Beyond the Reactive:
WAC Programs and the Steps Ahead

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Many models of writing across the curriculum flourish in institutions ranging from small private schools to land grant colleges to large universities. In our combined experience of over 30 years as WAC consultants, we have seen a pattern borne out that reflects much of the pertinent literature on writing across (and in) the disciplines of higher education. Typically, WAC programs attempt to answer the call of faculty who a) believe that students need to improve their writing skills, and b) want resources that will help them assist their students. In many cases, the call begins with faculty complaints about students' poor grammar and punctuation skills, but in addition, faculty often recognize that students also need critical thinking skills, which include the ability to manipulate content, research effectively, and synthesize multiple points of view with their own perspectives.

Understanding the role that writing can play to foster these skills, many instructors extol the practice of using writing as a tool to improve student learning. The notion that learning-to-write and writing-to-learn function well together is explained recently in Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon's *College English* article, "Clearing the Air: WAC Myths and Realities." Less recently, others have offered possibilities for WAC, including Toby Fulwiler (*Programs that Work*), John Bean (*Engaging Ideas*), and David Russell (*Writing in the Academic Disciplines*). In fact, a well-documented history exists to highlight and elaborate the benefits of using writing to facilitate learning-to-write and writing-to-learn.

Faculty members come to the point of using writing in their classes in different ways. Some attend a WAC workshop out of curiosity, then

discover later the advantages of applying WAC ideas in the classroom. Other faculty respond to experiences from their graduate training, specifically those in which their mentors emphasized the benefits of having students write. And some seek solutions after hearing cries from their students' employers who ask pointedly, "Why can't your graduates write?" Faculty in all of these cases use writing largely because of self-motivation. In fact, nearly all of our experiences with hundreds of faculty have been ones in which they have voluntarily sought help on writing-related initiatives. Even in institutions with writing-intensive requirements, rarely are instructors required to teach writing-intensive courses. They volunteer for specific, individualized reasons, and they usually see the benefits of writing and continue using it semester after semester. We call this voluntary approach to WAC "bottom-up" because faculty come to it themselves, see the benefits, and promote them. This approach, so one hopes, will create a groundswell of support that develops into a thriving WAC program.

A primary advantage of a voluntary approach is that instructors become agents in making a successful WAC program. Whether they have read the literature about WAC or not, they see WAC's benefits. Within these voluntary programs, students write a variety of texts in a variety of classes across the curriculum. From WAC's modern beginnings in the 1970s, the gains have been tremendous. In her 1989 article, "Writing across the Curriculum: The Second Stage, and Beyond," McLeod describes the advances that WAC has made and the ways in which programs have grown and progressed. She praises the institutionalization of WAC. Yet a problem has emerged – the development of "pockets" of writing instruction within many institutions.

In most cases, the pockets reside within disciplines and schools because the only faculty who teach writing are those who choose to do so. Sometimes those pockets open up and consist of an entire department, as is the case with Nursing at the University of Michigan—Flint. Alternatively, the pockets might simply consist of one or two faculty members within a department who may be overburdened with writing initiatives. A problem with the voluntary approach with its pockets is that often no guarantee exists that students will take those courses that require writing or include writing instruction. In fact, most of us have probably known students who have avoided writing courses altogether.

More critical is the undesirable, fitful character of the pocket ap-

proach. Just when students find a lush pocket, they finish the term and, perhaps, find in course after course no subsequent opportunity for refining their writing. We sympathize with the notion that, in some cases, writing-intensive courses serve to promote writing within disciplines or in general education; regardless, the gains are minimal when contrasted with the prospect of a wider-reaching WAC agenda. In our view, WAC advocates can better serve their communities by doing more than relying on a limited number of courses in which they are assured writing is being assigned, merely hoping for WAC to take hold in their various institutional settings.

