiana is a big hunting state and big fishing state and at the same time we're dependent on the oil and gas and chemical industries that do damage to the environment and we as a state have allowed lax regulations to attract that industry here. So you didn't find a lot of the shrimp fishermen complaining a lot about BP because, well, they have family members who work for oil. So the moratorium was unpopular. I think Obama was more unpopular for declaring the moratorium than BP and Halliburton were unpopular for mismanaging, although they certainly took a hit in their popularity. But BP is putting a lot of grant money and some of that is not just to understand the environmental damage but to understand how it is affecting the culture. We have some English professors who are collaborating with folklore professors in other parts of the state to get grant money to get into cultural exploration of how BP has affected Louisiana. That, I think, will probably affect writing classes and we will have a lot of issues students can write about with what has happened with the hurricanes and with the wetlands and with the oil spills. It's a state that has suffered a lot of problems and that gives students a lot to write about and the BP spill will just become a bigger part of that.

SKR: How long have you been at ULL?

JCM: Since 1987.

SKR: That's a long time. How has working there and living in the region changed you?

JCM: It's changed my cholesterol! All the southwest Louisiana food is not the healthiest. I have a large Louisiana music CD collection and I'm very big on attending the Cultural Festivals down here. I've developed an amateur interest in Louisiana folklore and Louisiana music and culture that has gotten into my research in some ways. It's also a poor state and is always ranked in bottom five as far as income and employment and literacy rates and high school dropouts. It ranks lowest. The education system has been a matter of a lot of concern for decades. Education is not a top priority for a lot of people in this state. I think that's one of the reasons we have a very high percentage of nontraditional students and older students. Something like 25% of our student population is considered non-traditional—people who've worked in the oil fields and lost their jobs or been injured or for other reasons decided higher education was important for them later in life instead of just after coming out of high school. That means having older students in your classes and that changes your teaching. They're going to be more assertive and they're going to bring more knowledge of culture. They're going to bring different economic realities. That's changed my teaching in some ways.

It's a relaxed culture. It's not a culture that seems to produce a lot of Type A personalities. I like that. We don't make a lot of money in Louisiana universities. We took years to reach the southern average, as far as salaries go for higher ed, from being the bottom. We reached that and then they started cutting our budget. But I decided early on that I needed to attend the festivals—Acadian, Internationale, and Blackpot. I take advantage of all the music down here and consider that part of my salary. Otherwise I might as well be teaching in North Dakota or someplace like that if I'm not going to these places. So I hit the festivals and some of the clubs and a fair number of times do take advantage of the music out there. At my age it helps if the bands play earlier.

SKR: I mentioned my metaphor for the writing program I direct, which is the ocotillo. If you were going to choose a metaphor for one or more writing programs at ULL – a metaphor that was native—what would it be?

JCM: Well, the most popular metaphor down here is *gumbo* because every gumbo is unique. It all depends on what you put into the gumbo. We have gumbo parties down here when the weather is cold enough. Everybody has to bring something to put in the gumbo. It's different depending on who shows up and what they bring. People bring chicken or sausages or shrimp. It's always a different mix, and that makes it a nice kind of metaphor for multiculturalism. Everything in the gumbo doesn't get mashed up. It's adding to the flavor but also retaining its uniqueness.

The gumbo metaphor is a way to see how the university should work in the community. It has distinct flavors, but at the same time each individual needs to contribute something different to it. That's what we aim for if we think about our writing program as a community of teachers and students.

SKR: If I were to visit your campus in person, what place or places should I visit other than writing program offices and classrooms in order to understand how the ULL context shapes writing programs?

JCM: We'd definitely take you to the swamp we have in the middle of campus. There are several alligators there. There's a sign that says "Don't feed the alligators." The campus swamp has a bunch of cypress trees growing out of it and some Spanish moss and it's the symbol of the university and the culture and the natural environment around here. That would be one. It's also interesting that we have a fast food Lebanese restaurant on campus. Actually the Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean cultures are actually part of this culture. They're brought here for the oil industry, so it's not just French Francophone. The place is becoming more mixed. They actually have pretty good gyros, chicken shawarma, and things like that at that restaurant.

