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Starting a WAC Program

Strategies for Administrators

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As administrators become more concerned about student writing, it is natural for them to turn to the literature for assistance. Unfortunately, little guidance is available for the administrator struggling with questions about writing programs and how they can best be sustained on the individual campus. While much has been written (and continues to be written) about what WAC is, how successful programs work, and how WAC techniques change student learning, the administrator faced with the challenge of implementing and supporting a fledgling program is frequently on her own. As a French-teacher-turned-administrator, I bring a special dual perspective to the challenge of beginning and maintaining effective WAC programs, and—not unlike any other aspect of academic administration—that challenge yields more readily when I first turn to my faculty instincts for guidance.

Those instincts and my experience provide some simple advice: Keep in mind that your role is to support and encourage good curricular activity on your campus. As other contributors to this volume have noted, it is impossible for an administrator, no matter how knowledgeable in WAC theory or practice, to construct a top-down writing program. You must, therefore, look for co-conspirators and work with them to design a WAC program with the right fit for your campus.

THE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

My experience as a faculty member invited to participate in a WAC seminar is probably not dissimilar from that of many colleagues. The invitation came to me at lunch while I was enjoying some leisure time with our campus' new director of writing, Toby Fulwiler. When Toby suggested that I participate in the writing workshop he was planning for faculty from all sectors of the university, I felt a slight twinge of annoyance. Here was a new colleague inviting me to learn about writing without appearing to exhibit the slightest comprehension of the fact that—as a French language teacher—I taught writing all the time. However, the invitation was offered with such a spirit of sharing and collegiality that I decided to attend the workshop and see what happened next. I also decided that the workshop might give me the opportunity to let my colleagues in English know what kind of writing training foreign language students received.

The workshop itself put my annoyance far behind me. Toby's approach was to ask each participant to reflect on his or her own classroom experience and to bring to bear on that experience the insights we were gaining together at the workshop. I was excited and encouraged to discover that the kinds of writing I had been assigning—presumably in isolation—was the subject of careful discussion and positive interest. Journal writing, freewriting, collaborative activities, my other attempts to free students from their fear of playing with language were brought into a theoretical and practical focus that gave me new ideas and new encouragement. I left the workshop feeling validated in my pedagogy and intrigued to find out more, to continue the conversation about writing. Today, having participated in, organized, and led various WAC workshops, I wonder at Toby's ability to keep the missionary zeal out of sight, to offer that workshop as an opportunity for successful practitioners of the art of teaching to validate each other's experience. Essential to that successful workshop was the attitude Toby has repeated many times in print: "that's really what a writing workshop is—a time and a place for sharing among teachers who care" (Fulwiler 63). In short, successful WAC directors draw from the strengths of each faculty member they contact;

they depend on and grow with their colleagues as they work together to build a program that will change attitudes (and pedagogy) relating to writing.

AFTER THE WORKSHOP: CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

My experience as a faculty member leads me to this central observation: Working with faculty from many disciplines is likely to be the most challenging and the most intellectually exciting part of building a WAC program. For example, following that first workshop, I was invited to join a group of faculty (who all happened to be in the English department) for weekly brown-bag sessions to talk about writing. Writing meant any writing: professional writing, your students' writing, pedagogical approaches to teaching writing, whatever. The only requirement was that you had to share regularly some experiment, research project, observation, or paper. What began to dawn on me as a member of a large faculty body was how isolated I had felt and how exciting it was to connect with colleagues with similar interests. I shared a paper I had been working on—with little success—for some time. The comments of the group helped me get it accepted for presentation. Others discussed classroom experiments; others shared drafts of journal articles. I hardly remembered feeling resentment against English department colleagues. Now I knew them; I was working with them and they, with me.

As a spin-off of that group, another group of faculty began to meet regularly. We were interested in ways to teach more critical thinking in our classes; we wanted to apply current cognitive theories to our teaching practice. Toby, as part of that group, kept writing central to the discussion. Gradually, my horizons were expanding; so were Toby's; so were the others'. I left the university shortly afterwards, but that group went on to sponsor summer workshops for teachers and to promote other changes in the curriculum. Connections abounded. New ways of viewing one's discipline and practice emerged from these conversations. New viewpoints kept challenging my definitions, methods, and expectations.

OPERATIONALIZING WAC ON YOUR CAMPUS

As I draw on my experience as a WAC faculty member, I am convinced that faculty commitment is the necessary (and sometimes sufficient) contributor to successful continuation of WAC on a campus. If you, as an administrator, wish to see WAC flourish on your campus, you must foster faculty interest and dedication; you must allow faculty to own the program, and build it, and customize it—bit by bit—to suit your curriculum. Like an expectant father, there is much you can do to help, but some things by the nature of your job will be beyond your capacity.