Unlike voluntary WAC programs, writing-intensive programs guarantee that students will be assigned writing. Each student's curriculum dictates that a specified number of writing-intensive courses or credits must be taken. The required number, level, content and structure of writing-intensive courses all vary by institution and, to some degree, by course. One readily identifiable goal of all writing-intensive programs, however, is to get students to write beyond first-year composition, and in ways both more sophisticated and situated than they had encountered as first-year students (Farris). From our perspective, students in writing-intensive courses need the support of a proactive WAC program to insure that they receive frequent, consistent writing instruction, regardless of the discipline or class level. They need more structure than can be provided by the occasional in-class WAC workshop or the writing center tutoring session.

Some institutions require students to complete a specified number of writing-intensive courses or credits. Bucknell University, for instance, requires three courses. One writing course (W1), a foundation course, is intended for first-year students. After their first year, students eventually take two discipline-based writing courses that may or may not be within their major. With some exceptions, those courses are typically offered at the sophomore and junior levels. A rationale for writing-intensive courses is that if students are required to complete a specified number of credits deemed writing-intensive, they will have sufficiently practiced and been exposed to specific writing conventions/genres.[1] At Bucknell, students may take more than the requisite three courses. In fact, the rare student has been known to take more than ten, simply because the courses he or she needed happen to be writing-intensive. But this student is an exception. Bucknell can only guarantee that graduating students have fulfilled

the requirement of taking three writing-intensive courses. This is adequate for many Bucknell students; they arrive at the university as well-prepared writers, and some faculty use writing in courses not formally classified as writing-intensive.

Providing adequate instruction and opportunities for writing may be more problematic at other institutions, such as California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), which also has a three-course writing requirement. Students there must take a first-year writing course, then two interdisciplinary courses that contain "a substantial writing component" (California). CSULB serves a different population than Bucknell. In accordance with CSULB's mission, a larger percentage of their students are deemed underprepared, and the students generally need greater writing instruction to succeed in academia. Students may take more writing courses; the English department offers a number of them. Some faculty across campus use writing in their classes, a seemingly implicit WAC program. However, at CSULB students will not necessarily get substantial writing instruction and practice. The only assurance that students have learned to write adequately is that they must pass a writing proficiency exam to graduate.

The weakness in the voluntary as well as the writing-intensive approaches to WAC that have so well served many institutions, including our own, is that they are designed primarily to react to problems that instructors perceive in their classes. These approaches place writing in isolated courses across the curriculum as a need is identified. Such reactive models have structural problems; they do not consider writing as a complex set of abilities that must be continually practiced and enhanced. Instead, as mentioned earlier, these reactive models appear erratic and fitful. Students typically get some writing instruction when they enter an institution in first-year composition or its equivalent. Thereafter, requirements vary, but generally students are not required to write again until they opt to take writing-intensive courses, a capstone course, or happen into a course from an instructor who voluntarily teaches writing.

Regardless of the sites and contexts of writing, novice writers are better served with frequent instruction and myriad opportunities to write, just as a musician must regularly study and practice. Yet at most institutions, writing requirements might be fulfilled with a gap of years between writing courses. Few schools can guarantee that students write regularly throughout their academic careers, and still fewer ensure that students get

formal writing instruction that helps them improve as writers and learners across the curriculum. Particularly with the growing popularity of introducing course add-ons such as computer technology and Information Literacy initiatives, we wonder if the ranks of faculty volunteers using writing might dwindle.

