The Protean Shape of the Writing Associate's Role: An Empirical Study and Conceptual Model

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Writing fellow or writing associate[1] programs trace their heritage to a single point of origin: the model developed at Brown University in the early 1980s by Tori Haring-Smith (Soven, 1993, 2001).[2] Since then, the Brown model has spread to hundreds of schools. As Haring-Smith argues (1992, 2000), the writing associate (WA) concept is a remarkably adaptable strategy for helping students enhance their writing abilities. It works as effectively at large research universities as at two-year community colleges. It partners well with a variety of institution-wide initiatives, including writing-across-the-curriculum, writing-intensive-course, and writing-in-the-disciplines programs (Soven, 2001). It can also stand alone at institutions that have no other writing initiatives.

WA programs are so adaptable because they consist of many discrete elements, each of which can be adjusted to match the character and aspirations of individual institutions. Program directors can localize the requirements faculty must satisfy to obtain the assistance of a WA, the kinds of help WAs provide to students, and everything in between. Consequently, each WA program, despite its family resemblance to all others, remains distinctive. In fact, our study of program descriptions in print and at websites identified only three features shared by all WA programs: They use (1) student consultants or tutors (2) to provide writing assistance (3) to the students enrolled in a specific course or section of a course. In every other feature, programs can differ from one another.

As they localize, WA program directors are able to draw on theory and practice from the literatures concerning several other strategies for enlisting some students to help other students learn. For example, WA program directors can gain helpful ideas from the literature on supplemental instructors (Hafer, 2001) and curriculum-based tutors (Lutes, 2001; Spigelman & Grobman, 2005),[3] who, like WAs, work directly with a faculty member as they assist students in the faculty member's course. Likewise, from the literature on peer consulting in student writing centers, program directors can borrow tutoring techniques to teach their WAs (Gillespie & Lerner, 2004; McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001).

The ease with which WA program directors can borrow from other peer-assistance initiatives may explain why the literature on WA programs is so small when compared with the literatures on these kindred strategies. With so many useful publications readily available in other literatures, WA specialists may have concluded that they had little to gain by developing their own corpus of research.

Despite the obvious similarities, however, the WA's tasks and responsibilities differ significantly from those of supplemental instructors, curriculum-based tutors, and writing-center tutors. For

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example, a WA typically assists students with writing only, whereas supplemental instructors and curriculum-based peer tutors typically assist students with all course content. Unlike a writing-center peer tutor, a WA typically works with students in only one course, interacts closely with the course instructor, and assists students outside the student writing center. Such differences prompted us to wonder whether an empirical study of the WA's role on its own terms might yield theory and practical insights helpful to program directors. We would not be the first to produce a description of the WA's role, of course. Program directors define their vision of the WA's role in abstract, idealized terms when they describe the training they have created for their WAs and the policies that tell what WAs should and should not do.

To find out what might be gained by examining the WA's role empirically, we studied the activities of four WAs in a special program that was very different from what we might call the Brown model. Rather than specifying the proper role for the WAs, we let each faculty member/WA pair work out the WA's role together within deliberately vague, loosely defined requirements concerning the WAs' responsibilities. This open-endedness created a wonderful research opportunity for exploring the dynamics of the WA's role. By gathering and analyzing information from the WAs, their faculty partners, and students in the faculty members' classes, we developed a conceptual model of the WA's role. The model includes four major elements:

- the *essential tasks* of a WA
- the *principal forces* that influence the ways a particular WA performs these tasks
- the *dynamic interaction* among these forces that shape the WA's role
- the *institutional context* in which the WA works and the dynamic interaction occurs

Our model focuses on the complex process through which every WA's responsibilities are defined, and it highlights the singularity of each WA's particular role. At the same time, the model recognizes the features that all WA roles share. We will discuss the model's details after presenting the research results on which we based the model.

We believe that our dynamic model can provide a tool that WAC program directors can use to review and refine existing WA programs. For WAC program directors who are thinking about launching a WA program, the model may suggest innovative ways of configuring their new initiatives that will increase the program's effectiveness and the satisfaction of its participants. The model may also serve as a framework for a line of research that focuses specifically on WA programs as distinct from supplemental instruction, curriculum-based peer tutoring, and tutoring in writing centers.

Method

To learn about the WA's role as it unfolds in situ, we designed a participant-observer study in which we gathered information from WAs and their faculty members throughout a semester. At the end of the term, we distributed a survey to the students in the faculty members' classes. We conducted this study at Miami University (Ohio), a public institution that offers a liberal arts undergraduate education and selected master's and doctoral programs. All aspects of our study had prior IRB approval.

