Section 17.

Summary

During the period, August 1-October 31, 1997, a team of evaluation specialists from CIRCE at the University of Illinois evaluated the Fall, 1996 VBA staff training in Reader Focused Writing. Five Regional Offices were studied, a national survey was administered to directors and trainees, and letters to veterans were examined. A meta-evaluation study culminated in a three hour hearing on October 29 under the direction of Vice Chancellor Stephen Kemmis of the University of Ballarat. A draft of the CIRCE report was submitted to the Veterans Benefits Administration on November 6. A summary of conclusions follows:

Evaluation of Need, Goals, and Plan

Under the title of Reader Focused Writing, a coordinated effort to upgrade written communication within the Veterans Benefits Administration resulted in the Fall, 1996 training of 775 staff members at Regional and Central Office sites. For each trainee, the training lasted 21 hours and, at the regional sites, was carried on via an interactive satellite network. Presentations and activities centered on increasing attention to the veteran’s needs and making communication comprehensible and useful to the veteran.

Appeals for better letter-writing had been long heard from veterans, legislators, the President, GAO evaluators, and from VA staff persons themselves. Some criticisms overstated the problem, but a problem existed. Despite remedial efforts over the years, the need for more considerate and useful letters to veterans remained. Studying a sample of letters sent out by Regional Offices, our panelists concluded that much more should be done to consistently reach high standards of communication. The majority of letters were at least satisfactory but a troublesome minority remained unacceptable.

The goals of the RFW program were to upgrade communication awareness and effort of the entire VBA
workforce. In a corporate sense, all workers are engaged in communication with veterans and it behooves all to understand the problems and possible alleviations. The instructional goals of Reader Focused Writing were clearly appropriate for the VBA.

But it was clear that getting everyone trained, or getting even the subgroups primarily responsible for letter-writing better trained, would not by itself eliminate faulty communication. There were impediments to communication beyond insensitivity and low capability. One impediment was—with an increasing flow of letters from a staff being downsized—an institutional need for high productivity. Another was the lack of consistent support from Agency leaders for re-engineering the writing. The expressed goals for RFW were clear and legitimate but were not given sufficient priority Agency-wide to dramatically change actual practice.

The need for staff training was real, but equally real, perhaps even more pressing, was the need for getting PCGL and other computerized letters fully compatible with Reader Focused Writing. RFW principles of communication are sound principles for all communication. Many of the PCGL passages continued to be obscure, impersonal, and traced with defensiveness. This is not to say that all claim resolutions can be stated in a way every veteran can understand, but complexity is not the major problem. The major problem is one of priority. Good letters, whether originating as pattern letters or not, take longer. To best resolve the conflict between "timeliness" and "veteran oriented writing," it is important to have a staff keenly aware of good and bad letters. The plan for general education of the staff in RFW was responsive to the need and well thought out.

**Impact of the Training**

We found indications that a high majority of VBA staffers were persuaded even before RFW training that their letters to veterans were low on sympathy and high on technicality. The training reinforced the desire to do better, but it gave them many unexpected ideas about how to be more considerate of the veteran and to deliver a more useful package of information. Quite a few trainees reported observing some changes in RO operations attributable to the
training. The most visible impact was to move them into appreciation of the RFW format, with headings, bullets and white space. But the more powerful impact was to persuade them to worry less about being precise, complete, and protective if it might make the letter more comprehensible. According to testimony, they came away from the training with greater understanding of how a letter is read. And according to our analysis of the letters they authored in our contrived performance situation, they were able to put into practice the principles of RFW. And our panelists reviewing RO letters which were offered us from the file, even those from PCGL software, found a few more high quality letters after the training.

But we had little reason to conclude there has been change in quality in the volume of letters actually mailed to veterans each day. Regional Office personnel did not expect a change because PCGL structures are changing too slowly and because the workload for Adjudicators and others who use the structures is too demanding to allow customizing or even to carefully proofread the work that they do. They know how to write better. The system does not require them or allow them to create and guarantee the best of which they are capable.

Quality of the Training Method

Interactive satellite instruction was used during the Fall, 1996 Orientation and Tools Course for two hours of training each day followed by an hour of small group problem solving. Some found this running on too long. On the big screen, presentations were informal but highly accomplished, engaging the eight or ten staff members gathered at each site, attentive to questions raised and closely tracking a well-developed instructional plan. It was well done. Essentially all of the data we gathered were based on instruction under a single impresario, Melodee Mercer—which means that we do not know how effective the training would have been under a less talented leader. Continuous emphasis was given to orienting the letters to the veteran, anticipating his or her needs and laying out clear steps to be followed or options to be selected.
Distance education (that’s what this is called in Education circles) in industrial and scholastic settings has often been ineffective because, even more than in the classroom and auditorium, the audience remains disengaged from the learning, sometimes hostile to it. The interactive electronic equipment used with RFW, allowing voice contact between all trainees and the instructor (although visual imaging was only of the instructor), did not function well much of the time, but the trainees at most stations were regularly and comfortably engaged. In some cases, the engagement was facilitated by the on-site instructor, but most of the attentiveness was drawn by the quality of ideas raised by the lead instructor, the instructional materials, and particularly the illustrative letters to and from veterans. From all our evidence, it was apparent that the participants found what was being taught worth learning.

