



## Guest Editor Introduction

### Writing the Future to Improve Systems and Empower Ourselves, Our Colleagues, and Our Students

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Learning to listen with concern for the weather in Iraq as well as for traffic reports on Houston freeways, I have discovered it is easy to feel helpless, overwhelmed with thinking about systems only a few can affect. Sitting in our schools and colleges, students must feel even more powerless. The key for leaders is not to focus inward or to block out the system. We must understand systems in new ways and find new alliances that can develop the liberating force of articulate, persuasive communication. We must improve, enhance and reform the systems as we empower ourselves, our colleagues, and our students.

In March 2002 the Sixth National Writing across the Curriculum Conference: "Writing the Future: Leadership, Policies, and Classroom Practices" challenged panelists and presenters to show policy makers and administrators WAC's potential. Summaries of panelists' comments, articles dealing with institutional, civic, and international or national leadership, and accounts of innovative practices in the disciplines are presented here to begin a dialog. The authors of these articles have dared to write the future by sharing their thoughts on leadership and discipline-specific opportunities. We invite you to take the next turn in the dialog with academic colleagues and with leaders outside of academe.

In an era of international electronic networks, a global economy, and hemispheric trading partnerships, communication skill affects the success of individuals, companies, and coun-

tries. Mathematical or scientific literacy is vital, but without communication skills workers may be relegated to lower technical tasks and be unable to influence their futures. Federal and state education policies, institutional arrangements, technologies, and funding can dramatically facilitate—or limit—outcomes. Many policy makers at all levels—in government, business, and education—are deeply concerned with these issues, but they are unaware of their own potential for enabling writing and communication across the curriculum to help accomplish these goals. Our vision requires that all people be helped to find voices in democratic processes. To prepare students across the Americas, writing and communication must be restored as a top priority.

However, the future prompts a host of questions: What goals should countries and schools set for their students to make them successful? How can students be encouraged to write not only for their first job but to imagine their future? How can students be taught to think critically and productively about problems in every field? How can writing across the curriculum, writing in the disciplines, and communication across the campus be used to help students master the knowledge they will need? How can the full potential of rhetoric and professional communication be brought into the partnership and not merely a “handmaiden” or “service” view of collaboration?

How can legislators, policy makers, educational leaders, and scholars collaborate for faster responses to the challenges ahead? What institutional arrangements will position writing across the curriculum programs and leaders for success in schools and colleges? What support and training enable writing across the curriculum faculty and teachers to reach their objectives? What oversight and assessment practices foster program improvement? What recognition will encourage participation? How can the slow pace of educational reform be accelerated to accomplish our vision for the future?

To spark thinking about how to address such questions, the conference began with a plenary session on planning processes. This session included senior WAC leaders Chris Thaiss of George Mason University, Carol Holder of the California State University System, Susan McLeod of University of California Santa Barbara, and Carl Lovitt, Associate Dean at Penn State University Berks, as well as Julie Zeleznik, a Ph.D. candidate who had been involved in facilitating community focus groups in planning an expanded WAC program at Iowa State Univer-

sity, and Linda Driskill, leader of a relatively new program at Rice University. The summary of their remarks provides a starting point, whether administrators are founding a new program or directing an established one.

The highlight panels were planned to invite contributions from policy makers and industry leaders as well as writing across the curriculum scholars. A list of the panelists is shown on pages 89-91. Summaries of two panel discussions present these distinguished speakers' insights on what leadership, goals, and policies can ensure that college students communicate well in multicultural environments, and international commerce and in their chosen fields. In the first, Moderator Deborah Andrews summarizes ideas presented by Rebecca Burnett, University Professor, Iowa State University; Mr. Daniel Chavez, President, Grupo Vidafel, Guadalajara, Jal; Mexico; Jonathan Monroe, Professor and Knight Writing Program Director, Cornell University; Neal Lane, University Professor, Rice University, formerly National Science Advisor to US President William Clinton, and Carol Geary Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), Washington DC. Andrews shows how their comments endorsed, in Schneider's term, an approach to intercultural learning that supports "a vision of civic responsibility in a diverse and still deeply unequal world."

In the second panel summary, Moderator Steven Youra emphasizes the range of changes in funding, leadership, faculty participation, and communication abilities that the panelists recommended. Panelists in this group included more administrators and faculty, both from WAC and from other disciplines. Among them were Mary Burgan, General Secretary, American Association of University Professors; Brian Huot, Professor of English and Director of Composition, University of Louisville; Ken Cox, Instructor, Department of Chemical Engineering, Rice University; David Jolliffe, Professor of English, DePaul University; Sharon Quiroz, Editor of *Language and Learning across the Disciplines* and Director, Communications Across the Curriculum Program and Academic Resource Center, Illinois Institute of Technology; and Tracy Volz, Assistant Director of the Cain Project in Engineering and Professional Communication, Rice University. This panel brought together Mary Burgan's national perspective and Sharon Quiroz's view as editor of the key journal in the field as well as comments of assessment specialist Brian Huot and views of faculty in the disciplines such as chemical engineering faculty member Ken Cox.

