

CHAPTER 10

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT WAC PARTNERSHIPS AND THEIR FUTURES

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In 1992, Pam wrote an article for *Writing Lab Newsletter* on writing center collaborations entitled “College/High School Connections” in which she described both the problems and advantages of high school-college writing center collaborations. She saw the problems as a “lack of mutual understanding of roles as educators, time restraints, pre-established roles of participants, pecking order hierarchy, and why get involved with another institution” (Farrell 1). The advantages of partnerships were seen as “interactive training of tutors, exchange of ideas to survive the politics of education, focus on clear goals, shared expenses, and intellectual development” (Farrell 5). Over two decades later, little has changed.

After years of work with WAC partnerships, including the individual data gathered by our colleagues in their chapters of this book, we have learned more than we had imagined. First, there are many commonalities described in these chapters that reinforce the results of our original survey for our 2011 article in the *WAC Journal*. They include:

- Respectful, collaborative nature of partnership
- Jointly initiated collaborations
- Involvement of many stakeholders in development to benefit all
- Integration of programs into the fabric of all institutions involved
- Importance of information sharing (transparency)
- All or part of funding provided by both institutions
- Partnerships formed around local contexts
- Involvement of teacher preparation and faculty development
- Involvement of students through variations of a writing center or writing fellows program

These responses are unsurprising, yet they provide more evidence for the kinds of conditions required for successful partnerships, no matter the context, size, number of partners, or resources. These are not rules, but they do repeatedly

resurface in our research. When asked about his research of dual credit courses for his dissertation, James Uhlenkamp, Director of Field Experience, Gleazer School of Education at Graceland University, responded:

The success largely depends on the college offering a predictable set of classes at a time when the HS schedule can accommodate them; on the HS providing a teacher willing and able to deliver a class at the college level, including at the college pace, which tends to be much more intense than the HS classes; and on the two entities having a solid and understandable contract governing the expenses, expectations, responsibilities, and opportunities the partnership affords.

In contrast, we also see what most of our authors, as well as respondents to surveys and interviews, describe as the “uniqueness of every partnership.” Therefore, many of the commonalities have been listed in more general terms to fit those individual partnerships, while each collaboration has some little quirks that make it different from any other one. For instance, many of Trixie Smith’s short-term partnerships have specific qualities that are dependent upon the institutions or community groups involved. And, even though we hate to admit it, most of the partnerships we have located involve English/writing teachers and some science or history partnerships. In the undercurrent of these partnerships are hidden ones involving mathematics, art, music, physical education and foreign language classes. They may begin when two educators meet at a conference and decide to try an online exchange involving secondary education majors and a high school music, art, mathematics or foreign language class. Deborah Snider of Southern Utah University is editing a special issue of *The Clearing House* (2016) called “Drawing from Within: The Arts & Animated Learning” that will include secondary-college partnerships on writing in art. And, we are hearing about more projects in future articles on a social science-mathematics partnership that involves WAC, another based on research into the value of using English-speaking music (especially lyrics) to teach English to students in China, and yet another discussing the value of teaching writing across disciplines in high school for successful writing in college history classes. So, the importance of WAC continues to go beyond our limited work here.

In the spring of 2014 we wanted to gather more perspectives on WAC partnerships, so we invited international educators from California to Germany in secondary, community college, and university writing programs to respond to another survey. Based on their anonymous responses, we noticed similar patterns to those mentioned above. However, we learned more specific information from their responses to the following questions:

1. If you have had experience with WAC partnerships through professional organizations or with colleagues or individuals at other institutions, describe a successful one. What made it work?
2. If you have had experience with a partnership that was less successful, what would you have done differently to improve the partnership?
3. As a professional educator, what do you predict about WAC partnerships in the future? What might/should they look like? Will they be needed?
4. What words of encouragement can you offer to present and future collaborators?

