

CHAPTER 20.

CRAFTING A RHETORICAL
ODYSSEY: PIONEERING A
WRITING ACROSS THE
CURRICULUM PROGRAM AT
A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Abstract: Given the limited literature on WAC-building at community colleges, we offer here a four-part heuristic for inventing and operationalizing a WAC initiative at a two-year college. After briefly describing the exigence of our unlikely partnership with a public-ivy university (Miami University, OH) that informed this heuristic, we unpack the inward/outward rhetorical work that we engaged in to establish this fledgling project at one open access institution and eventually operationalized it at the district level (our community college is one of ten colleges that comprise our community college district). These rhetorical activities are as follows: Allying, Navigating, Framing, and Brokering. We argue that the rhetorical work involved in these activities is relevant and transferable to other contexts and provide readers of this collection who might be interested in beginning a WAC program at open-access institutions with a productive framework to begin and engage in that work. We echo the need for WAC leaders and programs to be what Elizabeth Wardle recently referred to as “boundary crossers” and believe the short history of our WAC Program reflects the productive potential of such a call.

Composition faculty at community colleges have long been invested in the dual objectives of facilitating writing knowledge transfer into and beyond their courses and creating accessible and inclusive learning environments. In light of these aims, scholars have emphasized the importance of extending writing instruction and support beyond the confines of a single semester or two of first-year composition (FYC) and collaborating across the college (Anson & Moore, 2017; Bazerman et

al., 2017; Goldschmidt, 2017; Wardle & Mercer Clement, 2017). This highlights the pressing need to not only refine individual courses but also to reconceptualize the broader learning ecosystem within which students operate: to pursue change. In response to calls for extending writing instruction and support beyond the confines of FYC, the integration of writing across the curriculum (WAC) surfaces as a promising mechanism for change, especially at a community college. Community colleges, known for their diverse academic paths and technical and career education, provide an ideal environment for embedding writing instruction across various disciplines students recognize as relevant and meaningful to their goals. This alignment positions WAC as a catalyst for change in the college ecosystem, a pivotal driver of student success, enhancing not only academic preparedness but also future career prospects. However, despite this apparent alignment, research on WAC programs at community colleges presents a narrow and fragmented picture. WAC is not thriving, surviving, or often even present at two-year colleges.

Community colleges, noted for their emphasis on teaching and learning, student development, and a curriculum rich in both general education and career-oriented programs, remain largely absent from the WAC movement. Chris Thaiss and Tara Porter's 2010 national survey, coupled with UC Davis-based International WAC/WID 2015–2020 survey (n.d.), reported the stark reality: only 32 percent to 33 percent of two-year institutions in the United States have a WAC program. These figures stand in contrast to the network of WAC initiatives thriving in four-year institutions across the country: 65 percent at PhD-granting; 60 percent at BA/BS-granting institutes (Thaiss & Porter, 2010). Beyond the scarcity of programs, Leslie Roberts' seminal 2008 study documents some of the internal struggles that plague new and existing community college WAC programs, which range from institutional underinvestment and fragmented ecosystem, to faculty passivity and disengagement. Chief among these challenges is the demanding workload faced by two-year faculty, who must navigate a 5/5 teaching load alongside mandatory committee work, leaving them limited time and resources for the additional research, planning, and piloting necessary to establish a WAC initiative. Needless to say, the convergence of challenges reflected here presents a sobering reality.

Within this context, as two community college English faculty members interested in establishing a WAC program, we embarked on an investigative journey to the Howe Center for Writing Excellence at Miami University. Directed by Dr. Elizabeth Wardle, the program is renowned for its innovative WAC initiatives and was honored with the 2022 Exemplary Enduring WAC Program award by the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum. Of particular interest was the Writing Fellows program, a faculty-centric initiative supporting disciplinary teams as they explore writing across academic fields.

An initial email with Wardle in 2021 evolved into a productive exchange, reflecting a shared commitment to WAC principles and curiosity about the relationship between a four-year public ivy and a two-year Hispanic Serving Institution. This dialogue led to an invitation to observe the upcoming Writing Fellows cohort in summer 2021, followed by co-facilitator roles in Miami's 2022 cohort. Participation in these cohorts offered invaluable insights into the seminar's curriculum (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2022) and its emphasis on faculty collaboration and agency—elements that strongly aligned with our vision for a robust WAC project at our community college.