Participants

We recruited four faculty participants from a faculty learning community (FLC) sponsored jointly by Miami's Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence and its Center for the Enhancement of

Learning and Teaching. An FLC consists of a small group of faculty, typically 6 to 15, who meet regularly for a semester or year to study a particular topic related to teaching (Cox, 2001). Topics are extremely varied. Examples include cooperative learning, technology in the classroom, and using diversity to enhance learning. The concept of faculty learning communities was developed at Miami, which has won two Hesburgh Awards for its FLCs and received a FIPSE grant to help other institutions develop them.

We recruited the faculty for our study from an FLC on "teaching writing-enriched courses." Its seven members, representing seven disciplines, met twice a month with Howe Center staff for a year-long conversation about writing. Their work together began with a two-day retreat led by Chris Anson and Deana Dannels. At subsequent fall meetings, members discussed WAC readings, shared ideas, and reviewed drafts of syllabi and assignments for the writing-enriched courses they would teach in the spring. To recruit participants from this group for our study, we offered to pay, train, and provide ongoing support for the undergraduate WA chosen by each FLC faculty member who wished to participate. Four of the seven chose to do so.

As demonstrated by their voluntary participation in the FLC, the four faculty shared a deep conviction of the importance of writing to a college education and a desire to explore ways to use writing more effectively in their courses. By the end of fall semester, the four had shared their concerns, desires, and strategies related to student writing in extended and far-ranging conversations with one another and the other members of the FLC. Three of the four already included substantial amounts of writing in their courses. The fourth, a mathematician, desired to. None had previous experience with a WA.

The faculty recruited the four undergraduate participants who served as WAs. We asked faculty members to select, if possible, a student who previously had taken the course for which they were planning a writing-enriched version for the spring. Three did, and the fourth chose a senior who, though she hadn't taken the particular course, had impressed him with her writing and her success in more advanced classes. That student was the only one with previous experience as a peer writing tutor. We paid the four WAs student wages.

The third group of participants consisted of the students in the courses for which the faculty members wished to have a WA. The students' participation was limited to completing, on a voluntary basis, a questionnaire distributed at the end of the semester. As Table 1 indicates, the courses taught by our faculty participants represented four distinct areas of study: education, humanities, social science, and mathematics. All had between 21 and 28 students, mostly sophomores and juniors.

Table 1: Faculty, Writing Associate, and Student Participants*

Course	Faculty Member (Rank)	Writing Associate (Major)	Students
Differential Equations (300 Level)	**Sam** (Associate Professor)	**Marcia** (Interdisciplinary Studies)	**21**
Foundations of Reading, Language, and Literacy (200 Level)	**Frank** (Professor)	**Carol** (Education)	**16 and 5** (two sections)

Japanese Tales of the Supernatural in Translation (200 Level)	**Anita** (Assistant Professor)	**Nick** (Interdisciplinary Studies)	28
Sociology of Gender (listed as a Sociology and a Women's Studies course; 200 Level)	**Perry** (Professor)	**Andrea** (Sociology)	23

*All names are pseudonyms.

Activities

To reproduce in miniature the variety of policies and practices employed by WA programs nationally, we let each faculty member determine most features of his or her WA's role. We were able to allow faculty this freedom because Miami University actively pursues the goal of helping students increase their writing skills through a variety of initiatives it sees as viable alternatives to writing-intensive-courses, writing-in-the-disciplines, and similar requirements. In addition, Miami does not have a WA program whose policies needed to be followed by participants in our study. Our only requirements were that the faculty introduce the WAs to their classes and that the WAs schedule at least two "office hours" per week as well as make appointments with students who couldn't see them during that time. Each of our four faculty members determined how often the WA would attend class, decided what the WA would do if in class, defined the priorities for the WA in responding to student writing in the course, determined how much to consult the WA about these decisions, and (as the semester proceeded) identified adaptations that would support greater student success.

At the beginning of spring semester, the WAs participated in a three-session training program that the university's Learning Center developed for its new tutors. The WAs also met every other week for ongoing training and discussions led by RC. Three of the faculty attended one of these meetings; the fourth had a conflicting obligation.

Data Gathering

As organizers of the FLC and facilitators of the WA project, one or both of us were participant observers in all meetings of the WAs and the FLC. At the FLC meetings, our four faculty participants reported on their WA courses as they and the other three FLC members discussed their writing-enriched courses. At mid-semester, we facilitated a discussion among the four WAs and the three faculty who were able to attend. During each meeting, RC made notes that she later transformed into a detailed record of the discussion. We also kept a copy of all exchanges on a listserv established for the WAs.

At semester's end, we asked the WAs to prepare written reflections on their experiences in this study. We also conducted individual interviews with the WAs and a group interview with all four WAs at the end of the semester. We interviewed the faculty individually at the beginning of the following spring semester. This timing enabled us to ask the faculty not only to reflect on their WA experiences but also to describe the ways, if any, their WA experience had affected their subsequent teaching.

