

**Maintaining a Research Agenda at a Small Teaching College:  
A Faculty Dilemma**

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*The preparation of mind and will for the knowledge and love and service of God can never end.  
It is what our life is for.*

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**by**

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### ***Introduction***

At many small liberal arts colleges, faculty are expected to provide—and are rewarded for—excellent teaching and service to students and the college community. Expectations for research may be quite minimal. Although this relieves faculty from the anxiety experienced by colleagues in research institutions to “publish or perish,” it does not provide faculty with much incentive to develop and maintain the research agenda developed in graduate school or to share knowledge and expertise with others in their fields. At Wilmington College, a group of five faculty members in education, biology and athletic training/sports medicine met for a semester to support each other’s efforts to develop and implement a continuing program of research and other scholarly activity. Their discussion resulted in the following insights—as well as a number of publications and presentations!

### ***The Process***

The primary purpose for forming the writer’s support group at Wilmington College was:

- 1) to provide support for faculty as they moved forward with their tenure applications, and
- 2) to meet individual expectations in the area of scholarship. A consultant with experience in writer’s support groups was hired with faculty development funds to lead and inspire the members. After an initial meeting with the consultant, the group agreed to a set of ground rules. Specifically, members were allotted 15 minutes per session to present and discuss their research ideas at meetings scheduled approximately every two weeks, usually over coffee or a meal. These peer consultation meetings provided an opportunity to not only examine the direction of each member’s individual research and writing, but also serve as an occasion for the members to share their opinions and perspectives about everyday life.

### *Quaker Perspective*

The team approach used by the writer's group fit nicely with the College's mission of teaching peace and social justice. Quaker traditions, values, and process are uniquely interpreted at Wilmington College, mostly by other-than Quakers. The most obvious Friendly persuasion is governance by consensus decision-making. The tradition of using first names at Wilmington regardless of status is also attributed to Friends but legend is that the first-name tradition was actually started in the 1960's to appease some student hippies.

One particular feature of the Wilmington writer's support group unique to Friends was the concept of clearness committees. Vicki Wilson, a member of the group was sharing the writer's group concept with a former colleague and Friend who suggested that our group could be considered, in some respects, a "clearness committee." Investigation of a clearness committee lead Michele Beery, (another member of the group), to a text written by Patricia Loring titled: *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees*, (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #305, 1992). In short, Quaker clearness committees may be organized by an individual or group for the purpose of seeking advice or for gaining input prior to decision-making. For example, in some Meetings a clearness committee is traditional before a couple decides to marry. The Wilmington writer's group functioned similarly to a clearness committee because each member asked for input from the others without fear of rejection or threats to personal self-esteem. Further, each group meeting focused on one person's work during this intellectual process rather than multiple assignments from many people. Much like a clearness committee, the group defined how we pursued these leadings, trusting that the group members would be given the ears to hear, and the mouths to speak what was important.

Initially the group struggled with the decision of who should be in the writer's group in a manner similar the composition of a clearness committee. Being intent on inclusion, but having an eye toward productivity, this proved to be troublesome for several members because they felt they were alienating others.

The concept of clearness committees may also be somewhat awkward for some colleagues because researchers usually work alone. Thus, people who participate in the writer's group process must see themselves as learners. Power issues or status must be eliminated if the group is to be successful. Establishing and maintaining trust, especially when risking to share new ideas and rough first drafts takes time—probably more time for people unfamiliar with one another than for people who already have established relationships.

### ***Writers Group Members***

In the following section, members of the group identify their place of self, why they joined the group, and the benefits they received from participating.

***Michele Beery:*** I am a wife, the mother of three school-aged children and an assistant professor of education. I joined the writer's group because I am scheduled for promotion and tenure review next year. I am ambivalent about tenure but like most working mothers, I need a little bit of extra income and the status of promotion. And I like my job, which happens to be tenure-track. I also like the other faculty who were involved in the writer's group. I don't usually take time to socialize at work and this was a good excuse.

I knew from the start that my biggest obstacle to scholarly research is finding uninterrupted time to study and write. My responsibilities at the College have grown exponentially in the last couple of years. In my third year, I was elected Assistant Presiding Clerk of the Faculty, and I am just competing that cycle. Last year I accepted the position of

Chair for the Education Department. All-in-all, editing my daughter's Honors English 11 research paper still takes precedent over my own writing.