With this backdrop in mind, below we offer a WAC-building heuristic that describes the rhetorical labor requisite for the initiation of a grassroots WAC program at a community college. We begin by introducing the heuristic, explaining each of the four rhetorical moves and then, illustrating their application through vignettes grounded in the empirical evidence collected in the work at our two-year institution. The final section of the article delves into the implications for educators interested in undertaking similar WAC work within their own institutions, offering insights and recommendations garnered from our experiences. While we recognize that readers may be interested in student outcomes, assessing direct student impact is beyond scope of this chapter; instead, we offer a scholarly examination of our efforts that aims to enrich the limited discourse surrounding the development and sustainability of WAC initiatives in community college settings.

INTRODUCTION TO HEURISTIC

Below we describe a four-part heuristic we developed for initiating, growing, and sustaining a WAC/WAC-like program in community college contexts.¹ This heuristic builds on the work of Michelle Cox et al. (2018), who argue that the practices, procedures, and processes of building, running, and sustaining a WAC program must be theorized. In *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs*, they introduce a whole systems approach to emphasize the complexity of organizations, highlighting the need for change agents to consider structure, culture, processes, and people holistically. To account for this integrated view, we employ organizational change theory to understand activities that facilitate change within complex systems. We also draw on Adrianna Kezar's (2018) *How Colleges*

1 The heuristic we present here is drawn not only from work at our two-year college, but from the culmination of numerous conversations, work sessions, and collaborative presentations with Wardle. These collaborations include conference sessions at the American Association of Colleges & Universities and the International Association of Writing Across the Curriculum.

Change: Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change, which provides theories, frameworks, and strategies for leading and implementing change. Particularly germane to our conversation is Kezar's (2018) definition of change, which she frames as "those intentional acts where a particular leader drives or implements a new direction" (p. xii). Finally, we situate this heuristic within the broader national conversation on leadership in higher education, drawing on Elaine P. Maimon's (2018) *Leading Academic Change: Vision, Strategy, and Transformation*, which frames WAC development through a leadership lens and highlights twelve principles of transformative leadership.

By embedding our heuristic within change theory and through a leadership lens, we highlight the importance of regarding those involved in WAC program initiation and development as change agents, and the tasks they perform as rhetorical activities that make such change possible. On the one hand, this perspective acknowledges individuals' agency in altering "the operating systems, underlying values, and culture of an organization or system" (Kezar, 2018, p. 62). On the other hand, our heuristic broadens widely the rhetorical ecosystem—the contexts, stakeholders, exigencies, texts, and purposes that WAC leaders must engage to begin, develop, and sustain a WAC program.

ALLYING

The first rhetorical activity that change agents must engage in when initiating a WAC program is *allying*. We refer to allying as a coalition building strategy (Kezar & Lester, 2011) aimed at forming cooperative relationships between individuals, groups, or entities for two distinct purposes. First, given the grass-roots nature of many WAC creation initiatives (Cox et al., 2018), it is essential for change agents to ally with relationships that can garner support and enhance credibility. Allies may also offer insights on potential resistance or suggest additional partnerships to build momentum.

Second, the relationships formed through allying lay the foundation for sensemaking, which involves creating order and making retrospective sense of events (Weick, 1995). Allying helps change agents identify key stakeholders suited to sensemaking and positions them to leverage alliances when necessary. Though we have cultivated many relationships, the two allies highlighted below operate at the college and district level respectively. This illustrates the need to ally across organizational scales and reflects dynamics similar to those in statewide two-year college systems, where multi-level collaboration is essential for effective program implementation.

The first coalition we forged was with Jennifer Fay, an exercise science faculty at our college. Fay had influence at both our college and district through her

leadership in the Guided Pathways (GP) initiative from 2016 to 2020, creating transparent pathway maps to support student progress and transitions. Over this time, Fay gained the trust and respect of faculty, staff, and administrators. Although her formal GP role had ended, she remained active in student and faculty and chaired her department.

