WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 14, Numbers 1-2, Fall/Winter 1990
© Council of Writing Program Administrators

Writing Across the Curriculum: Transforming the Academy?

Cynthia Cornell and David J. Klooster

As the Writing Across the Curriculum movement enters its second decade, participants recognize that the continuation of campus-wide writing programs is threatened. On many campuses where writing programs have existed for a decade or more, the willingness of faculty to share responsibility for writing is waning, and administrative agenda are shifting to other issues. On such campuses writing across the curriculum is struggling for survival.

In an attempt to support flagging energies, a national WAC network has gathered at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication for the last several years to discuss strategies for sustaining Writing Across the Curriculum programs. A panel at the 1989 CCCC's in Seattle devoted itself to the issue of "Building WAC Programs That Last" (Sipple). A recently published book offers advice on *Strengthening Writing Across the Curriculum Programs.* And a recent article in *College Composition and Communication* provides lessons from past, unsustainable cross-curricular writing programs to "those who are now attempting to make struggling programs into institutional fixtures, and transform an educational trend into a tradition" (Russell 185).

The irony of the situation is obvious when we consider other developments in the WAC movement. For many university administrators, writing across the curriculum remains a compelling goal. For example, an Indiana University task force has been carefully planning a new writing across the curriculum requirement. Across the nation the story is the same: new programs are beginning everywhere. In terms of numbers of participating institutions, the WAC movement has never been stronger.

The educational value of Writing Across the Curriculum, after all, has never been doubted. Articles by Fulwiler in *College English* and by Griffin and Russell in *College Composition and Communication* describe the benefits that members of the movement have long known. WAC has been singularly effective in raising consciousness on campuses across the nation about the importance of writing in the learning process. Participants acknowledge that careful and sustained attention to writing produces a host of salutary effects: colleagues from diverse disciplines engage in productive conversa-

WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 14, Numbers 1-2, Fall/Winter 1990
© Council of Writing Program Administrators

tions about their teaching, instructors clarify their goals and develop methods appropriate to their courses, students receive increased and more effective support in the difficult process of learning to write, and the classroom becomes a more active community of learners. In addition, within the composition and rhetoric community, WAC research has helped to initiate a major reexamination of the nature and problems of academic discourse. Other unexpected benefits of WAC programs include increased faculty collaboration, improved teaching and research among participating faculty, and a greater sense that the university is in fact a community of teacher-scholars and not an accidental collection of competing researchers (Fulwiler).

A recent large-scale assessment of the ten-year-old program on the DePauw University campus confirmed such findings (Cornell et al). Our study drew responses from one quarter of our student body and two-thirds of our faculty. Students, faculty, and administrators almost universally support our program for the many reasons cited above. In addition, our evaluation gives us information beyond attitudes and individual testimonials and demonstrates what we had before only suspected: that in spite of the fact that our program is built around required writing-intensive courses, WAC hasn't limited itself to those courses. The program has produced a ripple effect, so that all across campus—in and out of the boundaries of the program—more and more writing is being assigned and supported by university faculty.

Why, then, in view of such evidence, are some WAC programs struggling?

The answer, we believe, lies in the fact that WAC programs come in conflict again and again with faulty assumptions about the educational process and with competing priorities within the university. Fundamentally, WAC forces institutions to reexamine their identity.

Threats from Faulty Assumptions about WAC

As WAC programs mature, many of them find their continuation threatened by present realities that do not accord with the initial assumptions of their founders. When we say this, we have in mind particularly those programs that intend to improve student writing as well as student learning.[1] We are not talking about the fate of programs which have limited themselves to a more modest agenda, using writing as a way of learning, with little or no attention to a final, formal written product. Nor do we question the value of such programs. We simply recognize that the learning-to-write agenda of WAC programs faces the greatest difficulty in sustaining itself.

We are also not talking about WAC programs, formal or informal, at very selective colleges where students enter with well developed learning and writing skills and need only limited instruction in academic discourse. We have in mind, instead, programs at colleges and universities that are accepting students with widely differing abilities and academic experiences and who, if they are to survive in the academy, often need extensive instruction in writing and thinking.

Assumption #1. *WAC is temporary.* Some administrations and faculties, we suspect, hoped WAC would be a short-term therapy with long-term benefits for an ailing curriculum and educational culture. As soon as some programs prove their effectiveness in improving students' performance on writing tasks (often measured with pre- and post-test writing samples), administrators may be eager to declare that the patient is well again. They may want to say that writing is back where it belongs in the curriculum and that the efforts that helped to reinstate it can be discontinued.