During the final weeks of the term, we distributed questionnaires to the 91 students enrolled in the WA courses. Fifty students (55%) returned the questionnaires.

Limitations of our study design

Our study design had several limitations, some shared with other qualitative studies and some peculiar to our investigation. We studied a small number of participants, all of whom taught or studied at a single institution. Our study was situated within the unusual context of a faculty learning community. In addition, all four faculty participants chose to use WAs in small-enrollment courses at the 200 and 300 level that enrolled 28 or fewer students. Likewise, by deciding to forgo use of several common requirements, such as the one mandating that WAs attend every session of their faculty members' courses (Lutes, 2001; Soven, 2001), we may have observed situations that would never occur in a typical WA program, thereby limiting the generalizability of our findings. We hope that our in-depth observations nevertheless provide useful insights into aspects of WA programs that occur in some form wherever WAs are used.

Results and Discussion

Our major finding is that the role of a WA is shaped by the dynamic interaction of the faculty member, WA, and students. Moreover, the WA's role may evolve as the relationships among the faculty member, WA, and students unfold throughout a semester or quarter. While it's true that our study involved an unusual absence of explicit guidelines defining the work and relationships of the WAs, we believe that the same dynamic marks all WA situations, though often to a lesser degree.

Any discussion of change presumes an initial state from which subsequent states differ. We take this initial state to be the vision of the WA's role that the director instantiates in the policies, guidelines, and training he or she plans and provides.[4] The director's vision might be termed the WA's "proper role" because it describes what the program director believes the WA ought to do. Although the program director's policies, guidelines, and training exert an initial and powerful influence, our findings indicate that they do not adequately describe what a WA actually does. While a WA's proper role and his or her actual role may be very similar, they are never identical. The difference between the two, however, does not diminish the importance of the program director's vision. On the contrary, we believe that understanding how a WA's actual role develops can help program directors design policies, guidelines, and training that are as effective as possible at achieving their programs' goals.

In presenting our results, we begin by focusing on ways each stakeholder in a WA-supported class (faculty member, WA, and students) can influence the WA's role. However, because WAs enact their roles in a social context, no single stakeholder can completely control any change. The outcome of every change in the WA's role results from interactions among the stakeholders.

Faculty Vary In The Role They Want WAs To Play

One unmistakable sign that the WA's role is not defined solely by the program director is our finding that different faculty members approach the opportunity to work with a WA in different ways. A particularly notable difference concerns the aspects of writing they want—and ask—their WAs to concentrate in student papers. As the literature on writing in the disciplines suggests, our faculty participants' directions to their WAs were inflected by the discourse conventions of their disciplines and courses (Russell, 2001). We found faculty members' perceptions of their students' writing needs were also shaped by their personal convictions about what constitutes good (or acceptable) writing by college students. Even where the views of two or more faculty participants overlapped substantially, their views diverged in a consequential way.

For example, three of the four stated that helping their students learn to write clearly was a major task they wanted their WAs to perform. However, these three faculty defined clarity differently,

leading them to assign much different tasks to their WAs. For Perry (sociology), clear writing was inextricably tied to error-free writing in which word choice, grammar, and spelling are flawless. In contrast, Frank (education) insisted that focusing on error would diminish the students' ability to learn the writing skill he thought most crucial: the ability to construct arguments with explicit claims supported by specific evidence. When Sam (mathematics) described the need for students in his differential equations class to write clearly, he meant that they should be able to adapt their writing to two different audiences: mathematicians and non-mathematicians.

Unlike the other three, Anita (Japanese) did not ask her WA, Nick, to focus on clarity. She wanted him to use his comments and conversations with students to help the students develop their ideas more fully, a goal that overlapped one of Frank's. For Anita, however, helping students develop their ideas meant expanding their understanding of the Japanese stories they read and increasing their knowledge of Japanese culture through this reading. For Frank, helping students develop their ideas meant helping them build arguments of the kind he valued.

These and other differences, which resulted from the faculty members' differing perceptions of their students' writing needs, produced differences among the tasks they assigned their WAs. Perry included grammar and syntax among the features of his students' sociology papers on which he wanted his WA, Andrea, to focus. He even identified certain grammatical and syntactical errors he wanted her to look for. In contrast, Anita told Nick not to pay particular attention to correctness. Like Frank, she wanted her WA to concentrate on content. However, Anita instructed Nick to address the richness of the students' discussions of the stories and of Japanese culture, while Frank wanted Carol to focus on the structure of the arguments in his students' literacy papers.