In my opinion, the institutional expectation of scholarly work depends on whom you talk to at Wilmington College. I believe that the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) during my first three years here wanted to raise the bar, but our faculty self-review process requires that each individual define what she wants to be considered her scholarly work. In my case, I made two or three presentations and conducted workshops each year at the Ohio early childhood conferences. The writer's group has challenged me to attempt to publish the content of the sessions. The group members have inspired me to try to carve out some time of my own, to prioritize some projects, to get my ideas organized and substantiated and to submit them not so much because I need to publish to get tenure, but because I might have something worthwhile to contribute.

Another personal benefit of participating in the writer's group is feeling like I am supporting the scholarly work of my colleagues. I received my Ph.D. from The Ohio State University several years ago and I was sent forth to promote the mission of the OSU School of Education and to conduct research. Unfortunately, I didn't find a job in my field in my geographic area for 10 years. My commitment to research is still alive but my skills have never really been practiced. I am also a teacher first and like most teachers, I want to improve the world. The members of the group have shared their suggestions for alternative venues of publication that value the contributions of practitioners. I believe I can make a difference by writing for newsletters, the ERIC Clearinghouse, and in lay journals aimed at an audience of parents.

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**Jeff Wimer:** Having a bent for research throughout my career, I was interested in joining a group not only for the motivation, but to “talk shop” with colleagues I usually don’t have a opportunity to do so with. During the fall semester, I made a suggestion to the VPAA that she consider hiring Dr. Katie Kinnucan-Welsch as a speaker for our beginning year academic inservice retreat. In past years, speakers had included experts on teaching techniques, pedagogy, and critical thinking. Katie served on my dissertation committee and I worked closely with her on a major research project that examined changes on urban schools resulting from the introduction of school choice scholarships (vouchers). Moreover, Katie was working successfully with faculty at the University of Dayton in the area of writing, and she had published and presented nationally on this topic. My hope was for the VPAA to hire Katie, and together, they would reintroduce faculty to the importance of research and writing on our campus and for their careers. Unfortunately, due to budget restraints and concerns that the administration might be seen as endorsing research over teaching, the speaker session was not scheduled.

Summer vacation passed and fall semester began when Michele Beery approached me and suggested we revitalize the writers support group idea. Michele recommended we submit a proposal to the Institutional Development and Research Committee (IDRC)—a grant program at Wilmington College which funds awards for faculty research ranging from \$500-\$1000 each. Rather than sponsor a speaker for the entire community, Michelle suggested we work in a smaller group. I had won grants from this committee in the past for an investigation on recycling with two WC colleagues, and, therefore, thought the joint faculty proposal for a writers support group sounded like an excellent idea.

I enjoy teaching, and find it comes naturally to me. Having been trained as a K-12 health education teacher and earning an Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) degree, I elected to pursue my

Ph.D. in higher education leadership rather than in biomechanics or exercise physiology—two common tracks for many Certified Athletic Trainers (my primary responsibility at Wilmington College). I have remained active in issues of education by continuing to keep abreast of the current literature in the field. Therefore, when the opportunity to participate in a group with three members from the Education department appeared, I was quite excited.

Building on my passion for educational leadership and the work from my dissertation, my personal goal for joining the group was to further develop a focused line of research in leadership and administration. Issues of leadership can be the mediating variables that maximize potential in educational organizations. My time in the group was devoted primarily to a project that investigated the inter-rater reliability of athletic training (sports medicine) accreditation site visitors, the purpose of which was to collect baseline data to explore whether there was evidence of agreement and accuracy regarding compliance and non-compliance during accreditation visits. The study involved the use of an on-line instrument, and included 93 of 135 (68.8%) athletic training site visitors (61 men, 32 women, age  $41.1 \pm 7.6$  years) and 98 of 1,997 (4.9%) subscribers to an E-mail listserve on athletic training issues (57 men, 40 women, age  $34.0 \pm 6.9$  years).

Members of the writers group assisted me in editing drafts of my papers and by making suggestions for improving the clarity and structure of this manuscript. Currently, the results of the project are under review for possible publication in the *Journal of Athletic Training*. Additionally, a refereed abstract of my study has been accepted for presentation at a national Athletic Trainers Educators Conference. Without the steady support and critical reviews of the writer's support group, I would have not been able to complete the manuscript as quickly as I did.