Given her positionality, Fay emerged as a primary contact because her endorsement lent credibility to our initiative. Through formal meetings and informal interactions like texting and coffee conversations, she demonstrated clear support. With her backing, we strategically leveraged her advocacy in discussions with key stakeholder—including the Vice President of Academic Affairs, instructional deans, and the Center for Teaching and Learning director, where Fay’s support for the initiative, later called the Literacy Partners Program (LPP), was pivotal in securing endorsement and cooperation.

Additionally, Fay provided names of other potential partnerships to contact. While many were within our college, some were at the district level. Given her GP experience, she identified stakeholders who could help our initiative develop across the district. This guidance proved invaluable. Following her advice, we requested meetings with key upper-administration stakeholders at both college and district levels, often strategically referencing our alliance with Fay. In some instances, Fay graciously reached out herself before or after our meetings, helping create favorable conditions or solidify support gained during the meeting.

Another individual we strategically sought out was Meredith Warner, a District Director in the Academic & Student Affairs Division. Her involvement in the GP initiative and recent collaboration with Arreguin on a district-wide faculty development event made her a key ally. Reaching out to Warner was instrumental in two ways.

First, her positionality at the district office gave her insight into district-wide student and academic affairs initiatives, informing how we framed the LPP to stakeholders, a process detailed in the Framing section. Warner helped us explore ways to position the LPP as both a student affairs *and* an academic affairs initiative, a departure from our initial academic affairs-only vision. Second, Warner’s awareness of district budget lines prompted us to seek funding from one historically earmarked for the Maricopa Summer Institute (MSI). Though MSI had run successfully for 20 years, it needed redefining, making it an ideal fit for the LPP.

NAVIGATING

Navigating, in the context of organizational change, entails a change agent’s ability to maneuver through the diverse spaces and people within an organization.

While many faculty development initiatives target individual faculty, Barbara E. Walvoord (1996) situates WAC program work as macro-level rather than micro-level. Given this, those engaging in WAC work must navigate various institutional spaces and stakeholders to make “what is going on in the organization [and the proposed change] meaningful and sensible to the organizational participants” (Cameron, 1984, p. 130).

Thus, we came to see navigating as a fundamental rhetorical activity in initiating the LPP. Early on, it became clear we needed to tread carefully when speaking about the LPP to multiple voices, including disciplinary sub-groups within our English department (journalism, humanities, literature, ESL, creative writing) and across the district’s ten English departments. Thus, any widespread initiative such as a WAC program would need the support of both our own college’s department as well as nine others across the district. Although we were confident conceptual support existed, publicizing the initiative too early could invite scrutiny and potentially derail the program before launched.

Beyond maneuvering through these disciplinary territories, other spaces we learned to navigate carefully were contexts that were already engaged in faculty development programming. Of note here are the Centers for Teaching and Learning that exist in every one of our 10 campuses. On the one hand, our CTL director showed early support for our project given our willingness to collaborate with the center. Interestingly enough, our college’s CTL supported our very first LPP programming back in 2022 by providing the space to hold our two-week workshop as well as providing us with a quasi-project manager. However, when we initiated conversations about an LPP 2.0, we were met with some hesitation related to a number of factors. First, given our expressed desire to grow the LPP in size, scope, and influence, it became clear that our initiative would be competing from the same funding streams as the CTL. Second, given that the LPP was seen as a faculty development initiative, questions arose about overlapping/competing programming. In other words, although we were confident that content/programming of the LPP would be different from the kind of faculty development programming traditionally offered by CTLs, we began to field criticism that our work was drifting too close to the CTLs territory.

Additionally, even once the LPP received initial support from upper administration at the district level, we still needed to carefully maneuver the different district initiatives as well as the personalities leading those initiatives. From directors leading our development education and first-year experience initiatives, to those charged with our guided pathways, research fellowship, and student success initiatives, we constantly navigated between seeking support from these directors while also articulating the ways that the LPP priorities aligned to their existing strategic priorities.