In addition to wanting their WAs to help their students in different ways, our faculty participants differed in many other ways. Four differences had an especially significant influence on the roles the WAs performed.

When they asked their WAs to work with the students' writing.

Fred and Sam assigned their WAs to assist students with drafts. In contrast, Anita and Perry had theirs work almost exclusively on finished papers submitted for grading. This difference produced two others. While Fred's and Sam's WAs provided all of their assistance to students in conversation, Anita's and Perry's communicated their comments primarily in writing—two distinctly different tasks for a WA. Also, because Fred's and Sam's WAs worked with drafts, they always provided students with prospective advice. In contrast, Anita's and Perry's faced the challenge of commenting retrospectively on completed papers in ways that students could apply to papers they had not yet begun to write.

How they coordinated the WAs' work on students' final papers with their own.

When students turned in an assignment, both Perry and Anita gave the papers to their WAs with instructions for the WAs to write comments on the papers. When his WA completed her comments on a set of papers, Perry added his own comments and a grade. In contrast, after her WA finished his comments on student papers, Anita talked with him about the papers and his comments but she did not write her own. Fred, who asked his WA to work with students on drafts, did not have his WA write comments on any final papers. However, before he began grading a set of papers, Fred did ask her to read a selection of them and then share her impressions. Unlike the other three faculty, Sam did not show any of his students' final papers to his WA. Thus, the four WAs not only worked differently with student papers but also interacted differently with their faculty members concerning the papers.

How they encouraged students to meet with the WAs.

At the beginning of the semester and from time to time during it, all four faculty encouraged students to meet individually with their WA. However, the means and extent to which they promoted these meetings varied significantly. Anita offered students extra credit for meeting with Nick about their responses to a practice essay exam on Japanese stories of the supernatural. During each class, Frank had Carol pass around a sign-up sheet students could use to make appointments with her and he frequently told students how fortunate they were to be able to receive her help. He also offered students who received low grades an opportunity to revise their work if they visited Carol before resubmitting. As a result, Carol reported that she held about "nine hours of office hours per week" to satisfy student requests for appointments. In contrast, Sam provided no incentives for students to visit his WA, Marcia, who held only two hours of office hours per week, often receiving no visitors.

How closely they defined the work they wanted WAs to do.

When defining their WAs' tasks, Perry and Frank were much more directive than Anita and Sam. For example, Perry identified several issues he wanted Andrea to address, from organization to proper referencing and documentation of sources; he gave her a list of errors in grammar and syntax that he wanted her to note. In contrast, Anita and Sam gave their WAs a greater opportunity to define their own roles. However, no faculty member gave his or her WA complete freedom in deciding how the WA would work with students. While giving Marcia great latitude in many areas, Sam unequivocally told his class (and her), "She's not here to fix your math."

How much prominence they gave their WAs in class meetings.

The four faculty participants also differed in the degree to which they made the WAs an integral part of their class meetings. Frank and Sam gave the students considerable presence, even including them in some class discussions. In contrast, Anita initially asked Nick to attend as an observer. Perry told Andrea she did not need to attend, even discouraging her from doing so except when he extended a specific invitation.

Each of these (and other) differences among the faculty influenced the work each WA performed. Of course, a program director might legislate that all faculty members approach each of these areas in the same way. Nevertheless, because each faculty member interprets a program's regulations as he or she assigns tasks to his or her WA, the faculty member's instructions and feedback to the WA will inevitably shape the WA's role at least to a small—but significant—degree.

A WA can influence his or her own role

Through their actions, all four of our WA participants altered their own roles. In some cases, they induced the change by simply doing well a task that was part of their initial responsibilities. At the beginning of the semester, Frank asked Carol to tell him at their weekly meetings how well she thought specific students who visited her were grasping the concepts in his literacy course. Carol's answers were so helpful that the two gradually became, in a sense, co-teachers. Frank used their discussions to guide his discussions with these students about course concepts. While honoring Frank's request that she not discuss course content with his students, Carol used their discussions to determine how to guide the students she and Frank had discussed as she helped them learn how to improve their papers.

Two other WAs modified their roles by taking deliberate action. During the first half of the semester Andrea grew frustrated because few of Perry's sociology students visited her during her office hours.

Consequently, after the midterm break she began attending every class, having heard the other WAs tell how they used their class attendance to build rapport with students that encouraged them to seek help from the WAs. Marcia, on her own initiative, created a handout (not a usual role for a WA) for Sam's differential equation students, which Sam distributed.

Students in a WA-assisted course can influence the WA's role

The students in a class can also shape the WA's role. Andrea's decision to begin attending all class sessions was prompted by the students. In her Japanese class, Anita had announced that she would impose a penalty on students who failed to consult Nick about a certain assignment. Because the students expressed displeasure about this policy, she decided instead to give bonus points for doing so. Her decision in response to the students changed Nick's role. Originally his role was to meet with all students regardless of their independent desire to do so. Now his role was to meet with only the students who wished to consult him.

