

What Do You Need to Start—and Sustain—a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Program?

Susan H. McLeod and Margot Soven

As members of the Board of Consultants of the National Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs, we have noticed a new trend in the semi-annual Network meetings held at NCTE and CCCC. In the early 1980s when the Network was new, those who came to our meetings were usually faculty (often WPAs) who were interested in finding out how to set up a program themselves. Writing across the curriculum (WAC) was at that time very much a bottom-up phenomenon, with programs being developed because of faculty initiative. Now, however, we notice that a number of people attending the Network meetings have been sent by their dean, department chair, or some other administrator. In other words, as WAC is becoming institutionalized—part of the academic landscape, as it were—it is also becoming a top-down phenomenon.

We find this trend gratifying in one sense, since it shows how WAC has become something that institutions want as a matter of course, rather like freshman composition, but we also find this mandating of WAC disturbing. Many deans and chairs, like the people they send to our Network meetings, are proceeding with good will, seeing WAC programs as something beneficial to their campuses; but they often do not have the time to read up on such programs and therefore do not understand the work involved in implementing them. The people these administrators send to our meetings, while they are just as committed as our earlier clientele, are worried—even frantic—about the unrealistic expectations of their administrators and about the seeming impossibility of the task they have been assigned. (One frustrated WPA confided to us that her dean had told her to deal with reluctant faculty by “ramming WAC down their throats.”) We see this lack of information about WAC principles and the accompanying expectations among some administrators as a potential danger to the WAC movement. What follows in this essay, then, can serve WPAs who are or might soon find themselves assigned the task of developing a WAC program as a guide to help them in informing administrators about some basic points, in knowing what to ask for before agreeing to take on the task, and in

understanding some basic procedures to follow for WAC program development.

Defining WAC

At the first mention of writing across the curriculum on campus, WPAs should make sure that everyone understands what that means since WAC programs vary significantly from campus to campus. In defining the concept, it is easiest to begin with what WAC is *not*—WAC programs are not simply additive (more term papers, more writing assessment); nor are they programs for teaching grammar across the curriculum, focusing just on the surface correctness of student writing. Instead, at its best, WAC involves a comprehensive program of faculty development and curricular change, instituting writing in virtually all university courses in order to improve students' writing and critical thinking skills.

There are two philosophical bases for WAC programs. The first may be termed "cognitive": writing assignments (especially journals, learning logs, and other non-graded writing, as described in Fulwiler's *Journal Book*) are used by students as tools to develop their thinking and learning skills. The WAC program at Michigan Technological University is the best-known example of a program with this sort of philosophical base; it is described in Toby Fulwiler's and Art Young's *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, and in Young and Fulwiler's *Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice*.

The second philosophical base may be termed "rhetorical," with ties to theories of knowledge as a social construct. Writing is seen as a form of social behavior in a discipline, a way of entering into the ongoing conversation in a discourse community; writing assignments (often in upper-division "writing-intensive" or "writing-in-the-major" courses) are designed to help students become familiar with and eventually conversant in the discourses of various disciplines. The best-known program based on this philosophy was established at Beaver College by Elaine Maimon; her methods are presented in her text, *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*, and in her articles, "Talking to Strangers" and "Writing in All the Arts and Sciences." While programs like these emphasize one or the other philosophical approach, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive; many WAC programs encourage both writing-to-learn and learning-to-write-within-particular-discourse-communities. (For a fuller discussion of WAC definitions and philosophical assumptions, see McLeod, "Defining.")

What WAC Programs Need If They Are to Succeed

Given the fact that WAC programs involve comprehensive curricular change, the first thing such programs (and program directors) need is time. Successful programs, while requiring strong administrative support and encouragement, must grow and develop through faculty consensus and dialogue. Most programs start with a few committed teachers voluntarily attending a workshop on methods of assigning and evaluating student writing. These individuals, the experimenters who are always seeking ways to improve their teaching, are very often among the campus leaders and/or most respected teachers. Once they are successfully using writing in various ways in their classes, the word spreads; the more cautious faculty members then attend workshops and adopt strategies to improve student writing. Depending on the size of the faculty, it can take several years of workshops before any real changes in classroom practices can be detected and curricular change starts to take shape. And there are, of course, always some who will never change their approach to teaching, and who would resent being told they should; these teachers should be allowed to continue as dinosaurs, and certainly never be required to go to WAC workshops, where they would probably do their best to subvert the proceedings. It is particularly important for WPAs to take the time to secure the support, or at least the benign neglect, of English Department faculty; while the WAC program need not be centered there, hostility toward WAC in the department that traditionally teaches writing can eventually kill any WAC efforts.