Our research on the DePauw program demonstrates quite clearly that to declare the patient cured and abandon the program would be to risk its gains. Faculty who participate in the program are willing to take on the considerable extra work required to teach writing and teach with writing when the university puts that work high on its list of priorities and supports it with clear curricular sanction and adequate resources. But were priorities to shift and the program to disappear, it is likely that many faculty members would revert to their pre-program practices of teaching without writing or requiring formal writing without teaching students how to do it. After a short term of therapy, we can't assume that the teaching practices of higher education will have been permanently transformed.

Assumption #2. *WAC will make our students competent writers.* Some institutions began WAC programs as a response to society's demand that students write well. This was certainly one of the founding purposes of the DePauw program, a purpose reflected in its title, "The Writing Competence Program," and in the certification procedure that marks each student's exit from the final required course in the program, the writing intensive course in a discipline.

But the claim implied in such language needs to be carefully qualified, because a misunderstanding of the realities of writing instruction and student learning can subvert support of any developmental writing program. While an extension of writing instruction into content courses certainly can help students become *better* writers as well as better learners, WAC programs cannot easily deliver on the promise of producing writers who are competent in any situation.

WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 14, Numbers 1-2, Fall/Winter 1990
© Council of Writing Program Administrators

The data we gathered for our evaluation showed us that students do make statistically significant improvement in the grades they earn on essays written during the semester in a writing-intensive course. But our data also demonstrate something composition teachers have long known without experimental verification: the gains a student makes through writing instruction do not always transfer well from one course to another. Our students may make remarkable progress in one course, but when they go on to another, especially one in a new discipline, we may be confronted in the hallway by an astonished colleague, asking "Who taught this kid how to write?" WAC programs make this fragility of writing instruction more widely experienced within the academy but perhaps not more fully understood.

Assumption #3. *Teaching WAC courses is no more work than teaching traditional courses.* Anyone who *teaches* average students to write knows that writing instruction takes tremendous time and energy. Composition instructors accept this work; their colleagues in other departments may not. For some, the additional workload makes it impossible to cover all the material of a course; for others the added work cuts into their own writing. When we asked some of our colleagues at DePauw why they had not continued to participate in our WAC program, we received answers like these: "I had to choose between my students' writing and my own," or "If I had to grade one more paper, I'd sink."

A failure of administrations to address the workload issue will almost assuredly lead to a failure of a WAC program as a learning-to-write program. Some large institutions appear to be shifting the paper-marking burden to graduate assistants, especially in writing-intensive sections of large lecture classes outside the English Department, a practice fair neither to the graduate assistant nor to the student writer. In small colleges, adequate solutions are hard to find because faculty time is already spread so thin. Solving the workload problems of WAC will require creativity and commitment.

Assumption #4. *WAC can be sustained by the energies of faculty leaders and the goodwill of faculty participants.* Certainly a program cannot get off the ground without plenty of energy and goodwill. WAC leadership has been remarkably energetic; the missionary zeal of the national leaders of the movement has infected local leaders as well. But without deep sources of institutional support, WAC programs cannot last. The Berkeley and Colgate stories (Russell) tell us that, as does our own experience. Our ten year program has been staffed by a diminishing group of faculty members whose goodwill has been sustained largely by the commitment of a single faculty leader

outside the English Department. When this leader retires in five years, he may well have no successor.

Assumption #5. *WAC is cheap.* Many institutions sought grant money to get their WAC programs going. Those funding sources are typically exhausted several years into the program when it becomes painfully clear that WAC requires not just a beginning investment in seed money but huge amounts of additional capital for crop maintenance and harvest. Writing centers, writing center directors, tutors, teaching assistants, word processors, workshops for training new faculty in the program and for the renewal of veteran faculty, coordinators of the program, incentives for faculty members to take part—all of these cost money. When faculty participation is voluntary, programs may well find that after the early years of collegial cooperation and sacrifice, faculty will drift away from the program or demand compensation in time or money for their work. For many faculty members, a reduction in teaching load—in either number of students or number of courses—is the best incentive to participate in a WAC program. Clearly, for WAC to prosper, it cannot be cheap.

Assumption #6. *WAC works best at institutions where teaching is paramount.* Fulwiler, Rose, Lanham, Russell, and others have already argued that WAC programs encounter particular resistance at the kind of institution "which places research and specialized professional training above undergraduate teaching" (Russell 191). It follows, then, that if WAC works anywhere, it should work at colleges and universities that define themselves as teaching institutions. It should work at schools like DePauw. And clearly it has, at least for a decade. Our university prides itself on excellent teaching. Effectiveness in the classroom is the *sine qua non* of all personnel decisions. Research and publication requirements are modest. Ten years ago our administration strongly supported the founding of our WAC program, and it continues today to nurture the program with tangible encouragement. Faculty receive money or released time in exchange for attendance at the WAC training workshop; WAC courses limit enrollment to twenty students; participation and leadership in the program are credited in personnel decisions; special faculty development monies are available for attendance at writing conferences.