Cohort groups can influence the role of a WA

As they shared reports about their WAs' roles during meetings of the faculty learning community, the four faculty participants gained ideas from one another that inspired changes in the roles of these WAs. After hearing the other faculty describe their reasons for allowing students to revise papers and the results they obtained from the practice, Frank for the first time permitted revisions, limiting them to students who received a failing or very poor grade on an assignment. He encouraged the students to discuss their papers with Carol, a requirement that accounted for a significant number of her consultations. Likewise, as a result of the discussions among the faculty, Perry changed his mind about the extent to which he wanted Andrea to focus on grammatical and similar errors, asking her at mid-semester to note some but not, as he first requested, all of them.

Similarly, some WAs modified their roles in light of ideas they heard from others. For instance, Andrea's belief that she could increase the number of students consulting her arose from Carol's and Marcia's accounts of the ways they used class attendance to build rapport with students, thereby increasing the students' willingness to visit them.

The faculty member, WA, and students interact dynamically when shaping the WA's role

So far, we have focused on our finding that each of the actors in a WA-assisted course (faculty member, WA, students) can influence the WA's role. Equally significant is our finding that these three actors interact dynamically when producing a change. No modification results from one actor alone. This might seem counterintuitive. Because of a faculty member's power to establish the expectations in his or her course, it might seem that he or she would unilaterally define or redefine the WA's role. By declaring that all students must bring a draft to the WA, a faculty member would, of course, influence that WA's role. But the actual role of the WA—what the WA actually does— would be nuanced by the students' and WA's response to this requirement. If, for instance, the students resent it, the WA's role includes dealing with students who are hostile during their visits with him or her, a circumstance that could also influence what the WA does during consultations.

We witnessed the interactions of faculty member, WA, and students in a particularly striking succession of events that repeatedly redefined Nick's role as the WA for Anita's class on Japanese stories. At the beginning of the semester, Anita misspoke when introducing Nick, leading the students to believe he was a graduate student. After realizing that Nick was an undergraduate, they became

upset when Anita told them that they must meet with Nick to discuss their responses to a practice essay exam question. Upon learning about their hostility, Nick became uncomfortable, so he informed Anita about it. She followed Nick's suggestion that she abolish the requirement, leaving students free to consult him only when they wanted. However, the students stopped visiting Nick altogether. His role was now reduced to observing the class sessions and waiting during his office hours for students who didn't come. One can imagine interventions and policies that might have avoided this outcome. Nonetheless, these events illustrate how, often to a less dramatic degree, the role of a WA is shaped by the dynamic interactions of the faculty member, WA, and students.

Of course, interactions among these three actors can also achieve very desirable outcomes. Carol's role as the WA for Frank's literacy course is an example. Frank's encouragement that Carol join the class discussions and her efforts to establish rapport with the students by chatting with them before and after class contributed to the high number of office-hour visits she had from students. During these visits, students talked about their work in the course, providing her with the insights into the students' progress that she shared with Frank. Through this sharing, she changed her role as a WA in the way described above.

A Conceptual Model of the WA's Role

Using the insights gained through our study, we have created a conceptual model for the WA's role that identifies essential activities of a WA, represents independence of these activities from one another, captures the major factors that influence the shape of a specific WA's role, discusses their interaction, and includes the context within which the interaction takes place. We believe that this model could help WA program directors consider their alternatives systematically as they seek to make their programs as effective as possible. This model can also help researchers survey and select from among the many topics they might pursue in qualitative and quantitative studies of WAs.

WA's Role

The model defines a writing associate as a peer tutor assigned to assist a faculty member by assisting students in his or her course with their writing. The WA's role is the set of activities the WA actually performs when providing this assistance. Table 2 identifies the seven essential activities that our observations suggest a WA must perform in order to provide faculty and students with maximum assistance. In some instances, the WA's responsibilities may include additional tasks beyond these seven, such as assisting students with other aspects of the course and assisting the faculty member by reviewing assignments and planning instructional strategies.

Table 2: Essential Tasks for a Writing Associate

• Learning how the WA program, faculty member, and students define the WA's role
• Negotiating among these three definitions as well as the WA's own definition
• Enacting the negotiated role as the WA understands it
• Learning about the course material and associated writing tasks
• Building a partnership with the faculty member
• Establishing rapport with the faculty member's students
• Looking for additional ways to assist the faculty member and students

Principal Forces

A WA conducts these activities within an administrative framework of policies and guidelines intended to tell the WA how—and how much—to perform each one. However, the specific way that the WA actually enacts his or her role can be influenced significantly by the faculty member, WA, and students. Because the faculty member, WA, and students interact with one another outside of the program director's view, these interactions can have a much greater impact on a WA's role than similar interactions have on the roles of the tutors in other forms of peer assistance.