The second problem with the current models of WAC is that students often get inconsistent writing instruction. Instructors design assignments and classroom instruction to meet the needs of their individual courses, without necessarily taking into account the larger institutional goals for writing and learning. Many faculty assign as the only writing in a course a research paper due at the end of the term, with no class time dedicated to the assignment or to engaging the students' writing processes through such activities as prewriting or peer response groups. We have also seen faculty integrate multiple writing tasks into courses and take significant class time to talk about writing and its importance to learning and reflecting upon the course content. Thus the writing assigned and the attention given to it in class may differ significantly from one course to another. In certain contexts, both assignments may be valuable, yet the variation, unexplained to students, sends mixed messages about the uses and value of writing. If the academic community values writing, faculty as a whole need demonstrate that value in classes across the curriculum. This should be the case whether they do it through extensive dedicated class time or through an extensive discussion of the assignment and its goals. Otherwise, if writing is assigned purely for evaluative purposes, students will come to see it as a narrow, hoop-jumping task unrelated to learning. Their potential to see writing as a valuable learning tool and a necessary and useful life-long skill will be diminished. Not all faculty must teach writing in the same manner or assign similar tasks, of course, but our view is that they should ascribe value to writing in a course beyond a grade and demonstrate to students how writing can be used and can benefit them in their futures. Equally important, faculty should develop an infrastructure for gaining knowledge about how and why their colleagues assign and use writing. Ongoing and spirited dialogue about these issues could lead to ideas about best practices for certain activities in the classroom. Such dialogue could also help colleagues address the inconsistency in and lack of writing instruction across the disciplines that undermine students' ability to use writing as a powerful tool for understanding discipline-specific content.

Both problems mentioned above present students with a fragmented vision of writing-to-learn and learning-to-write in the educational process and beyond. Considering the two dominant approaches to WAC, we can see that institutions do not have a holistic view of writing's role in education. Either faculty do it voluntarily, at schools like Kent State University or the University of Nevada, Reno, or they require students to take 10-20 units of courses that include some form of writing, a small percentage of their overall education that can be unevenly spread out over years. Students are then left to practice and value writing as they find it. It is our contention that students deserve more guidance than they generally receive, and we believe institutions should divide the labor of writing instruction across the faculty. Literature on writing-to-learn and learning-to-write supports the idea that writing deserves more status on campus as a tool for learning (Britton, Langer, Blumner). In fact, in spite of the institutional shortcomings, higher education continues to espouse the value of writing and writing education. We don't doubt the sincerity. We simply believe their efforts fall short, partly due to the fragmented, reactive character of many WAC programs.

Furthermore, the dynamic ideological and structural changes within and without the academy make this call for a spirited movement beyond the reactive all the more relevant. Writers provide numerous reports on how demographics of learners are diversifying, how distance learning and other applications of technology are on the rise, and how internal and external competition and commodification are increasing. James J. Duderstadt argues, for example, that the "array of powerful social, economic, and technological forces" (2) driving change in terms of people's needs calls for a reconsideration of the "social contract" between universities and the nation (1). Rowley et al., in *Strategic Choices for the Academy*, believe that concerns of immediacy, acceleration, and convenience "define the primary design criteria for education as we move into the twenty-first century" (xiii). Duderstadt cites changing U.S. and global demographics as motivations for understanding the contemporary university as a "truly international institution" (2). Market forces dictate that the university in the twenty-first century will no longer enjoy a monopoly. As Rowley et al. imply, distance education and for-profit learning centers are challenging all market constraints. Comparing restructured institutions such as health care with public education, Duderstadt posits that "we may well be seeing the early stages of a global knowledge and learn-

ing industry, in which the activities of traditional academic institutions converge with other knowledge-intensive organizations" (3).

To thrive in this impending climate of rapid change within higher education and beyond, WAC programs must transcend the principal habit of following or reacting to the prerogatives of individual faculty and disciplines. WAC can no longer simply afford to tailor its programmatic structure solely in response to individual agendas. We envision a model for WAC that encapsulates existing cross-curricular possibilities for writing instruction and advocacy while it expands the possibilities for WAC programs to help set rather than simply accept the institutional steps ahead. We maintain our advocacy of an inquiry-based approach to WAC that uses faculty expertise to advance WAC within courses.[2] At the same time, it is necessary to take additional and more assertive measures beyond offering campus-wide workshops on assignment design, for example, or working with those faculty who call the WAC program office for help. In short, more faculty need to be involved in a systematic way that ensures each student receives a cohesive writing education that reflects the goals of the institution and the student's chosen discipline, that connects the academic dots of classes, and that explicitly demonstrates to students, for example, the connections between learning and writing in a philosophy or history course and learning and writing in a psychology or chemistry course. Such connections borne from a proactive WAC program can be developed into an intricate web of practices and values that exemplify what institutions and individuals consider a quality education.