FRAMING

In the context of WAC-building, *framing* is a crucial rhetorical activity for managing meaning and promoting change. It involves crafting, aligning, and communicating a perspective on new initiatives to align with stakeholders' values and expectations (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Fairhurst, 2005; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 2014). Within the intricate landscape of higher education institutions, characterized by hierarchical structures, bureaucratic processes, and competing interests, framing is essential for clarifying the purpose, direction, and potential outcomes of proposed changes, while addressing potential concerns or resistance from stakeholders. It emerges as what Karl E. Weick (1995) refers to as "sense giving vehicles," a mechanism for leveraging language and communication to facilitate the evolution of an individual's thinking (qtd. in Kezar, 2018, p. 68). Engaging in this rhetorical activity, WAC developers can inform and potentially transform the mental frameworks people employ to organize knowledge, shape perceptions, and make decisions.

An early instance of framing occurred at the college level, where we, recognizing the need for both endorsement and financial backing to initiate the LPP, reached out to Nora Reyes, our college's Vice President of Academic Affairs (VPAA). Reyes was a familiar and supportive figure, someone we had collaborated with on previous projects and who shared a similar professional trajectory. She was an ally. Informed by this history of collaboration and common disciplinary background, we were confident she shared our belief in the synergy of interdisciplinary work and the transformative power of writing to enhance deep learning. This conviction prompted us to undertake *visionary framing* as described by Pamela L. Eddy (2003, p. 329) and William Hamilton (2016, p. 628). In our first email to Reyes, we emphasized the potential of the LPP to reshape our ecosystem and enhance our students' experience at our college. By articulating program goals and processes aimed at breaking down disciplinary silos and supporting faculty building inclusive learning environments, we aimed to align with Reyes's values and present a compelling vision intended to spark interest, initiate a productive dialogue, and secure her conceptual support for the LPP. This framing proved successful.

Our second interaction with Reyes was centered on securing her commitment to fund the LPP, necessitating a shift in our framing. As the chief academic officer and a financial steward of the institution, it was crucial to not only present the LPP as an innovative project but also to articulate how the resources we sought would further the college's overarching mission of enhancing access and supporting students in their educational journey. Therefore, in our initial discussions and the subsequent formal funding proposal, we connected the LPP with

the college's most current strategic plan, embedding it within the broader context of existing initiatives such as GP and the emerging diversity equity and inclusion initiative. This approach aimed to dispel any perceptions Reyes may have had regarding the LPP as an isolated or conflicting initiative. Instead, we underscored shared values and objectives, emphasizing its potential to complement ongoing endeavors and utilize existing resources. Our framing also anticipated concerns Reyes might have about program efficacy. Thus, we presented qualitative data from Miami University's Writing Fellows program (Glotfelter et al., 2020; Glotfelter et al., 2022) upon which the LPP is modeled, as well as research from George D. Kuh (2008) highlighting how faculty using high-impact practices, promoted and facilitated by the LPP, significantly benefit students from marginalized and underserved demographics. Ultimately, this framing was successful in gaining Reyes's support both conceptually and financially.

A second example is related to our framing efforts towards grant directors from colleges across the district. Framing to this new audience involved crafting narratives that underscored the ideological alignment between the LPP and each grant. This frame-bridging tactic was essential for navigating the strict constraints grants have on fund allocation. For example, a Title V government HSI-grant at one institution was committed specifically to promoting learning communities as means of promoting the success and retention of students. Understanding this priority, we highlighted the need for teams from nursing and dental hygiene, teams that taught learning communities, to have access to LPP programming and support. Our framing to this grant manager accounted for faculty development grounded in a WAC pedagogy of access with proven connections to supporting traditionally marginalized students, thereby directly advancing the grant's mandate. Emails and discussions also emphasized the LPP's ability to catalyze change through the support of faculty-led grassroots projects specifically tailored to overcome barriers to student success faculty identify within the learning communities they teach. Framed support of the LPP as a means to not only ensure the attainment of the grant's objectives but also sustain progress beyond the timeline of the grant through continued faculty engagement was key. This deliberate alignment underscored the efficacy of the LPP and its potential to operationalize meaningful change, rendering it a compelling candidate for the allocation of Title V funds, so compelling that grant funds were successfully distributed to support the LPP.