I think I'd have you take a look at some of the archives in the library—particularly the music archives. We have recordings of Cajun and Creole bands going back to the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and Cajun storytelling as well, although in French. That gets into the university seeing itself as something that's supposed to preserve the culture and not just the high culture.

I'd maybe end up taking you to Eunice where they have a live radio program of Cajun music and other Louisiana music that's hosted by folklore scholar Barry Ancelet, who was Department Head of Modern Languages, who is a great storyteller himself and sees his program as a way to educate people about the culture around here.

SKR: Sounds like fun! Thanks so much for talking with me, Jim. I'm looking forward to seeing you in Baton Rouge this summer.

JCM: You're welcome.

NOTES

1. Lillian Bridwell Bowles.

2. The *Southern Review* literary magazine, first published at LSU by editors Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks from 1935 to 1942, has been published continuously at LSU since 1965. For Warren and Brooks' account of the early history of the magazine, see the *Southern Review* website at <http://www.lsu.edu/thesouthernreview/history.html>.

3. Piyush Amrit "Bobby" Jindal, current governor of Louisiana.

4. Taylor Opportunity Program for Students.

5. The late Pat Taylor, an LSU alumnus, was a New Orleans oilman, businessman and philanthropist.

6. Southern University and A&M College is a Historically Black 1890 land grant institution.

7. For the full statement of the Flagship Agenda, see <http://www.lsu.edu/flagshipagenda/Flagship2010/index.shtml>.

8. The Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill, also known as the Gulf Oil Spill and the British Petroleum Oil Disaster, began on April 20 and lasted until July 15, releasing nearly five million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

9. Mark Emmert was Chancellor of LSU from 1999 until 2004, when he became the President of the University of Washington. Emmert became President of the National College Athletic Association in September 2010.

10. Huey Pierce Long, Jr. (August 30, 1893 – September 10, 1935), was the 40th Governor of Louisiana from 1928–1932 and U.S. Senator from 1932 to 1935.

11. WPA is the acronym for the Works Progress Administration, later named the Works Projects Administration, an agency created as part of FDR's New Deal to employ millions in building and creating public works, including art. Part of the mural is used as a banner on the Department of English website: <http://uisw-cmsweb.prod.lsu.edu/ArtSci/english/#>

12. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is the regional accrediting association for higher education in Louisiana.

13. Update March 2011 from JCM: The English faculty voted last month to offer concentrations in the English major, including concentrations in professional writing and in creative writing. We will need to do much more with internships

for the professional writing concentration. I'm also planning to talk soon with the department head of Communications about proposing an interdisciplinary professional writing minor, which would have a curriculum including journalism and other writing courses in Communications as well as the business college's business communication course.

14. Nominated to the Supreme Court by Lyndon Johnson in 1967, Thurgood Marshall (July 2, 1908 – January 24, 1993) was the first African American to serve on the United States Supreme Court. Prior to his service on the court, he was a lawyer, and is remembered for the victory in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, a decision that declared that state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students were unconstitutional.

15. Marcia Gaudet.

16. *Mardi Gras, Gumbo, and Zydeco: Readings in Louisiana Culture*. University of Mississippi Press, 2003.

17. JCM's note: *Boudin* is grilled pork and rice dressing with various spices in a sausage casing, though there are variations with seafood, crawfish, alligator, or turkey instead of pork.

18. Dr. Ray P. Authement, President of ULL from 1974 to 2008.

19. JCM's note: The journal *Reflections: Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy* devoted Volume 7.1-2 (Spring 2008) to a special issue, *Writing the Blues: Teaching in a Post-Katrina Environment*, and it is a fine source on what Louisiana writing programs went through after Katrina, especially in New Orleans.