Responses to each of these questions brought similar ideas of what made the collaborations successful. Common responses to Question 1 included mutual respect, common goals, need for a clear plan with goals, faculty development and common scholarship, flexibility in communication, and dedication of teachers and administrators. A secondary educator appreciated “encouragement to pair up with a faculty member from another discipline and create an autonomous lesson that drew upon the expertise of the instructors to showcase another way of approaching their discipline.” Respondents also mentioned attendance at conferences, such as CCCC and discipline-specific ones to bring back ideas for colleagues to implement, and use of the WAC Clearinghouse website (wac.colostate.edu) that offers many professional open-access books and journals as resources. One university respondent mentioned co-consulting with a secondary WAC specialist as an important part of a successful collaboration that impacted changes in curriculum and staff development, as well as collaborative presentations at conferences. Another respondent noted that mutual respect meant “going into the relationship knowing that you have a lot to learn from each other. It also means remembering that you are all concerned about the same thing: the students’ success.” One university respondent described her successful partnership as follows:

While in the college setting, email is the expected means of communication for pretty much everything, my WAC partnership with secondary school teachers requires a lot of texting. It also requires that I occasionally just show up, in person, in the high school classroom (even if that means dropping in unexpectedly). Sometimes it means sending messages through liaisons, such as a college student who happens to be interning at the high school. All these “back channel” means of communication are necessary to make sure we’re on the same page. Also necessary is getting to know one another outside of the school environment—by meeting for brunch, going out for drinks, hosting a cookout, etc.

But what problems did respondents encounter that they would handle differently? Mainly administrative issues, such as constant changes at the top in schools struggling to find stability, while new people come in “with goals of productivity not learning,” overworking teachers. One respondent described how leaders of the partnership “insisted on a very formulaic way of writing the experience up that many found off-putting, and the project was paired (needlessly) with another effort to map the skills involved in particular courses.” They speak of consultants brought in “to conduct a workshop but not build a relationship.” In handling the situation differently, they mentioned that the WAC partnership should be “on the books” as a course or real project, and faculty in-house training enables all partners to have the same terminology and understanding for better communication.

In considering the future of WAC partnerships, most respondents had very clear individual concerns, so we will try to offer the most common suggestions. One university respondent emphasized that WAC at universities has “to grow organically, within departments and from individuals within departments.... we need to stop the one size fits all models that still prevail. WAC needs to transition to CxC or another name and engage in the five languages (visual, oral, alphabetical, mathematical, physical).” The majority of respondents clearly felt that the need for WAC partnerships would increase in the future because of revisions in the SAT and CCSS that include writing across disciplines, a resurgence in popularity of WAC due to an emphasis on literacy, the need for writing in job readiness, and advancements in writing in higher education and professional training that we cannot even predict. Several respondents offered valuable comments on this question. For instance, one respondent said:

The testing agenda that drives many high school curricula (currently at least) does not have a clear analog at the college level, so it’s hard for educators in the different contexts to truly see where each other is coming from. At the same time, that’s exactly WHY we need these partnerships: because, if we want students to enter colleges with the habits of mind that colleges value, high school and college teachers (and administrators) need to be talking with one another. In addition, true partnerships between high school and college instructors help remind the college-level faculty that they can learn a lot from their K-12 counterparts.

While another respondent added, “I think that they [WAC partnerships] will become more numerous and necessary, if for no other reason than job readiness is becoming the coin of the realm. I think that the stand-alone English depart-

ment that focuses primarily on literature is fading and that kind of ‘English’ will be folded into other programs while writing will become more distributed.”

So, what do WAC educators say to current and future WAC collaborators? More than anything else, they emphasize that it should be a reciprocal relationship in which all involved are learners as well as teachers who are passionate about the partnership. They also suggest strong communication among members of the partnership—teachers, administrators, students—to eliminate misunderstandings. Also, they remind others that change takes time, so patience is required through the stressful times of beginning the partnership. Again, they mentioned the need for a contract or concrete document that outlines the goals of the partnership. In valuing one’s colleagues in a partnership, a respondent noted, “there is a core of literacy-focused, imaginative teachers in our state whom we have been able to tap as inspiring speakers and workshop leaders.” As one high school respondent said, “Working with a colleague from another discipline liberates me from the chains of my own ignorance. I became an educator, in part, because I loved to learn—not just English—and such partnerships create a natural bridge to new knowledge and experiences.”

Finally, partnerships exist beyond the university with individual connections that begin in high school. For instance, Austin Lin, a high school student interested in writing across the disciplines through the writing center, changed his major from English to chemical engineering while at Johns Hopkins University. However, he continues to value writing in his current field by writing a blog for StayWithIt.org, a group started by the White House Council on Jobs and Competitiveness to reduce attrition from engineering programs for undergrads (<http://staywithit.org/blog-entry/tennysons-daydream-what-engineering-majors-and-poets-have-common>). In Austin’s words, “I write about the importance that writing had in making me a better engineer—in my case, writing across the curriculum literally made me a better engineer” (Lin). Brandall Jones, recent college graduate, commented on his high school experiences that he now uses; “I agree that the collaboration between college professors and secondary school teachers is imperative, in order to adequately prepare students for college writing.... I find myself helping friends here with writing challenges that are a breeze for me” (Jones).