The second thing needed to create a strong WAC program is resources. The first and most valuable resource is a coordinator for the program—a faculty member with vision, leadership skills, tact, and some clout. Sometimes this person is the WPA, sometimes not. Sometimes this person is the one who leads faculty workshops; more often he or she brings in outside experts for workshops and then does the follow-up work, contacting workshop participants and offering consultation. Without a campus coordinator like this, a WAC program will lack direction; released time for the coordinator—during the planning period as well as after—is essential. If this person is expected to set up a program from scratch, he or she should have at least a semester (preferably a year) to study programs at other institutions, ask advice of other WAC directors, attend meetings where WAC is discussed, and gather materials for faculty use. (Two particularly good resources are Walvoord's *Helping Students Write Well* and Holder and Moss's *Improving Student Writing*.)

There should also be a reward system for faculty who participate in writing-across-the-curriculum workshops. In the early days of WAC, when outside funding was readily available, programs were able to offer modest honoraria to participants. If funding is not available for such honoraria, however, other sorts of awards can be just as successful—a catered lunch provided by the Dean, for example, or public recognition and commendation of faculty at the time of annual review. Sometimes just holding the seminar off-campus in a quasi-retreat setting is enough. But some sort of reward is essential for participants, providing public recognition that the university values the time commitment these teachers have willingly made.

The third resource needed to create a successful WAC program is support systems for both students and faculty. A writing lab or peer tutoring program of some sort is vital. Faculty in the disciplines can be expected to assign and respond to more student writing, but they cannot be expected to provide the intensive one-to-one feedback that a well-trained writing tutor can. A writing lab provides one of the most essential ingredients of good writing—a sympathetic audience; students can take drafts of papers to the lab for help with revision, and faculty members can consult with the lab on the design of assignments so that the tutors are prepared when students bring those assignments to the lab. The writing lab director can also provide outreach activities in the disciplines, visiting classes to discuss strategies for taking essay examinations or for planning and writing research papers. (For advice on setting up and running a writing lab, see Olson.)

Finally, WAC programs need some sort of administrative structure, however slight, to ensure that curricular change takes place and stays in place. The importance of such a structure cannot be overstated; David Russell points out that past programs similar to WAC have disappeared when their leaders retired or left, showing the importance of institutionalizing such programs. A large university with a WAC program needs an all-university writing committee, a composition board, or a centrally located WAC advisory board, with representation from all disciplines. Such a board would oversee and approve writing-intensive courses or writing in the major courses, making sure that the curriculum is consistent with WAC principles. At Oregon State University, for example, there is a campus-wide director of writing across the curriculum who is part of the Baccalaureate Core Committee now implementing changes in the university's general education program, changes which include a writing-intensive

course requirement. At a smaller institution, WPAs should be careful about trying to set up new lines of authority, but WAC can be administered through less formal structures. At La Salle University, for example, the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences oversees WAC and appoints ad hoc committees to address specific issues, such as the development of a proposal for writing-intensive courses and the administration of the Writing Fellows Program.

How to Get a WAC Program Started

Once it is understood that WAC programs will take time, resources, and some administrative scaffolding for continued success, here is how a would-be WAC director should go about setting one up.

1. Set up a planning committee. Involve key faculty at the decision-making level and make sure composition faculty are involved and knowledgeable. Get administrators to send some of these key people to conferences to learn more about WAC—for example, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the summer conference and workshop of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, or the University of Chicago seminars on writing and critical thinking. Read up on WAC programs yourself as much as you can, starting with the works we have cited here.
2. With your planning committee, study the structure of your school and decide how a WAC program will fit with the institutional mission and any institution-wide planning underway. Since WAC begins with faculty development, what provisions and resources does your institution already have for such programs? Do you have a writing lab or learning center? Could WAC-support efforts start there? Should the WPA direct WAC efforts, or should someone else (an assistant director of writing, a campus-wide writing coordinator) direct the program? Study institutions similar to yours that have WAC programs to see how those programs are structured. (For descriptions of successful WAC programs at colleges and universities of various sorts, see Fulwiler and Young, *Programs That Work*.) Study any present institutional initiatives (such as general education reform or new core-curriculum projects) and tie funding requests to such initiatives where possible. Don't overlook the possibility of outside funding; while large amounts of federal funding are no longer available for WAC itself, writing can (and should) be an essential part of core curriculum revisions proposed to, say, NEH or FIPSE. Title III "Strengthening Institutions" grants are available from the U. S. Department of Education

for institutions with significant numbers of minority students, and several private foundations (Mellon, Pew, Ford, Lilly, Glenmede, and Bush) have recently funded WAC programs for particular kinds of institutions.

