



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78712-1164

Department of English
PAR 110
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August 29, 1984

Dear Professor Sutherland:

As you are aware, our writing lab director, David McMurrey, has resigned to take a job with IBM beginning September 4, 1984, declining the learning specialist position offered to him earlier this summer by the Executive Committee. The learning specialist title would have enabled Dr. McMurrey to work at full-time during the 1984-85 academic year and would have given him a measure of security not enjoyed by lecturers in this department.

I am asking that this learning specialist position be extended to future writing lab directors, beginning, if possible, immediately or no later than the beginning of the spring term, 1985.

There are several reasons for taking this action promptly. First of all, the lab--a highly respected facility on this campus--needs professional, reliable, and full-time administration. Now open forty-seven hours per week, the writing center has served thousands of students and hundreds of teachers over the past four years, consistently winning high marks for its services and the good will of the university--despite a budget that is minuscule, even by English Department standards. The continuation of this service depends upon our ability to hire and retain a lab director as efficient and dedicated as David McMurrey.

The need for an efficient operation will be particularly important over the next few semesters as we begin to put in place the E106 and E206 lab courses mandated by the new English requirements. If we are to launch the pilot programs for these courses by the spring or summer sessions as you have requested, we need to commit ourselves immediately to an administrative structure that will assure continuity in the lab.

Furthermore, the new director will have to assume major responsibility for overseeing the recently approved "Project Quest" grant to the writing lab. This is a project of substance and importance, endorsed enthusiastically by the university committee which made the awards. It has great potential for advancing our department in an area where we have, until now, lagged far behind other institutions and programs. The approval of a specialist position will enable us to take advantage of the Project Quest grant and to seek a writing lab director whose expertise includes the use of computers in English courses and the development of educational software.

To obtain a person whose professional interests are specifically related to writing labs and who has the expertise to implement both the lab courses and Project Quest, we need the specialist position.

I am afraid that the position of lecturers in this department is likely to remain too uncertain, vulnerable, and politically sensitive to expect anyone in that rank to make more than a temporary commitment to the writing lab. I would remind you that there are no provisions for evaluating the work of a writing lab director within the current hiring procedures for lecturers--an omission singularly evident this past summer when Dr. McMurrey was officially notified that he had not been rehired before any effort was made to assess the quality of his work in the writing lab. Neither I, nor my associate director, nor anyone familiar with David's work was consulted in the matter or notified of the executive committee's intention not to rehire the lab director. It is neither reasonable nor humane to expect future lab directors to place their professional careers (and personal lives) in such jeopardy. The specialist position would offer the lab director greater security than lecturers currently enjoy and would permit and encourage annual evaluations based specifically upon the work the director performed for the English Department.

I do not believe that the department is prepared, at this time, to hire a lab director at the rank of assistant or associate professor or to ask someone currently in those ranks to assume the responsibilities of the job. The criteria of the university for promotion and tenure weigh against the appointment of any assistant professor to the directorship. Neither would it be wise to put an associate or, for that matter, a full professor in the slot unless that faculty member were willing to make a professional and long-term commitment to the job and could expect professional rewards for doing it well. The lab needs more than a caretaker.

Consequently, I would urge you and the executive committee to authorize immediately a learning specialist position for the English Department Writing Lab. You will be acting in the best interests both of our students and our faculty.

Sincerely,



John J. Ruszkiewicz
Director of Freshman English