Perhaps the most prominent example of lifelong influence on partnerships may be Tommy Tobin, who worked with Pam and Trixie Smith through the Tennessee Writing Center Collaborative when he was in high school. While he attended Stanford, Tommy wrote an article for publication about the importance of high school preparation for college writing (Tobin) that he revised with assistance from Stanford’s Andrea Lunsford (writing program director) and Clyde Moneyhun (writing center director), then he presented with high school students

and Dilek Tokay of Sabanci University in Turkey at the 2007 WAC conference in Austin, Texas. Now, while completing a law degree at Georgetown and working on a Master's degree in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School, Tommy presented on WAC partnerships at the 2014 European Writing Center Conference in Germany with authors Luise Beaumont (Chapter 7) and Kirsten Jansen (Chapter 8). And, how many individual examples continue throughout the world? These are the hidden future of WAC partnerships; however, we can also make some more visible predictions based on what we have learned from others.

We see two ways in the short term that these partnerships will advance; the first is legislative and societal. More and more federal, state, and local governments are involving themselves in student success and education, and demands are increasing to prepare students for life after school. Part of that pressure is from stakeholders (students, parents, employers) questioning the bifurcation of K-12 to higher education. The legislative and societal pressure will demand increased accountability, and writing will be a key component of that because of its civic and professional importance. Arguably, as with many other educational movements that have arisen from legislative mandate, the vision may be limiting and highly focused on accountability.

Danielle Lilje in "Illuminating Possibilities: Secondary Writing Across the Curriculum as a Resource for Navigating Common Core State Standards" describes ways in which secondary school teachers can apply writing in classrooms across disciplines with the help of WAC advocates (college and university colleagues in all disciplines). She concludes, "WAC suggests the possibility for reconceptualizing CCSS-driven writing instruction in secondary classrooms not as addendum but rather as central to content area learning—a necessary support in meaning making and understanding." Lilje argues that the connection between WAC and the CCSS movement is an obvious one where these WAC advocates can make a difference at the secondary level.

The second way we see WAC partnerships advancing is through educators seeing the value of the work for students, producing results and scholarship about the work, and convincing school administrations that this work should be valued and supported. With the heavy push toward civic engagement of our colleges and universities and the growing need for support of our secondary schools, WAC partnerships provide an avenue to benefit all involved. Professional organizations, such as the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, see civic engagement by higher education as a moral imperative, and literacy partnerships are often a central component of that engagement. As more partnerships are formed and shared, others will be able to replicate and improve on the models. Then, ideally, this informed work will be used to educate communities and legislative bodies, which can in turn further promote and support this

important work.

If one were to think like a futurist, one might imagine an educational system that completely breaks down the barriers of moving from the K-12 system to higher education. Sometimes we hear the term K-16 education, a nod to seeing education as a continuum without a vast chasm between twelfth grade and college. Some form of higher education is becoming essential for professional success, and the benefits to personal growth are also well documented. WAC partnerships can lead the way to a seamless education that moves beyond the nineteenth century model of education to something that better serves our students in the twenty-first century.

Although robots are already writing for humans (Thompson 2014), we also predict that the collaborative efforts of educators will be necessary to prepare others to record research and advancements across disciplines. Today, much of what we do is not read by the masses, but it will still be necessary to advance society globally. Though nefarious, programmers have developed computer programs to create “gobblygook” academic conference proposals and academic papers (Thompson), pushing us closer to computer-generated content. According to the *New York Times*, computer-generated newspaper articles are gaining traction in the newsroom (Lohr 2011). What will be the role of writers in the future? Educators can and should play a role in that future, and that role can be stronger if educators are in partnership across the borders of K-12 and higher education.

From individual short-term partnerships, as Trixie Smith describes in Chapter 9, to cross-institutional collaborations, communication across disciplines will continue to support cultural advancements and service to others. Because university and secondary schools may become something totally different from what they are today, we will also see new ways that we can partner globally. Skype, Apple’s Siri, and other technologies are just the beginning of what we may expect and learn from the advancements of WAC collaborators in other countries. As long as there is the need for shared information across disciplines, there will be a need for WAC partnerships.

Based on the survey responses and the valuable insights our authors have brought to this book, we truly believe that WAC partnerships, no matter what we call them, will become even more important to us as educators and to our students at all academic levels in preparing them for the next phases of their lives.

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