A Review of *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs*

By Michelle Cox, Jeffrey R. Galin, and Dan Melzer. (2018). Urbana, Illinois: NCTE. 272 pages. [ISBN 9780814149522]

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As colleges and universities across the country continue to face massive budget cuts—some even permanent closure—administrations look for ways to find both short- and long-term solutions and, in the process, redefine the roles of formerly stalwart programs in history, philosophy, English, classics, and even economics. In addition to curriculum restructuring on campus, many first-year writing programs also face shrinking enrollments in the face of growing dual credit enrollment or general education redistribution. Moreover, as the 2017 open access collection *Bad Ideas about Writing* addresses, misconceptions about writing and writing instruction persist not only for our students but for colleagues and administrators with whom we should be working to improve our student writing experiences. For WPAs and WAC leaders, facing these challenges comes down to one main issue: What can we do to make sure that meaningful writing instruction becomes strongly integrated in all disciplines in a way that withstands this turbulence?

Michelle Cox, Jeffrey R. Galin, and Dan Melzer present a methodical full-systems approach to developing and—most importantly—*sustaining* writing across the curriculum programs in 2018's *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs.* Over the course of eight meaty chapters, *Sustainable WAC* lays out the need, framework, and methodology for a systems thinking approach to WAC in four steps: (1) understanding the institutional landscape, (2) planning a program, (3) developing a project and

making reforms, and (4) leading for sustainability. They conclude with a chapter exploring how to scale a systems approach and its implications. Unfortunately, the authors take on so many systems theory frameworks—including complexity theory, systems theory, social network theory, organizational network analysis, resilience thinking, sustainable development theory, Bellagio principles—that at times the scope of the project becomes overwhelming and the book loses focus in favor of breadth. However, there are moments of clarity and purpose that allow the reader to focus on the frameworks that best suit their aims, and *Sustainable WAC* is strongest in the individual experiences of the vignette authors, which include Terry Myers Zawacki, Chris Anson and Deanna Dannells, Bryan Kopp, and Beth Daniell and Mary Lou Odom (among others).

The authors make a strong and explicit argument that a systems approach to WAC fills a gap within the literature. Much writing about WAC usefully focuses on pedagogy or a local/micro-level issue, a topic about which they write, "When the three of us put together a timeline of WAC organizations . . . we began to see the field as both organizationally fragmented and led by a small group of leaders with strong ties and with few entry points for new leadership" (232). To this point, one of the most recognizable collections, Terry Myers Zawacki and Paul M. Rogers's edited collection in the Bedford/St. Martin's Series in Rhetoric and Composition *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Critical Sourcebook* (2011), spans a broad range of WAC concerns (including sustainability) but—due to its nature as a sourcebook—does not provide the depth of *Sustainable WAC.*

At least one other publication of the last decade has also attempted to de-fragment the discussion: author Dan Melzer uses rhetorical and genre analysis in 2014's *Assignments Across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing* to ask broad disciplinary questions and seeks out national disciplinary patterns. Suggesting that taking on systems thinking represents a "different mindset for WAC"—one that looks at the big picture (macro) rather than individual (micro) issues—Cox, Galin, and Melzer argue that such a mindset could be challenging for the field to take on because it differs from the status quo (233). They argue that "a WAC program that never moves beyond micro-level work is difficult to sustain, and may never get to the tipping point where it has a transformative effect on the campus culture of writing" (156). This distinction becomes the impetus for the entire work as they use whole systems approaches to argue for "sustainable and transformational changes," which provide for a type of "resilience" missing in many WAC programs (234).

The organization of this book differs from what we normally see in writing studies as the principal authors have framed each section as a conversation between themselves and a few respected vignette authors. The four main chapters that describe the aforementioned steps are arranged with quick introductions relying on the systems frameworks for context and followed by short, contributed vignettes that exhibit the systems structures the authors suggest considering at each

step. These contributions are also integrated with commentary from the authors, making each chapter the synthesis of perspectives.

Certainly, the success of this book relies on an ecological paradigm of WAC programs, which they acknowledge owes an intellectual debt to Reiff, Bawarshi, Ballif, and Weisser's 2015 *Ecologies of Writing Programs*; readers can also correlate these arguments with those of Colin Gifford Brooke's *Lingua Fracta* (2009) in its discussion of an ecological view of the five canons of rhetoric. These discussions are important because writing studies faculty or academic staff—sometimes the only writing studies expert on campus, especially a small campus—might feel isolated in their discipline. This book argues through its systems approach and its conversational organization that writing across the curriculum must be seen as a dynamic and collaborative system in order to have longevity.