Even before the term begins, the faculty member interprets the program's expectations in ways that are suited to his or her teaching practices and preferences. Prior to the first meeting of the class, the WA and students may influence the faculty member's initial definition of the WA's role. The WA may exert this influence through pre-term meetings with the faculty member. The students may exert it indirectly through the faculty member's experiences with students similar to those he or she expects to enroll in the class.

Throughout the term, the WA's role may be altered in response to any or all of the participants, based on the expectations and preferences each brought to the course. The likelihood of change increases if the WA is a beginner and the faculty member and students are new to using WAs. In this case, as Soliday (2001) says, all three have trouble "placing the [WA] in the classroom's hierarchy and defining the [WA's] role."

Dynamic Interaction

Rarely does the faculty member, group of students, or WA influence the WA's role in a simple, direct way. Rather, they interact with one another often in complex dynamic ways. The evolution of Nick's role provides a classic example. Anita's students become upset when they learn that Nick is an undergraduate. Nick discovers their resentment and asks Anita to change the requirement that all the students meet with him. Consequently, the students stop visiting him. This interaction had several additional twists that would be tedious to describe here. Even in situations where the interaction is less protracted, a WA's role nevertheless results from interactions rather than single actions.

Furthermore, this dynamic interaction can last through a significant portion of the academic term. The roles for all four of our WAs changed significantly a month or later after the course began.

Context

As they interact with one another, the faculty member, students, and WA each operate within a different context. Many of the salient features of the contexts overlap in what might be called the institutional context—the set of policies, practices, and whimsicalities that characterize the academic culture of a college or university. Our model places the rules that govern a WA program as belonging to this context. All parties who interact directly in a class supported by a WA know these rules either directly or indirectly. These create an intangible space within which faculty, students, and WAs interact. But the boundaries of the space are porous. As a WA's role evolves, its shape is only partly defined by them.

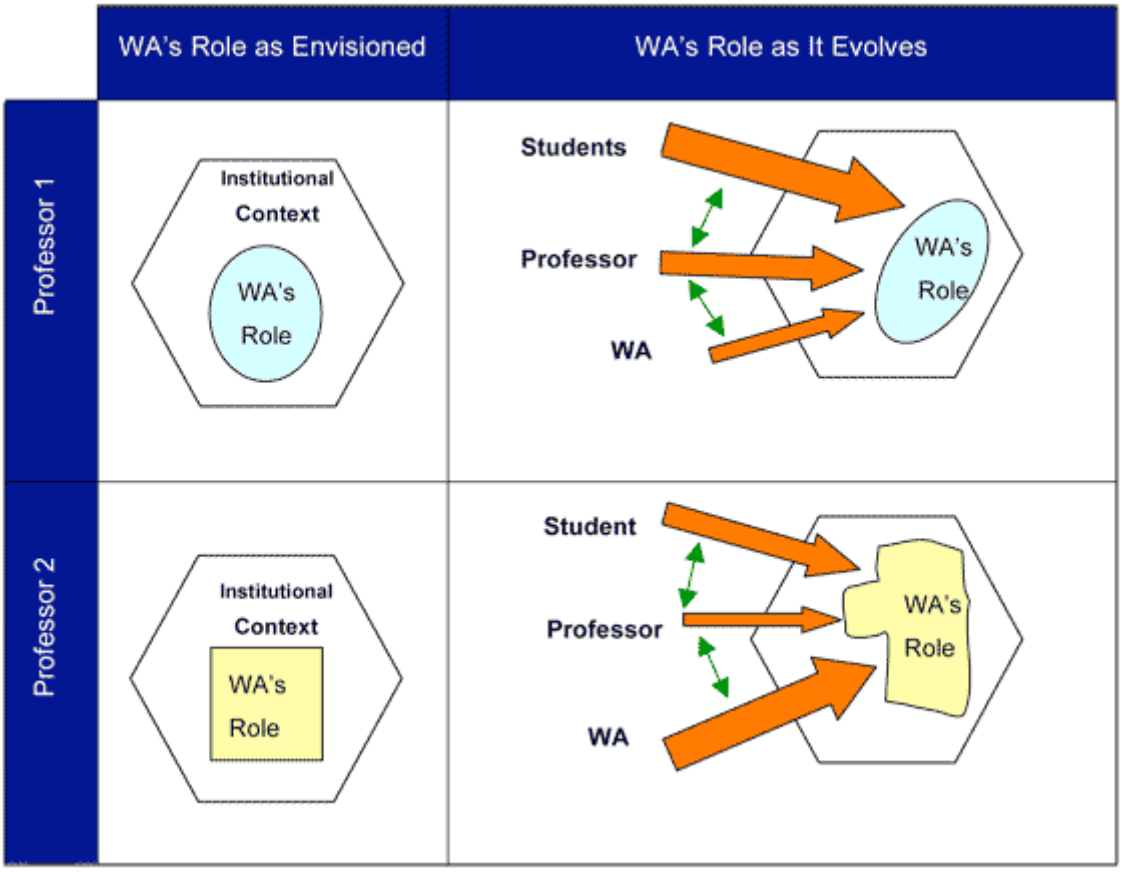
Our model also places the WA program director in the context because the WAs typically enact their roles away from the program director.

