

Considering WAC from Training and Hiring Perspectives: An Interview with Irwin “Bud” Weiser of Purdue University

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FOR THIS ISSUE of *The WAC Journal*, I interviewed Irwin “Bud” Weiser, who, in addition to bearing the very best nickname in the business, has a long career in writing instruction at the undergraduate and graduate levels as well as serving as an administrator of writing programs. A graduate of Miami University (Ohio) with M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Indiana University, Bud has taught writing at a variety of schools and held numerous administrative appointments. Author of dozens of articles and book chapters and a tireless presenter at conferences, his most recent book-length project, co-edited with Shirley Rose, is *The Writing Program Administrator as Theorist: Making Knowledge Work* (Heinemann, 2002).

Currently in his second five-year term as head of Purdue University’s English department, Bud provides a thoughtful, seasoned take on the prospects for new Ph.D.s who are attracted to WAC work. As a department head, he speaks from both sides of the interview experience—as one who advises candidates preparing for the job market and also as one who helps search committees craft position descriptions and conduct interviews.

CAROL RUTZ: You have been affiliated with Purdue University and its well-regarded Rhetoric and Composition Programs (undergraduate and doctoral) since 1981, and you have held various administrative positions in writing programs at Purdue and elsewhere. What drew you to the teaching of writing?

IRWIN “BUD” WEISER: I’d guess my story is similar to most people’s. What drew me to the teaching of writing was the enjoyment I received from working with students in the composition classes I taught as a teaching assistant at Indiana University. I found—and still find—it very rewarding to think about ways to teach writing that will help students develop their abilities to use language to accomplish their personal and professional goals.

In the early 1970s, when I started teaching, there were not many Ph.D. programs where one could formally study the teaching of writing, so at Indiana, teaching assistants formed their own informal support groups. And like most people in the Ph.D. program at I.U. at the time, I was there to get a Ph.D. in literature—Victorian literature in my case. But the 70s, not too unlike today, was a time when the literature job market was weak, and my first academic job was as an adjunct at the University of Louisville. That was a turning point for me, because I got that job the same year Joe Comprone was hired to be director of composition at Louisville. Joe is the person who introduced me—and all of us teaching in the program—to composition scholarship and research. As I began to read that work—especially work by Frank D’Angelo, Ross Winterowd, and Janice Lauer—my interest in teaching writing intensified and I began to look for faculty positions as a writing teacher.

CR: And you were off and running. In addition to teaching writing, you are an expert teacher of writing teachers. What is different, in your experience, between teaching writing to undergraduates and helping new teachers of writing learn the moves?

BW: When I teach writing, I’m teaching students to produce written discourse. When I teach new teachers of writing to teach, I’m teaching them how to teach their students to produce written discourse. In a first-year composition course, I don’t ask students to read composition scholarship or rhetorical theory; instead, I rely on my understanding of that work to develop a course and assignments and to guide my evaluation and response to students’ work. In a graduate practicum on the teaching of writing, I do assign scholarship in rhetoric and composition, and we talk about how that work can be applied in the writing course. And of course, I observe new teachers teaching and I read examples of student writing they’ve responded to and I try to describe to them what I see in their practice—what I like and what I think they could work on.

CR: Your own university is not a WAC campus. There must be a story about that. Would you care to tell that story?

BW: There are a couple of stories here. One is that Purdue has no general education requirements. Every College in the university establishes its own requirements (though every College requires students to have credit for first-year composition, either by taking the course, transferring in credit, or scoring well on the A.P. exam). Given that, there's no mechanism for establishing a campus-wide WAC program.

Almost ten years ago, the College of Liberal Arts revisited its curriculum and adopted a requirement for a writing intensive course, post-first-year composition, for every student in the College. But the College has over 6,000 students, and the resources for implementing that requirement simply haven't been available. We were able to conduct some very popular and effective workshops for faculty who wanted to incorporate more writing in their courses as part of the preparation for the W-I requirement, and I know that a number of the faculty who attended the workshops continue to use ideas and assignments they generated as participants.

CR: As an administrator as well as a faculty member, you must have an internal scale to assess the difficulty of various problems that come to your attention. In your experience, how do WAC-ish problems rate relative to other administrative challenges?