BROKERING

The fourth rhetorical activity we discuss is *brokering*. Particularly germane to this conversation is Etienne Wenger's (1999) notion of boundary-brokering that he

introduces as part of Jean Lave and Wenger's (1991) early work on communities of practice. More specifically, as we have described above, WAC directors and practitioners must engage in allying, navigating, and framing activities across scales (department, college, district, external) where they inevitably interact with stakeholders from shared and varied communities of practice. As they do so, they must cross boundaries from one community of practice to another, brokering practices, norms, power relations, and values to potentially create "generative space(s) where differences across communities of practice can be bridged and new insights and unusual learning can arise" (Lai et al., 2019, pp. 1107–1108). Given that more often than not institutions "implement reforms [only to] find it difficult to sustain them in the face of competing priorities, changing demands, and teacher and administrator turnover" (Coburn, 2003, p. 6), we find boundary-brokering a useful metaphor to describe the kind of work that is required to scale up and sustain a WAC program. Below, we situate our own boundary brokering activities within an inward-outward continuum that accurately encompasses the wide and diverse boundaries WAC directors must cross for their WAC programs to endure.

Even as the LPP scaled up from one college to the district, we turned our attention to brokering efforts along two fronts. First, we recognized that to maintain the momentum that was created since the LPP's inception, we needed to continue to look inwardly in order for the LPP to effect the kind of change that Cynthia E. Coburn (2003) argues, moves well beyond surface structures or protocols and actually takes root in classroom practice. To do so, as the LPP's program director, Stacy Wilson, focused her efforts inwardly—at the faculty and college levels respectively. In terms of her work with faculty, this consisted of continuing the partnerships with LPP faculty participants that had been created over the last two years. At times, this meant that she worked throughout the academic year alongside individual or teams of faculty to implement the LPP-related project that had been proposed at the end of the LPP workshop. At other times, past LPP participants invited Wilson to run WAC-related workshops at their particular campus, hoping to introduce other faculty to the kinds of theory and pedagogical conversations that had been discussed during the two-week workshop. Still in other instances, Wilson was invited by faculty to collaborate on framing emails intended for deans and VPAs at their respective campuses meant to secure meeting times and/or support. In these inward-gazing endeavors that focused primarily at program-related activities, boundary-brokering emerges as a sustaining strategy, fostering continued collaboration and integration across institutional contexts. Wilson's multifaceted engagement with faculty and college administrators underscores the continuous inward gaze that WAC directors must maintain to foster sustained institutional change.

Beyond its internal focus, brokering as a rhetorical activity also has an outward facing gaze. Here once again, in order to both scale and sustain our LPP initiative, we focused, as Coburn (2003) also suggests, “on threading reform ideas throughout the district office, creating knowledgeable leaders who can influence policy, procedures, and values” (p. 7). Whereas Wilson’s positionality as LPP director facilitated her ability to engage in the aforementioned inwardly sustaining activities, Arreguin’s role as District Faculty Development Coordinator positioned him well to focus his sustaining efforts at primarily the district level. First, during our LPP’s inception year, Arreguin’s secured several one-on-one meetings with our provost to speak broadly about the state of faculty development in our district and when appropriate, continue to make a narrower case for the LPP. In many ways, these meetings reflected an early attempt at shifting the ownership over the LPP initiative from us to the district. In other instances, the outward sustaining work prompted Alex to invite district and college stakeholders to sensemaking sessions around faculty development. The primary goal here was to provide participants with an opportunity to share their goals for faculty development and to begin to develop a collective vision for it throughout our district. However, an important secondary goal was simply to build more coalitions and partnerships (allying) with other VPAAAs, CTL Directors, Student Affairs Directors, and other district personnel. Finally, another example of the externally sustaining work that Arreguin engaged in related to our district signature professional development events. We saw these events as ideal sites to introduce our entire faculty body to the kinds of scholarly and pedagogical values and frameworks that our LPP initiative hopes to engender. In light of this, Arreguin was able to leverage his position as district faculty development coordinator to invite Wardle, Dr. Linda Adler-Kassner, and Jessie Moore to serve as keynote speakers for some of these signature events over the course of several years. These writing studies, knowledge-transfer, WPA, and WAC studies scholars would go on to lay the foundation for the kind of topics and conversation that our LPP programming would offer at the district and college level respectively.²