By specifically locating our concern and call for change within the domain of systemic connection, our intent is to develop a case for drawing dynamic linkages among the specialized and often necessarily disparate islands we know within the academy: classes, workshops, instructor conferences, and tutoring sessions. In addition, we share with many the assertion that all members of the campus community have a responsibility to define WAC initiatives. Writing instruction, in other words, is the job of the university, not the First-Year Writing Program, the Writing Center, writing-intensive courses, or the English Department.

Toward this end, we propose several steps for developing WAC programs that play a more integral, proactive role within the academy. The path is well worn by other WAC scholars who have helped build pieces of the vision by developing goals or outcomes for a new program or working with faculty to approve guidelines for WAC, as many campuses with

writing-intensive requirements do. Bucknell University, The University of Toledo, and Iowa State University, for instance, each requires an extensive review process before courses can be offered as writing-intensive. As Susan McLeod asserts, however, WAC initiatives and practices must become part of the fabric of the institution. To successfully do that, WAC coordinators as representatives in these initiatives need to develop a greater vision of institutional writing needs.

Step 1: Develop—and Continue Developing—a WAC Program Strategic Plan

We recommend developing a strategic plan of what students should be learning through writing and about writing and how specifically to embed these needs in the institution's strategic plan as well as into the way the institution is linked to the larger community. Developing such a plan will most likely include closely studying aspects of general education, genre theory, learning organization theory, and management studies. The development of strategic planning has occurred definitively in the context of military strategy, but it is only in the last two decades of the twentieth-century that educators began to formally adopt variations on the longstanding theme. Much of the insight regarding strategy has come from scholars in business management, as well as practitioners within business settings. George Keller's *Academic Strategy*, Robert G. Simerly et al.'s *Strategic Planning and Leadership in Continuing Education*, and Rowley et al.'s *Strategic Choices for the Academy* provide but three examples of the ways in which strategy has been conceived in the academy. And in separate presentations at the 2000 National Writing Centers Association Conference, Kelly Lowe and John Eliason addressed the potential of strategic planning in higher education at both the program and individual levels.

A notable advantage of strategic planning is its resistance to mechanical and deterministic formulations. A good strategic plan favors capitalizing on existing strengths while developing new ones in response to changing environments. A plan by itself, however, can become static, and in the present era of rapid change, this is of particular concern for WAC advocates. In a post on the listserv for the Council of Writing Program Administrators, for example, Ed White notes that most mission statements "aren't worth the paper they're written on" because most people forget about them and file them away. He writes that, after taking part in

a research study that asked 19 writing program administrators about their mission statements (and instruction goals and outcomes statements), the only statements with any lasting effect "were those developed, and developing, as part of some kind of assessment strategy" (White).

To avoid the static, it is prudent to follow the advice of management theorist W. Edwards Deming and many others who have noted that the planning is the point, not the plan itself.[3] Writing from the context of business strategy formulation, Anthony W. Ulwick also supports the idea that the act of planning and carrying out the plan is more important than the document itself. He defines strategy as "an executable plan of action that describes how an individual or organization will achieve a stated mission" (4). He suggests that many times when people attempt to define strategy, they are actually creating a strategy. This is what he calls a strategy formulation process, which involves defining the steps to take to formulate what will hopefully be the optimal strategy or solution. Management theorist Jack Koteen recommends that planners address the following key questions when discussing strategy:

> What business are we in? What is our vision of the future? What are our underlying purposes, directions, and values? What do we do best? Who are our target clientele? How well are we performing? Do we have top quality performance? Are we satisfying our key interests? Where do we want to go—in service, target group, or quality? How does the changing environment affect us? What changes in our decisions or operations are indicated? What opportunities or threats exist that we should exploit or avoid? What weaknesses should be corrected? Are we productive and effective in what we do? Do we learn from lessons of experience? (27)

Despite the perhaps undesirable 'marketplace' language that forms the tone and physical substance of many of these questions, we suspect that significant possibilities exist for such prompts to help WAC advocates in responding to a climate of rapid change, provided they work closely with the goals and objectives of their institutions as well as their programs.[4]

