

## The FACCORDs—who were we and what did we do?

Karen Olsen  
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In 1985, Joe Arden and David Glaser (then serving as the Mediterranean Area Director) offered me the chance to serve for six months as a “FACCORD” (this an awkward acronym for an even more awkward job title: Coordinator, Faculty Evaluation and Assistance). Since I was at that time sensing the first smoldering of burnout after ten years of teaching English 101 at Hellenikon AB in Athens, I leaped at the opportunity to take on something (*anything!*) new and headed up to Heidelberg. Like many faculty toiling in faraway places, I’d never been in Heidelberg, never met my English department boss, Bob Speckhard, or indeed most of the administrative staff.

For the next three years, on and off, I crisscrossed Europe by car, train, bus and plane, visiting bases from Berlin to Reykjavik and from Sigonella to Sinop.

What follows is an utterly subjective account of the position of Faculty Coordinator as I knew it then.

In those days there were several of us acting as Coordinators, the others being Fabian Schupper, Chris Mooney, Jane McHan, Jennie Quillien, George Sydney, and Sam Thompson. Not all of us served at the same time. To be effective, Coordinators needed to preserve a collegial relationship with their peers; thus the position was designed to rotate among the faculty.

At the same time, the names I’ve listed tell you something that I only later realized—that the job was also seen in Heidelberg as a trial position, a rung on the ladder leading up to a “real job,” either as Area Director (AD) or as Academic Coordinator (AC). Only two of us, in fact, declined to go that route, Fabian because he was looking forward to retirement, me because I had a fulltime life back in Greece. Perhaps too because neither of us had either the appetite or the aptitude for a position of power.

Note: Fabian probably should have resisted Joe's enticements and retired before he took to napping during his classroom visits. But he was for me and many others a wise and caring mentor, and in Heidelberg he *always* championed the faculty. A truly humane and splendid person, whom I deeply miss.

Anyway, power was *not* in our job description. We didn't hire or fire anyone, we didn't approve syllabi or texts, we had little or no clout with ESO's or even Field Reps. With the ADs and ACs, we had a strictly advisory role and a minor one at that. One of my anonymous colleagues was probably correct in surmising that that our job was created primarily “to prevent ACES (ESO) people from creating their own form of inspection.” Joe really did assume “the integrity and competence of teachers” and he had no taste for Big Brother spying or lofty dictates about the Right Way to Teach. This was also true of the other senior staff. For me, one of the major perks of the job was the

opportunity to work with and for people I admired, like David Glaser, Paul Brewer, Wally Knoche, Paula Harbecke, LeAnne Cragun, Paul Phillips, and Martie Shull.

So what were our official duties as FACCORDs?

- visiting classes (more on this anon)

- holding workshops

These were one- or two-day affairs where we got together with small groups of instructors, led round-table discussions and practiced various teaching techniques, using a video camera. We all struggled with the technology, and I'm not sure how valuable these workshops were. But we were very earnest and we generally had a good time together too.

- interviewing potential faculty

In this role I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to meet a lot of interesting, talented and colorful people in out-of-the-way places, some of whom eventually became Maryland colleagues.

- orienting newly hired faculty

In my mind this was one of the most valuable parts of the job. Like many of us, I had had zero orientation when I first started with Maryland and in fact, had never met anyone from Heidelberg during the first five years I taught. So I always did my best to brief new teachers about our truly unique and strange environment. The other Coordinators did too. We created checklists for newbies, put together a grab bag of teaching tips, shared useful phone numbers and syllabi, etc.

- waving the flag for the university

When out in the field, we Coordinators were expected to act as roving ambassadors for the university, helping to maintain good relations with the various military organizations. This meant giving newspaper and radio and television interviews, as well as meeting with ESOs and other ed center and base personnel. They were a mixed bag, to say the least, sometimes acting as excellent allies in the mission of educating the troops, sometimes testing my diplomatic skills and fraying my nerves.