BW: Since we don't have a WAC program, WAC-related issues aren't part of my regular work. The closest to addressing WAC issues I face is when other Colleges want us to do more teaching of writing than we're able to do and I instead offer to help them develop ways of doing more writing instruction in their existing courses, or when an administrator from another College wants to talk about how a course we offer isn't meeting their expectations. Both of these things happen rarely.

If we had a WAC program, I doubt I'd be particularly involved in it, since as a department head, I'd only support having such a program if we had the personnel to do it right—at least one person designated to direct it, an appropriate way to support instructors in the program, and sufficient resources to sustain it. My sense is that at large research universities, it's been very difficult to sustain WAC programs because to do them right, it costs money, and too often there's not an institutional commitment to provide enough.

CR: A sobering thought, but I think it's accurate for most large universities. The large thriving WAC programs—I think immediately of Missouri and Washington State—do so because of an institutional commitment to provide the resources. We can hope that the new initiative at Minnesota demonstrates another successful approach.

To slightly shift gears, I'd like to talk about the job market for rhet/comp people and WAC opportunities. Your position as the head of a large department with oodles of Ph.D.s, MFAs, and MAs to place makes you a good person to talk to about the job market for various kinds of specialists. You probably have a sense of what it takes to 1) land a WAC job and 2) succeed at it. My guess is that you have observed—if not personally advised—folks who have either sought, settled for, or ended up with WAC in addition to other responsibilities.

What are the risks for new hires who become WAC or other writing program administrators (WPAs) in general? Is a staff job or a hybrid faculty/administrative job a risk? Why or why not?

BW: As you certainly know, the standard advice for new Ph.D.s on the job market is to avoid administrative positions before tenure. Of course, that advice isn't always followed, and it isn't necessarily even the best advice. As you said, jobs differ, institutions differ. And especially since we and other programs are beginning to incorporate writing program administration into our graduate curriculum, it's not surprising that our graduates are interested in doing administrative work early in their careers. What I tell people, when they ask, is that they have to get a good idea of the nature of the administrative work they're going to be asked to do, the support they'll receive for it, and the way that work gets evaluated and counted towards tenure and promotion. Major administrative responsibilities, as any of us who have had them can attest, are drains on time and energy far beyond any release time from teaching that they carry with them. For untenured faculty, taking on these responsibilities without a commitment from the institution about how they will be evaluated, compensated for, and treated at tenure time is very dangerous. Taking them on at research universities is problematic unless the person is confident that the work will contribute to her scholarship and publication. But taking on those responsibilities at smaller institutions can also be problematic, particularly when the institution has a heavy teaching load and very little course release for administrative work.

For untenured faculty who are WAC directors, I think all of these comments apply, but they get complicated because the person is interacting with people from across the institution. There's a lot of potential for good in these positions, since the person gets to know people from across the university, and that isn't always the case for new faculty. So if the person is perceived as doing good work, there's going to be broad support for her. But on the other hand, working outside one's own department can be dangerous, especially if the WAC director is perceived as trying to force a WAC or WID program on unreceptive colleagues.

As an experienced WPA and a department head, my best advice is “Proceed with the utmost caution.” I certainly don’t encourage new Ph.D.s to accept administrative posts, but I don’t tell them it’s automatic professional suicide. And I think there are some contexts in which doing administration as a beginning faculty member could be a very good thing for the person. I’m thinking particularly of positions as assistant director, which can certainly provide a person with excellent experience and support, but without the full responsibility for the program.

CR: Let me extend my question with a little more context: At small schools a title like “writing director” can mean various things, ranging from responsibility for hiring and training adjuncts to fill required first-year composition or first-year seminar sections to running a writing center, to faculty development, to teaching—or maybe all of that.

Just this past year, Jill Gladstein at Swarthmore conducted a survey of over 50 small schools, asking questions about how writing programs and centers were organized, staffed, and so on. Her data show that slightly less than one-third of the schools surveyed have a tenured or tenure-able writing director. What her survey did not show was the range of credentials—that is, how many terminal degrees; how many degrees in “writing” broadly construed (rhet/comp, “creative,” English ed., linguistics, etc.); or how many jobs were term jobs based on some kind of rotation within a home department.