## **The Leadership and Policies Articles**

The current economic conditions tend to dissuade administrators from launching new programs and expanding established ones. Producing change is even more challenging under such conditions. How a writing or speaking program is positioned within a college can have strong impacts on its acceptance and effectiveness. Administrators can launch new efforts and redirect less successful ones with lessons from Chris M. Anson ([chris\\_anson@ncsu.edu](mailto:chris_anson@ncsu.edu)), Michael Carter, Deanna P. Dannels, and Jon Rust's model for choosing strategic partners within an organization. They use their own experiences at North Carolina State University as a test case to illustrate how the collaborations between units with common interests can achieve change.

The authors of two more articles recognize that change can be possible even when formal WAC programs and an official infrastructure do not exist. Lee Odell ([odellc@mail.rpi.edu](mailto:odellc@mail.rpi.edu)) and Bert Swersey of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute suggest a collaborative strategy for accomplishing curriculum objectives with a covert alliance. Their approach focuses on the intersections of rhetoric and engineering in courses and assignments. Their samples of student writing offer concrete, clear examples of how such an alliance can benefit both the faculty members and students.

A different creative strategy comes from Texas A&M at Corpus Christi. Glenn Blalock, Diana Cardenas, Joyce Hawthorne, and Susan Loudermilk ([Susan.Loudermilk@iris.tamucc.edu](mailto:Susan.Loudermilk@iris.tamucc.edu)) offer a refreshing illustration of how town and gown can unite by identifying community needs that an English department's writing programs can address. They propose to strengthen writing across the curriculum by managing writing program development in cooperation with faculty from other departments. The consultative process allows the writing programs to change their courses and other disciplines to plan more writing in their courses.

## **New Models and Classroom Practices for WAC**

An increasing number of colleges, especially in urban areas, struggle to educate students whose richly varied backgrounds include knowledge of other languages and cultures but who may know little English and be unfamiliar with student roles and US dominant culture. Linda Hirsch ([LHIRSCH@hostos.cuny.edu](mailto:LHIRSCH@hostos.cuny.edu)), WAC Director at Hostos Community Col-

lege/City University of New York, and Carolina DeLuca, CUNY Writing Fellow, illustrate how colleges can rethink their courses in order to scaffold learning experiences for these students. Both faculty and mainstream students are unaware of how much cultural knowledge is presumed in traditional assignments. Hirsch and her co-author show how traditional assignments lack detailed instructions and presume knowledge students may not have. They demonstrate how courses and assignments can be redesigned to give students opportunities for actively engaging with community institutions such as museums, and reflective writing and discussion assignments that honor students' own experience and consolidate new knowledge.

Educators from both two- and four-year institutions will want to examine carefully the learning community Ronald J. Heckelman (Ron.Heckelman@nhmccd.edu), Department of English, and Will-Matthis Dunn III, Department of Mathematics, at Montgomery College created. Their first-year students flourish when both a freshman mathematics and a freshman rhetoric course focus on models. For some faculty, such a yoking might seem improbable, but the intellectual synergism and value to the students convinced the audience (and the reviewers) that this highly original approach could stimulate fresh thinking all round.

Other conference speakers offered fine presentations that could not be included in this issue. Morgan Gresham (now at Clemson, sgresha@clemson.edu), Former Director of First-Year Composition at Texas Woman's University, Sandi Reynolds, Director of First-Year Composition (SReynolds@mail.twu.edu), and Hugh Burns, Professor & Chair, Department of English, Speech, & Foreign Languages, both at Texas Woman's University (hburns@twu.edu), gave a trio of presentations demonstrating that through WAC, nursing education can improve the professional training, affect patient care, and enhance nurses' professional practice. And remember all those reports that say a huge fraction of the US population doesn't have a clue where Manila, Afghanistan, or Belgium is located? Catherine Hooley and Tim Bailey in the Department of Social Science at Kansas's Pittsburg State University (chooley@pittstate.edu, tbailey@pittstate.edu), explained how geography can be a great site for writing and becoming a more knowledgeable world citizen. Deborah Smith (dasmith@siu.edu) of Southern Illinois University combined writing with Bloom's taxonomy to design a coherent instructional service learning sequence in

a recreation curriculum. Ivan A. Shibley, Jr., a chemistry professor at Penn State Berks, described how he assigns chemistry term papers that allow students to explore a chemistry topic of their own choosing. Finally, William Carpenter (carpentw@lafayette.edu) offered a call for courses and assignments that help students analyze the language of the fields they study with a critical eye to the ways that power and authority are wielded. Without fostering this kind of critical distance as well as mastery of disciplinary conventions, students may be assimilated unthinkingly into roles and processes that leave a legacy of suppression and exploitation.

Although we could not include these fine presentations in this issue, we urge you to seek out their publication in future issues of *LLAD* and other journals or better yet, to contact the presenters directly. This issue and the additional pieces we could not include suggest spots for faculty and a host of colleagues, friends, industry leaders, and government officials to become partners in writing a better future for all students, all people, all nations. We invite you to read these summaries and articles and to contact the authors or members of the editorial panel to discuss their implications. Our names and e-mail addresses are listed below.

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