**Vicki Wilson:** I was interested in the writers support group for a couple of reasons—I enjoyed the friendship and professional collegiality of the other faculty involved, and I had been part of a similar group at Muskingum College and felt that I had some insights and information to share. What I got from the group was, however, much more substantial than interesting conversation and appreciation for my contributions.

I have always had more ideas than time. For my research agenda, that translated into too many projects at too many stages of development, from hare-brained ideas to nearly completed manuscripts. The group helped me narrow my focus, to shed some of the “fringe” projects, and to concentrate on those that are more central to the work that I do and have done. I also got support for completing articles without including exhaustive literature reviews, one of the barriers that had kept me from finishing projects. The group assured me that it was acceptable to do a cursory review of the literature; reviewers could let me know if I needed to do more.

We also spent a considerable amount of time talking about our motivation for scholarly endeavors. It was interesting to me that we most often discussed research and its dissemination as a moral imperative, that we have an obligation to share our talents with others, independent of the need to publish for promotion and tenure. The moral aspect is far more motivational to me and, I suspect, to others in colleges such as ours.

**Reva Cosby:** When I graduated from high school my goal in life was to be a schoolteacher and to have my own classroom. My undergraduate degree was in Social Studies Education. I enjoyed my teaching experiences in the high school. I taught U.S. History, Psychology and Government for many years before pursuing my Masters degree in Educational Leadership and most recently my doctorate in Educational Administration. After completing my



doctorate I decided to pursue teaching at the collegiate level because I felt it was a natural progression, and I hoped to be able to continue doing research, which I thoroughly enjoyed in graduate school. Being an assistant professor in the Education department at Wilmington College is my first full-time position in higher education.

One of the differences between teaching in college versus teaching in secondary schools is the expectation of continued research and scholarship beyond what was accomplished for the doctorate. Wilmington College, like many schools of its size and with its mission of being a teaching college places less emphasis on scholarly writing, but there is an expectation and a desire among many professors to continue researching areas that interest them. I am one of those people who want to continue to do research, and when appropriate, to put this research into action as I teach my classes.

However, there are many things in my life that impact my ability to achieve the goal of research and scholarly writing. One of the reasons that Wilmington College appealed to me at this point in my career was because I did not want the pressure that some professors feel in higher education to “publish or perish”. I am raising a family and I feel a need to be available to them. Also being new to higher education, I need more time to prepare for my classes than I expect my more veteran colleagues need.

Participation in the writer’s group has allowed me the opportunity to work on scholarship. I have received many suggestions about how to write articles and where to try to get them published that are realistic in the scheme of my life. Since being in the group, I have revisited papers that I wrote in my doctoral program to see if they are worth pursuing as articles. I have also written a letter to parents about school choice, which at this point is for my own personal satisfaction, but I do plan to find a place to get it published. I have also sent in a paper

proposal for a regional meeting based on my dissertation. I am not sure that I would have taken these opportunities to continue the research and scholarship if I had not been involved with the Wilmington writer's support group.

### ***Barriers to Writing***

Participating in a group with the goal of increasing research opportunities and scholarly writing may be beneficial for helping people overcome barriers to writing—especially for those people in the early part of their professional careers. Many people who teach at small teaching colleges find scholarship to be a limited expectation, although experience suggests that engaging in a systematic approach to gather knowledge is a one of the basic cores of our educational system. As early as the fourth grade, students are taught the basic tenets of the scientific method, which leads to the cumulating school science fair. Unfortunately, the formalized process of conducting research in one's field is typically not encouraged at small teaching colleges. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to help readers and conference participants to further define potential barriers that may hinder success in scholarship. Working with colleagues may ease these barriers.

***Lack of Family Time:*** "Never enough time" is a popular mantra in many academic households. As both new and seasoned faculty, having family responsibilities tends to be one biggest barriers to writing and scholarship. A formal writer's group can assist by setting aside time for specific meetings and setting goals. The idea of having others depend on a specific people to be accountable at meetings can be an important motivational strategy. Because the Wilmington group was small, it was easy to pick times that were convenient for most of the members. Large groups may make scheduling more difficult. Therefore, the small group setting

is preferred because it allows time for relationship development outside of the traditional work environment.

***Lack of Motivation:*** While there may be little expectation from colleagues to produce scholarly work at the small college level, it is doubly difficult to become motivated to pursue activities that are time consuming and rarely rewarded. Being in a group with like-minded colleagues can serve to motivate others. In the Wilmington group, members would go around a circle and talk about ideas they were considering, which often times stimulated other ideas and possibilities. At times, some members felt that they had nothing worth pursuing, for which the group would encourage and give support to their ideas.