Obviously, institutions organize themselves in various ways that may be inscrutable to outsiders but make some sort of internal sense. Nevertheless, I’m curious about your observations and also about the advice you would give to your graduate students as they look at jobs at small schools. What kind of small-school job would be attractive to your new Ph.D.s?

BW I’m not sure what it takes to land a WAC job, and I’m saying that not because I don’t know what good credentials are, but because I know that often people get hired to administer programs who don’t have the kinds of credentials I’d most prefer to see. If I were advising a student at Purdue who wanted to become a WAC director, my advice would be a bit different than it would if we had a WAC program. If we did, I’d certainly advise that student to get involved in it as a teacher, writing specialist, tutor, assistant director, or in any other way she could. Since we don’t, I’d encourage the student to get a secondary specialization in writing program administration, an option we offer in the Ph.D. program. I’d encourage her to take the WAC seminar, the Writing Center Theory and Practice seminar, and the writing assessment seminar. I’d encourage her to seek a variety of teaching and tutoring and administrative assistantships. For instance,

I'd recommend applying to tutor in the writing lab, to teach an upper division professional writing course (since they attract students from many other disciplines), and to be one of the assistant directors of the introductory writing program or writing lab.

One of the most interesting questions you raise is "How can small schools with WAC programs make them attractive to well-prepared Ph.D.s?" There are so many variables. If the program is well established and well supported, it's going to be easier to attract people than if it's just starting up or if it's been neglected or is trying to function without sufficient resources. It matters, too, if the teaching load is reasonable.

And one thing I've seen is that well-prepared Ph.D.s are often shy about going to a place where they'll be the only rhetoric/composition/writing person there. It's quite a transition for people coming out of active Ph.D. programs where there are faculty and other students who share their scholarly and pedagogical interests to find themselves without people who have similar interests and backgrounds. It would, I think, be very smart for institutions to think about hiring two people if they have none. It's also a disadvantage for an institution that's recruiting if they don't have at least one well informed person on the search committee, so I'd say that even if a school doesn't have a rhet/comp specialist, it would be a good idea for someone who will be involved in the search to do some reading in the field, get on appropriate listservs, attend the WAC or WPA or Writing Center or CCCC conference a year before the search, and so forth. And schools need to realize that they have to be aggressive in their recruiting since the best prepared people coming out of Ph.D. programs are still very hot commodities. It's a mistake, for example, to wait until CCCC to interview for a new assistant professor, since by then, a lot of people will have accepted jobs based on interviews at MLA.

I'd also advise patience—the same patience I advise our students on the market. The job market is increasingly a year-round event, and good candidates may be available in late spring and early summer. This may seem contradictory—be aggressive and be patient—but I don't think it necessarily is. We regularly see that the candidates who are most appealing to us are also most appealing to others. We may interview people at MLA who have another dozen interviews, and we may not be successful in hiring our top choices. That doesn't mean we don't have other strong applicants, and I'd encourage people who are recruiting new faculty to look at applicants who have the kinds of experiences that I've listed above. In some cases, they may not even be people who are earning Ph.D.s in rhetoric and composition, but instead people with course work and experiences that supplement their primary area of interest in literature or linguistics or creative writing.

CR: I'm interested in your observation that small schools may not be attractive to those who have been trained within a rhet/comp department with an active teaching and research agenda. As you point out, a new hire often ends up as the only rhet/comp person on campus. One could say the same for the petrologist or the medieval historian or the labor economist. Each of them ends up teaching the specialty as well as intro courses and whatever else the department negotiates. How does the rhet/comp person's situation differ? Or does it?

BW: Good point. But these folks are in departments where there are other geologists, chemists, historians, or economists. The rhet/comp person may be the only non-literature or creative writing person in the department, doing work that no one else does or understands, with what is likely very different graduate preparation. And the work affects others in the department and college because it's connected to curriculum and teaching in ways that the work of "regular" faculty such as those you mention is not. So one potential issue is that the isolated rhet/comp person may become who everyone turns to for everything concerning writing, making it an overwhelming task.

CR: I see what you mean. If anything, it's compounded by the expectation in WAC programs that the rhet/comp person (or the poet or the Victorianist) with WAC responsibilities is expected to engage with the whole faculty. It's no secret that WAC programs depend on relationships to succeed—both at the individual level, between the WAC director and individual faculty members, and at a more corporate level—fostering an open, collaborative climate across campus to support writing pedagogy and assessment.