Chapter 1 sets up the need for a more macro-level, systematic approach to writing across the curriculum programs and provides an overview of their framework. They rely most heavily on one of these systems, *complexity theory* and its offshoots, which offers ways to analyze large networks with many "moving parts" and to adjust analyses and actions as the network changes (17). Because creating a macro-level system is more efficient and sustainable than revision of an existing program, they argue that it would be most useful to read (and heed) the book before a writing across the curriculum program is initiated on a campus, but that it can, of course, also be useful in revising or improving programs already in place, and that the book is useful for WAC leaders, scholars, administration, and non-WAC leaders on campus. While excerpts from this text can be useful as an introduction for non-writing studies stakeholders, writing program and writing across the curriculum administrators will find it more useful to read the whole thing, as that will provide the most comprehensive understanding of systems approaches.

Chapters 2 and 3 lay out the theoretical principles of and practical strategies for a whole systems framework that will be discussed throughout the remainder of the text. *Sustainable WAC* maps seven different systems theories one after the other, and the reader could easily become overwhelmed, especially when the acronyms related to each approach are used as well (ONA is Organizational Network Analysis, SIs are sustainability indicators, etc.) Chapter 2, in particular, would benefit from a focus on the most pertinent, prioritized approaches, and faculty members considering teaching this section to graduate students would be well-served to scaffold with critical reading strategies.

In Chapters 4-7, other authors enter the conversation and the greater value of the work becomes more evident with the addition of their individual experiences and the authors' interaction with them. For example, Chapter 5 introduces four different campus perspectives for "Planning a Program" that emphasize different ways systems theories can improve planning: by helping to

identify interdisciplinary goals (Oleksiak), forming alliances (Hyder), utilizing general education relationships (Morris), and focusing on faculty development rather than curriculum development (Weisser and Ryan). Throughout these central chapters, the authors provide useful "Questions to Consider" alongside their suggested strategies and vignette narratives that serve to exemplify the systems approach. This is one of the more practical attributes of the book and serves to bring the theoretical into manageable tactics that the reader could easily bring into planning meetings or professional development as a way to ground and focus discussions. For example, questions for the section on "Being Aware of Systems beyond Your Institution and Connecting to Those That are Beneficial to the WAC Program" includes "To what extent is access to mentorship for the WAC program director built into the WAC budget?" (192). Another important section focuses on "Assessing and Revising the WAC Program's Role within the System," as, they argue, being able to reassess is necessary for keeping a program alive and meaningful on a campus. They suggest that programs "Look at data collected across time in relation to the program. What do these data tell you about the ways the program has changed and grown? Has the program turned any indicator of distress into indicators of success? What could be adjusted to keep the program resilient?" (198).

In the end, Melzer, Cox, and Galin do a bit of organizational network analysis (ONA) on WAC as a movement and situated in educational contexts right now, arguing that WAC programs have been "unable to work cohesively at the national level" because of a "fear of the development of a central orthodoxy" and instead have favored "a loose collection of projects," although they note standout efforts such as the WAC Clearinghouse, the CCCC WAC Standing Group, and *Across the Disciplines* (228-29). In this discussion, they include a thorough "Chronological Summary of WAC Field Components in the United States" (220-23) and a visual map of the field (225). This section is interesting because of the macro-level reflection it provides: can we use our disciplinary tools to analyze our discipline in the same ways we assess our more local organizational structures? It does, however, feel slightly disconnected from the other sections and might be more powerful presented as a standalone argument.

To their credit, the authors include a section addressing the "limitations of this theoretical framework and book," mainly their acknowledgement that "it is the nature of a book such as this to be somewhat overwhelming" due to moving parts and unfamiliar information (211, 212). They also admit that as WAC leaders work through these systems that the implications for WAC will become clearer and more streamlined. The great success of *Sustainable WAC* is this: even if the reader is unfamiliar with the particular systems approaches outlined here, they will be convinced that an organization systems approach to WAC will be beneficial to them in creating, revising, or sustaining a meaningful writing across the curriculum program.

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Editor's Note: This review is amended from the version originally published on June 22, 2019. The original review incorrectly identified the authors of *Sustainable WAC* as editors and the book as a collection.

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