

Meeting of the Minds:

Collaboration between WID Interns and Learning Center Tutors

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Abstract

At many universities, the WAC program organizationally falls within Academic Affairs whereas Learning Centers often fall within Student Services, causing political and practical difficulties in collaboration that impede the creation of effective support in writing throughout students' academic careers. To combat these distinctions and divisions, the chief administrators of a WAC program and Learning Center (LC) collaborated to bridge the divide between the student and professional tutors funded through each program.

When the WID intern program, managed through WAC, was in its embryonic stages of development, the WAC and LC administrators recognized the strength and power of connecting the two areas of academic support through deliberate and thoughtful collaboration. For instance, in contrast to the WID intern program that is philosophically aligned with theories of supplemental instruction, the LC tutors have extensive experience and training in tutoring pedagogy. Capitalizing on the strengths of each philosophical tenet and encouraging collaboration between tutors and interns became imperative to each program's health and growth.

In addition to clarifying the unique roles and purposes of the WID interns versus the LC tutors, the programmatic connections between the interns and the tutors are enumerated. Specifically, the interactions between administrators when considering WAC program development, the use and allocation of budget and resources (space) to support the LC or WID interns when necessary, the involvement of LC tutors in WAC faculty training and WID intern training will be shared, demonstrating how rich collaboration that thwarts competition can promote effective academic support in writing.

Meeting of the Minds: Collaboration between WID Interns and Learning Center Tutors

In 2009, a Writing Across the Curriculum Program was launched at this particular institution in response to an accreditation core requirement to focus a university-wide initiative on student learning, often referred to as the Quality Enhancement Plan (SACSCOC, 2010). The committee that envisioned and documented this plan, which intends to fortify writing skills of students in their future professions and disciplines, required all undergraduate students to complete 5 writing or writing-intensive (WI) courses, including the two courses in the composition sequence and two program-required, content-area courses in their major prior to graduation. This influx of discipline-specific writing-intensive courses strained the existing resources available through the university's only academic support service, the Learning Center, which houses a number of tutors providing support in mathematics and writing. To meet the needs of the students in the writing domain, writing program administrators focused on designing and creating a new layer of academic support that focused on developing discipline-specific writing skills.

Because disciplined-based definitions of good writing vary according to the writing's context, purpose, and audience, the thinking and writing skills necessary to produce effective writing in a discipline can also vary. Recognizing that communication and thinking skills are often taught through indirect modeling to provide acculturation into a professional community (Carter, 2007), finding the best method of academic support in writing within a discipline is difficult. Like the instructional strategies related to the teaching of these writing skills, the academic support systems required to assist emerging writers in content areas could possibly differ too. As stated by Chanock (2004), the appropriate support for a writer may be difficult to envision for a writing or content-area teacher, depending upon the individual's academic and instructional needs. Thus, in order to meet these content-specific needs and expectations in writing, the Writing in the Disciplines (WID) internship program was developed.

Conceptually, the WID internship program is based on theories and research regarding traditional tutors in writing and learning centers (Barnett and Rosen, 1999), recognizing that these tutors work with a vast array of students from varying disciplines and often support the development of WAC programs as an essential form of academic assistance. In addition, with the burgeoning development of writing fellow programs, the WID internship program also draws from the belief that discipline-specific writing support should be contextualized due to the varying expectations and demands of a given writing-intensive course (Pemberton, 1995). Building upon the reasoning of Zawacki (2008), writing fellows—or, in this case, WID interns—can help improve achievement of students when matched with faculty members who teach writing-intensive courses. Finally, to embed the content knowledge of tutors and the academic support mechanism within the writing, the WID internship program also borrows from tenets of supplemental instruction (SI), which uses undergraduate peers who have succeeded in a course to provide “quality instruction in the reading, writing, and thinking skills necessary for content mastery” (Blanc, DeBuhr, & Martin, 1983, p.82). Supplemental instruction draws upon support from an upper-division student who has successfully mastered the course, allowing this upper division student to provide aid in learning strategies and course content simultaneously (Ning & Downing, 2010).