Given what we have already established about factors in play, I'm even more interested in your sense of what institutions and candidates should be aware of and prepared for as they advertise or respond to ads for WAC positions.

BW: Let's talk about the institutional side first. It's important to define the goal—the product. Asking for a "Ph.D. in comp" won't be specific enough, given the many directions rhet/comp graduate study can take. An accurate job description that includes the need for an administrative orientation as well as experience with program development and faculty development will help candidates decide whether their qualifications fit the job. Similarly, the search committee must have a clear idea of expectations for the position so that they can conduct a careful reading of applications and vitae to enable productive interviews based in the right credentials combined with the relevant interests.

That said, hiring groups run off the rails if they lack a clear understanding of rhet/comp as a field and assume that any Ph.D. can handle all of the responsibilities the committee associates with writing specialists. Chances are, no single candidate from a good graduate program can bring all of that program's strengths to the job. Misunderstandings at that level lead to jobs with comprehensive nicknames such as "writing czar," which implies that the person in the job can do everything involved with writing—as conceived by the institution. A candidate who accepts such a job without detecting that fundamental expectation is set up for feeling caught, overwhelmed, and unsuccessful. This outcome is not a result of malice on anyone's part; it's a lack of awareness of the potential complexity of WAC/writing work.

CR: You're edging once again toward advice for candidates. What else would you advise?

BW: My advice is much the same for those interested in WAC as for anyone going on the market: Focus on positions of genuine interest that merit your serious consideration. Prepare well for interviews by doing thorough research on the institutions and on the faculty who will be on the interview committee. Be honest if they ask something that is surprising or outside of your expertise to date. For example, if you learn at the interview that supervision of administrative staff is expected, explain that you lack such experience—if that is the case. Of course, candidates can express interest in learning how to do supervision—or something else—but it's probably wise not to promise that those skills will be in place on day one.

CR: I remember from my graduate student days that some of my peers were interested in landing jobs at small schools or other places that were likely to have WAC programs, but I always worried that they really didn't know what they were getting into, particularly if their own experience of higher ed was exclusively at universities. Before a candidate applies your advice to interviews, how should s/he prepare herself as an applicant?

BW: This is where the individual graduate program's offerings will vary a great deal, so I'll have to speak in ideal terms rather than recap the offerings from Purdue's curriculum I mentioned earlier. To the extent that you can, take advantage of courses in WAC, writing program administration, writing center theory, and assessment. These courses are more common than they were 10–15 years ago, although you may have to

search out writing assessment courses in Education programs as well as in Rhetoric or English departments. As you take such courses, maintain a bibliography of resources that you can quickly access during the job search. This particular move will help ward off panic when the interviews come up.

Again, assuming your program has teaching options for graduate students, vary your teaching as much as possible. Be a writing center tutor, teach writing courses at various levels, and if your campus has WAC courses, try to teach writing in a disciplinary context other than your own. Finally, if your program hires graduate students in assistant director, TA training, or other roles, do your best to land one of those jobs for the administrative experience.

Obviously, not all graduate programs offer all of these options. The point is, combine coursework and practical experience. You don't want your c.v. to draw exclusively on just one or the other; the combination is much more convincing.

CR: It occurs to me that even if a course in, say, assessment, is not readily available, a research methods course will give good background.

BW: Absolutely. In fact, if a WAC job is really what you want, you may be able to shape your dissertation project to reflect that. I can think of three advisees off the top of my head who completed dissertations based on WAC or WID problems that they studied in departments outside of English.

CR: I know you have taught courses in writing program administration for a long time. Have you ever taught a course in WAC theory or administration?

BW: I have, although it's been a few years. In that course, I used a lot of readings and tried to point students toward the practical implications, challenges, research sites, faculty development ideas, and potential dissertation projects. We looked at some WAC programs and discussed the kinds of institutions where WAC seems to thrive and those where it's more of a challenge. Students need to understand that available resources and institutional demands make a difference, such as who controls staffing, faculty support, and ongoing faculty development.