In my role as an academic administrator, I have worked on two campuses to strengthen WAC programs. On one campus, the commitment had already been made to establish such a program and a director of writing had been hired before I got there. On the second campus, several elements were already in place, but the understanding of what WAC really is and what it implies for teaching and learning rested almost exclusively in the mind of an overworked senior faculty member. The campuses were quite different in other respects, but in each case a writing center already existed (with released time available to the director), there was at least tacit commitment on the part of the college administration and faculty to improve student writing, and I was able to lend support in specific ways.

On the first campus, my supportive role focused on helping the nontenured faculty member advance WAC ideas despite resistance from her department chair. This took the form of persuading the provost to maintain her released time each year as her chair tried to assign her more sections to teach, sharing tasks with her (such as all the organizational details for the writing workshops), putting her in touch with faculty who would be interested in WAC and who could be influential with others, and helping her in obtain internal and external grants for her own research. You might say that I was a behind-the-scenes hand holder and cheering section. I took every opportunity to find her time, allies, and money while she established the program.

However, on the second campus, I happen to be the administrator most directly responsible for supporting a WAC program. This situation presents an interesting dilemma, one that I share with other academic administrators who are knowledgeable about writ-

ing theory: I am charged with the well-being of the program and know more about running it than most on our campus, but I cannot (and should not) lead it. The following are some observations derived from my experience, ones that can be applied not only to WAC but to any desired curricular change (see Sandler "An Administrator's View"; Glick).

1. Never try to start a program by yourself. If you actually manage to get something going despite the normal resistance faculty feel toward administratively launched curricular initiatives, the program will not last. Faculty know how to design courses and teach. Administrators know how to provide support and design structures to keep good ideas alive. Keep the lines separate and let each group do what it does best.
2. Exert all the influence you can in the hiring process. If you ever need to be interventionist, it is in this aspect of establishing the program. If you are directly involved in the hiring process, look carefully at each curriculum vitae for clues about the candidate's attitude toward writing, use of writing in her own teaching, and actual knowledge of writing theory (this latter is vital if the hire is to be in the English department). Ask your writing director and/or those most knowledgeable about writing to screen credentials with you and to help you design interview questions that will give you a good read on the candidate's potential as part of a WAC program. If you are not the hiring authority, try to get faculty associated with WAC to serve on search committees and work to get questions on writing included in the interview process. Hiring of new faculty is one of the most important areas for shaping the campus climate; depending on who you select, you can get to the critical mass needed to sustain a WAC program more quickly than you may have imagined.
3. Find the best teachers on campus and get them interested in WAC concepts. The two campuses where I have supported WAC programs already had talented and respected faculty members interested in developing a program. However, I am convinced that the concepts associated with WAC are those that would excite the interest and enthusiasm of any talented classroom teacher. If I, as an administrator, were to start a program from scratch, I would seek out imaginative and innovative teachers (one or two would suffice) and send them to conferences where they could learn something about WAC. The First Year Experience conferences (sponsored by the University of South Carolina) work well for this purpose, as do national assessment conferences such as the American Association

of Higher Education's Assessment Forum. (Incidentally, the AAHE also published an excellent collection of essays about WAC that can help inform both faculty and other administrators; see Smith et al.) In addition, there are meetings of the National Network of WAC Programs every year at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), mentioned in Chapter 2 of this book. Without directly trying to impose my ideas on these faculty, I would take the time to have lunch with them, talk about what I know about WAC, refer them to some basic books and articles, and/or put them in touch with some knowledgeable WAC faculty at nearby institutions. The concept of using a "lead teacher" to gather a critical mass of enthusiastic and interested faculty is a tried-and-true method to bring about important curricular change.