To capitalize on best practices from a combination of the literature on writing tutors, supplemental instruction, and writing fellows, administrators at this institution created the

Writing in the Disciplines (WID) internship program. WID interns are undergraduate students only, as opposed to graduates and professionals often used in tutoring and writing fellow programs. The use of undergraduates is vital, in that this particular university initiative is intended to promote learning outcomes for undergraduates only.

As suggested by the literature regarding supplemental instruction, the WID interns have successfully completed a writing-intensive (WI) content-area course; they are nominated by a WAC-trained faculty member who taught them in the course. Faculty members are requested to base nominations for the WID intern candidates on both content knowledge in the student's major and proficiency in writing skills. Academic achievement and upper-division status are also considered, and those students who meet all criteria are asked to complete an application and interview. Preferably, when candidates progress through the WID intern application and selection process, they are assigned to the specific course and faculty member who nominated them for the internship experience. To accommodate the number and demand, the WID interns are matched with additional courses, approximately seven courses per each intern with as many as 140 students to support, based on their completed curriculum and majors.

Considerations: Collaboration over Competition

With the formation of a new academic support program in writing occurring on the campus, honoring the skills and experience of the only existing academic support program, the Learning Center and its tutors, became an imperative objective. The directors of the Learning Center and the Writing Across the Curriculum program did not want to work at cross purposes. Rather, each administrator wanted to build on the unique strengths and offerings of their respective academic support methods, requiring ongoing communication and deliberate collaboration before considering the WID internship program's initial development and design.

Obstacles existed that could diminish the success of each program. For instance, the two units—the WAC program versus the Learning Center—are housed in completely different organizational areas of the campus. The WAC program is housed in Academic Affairs, whereas the Learning Center is housed in Student Affairs. In addition to physical separation of buildings, collaborations that require university funding, travel, or training had to be approved through two separate hierarchical administrative lines. Another consideration during program development focused on the potential competition that could occur between the new interns and the veteran tutors; rather, the administrators designing the WID internship were hoping to establish an appreciation of strengths and skills of the distinct programs. For instance, the interns possess a level of content-area expertise and the ability to communicate directly and frequently with writing-intensive faculty, whereas the tutors possess experience in forming relationships with tutees and expertise in writing pedagogy and English language conventions. These benefits needed to be explored, explained, and respected among personnel in each academic support program.

In addition to helping the WID interns and LC tutors understand their unique roles and academic support offerings, it was also essential to communicate these same distinct programmatic purposes and benefits to the faculty members who teach writing-intensive courses. If the WID internship program was developed to ease the workload of the Learning Center tutors, the faculty would have to accept this new form of academic support as viable and beneficial to improving student learning, yet when conflicting course schedules could potentially arise among the WID interns and students in their designated writing-intensive courses, the

faculty members would also have to feel confident sending students in their courses to the Learning Center. Most importantly, the faculty members needed to realize that both academic support programs, funded through the university, were options of choice for their students. Both support programs were options of support to help build the WAC program. Thus, it was essential to embed and interweave opportunities for interaction and sharing of expertise among the WID interns, LC tutors, and faculty members in order to increase the probability of WAC program success. The methodical points of collaboration and program intersection are provided and referenced as a possible model for other university administrators to follow when developing academic support for a university-wide writing across the curriculum program.

Collaboration during WID Intern Selection

From the first screening of WID intern candidates, collaboration between the WAC program staff and the Learning Center begins. In order to staff the WID internship program with the best possible undergraduate students on campus, the WID interns are first nominated by writing-intensive faculty. As mentioned earlier, the faculty members are asked to nominate students who are strong in both writing skills and content knowledge from their writing-intensive courses. Nominations are accepted throughout the month of April, and all nominees are contacted in May, asking that they complete WID Internship applications. If a student is nominated who already serves as a tutor in the Learning Center, the directors of each unit agreed that the student should have the choice to pursue either the WID internship or continue in the Learning Center staff, as some students are more comfortable with a traditional and structured Learning Center environment as compared to a more open-ended, self-paced work environment.