***Lack of Confidence:*** Writer's support groups can assist colleagues who are uncertain about their abilities. The group process is instrumental in encouraging and helping to build confidence by allowing people to share their work without fear of judgment. When everyone in the group is willing to put their work up to constructive criticism within a honest but caring environment, the results can very productive. As one Wilmington College group member put it, "It is much easier to share." Moreover, when the group is comprised of caring colleagues, no one feels the pressure of being penalized for what they did or did not bring to the group. Participation in the group boosted the confidence levels of several members because they realized that many of their ideas were worth continuing.

***Lack of Resources:*** Different from large college and universities where professors are given reassigned time in their schedules for research activities, the small teaching college administration usually does not often support research and writing activities in this way. Large college and university libraries typically budget for little known journal subscriptions and specialized databases to support studies in unique areas. At a small teaching college, scholarly

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productivity is not calculated as part of course load, and the library budget is usually devoted to major subscriptions that reach greater numbers of people. In many cases, research support tools become a low priority when institutional resources are limited.

***Activity for FAHE Conference Participants***

One key for success among writer's support groups is to determine your institution's expectations in the area of "scholarship." According to the rubric below, please rate what you believe are the institutional expectations at your school:

- 1 No research, publications or scholarly work is expected.
- 2 Scholarship is loosely interpreted. No written definition of scholarship is available and accepted by all. Each individual faculty member creates and follows their own personal definition of scholarship and decides what weight scholarship will have in their overall evaluation.
- 3 Definition of scholarship is open to some interpretation. There is a written definition of scholarship available but not everyone knows it, knows where to find it or refers to it. There are some examples of what could be considered scholarly works suggested. Individual faculty members have the option to make a case for alternatives to publications to be considered scholarship work (examples: teaching innovations, conference presentations, written works other than professional publications are considered). Scholarship is considered equally as important as teaching and/or other performance criteria (for example, community service). Faculty are periodically asked to document efforts.
- 4 A clearly defined written definition of scholarship is available and referred to often. Examples of what is considered scholarly work are listed and exceptions are rarely considered (examples: professional publications only, research preferred, etc.). Scholarship is a major consideration for promotion and/or tenure. Faculty are asked to document efforts at least annually.
- 5 A clearly defined written definition of scholarship with expectations is available, it is referred to often and it is are part of employment contract. Everyone, including students, understand the weight that publications carry in evaluation of faculty members. Number of publications per year is specified. Only research and papers published in juried professional journals are considered.

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### *Action Steps*

In this section we present “action steps” which may be used for improving scholarship endeavors at your institution or in for your career.

- Talk with your dean and other members of your college faculty to determine the level of expectation and support for research in your institution. There may be incentives other than promotion and tenure, such as release time, funds for conferences, grant-writing support, and opportunities for collaboration on campus or in consortia to which the college belongs.
- Develop short-term and long-term goals for research. Make sure that you’ve included some relatively easy goals to ensure early and motivating success.
- Examine your own motives for research and other scholarly activity. You may not be motivated by the pressure to produce, but the opportunity to share your good ideas with the larger community may have great appeal.
- Seek out others on campus who are actively doing research. Put together a research support group for emotional and intellectual support. It’s amazing how insightful faculty members are, even when the research is not in their areas of expertise.
- If you have a research support group, consider setting up “clearness committees,” concentrating on the ideas and problems of one or two members per meeting rather than having all-group discussions.
- Combine scholarship with teaching. Because our colleges emphasize teaching and service, our innovations and insights are often in these areas. Consider publishing or presenting pedagogy as well as content papers.
- Think of audiences other than academics to which to target your research. The insights you have may be more broadly disseminated to the popular press, to parents, to the educational or business community, or more specifically targeted to special interest groups, such as African-Americans or parents of gifted children.
- Sift through work you’ve already done, including papers written in graduate school, to see if you have something worth submitting now. For educators, ERIC provides a good first step in sharing work with the larger community.
- Realize that not all publications need to be research articles. Book reviews, encyclopedia blurbs, and short essays or descriptions of innovative teaching techniques are much less time-consuming to produce and are generally much easier to get accepted.
- Collaborate with colleagues and students—both for motivation and for the insights they bring to your work.