The details of this conceptual model can be changed in many ways without disturbing its central features. Other researchers might argue that, in fact the WA's essential roles are different from those

we identify. Nonetheless, any set would include tasks that can each be performed in many ways depending on the interaction of the faculty member, students, and WA. Similarly, other researchers might move the program director from the context, adding him or her as a fourth principal force that supplements the faculty member, students, and WA. Regardless of that change, the shape of the WA's role would still be determined by the dynamic interaction of all the principal forces operating within a specific, local context.

Figure 1 illustrates this abstract understanding of a WA's role. It represents the evolution of the roles for the WAs of two professors. On the left side, the circle and square represent the initial (and different) conceptions of the WA's role as envisioned by each professor and, perhaps, explained at the beginning of the term to the WAs and students in their courses. The circle and square are geometrically perfect to indicate that they are a starting point, not that the faculty member's initial vision is necessarily perfect in any other sense. For each professor, this initial conception of the WA's role includes the faculty member's expectations and assumptions (perhaps unexamined) about what the WA will do.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Writing Associate's Role



The irregular shapes on the right-hand side of Figure 1 represent possible revisions for the WA's role. Note that the relative influence of each participant will vary from course to course—and even from term to term. In fact, as was the case with Sam, the initial vision may be incompletely formed. In such an instance, the faculty member's starting vision may be said to be more pliable in response to

experiences during the WA-assisted course than for faculty such as Perry, whose initial vision was more detailed. As the course proceeds, the institutional context will influence the ways that the faculty, WA, and students want the WA's role to evolve; consequently, the arrows representing the influences of these stakeholders are shown partly within and partly outside the institutional context. The smaller arrows between the larger ones represent the dynamic interaction of the faculty member, WA, and students. The evolved shape of the WA's activities may more closely resemble the original (top example) or less closely resemble it (bottom example). Because the array of variables that influence a WA's role is so large, we assume that the role for every WA will be distinct from all others, including others working under the policies of the same WA program.

Although Figure 1 takes the faculty member's conception of the WA's role as a starting point, this conception is already shaped by several contextual factors, including the faculty member's academic goals for the course, his or her expectations about the students' responses and capabilities, and the institutional context (including the WA program's policies). The impact of the faculty member's prior experience with WAs and any interchange with the WA before this term will also be felt. Of course, the initial conceptions of the WA, students, program director, and other parties will all differ from the professor's and from one another's.

Suggestions for WA Program Directors

Our study leads us to suggest a few practical steps that program directors can take to increase the effectiveness of their efforts.

Include freedom for faculty members and WAs in program policies.

We discovered differences among our four faculty with respect to every significant aspect of their desires, expectations, and strategies for using WAs. We suspect that adding a fifth (or thousandth) additional faculty participant to our project would only have multiplied the differences. This variety suggests not only the diversity but also the richness of possibilities that reside in the WA's role. It means that WA programs can be adaptable not only at the institutional level but also the individual level. Allowing significant individualizing can substantially augment the appeal to faculty of a WA program and, hence, its impact. The wisdom of providing considerable autonomy for the WA's role is supported by the long-standing recognition that faculty ownership is a key to successful writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives (e.g., Williams, 1989; Townsend, 1990; Walvoord, 1992; Monroe, 2003). Increased autonomy could also allow faculty to make adaptations they require in order to overcome various personal and structural obstacles to using WAs (Halasz, 2006). In addition, by expanding the sense of ownership, greater autonomy could provide the benefits that Singer et al. (2005) and Martins & Wolf (2003) say can be accrued by treating the faculty member and his or her WA as a team that can define the WA's role collaboratively. Three of our four faculty participants actively engaged their WAs in such discussions.