I have to admit that one of the biggest challenges in teaching such a course at a place like Purdue is that we in my program don't have a handle on what happens through the curriculum—university-wide. Some years ago, we did have some wonderfully successful faculty development workshops. I met colleagues from across the Colleges who

still come up to me and talk about how they continue to use what they learned in those workshops, which is gratifying. However, we lost the resources that made those annual workshops possible, so my knowledge of the current curriculum is dated.

CR: That must be frustrating, given your command of the WAC moves that work elsewhere.

BW: In some ways, it is. However, Purdue is not likely to transform into a WAC campus anytime soon.

CR: Lately, I've visited some small schools that are trying to revive or institute WAC programs, and they want to hire wisely. In one case I was shown a draft job description for an administrative/non-tenure-track teaching position that included developing a WAC program (including outreach and faculty development), administering the writing center, developing and teaching writing courses, and being available to faculty to consult on their scholarly writing. Now that I hear your caution about institutional assumptions that a "writing person" can do anything related to writing, I better understand the thinking that went into what looks to me to be a completely unrealistic job description.

BW: Yes. WAC work requires an active choice by the WAC director to develop relationships and learn through assessment. The work also requires maturity and confidence in negotiating within the institution. It's another reason to discourage untenured faculty to take jobs such as the one you just described.

Consider this: If the job is non-tenure-track, the institution signals a lack of commitment to the hire, especially if the new person has little or no administrative experience. Why expect continuity from a person who knows up front that s/he is defined outside of the academic reward system? In such cases, you have to wonder whether the job is conceived as intellectual work. In an interview, it would be wise to ask about institutional goals for WAC. What projects are underway? What projects are expected? Who are potential allies for the WAC director?

I don't like the hybrid administrative staff/faculty jobs as a category. I think they complicate the lines of reporting and the evaluation of the person. For new faculty, they often mean two sets of responsibilities, two supervisors to report to, two units that evaluate the person on different criteria. Of course, like everything else, it's very context-tied, and it might work some places better than it does others. I see it as par-

ticularly problematic for untenured faculty, particularly if their tenure decision will be made by the department where the nature of their split appointment may not be understood or appreciated. The other side of the coin is that the person often is doing a lot of faculty work under the administrative title. Sometimes that work isn't compensated as well as it would be if it were a faculty position, especially if it's an administrative professional or administrative staff position. Also, I think faculty members generally have more credibility with other faculty members, so it could make working with faculty harder.

CR: The issue of credibility with faculty is a key one. It's hard to offer faculty advice about teaching, research, and assessment without some street cred, as it were. Communicating those expectations would be essential for hiring committees and candidates. It strikes me that most job ads are so form-driven that they verge on meaninglessness. How can institutions do better in describing the work to be done so that appropriate candidates apply?

BW: I agree that it's vital to jump start some imaginative thinking, starting with the ad. In most cases, deans and provosts lack the language to define the job they think they want done. I would love to see deans consult with those outside of their own institutions who actually do the WAC work elsewhere. They could call their peers and get in touch with WAC people at other campuses and listen to them.

Then they can look at the rhetoric of ads and think about the fit (or lack thereof) with the program's goals. It's important to use verbs that signal the work: administer, develop, lead, direct, and coordinate. Differentiate those activities and be realistic about demands.

Part of the problem is that administrative work doesn't divide into the same chunks as faculty workloads, which are typically defined as courses per year. Often administrative responsibilities are counted as "release time" from teaching, but the actual work may not be equivalent by any measure. Faculty work can be defined in a number of ways, and there is no hard and fast reason that administration should be viewed exclusively as "service." Program demands differ, and it takes imagination to equate administrative work with teaching and other duties more characteristic of a tenure-track appointment. Certainly, faculty development, tutor training, and similar duties are equivalent to teaching and can be counted as such. If the appointment really depends on intellectual work, the institutional reward system can be adjusted to accommodate the expectations of the job and convey a commitment to the new hire.

CR: This has been great, Bud. Thank you. What else would you like *The WAC Journal* readers to know about you and your work?

BW: Well, I could echo Blanche Dubois and say “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.” That is, I have found the community of scholars in rhetoric and composition to be generous and welcoming. When I first began attending the CCCC convention, in 1978, when the entire program book was 97 pages long, I found that the people whose work had become important to me were always willing to talk. And many of those strangers have become colleagues and friends. My work as a teacher and administrator, I hope, reflects their knowledge and their generosity.