4. Do not depend overmuch on the English department for these lead teachers. Although you can expect your English department faculty to have the training in writing theory and to have had far more experience in teaching writing, you should be aware of the talent available among other faculty on your campus. There are, for example, your colleagues in the foreign language department who also teach courses in composition. They may already employ some of the same successful WAC techniques you want other faculty to learn (for some examples of this kind of cross-over, see Sandler "Letting"). Some of the most imaginative writing assignments I've seen have originated in the History departments at small colleges. At my institution, a junior colleague in geology (who has never participated in a WAC seminar, although I keep trying to get him to come) uses writing to learn as if he knew these techniques instinctively. Collaborative learning techniques are frequently features of courses in schools of business, education, and agriculture. Oral communications faculty members use many ungraded informal writing assignments to encourage critical thinking in their students. The most successful WAC program will be that one that draws on the strengths of all participants, that brings people together to solve teaching problems together, and that highlights what already works in others' classes.
5. Once you've found your lead teachers, give them the support they need. If your budget is sufficient, help them find off-campus workshop consultants or send them for training. Give them some money to purchase books, go to conferences, join organizations, or visit nearby campuses. If you have a limited budget, make some of those unpleasant choices and find them some modest support money. I believe that money spent on a good faculty workshop (with hono-

raria for participants if possible) and a well-run writing center is your best use of funds (see Harris, this volume). I would rather do a few things slowly than rush the process. Let the quality of WAC concepts sell the idea for you; do fewer activities, if you must, but do them extremely well.

6. I'm fond of faculty writing workshops as a way to elicit interest, but I have never billed these workshops as a way to improve faculty writing or faculty teaching of writing. Rather, I have focused on these workshops as my way of supporting improved teaching. The workshops I've sponsored have always been optional, although I will talk to faculty about why I think they might enjoy the workshop if I have a good working relationship with the faculty member. I have often convinced someone to attend by confessing that I felt that person's viewpoint was critical to the intellectual respectability of the workshop or by telling an outstanding teacher that I needed excellent teachers at the workshop to give the ideas a fair trial. Do not try to screen out people whose views you think might be disruptive, although you should always inform your workshop consultant of the potential audience (see Walvoord, this volume). Workshop consultants should come to you with a great deal of experience at handling various group dynamics, and you should check with references before engaging any consultant to be sure he or she can handle resistant faculty. There is no quicker way to kill professional interest than to try to stack the cards in favor of your preferred teaching philosophy. Invite your best teachers no matter what you think their attitude toward WAC will be. They will probably surprise you anyway.
7. Recognize your faculty's interests in pedagogy and in research. Faculty will participate in a writing workshop because they have some interest in solving classroom problems or in improving their students' reasoning abilities. However, they are all practitioners who have professional interests beyond the classroom. Help to bring out the research areas related to writing, especially those that would be relevant and useful on your campus. For example, can someone document a relationship between certain writing assignments and improved test scores or improved performance in a course? What writing assignments are more appealing to a specific learning style? Is there a qualitative difference in classroom discussions when certain writing assignments precede those discussion? If you can use some faculty development funding to encourage your best researchers to work on these questions, you strengthen several components of campus life at the same time. What originally attracted me to WAC

was the potential to improve my students' learning. What has kept me engaged continually is the opportunity to develop intellectually.

8. Make connections, encourage connections, nourish connections. The intellectual attraction of WAC programs lies in their peripheral advantages as well as in their central mission. At small colleges as well as larger research institutions, faculty work with a sense of isolation and alienation that is counterproductive. You and your faculty will have to learn a great deal about other disciplines to recognize what writing approaches will be most useful (and what approaches won't work). Develop a network of interested faculty and then depend on them for advice. If you are demonstratively willing to learn from your colleagues, if you are a thoughtful listener, if you will provide the administrative support without working from the top down to establish a program, you will succeed where a "missionary" will fail. You may also find your faculty making unforeseen connections in productive collaborative efforts (see, for example, Soven and Morocco; Fulwiler and Strauss; Soven and Simon).
9. Link WAC concepts to improved teaching rather than improved writing. If possible, play down the idea that with the help of a WAC program students will finally learn to spell. Some faculty harbor real fears about their own writing and they will quickly (and erroneously) come to the conclusion that a writing workshop aimed at improving student writing will expose them to professional embarrassment. Needless to say, exposure to writing-to-learn philosophy as well as learning-to-write concepts frequently has a liberating effect on these faculty, but they won't get exposed to these ideas unless you can get them to attend. One of the best teachers on my campus almost skipped a WAC workshop (which she eventually attended and loved) because she felt so negative about her own writing. I was able to convince her to attend by citing some of the instructional aspects the workshop would address, aspects she was very interested in developing. Then there are those faculty members who take great delight in red inking every student paper while telling anyone who cares to listen about how poorly students write these days. You don't want them to attend a workshop with the expectation that they are going to learn more about paragraphing and spelling. The workshop leader will have a difficult enough time convincing people like this to try process writing techniques; don't compound the problem by false advertising. WAC programs take on a life of their own only by having a positive and lasting effect on teaching.
10. Provide as many rewards as you can for those involved in WAC. It is particularly important to reward your lead people. Released time for your WAC director is crucial. Conference travel money, a book