The expectation of many was that they were there to learn how to write better letters, and the lessons did not dissuade them. Over and over, the training beamed in on writing original letters to veterans. But this RFW Tools training really was not justified as skill development. Half the trainees had "letter writing to veterans" as less than 20% of their total responsibility. And they and the other half were locked into computerized letters. Almost all VBA letters to veterans were developed on PCGL software or the equivalent. Staffers were not allowed the extra time to write more personalized letters. Some trainees spoke of a mismatch between the training and their work. But all personnel did need to understand the RFW system. The instruction could better have acknowledged wide differences in work responsibility across the Agency and given more attention to the central role of PCGL but teaching about Agency responsibility for effective writing by concentrating on the writing of original letters was not necessarily a bad strategy.

**Impact of VBA Infrastructure on RFW**

RFW training did not persuade those who controlled the workflow in the Regional Offices that a better compromise between productivity and comprehensibility should—or perhaps could—be achieved. Productivity was a higher standard. Many stations were often faced with a backlog of files, turn-arounds extending into the months, unable to get the
job done even with the absolutely quickest of answers required by law. Staffers did not expect their bosses to give them opportunity to write a more compassionate, a more useful, letter. VBA is a top-down organization, the workers do not vote on performance standards. Training the workers to recognize and want better letter writing is no more than a wisp of influence on how the VBA will be run.

It is possible that under a different calculation of productivity, one taking into account the extra correspondence required by veteran requests for explanation and mis-response to VBA requests, a better balance between productivity and comprehensibility might be reached.

The ostensible fact is that the Regional Offices supported RFW. At perhaps half the stations there was surprisingly little reluctance to have a large fraction of the staff participate in the training. Concerns about the quality of VBA letter-writing appeared deeply felt, but administrators implemented neither the rewards for good letters nor the censure for bad that might have changed things. The principles of RFW communication were endorsed. With some apology, Directors spoke of their inability to find a way to answer the mail in timely fashion and, at the same time, adhere to expectations codified by RFW.

We found ample disbelief in the Regional Offices that the Central Office supported RFW. They pointed to CO communications reflecting little awareness of RFW. They saw little CO encouragement for mitigating timeliness standards in order to assure that each outgoing letter was carefully re-read. They knew that some people at the Central Office as well as Regional Offices had worked hard on the Task Force and on creating the training package but that they had less than full support across the Agency. The infrastructure for Reader Focused Writing was infirm at both federal and regional levels. Future extension of good RFW training could not be expected to generate, by itself, the climate essential for improved letter writing.

**Grounds for Continuation of RFW**

The general reaction of Regional Office people to the discontinuation of RFW telecasts in November, 1996 was
disappointment. Those who had participated found the sessions informative, persuasive, and a good opportunity to extend their understanding of their Agency. Even if obstacles to incorporating RFW into their work were formidable, they felt that the training enhanced their overview of responsibility. They felt, with good reason, that others should have opportunity of taking the Tools course and that more advanced work should be offered. Nor did there seem reason to discourage the supplementing of RFW with ordinary courses in grammar, business letter writing, and composition.

In fact, one of the more important sideviews of this evaluation study was that the Regional Offices appeared generally in need of a professional development environment or ethic. In-service education should not only be keeping up with technological change but enhancement of the worker as a person with professional responsibilities. The “Reinvention” process developed at the New York Regional Office, for example, indicates that staff members will be “implementing the design somewhat differently in different teams: some team’s case managers do more of their own development than others” (p 106). Other stations are moving in the same way. Such decentralization of responsibility requires an approach to training based partly on what is good for the individual worker, a professional development ethic. The interactivity and small group sessions of RFW training were consistent with this ethic.

The aims of the RFW program are likely to be best served by extended effort to upgrade PCGL-type holdings. Formatting and logic in these softwares are highly sophisticated but, over all, falling short of the personal view and utility standards advanced by RFW. Supportive of this effort should be the forthcoming RFW guide or reference book to help letter writers deal with unfamiliar problems. Future RFW presentations should be able to show letter writers using PCGL, working through unfamiliar problems, without diminishing emphasis on its principles of communication. Bringing in telephone communication will also be a needed extension of RFW. Future use of RFW should tie in with present job analyses of VBA personnel which, of course, will emphasize PCGL structures and voice interaction with veterans.
Reader Focused Writing is a major asset for the Veterans Benefits Administration. It is built upon sound principles, has the endorsement of the directorate and widespread acceptance among rank and file across the country. The training activities can be improved but, by and large, they have had a strong positive impact and appear well worth the investment. RFW addresses the recognized need for better communications and correspondence, and although insufficient to accomplish it alone, is an appropriate component in any re-engineering effort.