Administrator Interview Report: Planning Released Teachers' Projects

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Background

I conducted an interview with 'John'\(^1\), the director of 'EAP' (English for Academic Purposes) program at a university in Hawaii. 'EAP' is an ESL program for undergraduate and graduate students in the university who have English as a second language (not just international students but also immigrant students with green cards and American citizens who have English as a second language).

The interview is about the released teachers' projects in the program. Due to the unpredictable fluctuation of student enrollment, EAP sometimes release a few teachers from teaching for a semester and make them develop some projects instead. Typically, the teachers get released from teaching one course, which is counted as a 'half Graduate Assistantship' at the university (10 hours of work per week including preparation time). Hence, the released teachers are expected to develop significantly big projects that are worth the cost of half GA. Put differently, the released teachers' projects have been an important issue in EAP for its significant personnel cost and for effective exploitation of human resources.

Interview

I asked John three big questions in the interview: that is, 1) How often and how many teachers have been released from teaching?; 2) Who have been prioritized for getting released from teaching?; and 3) What kind of projects have been accomplished by released teachers?

\(^1\) All personal and institutional names are pseudonym.
Q1. How often and how many teachers have been released from teaching?

Starting from the day John got hired until 'some years ago' (John is not sure exactly when it was), EAP had never had any 'released teachers'. In those days, according to John, EAP had been able to hire only the 'absolute minimum number' of Graduate Assistants (henceforth, GAs) every semester. As he recollect, the Dean of CLL (College of Language and Literature) of the day allowed EAP to hire only the minimum number of GAs at the beginning of the semester. Each time student enrollment exceeded the capacity of the EAP classes, either John or the Chair of the Department of Applied Linguistics (which belongs to the CLL) had to talk with the Dean and hire additional GAs in the very last minute. Sometimes, John (or the Department Chair) and the Dean had to go through this process a couple of times at the busy beginning of the semester. Typically, as John explains, EAP 'started with 12 to 13 GAs' at the beginning of the semester and added '2 to 3' GAs after the semester started. While EAP did not have to have any teachers released from teaching, it seemed to have been a quite difficult process for both John and the Dean.

To avoid this difficulty, as John says, 'some years ago', the current Dean decided to allow EAP to hire GAs based on the 'typical needs' in the previous semesters. Since then, depending on the student enrollment of the semester, EAP has occasionally had some teachers released from teaching. John further explicates the difference between Spring and Fall semesters. Typically in Spring semesters, due to the smaller student enrollment, one (or more) teacher(s) tend to have been released from teaching one course (This means that typically a full GA get released from teaching one course while still teaching one course. In case of a released full-GA lead teachers, they do their lead teachers' job for 10 hours per week while carrying out a project for another 10 hours a week). Last semester, i.e., Spring 2007, the program had one lead teacher and as many as '3 or 4 other teachers' released from teaching. It is 'very unusual' for EAP to have that many teachers released in one semester. As John says, in the semester, the 'enrollment quickly run up' unexpectedly. In
contrast, EAP has not had any released teachers in Fall semesters until this semester, i.e., Fall 2007. Hence, this semester is very unusual for EAP in that it has one released teacher due to 'the slightly lower student enrollment for a Fall semester, combined with a larger average class size'.

John, however, points out the possibility that EAP may lose any released teachers in the future if the Dean change the policy again. Even so, 'possibly' EAP might be able to hire some additional GAs for specific projects if the program successfully get grants. As for this, however, John does not seem to be very optimistic. Previously, according to John, ‘the only time grants were available for a program like EAP was around 5 or 6 years ago, and at that time only two projects got actually approved out of eight to ten grant proposals submitted.'

Q2. Who have been prioritized for getting released from teaching?