The WID internship application requires that students submit an application form and two writing samples. In the first writing sample, the candidates are asked to simply provide a statement of interest that indicates their knowledge of the WAC program. In the second writing sample, the candidates are asked to articulate their understanding of their own personal writing process and how writing in a given discipline has impacted their approach and strategies when writing. The applications and writing samples are screened by a panel that consists of the directors of the Learning Center and the WAC program as well as the WAC Program's senior program associate who manages the operations and schedules of the WID interns. The three individuals select the top candidates for interviews that occur early in the summer semester.

All three members of the initial screening panel, comprised of both WAC and Learning Center staff, interview the selected candidates. The inclusion of the Learning Center director is essential at this phase of the application process, as she has a rich history and knowledge of interpersonal and communication skills that are expected of students interacting in academic support settings. It is during the interview phase that these skills become most apparent. Through discussion and consensus of the WAC Program and Learning Center staff members, the cohort of WID interns are determined for the following academic year.

Collaboration during WID Intern Training

Collaboration between the Learning Center and WAC Program staff continues into the phases of WID intern preparation and program participation. Initial training of WID interns occurs in late summer, typically August, of each academic year in order to prepare interns for the demanding fall and spring schedules. The initial WID intern training consists of five sessions

covering topics that include the following: (a) WAC program orientation and role of the WID intern in academic support; (b) Learning Center orientation and available resources; (c) Understanding responsibilities and “Program Do’s and Don’t’s”; (d) Basic tutoring and peer review techniques; and (e) Assessing and assisting students with writing, with a focus on available technologies. It is during the second session regarding the Learning Center, that the director of the Learning Center acts as the primary facilitator of the professional development, leading the students through a series of resources available to help them in tutoring or writing theory and practice and follow-up interactive discussions.

During the fourth session, which covers tutoring techniques, tutors from the Learning Center provide mock tutorials of some to role play the part of some of the difficult students who they have encountered in their experiences, from students who expect that the tutors will edit the papers to students who are reticent and hesitant to engage in a writing conference. The tutors also pose additional questions and problem scenarios to the WID interns to discuss best methods of support and successful tutoring techniques, and they conclude with an open question and answer session. During this session, the WID interns get their first exposure to real-world tutoring dilemmas and solutions so they are ready to combat and troubleshoot in individual writing conferences, maintaining the objective of improving student learning outcomes.

Training does not end for the WID interns with the first professional development series in August. Rather, following best practices, the training of the WID interns becomes ongoing and job embedded, with the Learning Center tutors continuing to act as the catalysts for the development. Throughout the first semester of the WID internship, the WID interns must observe two hours (or four half-hour sessions) of tutoring provided by the Learning Center. The Learning Center director selects the veteran tutors who can provide the most guidance to the new WID interns, and the reflections and learning that occurs as a result of these observations are then discussed in monthly staff meetings held with WAC Program staff. The observations provide an opportunity to continue connecting theory discussed in staff meetings with practice that is happening in the real-world academic support setting. In addition, the Learning Center has opened their tutor training sessions to any interested WID interns. If WID interns require more knowledge or information on topics ranging from FERPA and confidentiality issues, to interacting with varying personality types to a better understanding of style guides, the WID interns have the option to attend Learning Center training.

Collaboration during Faculty Training

In order to help the faculty members teaching writing-intensive courses understand the possible avenues of academic support, both the Learning Center tutors and WID interns become actively involved in faculty development sessions. The faculty training is divided into two distinct parts. The first segment of faculty training consists of four 3-hour sessions that occur prior to the semester of writing-intensive instruction. The second segment of faculty training consists of an additional six sessions, taught in a hybrid mode, that occur during the faculty member’s first semester of writing-intensive instruction. The Learning Center staff and WID interns each participate in faculty training at distinct times.