Step 2: Move WAC Beyond the Traditional

While the planning process is in motion, strategic action might mean moving beyond traditional contexts of writing across the curriculum. This can be (and is) done in a variety of ways. With colleagues from across the disciplines, WAC advocates can work to make writing an important com-

ponent of student internships and co-ops, field studies, and service learning projects. Inviting members of the community-at-large to cross the institutional boundaries to serve on WAC committees or to consult for WAC is an option worth considering. This strategy can be particularly effective for professional programs. Encouraging and helping to design ways for colleagues across the curriculum to use and practice writing in faculty externships and other off-campus endeavors is another way WAC advocates can contribute to the process of shaping a program that plays a more prominent role in the institution. Moving beyond institutional bounds can also involve taking advantage of available technologies. Listservs, chat rooms, web boards and a host of other possibilities for on- and off-line correspondence can enhance the dialogue so crucial for responding to rapid changes on campus and off that may affect WAC program initiatives. Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt envision similar goals in "Writing Beyond the Curriculum: Fostering New Collaborations in Literacy," arguing for "experiences that will help students and faculty see writing and reading in a wider social and intellectual context than the college curriculum" (586).

Step 3: Restructure Units/Courses to Allow for More Faculty Interaction and Reflection

To accomplish this goal, the strategic plan needs to include ways that academic units can work together to present students with a more cohesive writing education. For example, faculty from across a campus could use workshops as an opportunity to form networks in which they designed assignments that address specific concerns in both content and style. Their assignments would enhance the explicit exposure students receive to the interdisciplinary relationship of knowledge, thus connecting the disciplinary dots of education. Existing research on learning communities may be particularly informative in this regard. The National Learning Communities Project <http://www.evergreen.edu/user/washcntr/natlc/NLCPhomepage.html> offers a useful starting point for resources. Literature on interdisciplinary studies, learning organizations, and strategic planning could also inform decisions on unit/course restructuring.

Step 4: Lobby for Expanded Notions of Support for WAC Consultants and Faculty

Many scholars have acknowledged that any effort at systemic coor-

dination and programmatic development of WAC must have administrative support to be successful. As David Russell argued in "Writing Across the Curriculum and the Communications Movement," WAC must have some central administrative structure, a component that helps it be proactive to answer the needs of students and faculty. The program description of Martha Townsend's pre-conference workshop at the 2001 National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference echoes this sentiment:

> One innovation from which many WAC/WID programs—new or renewing—could benefit is an effective oversight committee to assist in policy making, planning, advising program staff, and creating a presence for the program on campus. (*Fifth*)

Many WAC programs already have oversight committees, writing advisory boards, and the like, yet they still flounder in the face of academic and administrative hierarchy. Creating a presence for the program involves the contribution of top-down policy commitments. Grass-roots efforts can wither and often do, and for myriad reasons. Funding from the administration may seem the first and most immediate answer. Though monetary support is invaluable, it is not, in many cases, the fullest or most effective form of support a program can get. Besides, most WAC advocates know the difficulty of securing funding. Thankfully, money is not the only form of administrative support that can ensure success of a proactive WAC program. Each institution has its methods of reward for faculty and departments, and WAC coordinators, as part of thinking and working strategically, can collaborate with administrators to establish a plan that includes promotion, release-time, decreased class sizes, or additional faculty posts.

Conclusion

Once an institution has developed a strategic plan, or the rough outlines of one with some particulars, it can begin implementing its proactive WAC program. The program should begin simply with attainable goals, like increased, structured coordination among faculty about how they teach writing and the kinds of assignments they give students. This coordination does not require that every instructor teach writing the same way, use the same assignments, or assign the same amount of writing. It does ask that faculty, in the spirit of inquiry, talk with students and each other about writing and language and how writing shapes their discipline and possibly how writing shapes and is shaped in non-disciplinary con-

texts. It may also ask them to consider the nature of writing and importance of writing to the entire Western intellectual effort. Christopher Thaiss addresses the programmatic benefits of writing in general education:

> Maybe the greatest benefit of programmatic thinking about writing in general education is that you can help faculty design a program of writing for all students that doesn't overburden either student or faculty, that gives the students a well-conceived general education in writing, and that enables faculty to feel that they are contributing to students' overall growth without feeling the anxiety of 'not doing enough.' (106)

Clearly, a more programmatic sense of how to approach WAC in relation to the missions of various general education courses can offer administrators, faculty and staff a powerful tool for WAC coordination. One useful way to conceive of greater coordination of WAC is to invite students into the WAC administrative, classroom, and faculty discussions as a form of active and authentic inquiry about writing across the curriculum and community.

All of these are possibilities, and each institution must form its own vision of what students need to be capable of when they graduate. Imagine how much more powerful a writing education could be if faculty worked together, building upon what each teaches, and providing a broad, intensive writing experience. Imagine how much more powerful a writing education could be if assignments asked students to explore the tacit knowledge of the academy and the community. These might include pedagogic conventions, process-learning, and the range of multiple genres that they will be expected to understand and utilize in and out of the academy. Because of our interest in multi- and interdisciplinary inquiry and writing, we favor a WAC program model that builds bridges between academic units at the same time that it answers the call of individual disciplines and programs. This could be as simple as linked courses from different disciplines that use writing to bridge subject matter or as complex as a group of courses that coordinates writing tasks to ensure that students receive varied writing experiences that build their breadth and depth of writing ability, whether course content is shared or not.

How might institutions begin to build such bridges? WAC proponents will need to take steps toward campus-wide leadership, so administrators, faculty, students, and the community will understand what is necessary for students and faculty to use writing optimally in and out of classes.

Only a proactive WAC model can help higher education institutions look more globally at writing and writing instruction.

By reading WAC literature, attending WAC conferences, and participating in a WAC listserv, we clearly see that many schools have developed successful programs, far more than had responded to McLeod in the late 1980s. Programs have become more sophisticated to serve institutional needs, and WAC coordinators in many cases already proactively seek ways to improve the teaching of writing on their campuses. Yet all of these advances have taken place within two dominant WAC approaches, the voluntary and writing-intensive. We advance that WAC must move beyond traditional programs. WAC programs must develop and use a vision that moves beyond an 'institutional additive,' sprinkled seemingly haphazardly throughout the curriculum. WAC must engage general education, individual departments, administrators, the community, and any other necessary constituencies with a vision and plan to integrate writing into the curriculum, to ensure that all students learn and use writing in an extensive, cohesive, educational experience.

Endnotes

[1] We are making reference to *genre* as it has often been represented in late-twentieth century theory on genre. In their 1995 *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication*, for example, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin offer the following five general principles for genre theory that we believe elucidate our use of the term:

> genres are dynamic forms that mediate between features of individual contexts and recurring features across contexts; genre knowledge is embedded in communicative activities of daily and professional life and is thus a form of 'situated cognition;' genre knowledge embraces both form and content, including a sense of rhetorical appropriateness; the use of genre simultaneously constitutes and reproduces social structures; and, genre conventions signal a discourse community's norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology. (4)

[2] For a cogent discussion of such an approach, see Mark L. Waldo's 1996 "Inquiry as a Non-Invasive Approach to Cross-Curricular Writing

Consultancy." [*Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* 1.3: 7-22.]

[3] For a useful discussion of pre-strategy considerations, see James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras' *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, particularly Chapter 11: "Building the Vision." That section describes a vision framework that we believe has great potential for WAC advocates interested in strategic initiatives.

[4] In *Strategic Thinking and the New Science*, author T. Irene Sanders asserts that to think as well as act strategically, "we must first understand the context in which our decisions are being made. We need to see and understand the world as an interconnected whole, where our thoughts and actions influence and are influenced by many *unknowns*." For us, Sanders' comment furthers the case for WAC advocates to develop strategic plans in collaboration with colleagues across the curriculum who may be able to reveal unknown factors affecting the WAC program.

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