- Putting out fires

When a crisis occurred at some Maryland outpost, one of the Coordinators was often sent in to mediate a conflict—sometimes between faculty and students, other times between faculty and ed center personnel or between faculty and base authorities.

I dreaded these cases. My initial instinct was to sympathize with the teacher, but often that is all I could offer: sympathy. A naïve or inexperienced teacher was no match for an angry functionary, whether said functionary worked for the military or for the university. Students too, as we all know, could be very difficult to deal with. And the instinct of the Heidelberg administration (even among these upright, otherwise excellent people mentioned above) was to soothe the locals and keep the boat from rocking.

That said, I sometimes discovered that the teacher in trouble had brought on the crisis, through some form of unprofessional conduct in or out of the classroom. Those were the cases that caused me the greatest grief. Though I did my best to soothe ruffled feelings and excuse misbehavior and counsel the offender, I often returned to the office defeated and discouraged.

Fortunately these disaster cases were rare. Despite the utter lack of exterior incentives in terms of competitive salary, job security, or tenure, the vast majority of the Maryland teachers I observed did a creditable job in the classroom and an amazingly large number of us did a great job.

- Facilitating discourse within the university

In contrast to the firefighting, my favorite duty was a more or less unofficial one. We Coordinators took it on ourselves (some of us did, anyway) to improve communication between faculty and Heidelberg and to encourage networking among faculty. This meant answering questions, fielding complaints, counseling people about library resources, suggesting that they talk to other instructors in their field, or to the textbook folks about possible alternative books, or to the business office to straighten out paycheck questions. And when we were out in the field, it meant, whenever possible, wining and dining our fellow teachers—just as often and as well as we could, given our not overly generous expense accounts. For these faculty, who so often felt (and were) isolated and tired and underpaid, this simple gesture of appreciation was an act of true assistance. For me, the reward was a wealth of new friendships, many of which I continue to enjoy, however distant we may be geographically.

So let me talk a bit about class visits.

Each one started with a call or a letter (these were pre-email days, in fact, pre-computer days for most of us) letting the faculty member know who I was and when I planned to visit. Once I arrived, I would slip quietly into a seat at the back of the classroom, and spend at least half of a 3-hour session observing the class. Afterwards, preferably over a coffee or a beer or a late dinner, I would tell the teacher what I had noticed, what I thought was working, or not. Of course, we both knew that my presence was inherently disruptive and that what I saw was necessarily atypical—that was a given. I often asked questions, I sometimes offered a suggestion, and I always listened to what the teacher wanted to say.

As my anonymous colleague has said, the idea was "to give the amount of constructive feedback that I felt the person could comfortably accommodate and then to follow up on any support I offered (the name of a book, contact person, whatever)." Like my colleague, I found that "instructors were leery the first time round and then actually pleased to see me the next time, since it was support, not control" being offered. After all, it was also a given that none of us Coordinators had any special training or credentials that gave us the right to evaluate our peers. Nor did we claim expertise in the subject matter at hand. I sat in on classes in mathematics, in computer science, in art history, psychology, German, and many other subjects far removed from my own English literature expertise.

Indeed, the "evaluation" in our job title was a rather nebulous word. As I said before, we did not have (or want) the authority to fire or discipline anyone, and we were adamant that our feedback (usually oral) to the ADs or ACs never enter the instructors' files and never be used against them. For us, the core of the job was contained in the word "assistance."

We acted with the assumption that as teachers all of us were dedicated to the idea of education (why else would we be in this underpaid, underrated profession?), that we all wanted to do a good job, and that one teacher might have something of value to learn from another. For sure, I did! I came away from those hundreds of visits with notebooks full of ideas to try out in my own classroom. And some of them even worked for me.

Overall, I found the Faculty Coordinator job to be both challenging and rewarding. It gave me a better understanding of the university as a whole, it introduced me to staff and faculty all across Europe, it expanded my own skill sets, and it sent me back to the classroom with new ideas and renewed enthusiasm.