Likewise, our faculty has supported the principles of the writing movement in large numbers. Indeed, many members of the faculty have long required their students to write, especially in upper level courses. Although our students vary in their aptitude and preparation for academic work, they are diligent and pragmatic in their desire to learn to write. We've had sufficient money to run workshops, to found a Writing Center, to send

WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 14, Numbers 1-2, Fall/Winter 1990
© Council of Writing Program Administrators

faculty leaders to conferences, and to publicize our successes. Yet despite this ideal environment and despite demonstrated success, the future of our WAC program is uncertain.

Although 104 of our 180 faculty members have participated in WAC workshops, only twenty-five to thirty regularly offer courses in the program. The rest have quietly removed themselves from official participation in WAC, which is voluntary here. Fourteen percent, then, of the faculty bears nearly the entire burden of writing-intensive courses now, and our data suggest that this same committed group assumes the heaviest responsibility for attention to writing outside the boundaries of the program. We doubt that this small percentage of our faculty, no matter how well rewarded, can maintain a strong program, and we fear further attrition among this group.

Our evaluation suggests that this decrease in faculty participation is most directly tied to faculty members' needing to chose between competing priorities at a small school where workload problems take many forms and are unrelieved by the labors of graduate assistants or the likelihood of released time or frequent leaves or sabbaticals. Thus we face a second category of threats to WAC programs. These programs can be subverted not only by discrepancies between naive expectations and sterner realities but also by conflicts among competing priorities. Some of these are peculiar to small colleges; others are general to the entire academic establishment.

Threats from Conflicting Priorities and Incompatible Agenda

Conflict #1. *Commitment to department and discipline vs. commitment to writing program.* WAC programs in small colleges often force faculty participants to make difficult decisions about where their loyalties lie. Often, teachers of writing-intensive courses must make hard choices about course design. How much material can be covered if a significant writing component is added to a course? When the course must fit into a departmental sequence, the instructor may feel she has to choose coverage over writing, loyalty to her department's curriculum over commitment to a university-wide competence requirement.

In some situations, faculty members must decide if they are more loyal to their departmental colleagues or to a university program. At DePauw, for example, an instructor may wish to offer a section of an introductory course as a writing-intensive course but will recognize that if he limits his enrollment in that course to twenty, his colleague may have to take fifty students in her non-writing section of the same course. Untenured faculty are particularly vulnerable in this dilemma of competing loyalties.

Conflict #2. *The Writing Program vs. other General Education Requirements.* On many campuses, the writing program must compete for faculty interest with other general education initiatives. Core courses, distribution requirements, interdisciplinary courses, and other cross-curricular programs all claim the time and dedication of faculty members. WAC has heavy demands; if a faculty has free choice about how and where to invest its energies, it may not choose Writing Across the Curriculum programs.

A similar source of difficulty for WAC programs on many campuses will be the inevitable shifts in institutional priorities and programs. As administrations come and go and as the academy responds to trends in the culture, the curriculum across which we write and the professional expectations within which we teach will be bent, pulled, revised, and redefined. If an administration increases the expectations for research and publication, or if it encourages faculty to diversify or internationalize its course offerings, or if the next cross curricular emphasis is moral reflection or critical thinking, the available time to teach writing will be sapped. If WAC is to survive, it must be able to adapt to such changing priorities.

Conflict #3. *WAC: A voluntary program for faculty vs. a requirement for students.* Some WAC programs require involvement by students but allow faculty to decide whether to participate. This is the case at DePauw, for example, where students must complete the three stages of the writing program by the end of their sophomore year, but faculty are free to elect when and if they offer writing-intensive courses.

This conflict becomes especially problematic when the number of faculty participants shrinks enough to have an effect on course selection and availability among the writing-intensive courses. When there are not enough courses offered, or when they are not offered in a variety of disciplines, students are forced to enroll where they aren't interested, they become frustrated and resentful, and the faculty who do offer courses find that they not only have a heavy paper load, but they also have churlish students and a chilly classroom climate.