John says that this is 'changing' after this summer when EAP revisited their strategic plans. This summer, John worked with 'Shoen', the director of 'HIAP' (Hawaii Institute of Academic Preparation), another ESL program on the same campus, and with 'Greg', the executive director of the both programs, i.e., EAP and HIAP. While the two programs have very different sets of learners (HIAP is dealing with ESL students who are preparing for college), both of them have started to work together closely after Greg has become the executive director of the two programs one year ago. Greg is a professor of the 'Department of Applied Linguistics' that belongs to the College of Language and Literature while being a part time executive director of the both ESL programs. With Greg's initiative, John and Shoen have revisited the strategic plans for their programs. An initial strategic plan, just for EAP, was developed 'some years ago' but this summer was 'the first time for the two programs to work jointly on strategic planning'. Whereas the strategic plans have always remained important for EAP, the plans have not necessarily been used primarily as the basis for designing released teachers' projects.
Before this summer, i.e., before the revision of their strategic plans, as John implicates, the selection of released teachers and the designing of their projects seemed to have been relatively more bottom-up. Typically, according to John, some EAP teachers, who are also graduate students in the Department of Applied Linguistics, proposed, and got approval from EAP of, their projects that are designed for their graduate courses. For example, a released teacher developed the 'statements of students' learning outcomes for some other courses [outside of EAP]' as his/her project for Program Evaluation course. The procedure seems to have been quite bottom-up in that the individual teachers proposed their projects, got approval from EAP, and developed the projects under the support and supervision of EAP administration.

After the revision of their strategic plans this summer, as John explains, EAP is changing the procedure into a more systematic and 'proactive' one. Now that EAP has an updated strategic plans, they 'want to change' the procedure of designing released teachers' projects in a way that makes the most of the strategic plans. Nancy, the academic coordinator of EAP, has now listed up the 'key areas' that EAP 'needs improvement or adjustment based on the strategic plans'. And EAP is now 'proactively' designing the possible projects that 'are very important' for them 'to develop'. They are also thinking ahead 'who will be the best or the most qualified person to work on the projects'. In short, ELI is now preparing potential projects and thinking ahead of the candidate developers of the projects ahead of time. That is to say, EAP is now, as John proudly terms, very 'proactive' in designing the projects and deciding 'who to approach first about being released from teaching' (If the first person does not show his/her interest in the project, EAP may talk to their 'second choice'). Yet, as John emphasizes, EAP's being proactive 'does not mean a complete paradigm shift from bottom-up to top-down'. As John clarifies, EAP still 'welcomes proposals from GAs as well'.

I also asked him if lead teachers are prioritized for getting released from teaching since, as an ex-teacher of EAP, I have had the impression that lead teachers tend to be released relatively more
often than other teachers. John explained that, as for the very first material development project, EAP selected lead teachers to get released since EAP thought that lead teachers were the ones who had enough experience and skills for accomplishing the project. From the next projects, John continues, EAP have chosen both lead teachers and other teachers for carrying out projects as long as they have 'stayed long' and are 'experienced and knowledgeable' enough. Hence, now EAP does not particularly distinguish lead teachers from other teachers when selecting who should get released from teaching; ‘what is more important,’ John says, ‘is having a GA who is a good match for the project.’.

**Q3. What kind of projects have been accomplished?**

John gave me a brief overview of the released teachers' projects in EAP.

1. Self-access material development project (1)

   EAP received a grant for this project. They completed Listening/Speaking materials and Reading materials, but did not put the Reading materials online, because 'the voice was too academic'. John hopes to 'revise these materials at some point, to reflect the same user-friendly voice of the Listening/Speaking materials, and then upload them'.

2. Material development project (2) ((several years later from 1))

   This project started 'several years later' from the first one, and 'focuses on incorporating options for radical pedagogy into the curriculum'.

3. Development of statements of student learning outcomes (SLOs) for EAP courses

   This project 'focuses on reviewing the goals and objectives for ELI courses, and developing SLO statements and various means of assessing these outcomes, as part of overall program evaluation'.
4. Program evaluation: Needs analysis of writing across the university

   The project took 'multiple means of investigation' including 'questionnaires and collecting and analyzing syllabuses of university courses'

5. Digitizing and adding Listening/Speaking materials

6. Developing a series of lessons on critical awareness of mass-media

7. Program development: Investigation of international students' lives in the university

   This is an on-going project, looking into international students' live at the university. The project is going to cover both academic and social lives of ex- and current EAP students.

Conclusion

   EAP has had some released teachers from 'some years ago' when the Dean of CLL changed the policy of hiring GAs. EAP has released some teachers from teaching especially in Spring semesters, and have made them work on varieties of important project including material development, program evaluation, and assessment of learning outcome. The procedure of designing projects is now changing in a more 'proactive' direction: that is, designing projects ahead of time based on their updated strategic plans.