3. Bring in an outside consultant, if at all possible. Members of the Board of Consultants of the National Network of WAC programs or other WAC directors familiar with programs across the country can advise you on the best procedures and structure for a program for your institution. (Christopher Thaiss, Professor of English at George Mason University, is the Coordinator of the Network; for a list of programs and program directors across the country, see McLeod, *Strengthening Programs*). Plan for this consultant to conduct some workshops to inspire faculty; make sure your on-site coordinator can lead follow-up discussions in one format or another (Brown-bag lunches have worked well in some institutions,) and can continue to enlist faculty participation in the program once the visiting expert has left.

4. To establish a comprehensive program, start with a few elements in a pilot program and phase in others over time. The program planned at Washington State University, for example, will eventually include faculty workshops, curricular change (substantial writing in general education courses and in upper-division "writing-in-the-major" courses), support services (a writing lab), and assessment (a "rising-junior" examination to assess proficiency). Coordinated by an all-university writing committee, some of these elements are already in place (the workshops and the writing lab); others are being phased in now (writing in general education courses), and still others will be established within five years (the rising-junior examination and writing-in-the-major courses). The program at La Salle University began eight years ago with a summer workshop for six faculty members; it now includes a writing-emphasis course requirement, an advanced workshop for those who have completed the continuing summer workshop, an undergraduate peer-tutoring program, and an annual across-the-disciplines essay contest. It would clearly have been impossible to institute all elements at once in either institution; for a comprehensive program involving institutional change to succeed, one must move step by step.

5. From the beginning, build evaluation into the program to monitor growth and progress. Evaluating WAC programs, like program evaluation of any sort, is difficult (see Witte and Faigley; Davis et al.; Young and Fulwiler;

Fulwiler, "Evaluating" and "How Well?"; White, *Developing*). Proceed cautiously and use multiple measures, such as faculty and student surveys, interviews, attitude measures, and examination of assignments. Any evaluation efforts must be carefully designed, taking into account research on longitudinal studies of writing development and the intricacies of pre- and post-testing of writing (see White, appendix to *Developing*).

6. Don't expect immediate and obvious changes, and make sure administrators don't either. WAC programs aim to develop critical thinking and learning skills and to have an impact on teaching. Skills develop slowly; teachers change their classroom practices even more slowly. Putting a program in place takes time, energy, leadership, and resources. Making sure it results in eventual change takes not only an administrative structure of some sort but also some patience and perseverance on the part of everyone involved.

There will, however, be certain immediate and gratifying results from the faculty workshops. The first is renewed enthusiasm for and commitment to teaching, and the second is a blossoming of collegiality; both are well-documented side effects of WAC programs (Weiss and Peich). In institutions that still have large numbers of tenured-in faculty who are approaching burnout faster than retirement, these outcomes may be just as beneficial as the eventual improvement of student writing and thinking. A third benefit is a personal rather than an institutional one; directing a WAC program, while it has its administrative frustrations, is enormously gratifying and instructive for the director. Faculty in other disciplines have much to teach us about writing in their discourse communities, if we will only listen. Many faculty are already doing wonderful things with writing in their classrooms, as those of us who conduct workshops always discover, and are more than willing to share their ideas and assignments with others. When we have created a program that helps such teachers break out of their isolated classrooms and share ideas about writing—and about good pedagogy in general—we have also helped to create a community of teachers and writers.

Works Cited

Davis, Barbara, Michael Scriven, and Susan Thomas. *The Evaluation of Composition Instruction*. New York: Teachers College, 1987.

Fulwiler, Toby. "Evaluating Writing Across the Curriculum Programs." *Strengthening Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum*. Ed. Susan H. McLeod. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988.

———. "How Well Does Writing Across the Curriculum Work?" *College English* 46 (1984): 113-125.

———. *The Journal Book*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1987.

Fulwiler, Toby, and Art Young, eds. *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1982.

———. *Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1990.

Holder, Carol, and Andrew Moss. *Improving Student Writing: A Guidebook for Faculty in All Disciplines*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1987.

Maimon, Elaine. "Talking to Strangers." *College Composition and Communication* 30 (1979): 364-369.

———. "Writing in All the Arts and Sciences: Getting Started and Gaining Momentum." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 4.3 (1981): 9-13.

Maimon, Elaine, et al. *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1981.

McLeod, Susan. "Defining Writing Across the Curriculum." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 11.1-2 (1987): 19-24.

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

Olson, Gary, ed. *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1984.

Russell, David. "Writing Across the Curriculum and the Communications Movement: Some Lessons from the Past." *College Composition and Communication* 38 (1987): 184-194.

Walvoord, Barbara Fassler. *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines*. 2nd ed. New York: MLA, 1986.

Weiss, Robert, and Michael Peich. "Faculty Attitude Change in a Cross-Disciplinary Writing Workshop." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 33-41.

White, Edward. *Teaching and Assessing Writing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.

———. *Developing Successful College Writing Programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.

Witte, Stephen P., and Lester Faigley. *Evaluating College Writing Programs*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1983.

Young, Art, and Toby Fulwiler. *Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1986.