It is possible to allow faculty so much autonomy that a WA's role may become defined in ways that undermine the goals of the WA program (see, for example, Zawacki in this issue). The precise threshold depends on local features at each institution. A program director must consider such factors as the institution's goals and traditions, the objectives of his or her specific WA program, and the extent to which the director can review each faculty/WA partnership to assure that it is developing in accord with program goals. On the other hand, a program director is not completely at the mercy of external circumstances. The director can use several strategies for reducing the risk that faculty and WAs will define a WA's role unproductively. For instance, a director can determine which aspects of the WA's role are truly essential in his or her contexts and then convey this information

explicitly in WA training sessions and in an orientation meeting for all WAs and their faculty. One of the WAs' duties might be to provide the program director with a brief, biweekly report on their current work.

No matter how liberally or conservatively a program director approaches autonomy, the key points are that faculty will inevitably make some adaptations and that thinking practically about these adaptations has the potential to improve a WA program.

Fully prepare WAs by covering all seven of their core activities in training programs.

WA training programs usually cover several of the core WA activities identified in Table 2 by teaching the WAs their responsibilities and how to fulfill them, providing information about how to work effectively with student writers, and suggesting ways to establish rapport with students in the faculty member's class. For training programs that don't already do so, we recommend explaining that the WA's role will probably change during the semester or quarter, informing them about the ways these changes may come about, and providing them with advice that would enable them to negotiate about these changes in ways that will bring about a positive result for their faculty members and their faculty members' students. As Halasz & Brinker (2006) discovered, WAs can feel caught in the middle if they unexpectedly encounter differences among their faculty member's expectations, their program's expectations, and their own expectations. WA programs can also increase their positive impact by helping WAs learn about the full range of ways they might be able to assist their faculty members and alert them to the importance of looking for chances to increase their value as WAs.

Establish cohort groups of WAs and faculty who have WAs.

Our four faculty unanimously expressed appreciation for the opportunities they had to share their experiences and ideas concerning their use of WAs. We believe that such cohort discussions can increase faculty's retention and transference to other courses of the pedagogical practices they learn through their WA experience. In their study of faculty perceptions of three WAC programs, Walvoord et al. (1997) observed that faculty "often remembered WAC events . . . in terms of community" (p. 137). Cohort meetings would also constitute the kind of "infrastructure" described by Brumner et al. (2001), one that enables faculty to learn "how and why their colleagues assign and use writing" (p. 25). The four WAs in our study also praised the value of their biweekly meetings, through which they not only exchanged helpful information but also formed the sort of community Lutes (2001) observed in her naturalistic study of WAs. Furthermore, both the faculty and WAs wished for additional meetings at which the two groups met together.

Adjust your institution's investment in WA programming to a realistic assessment of its potential for achieving institutional goals.

We believe that an appropriate long-term institutional goal for a WA program is the widespread and sustained faculty use of teaching strategies that improve student writing and increase student learning. Our results support a belief that WA programs can advance such a goal (Corroy, 2005). However, we also found reasons for believing that a WA program's potential for serving as an institutional change agent is limited. In our FLC of seven faculty highly motivated to use writing in their classes, the opportunity to use a WA appealed to only four. The percentage of faculty interested in participating in a WA program is almost certainly lower in the overall population of faculty. In addition, only two of our four faculty participants, Anita and Frank, employed in other courses some

techniques developed during their use of a WA. The other two not only restricted their use of these techniques to the course for which they had WAs, but they also ceased using them even in these courses once a WA was no longer available. These observations lead us to suggest that WA programs should develop clear criteria for evaluating their success in order to assure that they are investing their institution's writing-related resources as productively as possible.

Conduct research.

As an approach to improving student writing and increasing student learning, WA programs are widely used. Although WA programs pursue the same goals and use concepts and practices borrowed from several similar programs—supplemental instruction, classroom-based peer tutoring, and writing-center tutoring—WA programs possess a unique configuration of features. Consequently, they cannot simply borrow the research results about these other approaches to improving student writing and learning. There is much to learn about WA programs that could assist program directors in understanding, assessing, and increasing the effectiveness of their programs. An extensive research effort would pay off handsomely.

Notes

[1] At Miami University (Ohio), we have used the term "writing associate" to avoid the gender implications of "writing fellow." We follow this practice in our article.

[2] Soven (2001) reports that Harriet Sheridan was the first to link writing tutors to particular courses, a practice she originated at Carleton College and later brought to Brown.

[3] In some curriculum-based tutor programs, the tutors provide tutoring in the classroom; in others they are available for tutoring outside of the classroom (Soven, 2001). Other names used for them include "classroom-based tutor" programs (Singer et al., 2005; Soliday, 2005) and "tutor-linked courses" (Mullin, 2001).

[4] Other helpful studies could take the WAs' or faculty members' perspectives as the starting point. Halasz and Brinker (2006) demonstrate the value of looking at the WAs' original vision as it encounters the vision and expectations of the faculty members with whom they worked.

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