2 Although beyond the scope of this article, as part of our efforts to ensure both quality and sustainability as the LPP continues to expand across ten colleges, we have prioritized several district-wide strategies. First, from the program’s inception, we have envisioned the formation of a district-wide advisory group composed of faculty and administrators representing each campus. This group will serve as a collaborative body to guide program direction, ensure equitable representation, and maintain alignment within institutional goals across the district. Second, to promote continuity and build internal capacity, we are adopting a “train-the-trainer” model in which returning LPP fellows will assume facilitation and mentoring roles in future cohorts, creating a self-sustaining network of faculty leaders who can support WAC work within their own colleges. Finally, to assess the program impact and refine our approach, we recently completed a formal

IMPLICATIONS

There are three implications that we believe are relevant for those community college faculty asking the question, “How do I start a WAC program at my college?” First, we believe that the heuristic above underscores the dynamic, temporal nature of beginning, developing, and sustaining a WAC program. On the one hand, perhaps clearest through our empirical analysis is the heuristic’s recursivity. In other words, though we presented the activities in a linear fashion, the reality is that the work of allying, navigating, framing, and brokering was never a “one and done.” For instance, while allying in the initiation phases may see WAC-agents assessing and building relationships with department chairs, allying efforts occurring while trying to scale up an initiative may be focused on building alliances with upper administration stakeholders, illustrating the breadth and scope of these activities. Likewise, WAC-directors may find themselves brokering connections with CTL directors one day and months later find themselves at the table with vice presidents of Academic Affairs or a vice-chancellor. On the other hand, perhaps less apparent but equally important is the pre-rhetorical nature of WAC program creation. Here, we would argue that although we situated the four activities above within the rhetorical situation of actively trying to begin a WAC program, it must be noted that we also engaged in these activities long before we ever decided to formally initiate a program. And though this pre-discursive nature is beyond the scope of this article, we believe it might provide a novel and fruitful research trajectory within future WAC scholarship.

Second, while we value and have been influenced by Cox et al.’s call for a whole systems approach to WAC work (2018), our discussion highlights the productive potential of applying an additional change and leadership theory lens to such efforts. Employing the former, we argue, would help us to more concretely recognize, categorize, and describe the activities that WAC practitioners can engage in to facilitate change. Alternatively, when we employ a leadership lens to WAC work, we bring to the surface the agentic potential that resides within those who are interested in initiating change in their institutions. And in doing so, we position ourselves to engage in the kind of transformative leadership that Maimon (2018) calls for; the kind where leaders are engaged in activities such as those we describe, activities that are ultimately “more focused on relationships, more open to multiple interpretations, more adaptable to new

evaluation of the LPP in partnership with Jessie Moore of Elon University. This assessment has provided us with empirical data on faculty learning and cross-disciplinary collaboration, which will inform future refinements of the program and strengthen its foundation for long-term scalability and effectiveness.

situations, more flexible in adjusting to new environments, readier to multitask, and capable of paying attention both to the goals themselves and to the process for achieving those goals” (p. 5).

Finally, our journey to create a WAC program at a community college underscores the value of partnering with four-year institutions that have established WAC programs. As austerity measures continue to be taken across higher education, we argue that our four-year partners have perhaps a responsibility for using their resources to help support programs at two-year schools. In our case, Dr. Wardle’s willingness to share already-tested curriculum materials that we could localize for our context was instrumental in the beginning stages of our efforts. In addition, we were able to leverage assessment data provided by Wardle regarding Miami’s Fellows program with upper administrators to make a case for the efficacy of our proposed initiative. Finally, equally significant to our efforts was Wardle’s willingness to share the labor of Rena Perez, a doctoral student at Miami. In addition to collecting data related to her research agenda, Rena spent two weeks in Arizona serving as one of five facilitators during our 2023 summer LPP workshop, all of which was funded by Wardle’s institute. These represent just a few examples of the resources shared with us by Miami throughout our journey. And while our partnership has provided Miami a unique research site as well as valuable insights related to working with faculty with career and technical education and industry background respectively, it seems fitting that we end our article with Wardle’s simple email response to Arreguin’s request to begin a dialogue between our institutions:

Dear Alex, I would be thrilled to talk with you about this. It is always exciting when there is a kairotic opening for innovation. -Liz (E. Wardle, personal communication, March 22, 2021)

Three years later, with a funded Literacy Partners Program serving 10 colleges, it truly stands as a remarkable innovation.

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