Conflict #4. *The goals of a successful WAC program vs. the realities of academic administration.* In a paper presented at the 1989 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Richard Young offered an analysis of the incompatibility between the goals of WAC programs and the characteristics of effective academic administration. He noted that successful writing instruction demands a great deal of faculty time and energy—frequent writing assignments and feedback, regular reinforcement of developing abilities, a variety of forms and audiences for writing, and a

WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 14, Numbers 1-2, Fall/Winter 1990
© Council of Writing Program Administrators

compelling demonstration by the instructor of the importance of writing. Effective administration, on the other hand, requires that programs not place additional burdens on faculty and that they not require additional budgetary outlays. As we have seen, WAC programs, especially those with an agenda to teach writing, require both faculty time and institutional resources. Because the appropriate pedagogy conflicts with the necessary administrative priorities, all but the most committed institutions will experience tensions that can threaten the existence of ambitious writing programs.

Conflict #5. *Even in the teaching colleges, faculty as scholar/researcher vs. faculty as teacher.* We have already challenged the assumption that WAC works best at institutions where teaching is supposed to be paramount. We must now also challenge the assumption that such colleges and universities are free of the tension between the drive to publish and the commitment to good teaching. The reality is that some form of this tension is common throughout higher education today.

The pressure to publish comes from the institution, from the profession, and from within the individual faculty member. For one thing, if a college wants to compete effectively for the diminishing pool of students who are well prepared for advanced study and for the diminished pool of government and foundation funding for academic programs, it needs to demonstrate that its faculty is actively engaged in nationally respected research and publication. But it is not just administrations that influence the priorities of their teaching faculty. As new instructors come out of graduate school, their values and commitments have been shaped by the research institution. They begin their professional careers with their commitment to their discipline firmly established, but most are not yet equally committed to their students' learning. Finally, faculty respond to the pressures of the professional market as they establish their priorities. So, even though some colleges may still award tenure to faculty with modest publications but excellent teaching records, if faculty members want mobility within the profession, they know they had better attend first to their research and publication. In short, just when students in most of our colleges need a faculty deeply committed to teaching, faculties find it less and less professionally advantageous to commit themselves.

Conclusions: The Difficulty of Transforming the Academy

The WAC movement has gained considerable support in our colleges and universities because its aims and methods seem simple: to teach students to write and to help them learn their academic subjects by asking them to write more, and for more diverse audiences. But as the writing movement enters a new decade, we realize that our aims are not so simple. They are radical. The proponents of WAC are asking academics to transform themselves, to recompose their identities and priorities and practices. WAC requires professors to be *teachers* first of all, not disciplinary specialists, scholars, or researchers.

To continue to teach writing across the curriculum well, year after year, requires not just a willingness to be a good team player or half-heartedly to accept someone else's agenda; it requires a deep commitment to student development. WAC brings the structural conflicts of the academy to the forefront because the teaching of writing requires instructors and administrators to place the good of the students before all else.

Notes

[1]Griffin identifies three premises of such programs: 1) if we expect students' writing abilities to grow, we must give them opportunities throughout the college years to practice and improve, 2) writing is a way of learning, and thus a natural pedagogical tool throughout the university, and 3) "since written discourse is central to university education, the responsibility for the quality of student writing is university-wide."

Works Cited

Cornell, Cynthia, Robert Newton, and David Klooster. *A Decade of Writing Across the Curriculum: 1978-1988*. Greencastle, IN: DePauw University (in house), 1989.

Fulwiler, Toby. "How Well Does Writing Across the Curriculum Work?" *College English* 46 (1984): 113-25.

Griffin, C. W. "Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum: A Report." *College Composition and Communication* 36 (1985): 398-403.

Lanham, Richard. "Urgency and Opportunity: Implementing Writing Across the Curriculum." Address. University of Georgia, Athens, GA, 25 Apr. 1985. Reported in *Writing Across the Curriculum* 3 (1985): 5-6.

Rose, Mike. "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University." *College English* 47 (1985): 341-59.

Russell, David R. "Writing Across the Curriculum and the Communications Movement: Some Lessons from the Past." *College Composition and Communication* 38 (1987): 184-94.

Sipple, Jo-Ann, Chair. "Building WAC Programs That Last: A New Generation of Programs, Problems, and Solutions." Panel. Conference on College Composition and Communication, Seattle, Washington, 15-18 March, 1989.

WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 14, Numbers 1-2, Fall/Winter 1990
© Council of Writing Program Administrators

McLeod, Susan, ed. *Strengthening Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988.

Young, Richard. "Designing Second-Generation WAC Programs: The Question of Sustainability." Address. Conference on College Composition and Communication, Seattle, Washington, 15-18 March, 1989.