In the first preliminary sessions prior to writing-intensive instruction, the Learning Center director provides information to faculty members and shares resources that are available through the Center. The director emphasizes resources that can support the faculty members in their instruction, just as she emphasized during WID intern training. After her presentation, the

Learning Center tutors provide an actual tutoring session for the faculty members. This particular session coincides with a writing pedagogy regarding individual writing conference techniques. The discussion following the actual tutoring session focuses upon the use of techniques to support revision and higher order concerns in writing such as purpose, content, and organization, as opposed to emphasis on editing and lower order concerns such as grammar and mechanics.

It is during the second segment of faculty training that the WID interns become involved in the faculty professional development program. Because the second segment of training is provided in a hybrid, as opposed to a traditional face-to-face, mode of instruction, the WID interns first meet their designated faculty during an orientation session. This orientation affords an informal opportunity for faculty and WID interns to engage in communication, allowing faculty members to clarify their expectations of writing in their class and collaboratively determine meeting times to discuss student writing. Once this initial communication has been established, a relationship between the faculty member and their specific WID intern develops. Faculty members then feel comfortable to ask WID interns for assistance in seeking writing resources, discussing writing assignments, critiquing clarity of expectations on the assignments, and engaging in assessment norming activities to ensure that the WID interns are providing students with expectations that parallel those of the faculty members during individual writing conferences. It is during this first semester of instruction that the WID intern truly earns the name of “intern” as they act as a sounding board to ideas, an additional resource for seeking information on writing instruction, and an academic support for the faculty members’ students.

Conclusions and Additional Points of Intersection with Resources

The points of collaboration and intersection do not end with WID intern selection or intern and faculty training. Many other areas of connections continue between the WAC Program and the Learning Center. For instance, finances are shared between the two programs in that Learning Center tutors are paid for their time they dedicate in WID intern and faculty training through the WAC Program budget. Monies are transferred between budgets to support the Learning Center staff for their allocated work time. Also, when the WID internship was initially being developed, the WAC program helped to support the Learning Center by providing partial funding for tutors until the WID internship program was able to ease the load and student demand for academic support on the campus.

Space has also been a premium issue and consideration. As with many universities, the physical facilities are in high demand, and office and tutoring space are stretched thin at this institution. The university administration provided office space for the full-time WAC program staff; however, they did not include consideration for the space needs of the WID interns. Hence, to answer that need, the Learning Center, housed in the library, willingly shares individual tutoring space for the WID interns. Because the university’s library is perceived symbolically as the hub of the university’s academic mission, the provision of space within the library for WID interns is both central and convenient.

Finally, the two unit directors deliberately collaborate on most academic support areas that connect their operations. For instance, the Learning Center director serves an ex-officio member of the WAC Committee, which is chaired by the WAC director. The WAC director has also served on search committees for Learning Center staff, such as the selection of a Learning Center program coordinator, and the WAC director has served on space allocation and design ad-hoc committees. The two directors understand that the success of each program is somewhat

dependent upon their interactions, and the ability to provide varied, quality academic support enhances the WAC program, the university's quality enhancement plan.

Collaboration doesn't always happen naturally. Sometimes, it has to be deliberate and planned. Such is the case with this particular WID internship program. In order to enhance the university's mission to improve writing skills among all undergraduate students on campus, the Learning Center and WAC program staff communicated, collaborated, interacted, shared, and developed. Rather than creating a competitive environment between the existing academic support for writing and the newly created academic support for content-area writing intensive courses, the competition was minimized, and unique purposes were honored. It is through the fostering of ideas that successful academic programs and the support needed to sustain the WAC program can occur.

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