budget, and a celebratory lunch or dinner for participants and friends of WAC are all possibilities. Keep your eyes open to unexpected sources of income; try to find interested donors, grant money, and other resources. It's essential to let people know that WAC is a proven, sound, and cost-effective means of improving instruction; as such, it becomes an institutional priority. If you don't have money, find less expensive ways to say thank you. Write follow-up memoranda expressing your appreciation for the impact WAC lead teachers are having on the curriculum (with copies to their department chair, their personnel file, and the dean or president). I once used a small budget available to me to invite a faculty member to take two favorite students to lunch as a way of saying thank you. If you are in a position to influence (or to make) tenure and promotion decisions, let it be known that WAC involvement is a positive step. Remember that at some times during the establishment of a WAC program, your lead teachers may feel embattled, isolated, or underappreciated. You have to work to give them a sense of your commitment, which will carry them (and you) through any hard times.

11. Let your support of WAC be widely known, but do not appear to espouse a party line. Always approach the WAC issues in the spirit of instructional innovation and support. Your approach must say to all faculty, "I support this program because it works to improve teaching, but I'm always keeping an open mind about its components; let's try it and see what happens." No matter how much you think you know about various approaches to teaching writing, let your faculty lead. You'll learn more that way and your campus's WAC program will be its own.
12. Be patient and let the program build on its own quality. You will need to contain your desire for quick conversions. You cannot rush excellence; it grows and ripens only with time, integrity, and care.
13. Don't neglect your established faculty. Frequently, an administrator will believe that newer faculty are more supportive of curricular change. This is not necessarily true, especially on a campus that values teaching above other faculty contributions. As you look for lead teachers, pay close attention to the award winners or ask students to tell you who are the best among the experienced faculty. A few lunch conversations talking about teaching may then offer you the opportunity to share what you know about writing. However, offer just enough to elicit interest. Your experienced faculty cohort can give you perspectives that add stability to and understanding of the campus culture to balance the energy and innovation of the newcomers (a group that may include yourself). Trust them and depend on them as much as they permit.

14. Make it pleasant for faculty to continue the conversation after the first workshop. Faculty are busy; they frequently feel pressured with little (perceived) support from the administration. As you encourage their interest in WAC, you will need to be mindful of the stresses of their lives. WAC should alleviate, not add to, that stress. I always try to provide a relaxing and pleasant physical environment for the writing workshops; this includes providing, if possible, for really good food.

You can be quite creative about continuing that faculty conversation. Borrowing an idea from the University of Vermont's Writing Program faculty, I instituted at one campus what I called a Faculty Wretreat (*Writing + Retreat*). This was billed to faculty as a time to get away from campus to a pleasant and quiet environment where they would not be interrupted and where all needs would be met for them while they used the time to write anything they wanted. (One person wrote a computer program!) We provided a large room with partitions, computers and word-processing programs, snacks, restrooms, outdoor lounge furniture (it was at a ski resort in May), some tables for group work, and three meals a day. We also provided overnight accommodations for those who wished. The Wretreat lasted two days, during which time faculty wrote when and as they wished. It was a tremendous success for the 15 people who attended. What it accomplished was to encourage some conversation about collaboration, some sharing of manuscripts for peer editing, and (unplanned as it was) conversation over lunch about the positive effects of the WAC workshops on classroom situations. Because half the participants had not yet attended a WAC workshop, this latter event was much welcomed.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Recalling the success of the Wretreat for both WAC-ed and non-WAC-ed faculty brings me full circle. The value of a writing across the curriculum program lies in its effectiveness in connecting faculty in all disciplines with each other for continuing and meaningful conversation about teaching. The writing program on any campus consists of teachers sharing with teachers. Remember this, and you can overcome many obstacles. Forget it, and you lose momentum.

The more you rely on your teacherly instincts, the more successful and permanent will be your WAC program.

When the academic administrator confronts the task of initiating and supporting a WAC program on campus, the first impression could easily be that it will be a lonely task. From my experience, I want to assure you that this impression is probably wrong. The results of my involvement in the WAC program on the campus where I served as a faculty member can be summarized in two words: validation and connection. After almost 10 years of involvement in supporting WAC programs, I still come back to those two words. The administrator can find renewed energy and inspiration through active listening to faculty colleagues who can lead the way. Working with WAC as an administrator will offer unique opportunities to reconnect with faculty colleagues and to reconfirm the essential commitment to teaching, which serves us all—faculty and administrators—as the common and changeless bond.

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