WAC for the Long Haul:
A Tale of Hope

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If the tale we are about to tell sounds familiar, the reason lies in a familiar pattern. An awareness of the status quo arises from emerging dissatisfaction with an increasing number of features of that situation. A certain floundering around ensues, during which various factions propose various solutions. Finally, a new plan emerges and is put into place. Over time, that new plan becomes a new status quo; and the cycle continues. Robert Connors describes that cycle within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, but the pattern itself is hardly new. Thomas Carlyle described it in his 1831 essay "Characteristics." Thomas S. Kuhn documented similar cycles throughout the history of science in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), a work that reads across disciplines to chart revolutionary shifts in accepted intellectual paradigms. Our story of WAC's evolution at Carleton College chronicles two of these cycles, and what justifies the telling is the way the story parallels WAC's evolution from a faculty development movement to a multi-disciplinary initiative, and finally into an era when demands for outcomes-based accountability extend what we believe are unprecedented opportunities for WAC programs, which are a nexus where several important dimensions of student learning come together. Our tale, then, chronicles an alliance between WAC and assessment, an alliance that we believe represents WAC's third evolutionary stage.

On the other hand, if the tale we are about to tell sounds new, the reason stems from that very alliance, from the fact that what we are chronicling is WAC on a new frontier. For a variety of reasons, the growing accountability movement has focused on Writing Across the Curriculum. Of course, WAC in its writing-in-the-disciplines mode brings together

students' learning outcomes in their fields of concentration and in their writing. What better, more economical place can we find to evaluate a significant portion of what college graduates know and are able to do? Carleton's writing program has evolved in this direction, and so the story we tell is new because it represents our contribution to a small but significant body of work that is pushing WAC toward a closer relationship with assessment. Yancey and Huot's *Assessing Writing Across the Curriculum* (1997), McLeod, et. al.'s *WAC for the New Millennium* (2001), and Haswell's *Beyond Outcomes: Assessment and Instruction Within a University Writing Program* (2001) have established this trend, which Carleton's writing program is attempting to enact.

Context and Background: Carleton's WAC Program

Carleton is a small, private liberal arts college located in the upper mid-west. Until some thirty years ago, Carleton taught writing the way most colleges taught writing for most of this century, with a required rhetoric and composition course offered by the English Department. In the mid-1970s Harriet Sheridan, then the Dean of the College, replaced this requirement with what turned out to be one of the country's first Writing Across the Curriculum programs. Carleton's early WAC program started with a fairly small group of faculty from outside of the English department (who with some degree of pride called themselves the "Extra-Territorials"). With extensive training and support, these "E.T.'s" agreed to offer some of their courses with the designation "Writing Requirement." Now, rather than the required English department composition course, Carleton students were able to complete their requirement by taking any one of these WR courses. The faculty, as the system was instituted, needed only to decide at the end of the term whether the students should pass the requirement or not, a decision that was based solely on the quality of the writing the student had produced in the course, and was, theoretically, unrelated to the grade the student received in the course. A positive decision resulted in the student completing the college Writing Requirement. A negative one meant they needed to register for another such course and try again.

The system, eccentric as it seemed, was remarkably successful for a long time. The Extra-Territorials had a sense of pride and excitement that came with the novelty of the system; they were energized in part by their feeling that they were on the pedagogical cutting edge of a national move-

ment. While they received extensive training on creating and responding to writing assignments, they were not expected to explicitly teach writing in the course, only to judge it. If, at the end of the term, they felt that students' writing was still too weak to warrant a pass, they would refer those students to writing courses taught within the English Department for further help. Explicit writing instruction thus was still centered in the English department.

From the outset, then, the system was distinctive in having replaced a system of instruction with one of certification, or (as we would now call it) assessment. Guidelines for WR courses were crafted and revised, but the high premium set on faculty choice at Carleton precluded any kind of fixed requirements about the number or kind of papers students had to write, or the amount of drafting they had to do. Writing pedagogy more broadly defined, however, was well entrenched in the curriculum as a whole; even faculty who did not regularly offer courses designated WR still believed strongly in writing as a powerful way of learning, and the amount of writing they required all across the curriculum was, and continues to be, substantial. The Writing Program offered good support for this pedagogy of writing: there were regular short workshops during the term and longer ones during winter and summer breaks on various aspects of the teaching of writing. The practical reality was that writing assessment via WR courses meant a version of writing instruction in disciplinary contexts—a WAC benefit that was often forgotten as students migrated among disciplines, coping with varying conventions and expectations.

Carleton's WAC program thus rested on the assumptions that faculty were already assigning a good deal of writing in their courses across the curriculum, and that they were able to consistently assess students' skill levels. In 1995, the college adopted a plan—mandated by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools—for institutional assessment, and this added one more assumption: that faculty could accurately assess the Writing Program from an institutional perspective. Responding to what had been lurking discontent with student writing in recent years, the college committee charged with assessment identified writing as one of the first of Carleton's learning goals to be assessed, and a small sub-committee comprising faculty, administrators, and students started on that project in the Fall of 1995.

In happy ignorance of methods of institutional assessment the sub-

committee started looking at what people thought of writing at Carleton. Surveys were administered, focus groups were conducted, the office of Institutional Research was mined for potentially relevant data. Actual student writing was never considered. What the committee documented in its 1996 report were several troubling consequences of the manner in which the program had developed over the twenty years or so since its inception.

The most glaring problem identified was one of consistency. The student experience of the Writing Requirement varied enormously; denied WR by one professor, a student could usually quite easily find another who would grant it. Jane would find herself required to write two drafts of five papers in her WR class, while her friend Joe down the hall only had to write three and draft none in his. From the faculty standpoint also, consistency was a problem; many faculty expressed anxiety at having to shift from being a coach of writing through the term to a judge at the end. Was their experience of the students' efforts and travails interfering with their judgment about whether the student had skills sufficient to pass the requirement? And how could they be certain the decisions they made were comparable to those made by their colleagues?

The timing of the requirement also seemed to be a problem. While the rationale of the requirement was to make sure students had the skills they needed for their Carleton career early on, some students would end up without having passed the requirement (or even, potentially, without having attempted it!) in their final term at Carleton. Shady deals had to be cut to get seniors through the requirement so that they could graduate.

From an administrative perspective there were ongoing difficulties recruiting faculty to offer courses designated WR. The original Extra-Territorials were now approaching retirement and had, after all, been dutifully teaching their WR courses for twenty years. Persuading new faculty to do what looked like extra work with no institutional incentive was not always easy.

The faculty surveys also documented a general grouchiness about the quality of student writing. Some cited generational factors, television, poor high school preparation, and the effects of a more diverse student body. Many lamented the decrease in explicit writing courses available: while some students still took these, there were many fewer sections available in the 90s than had been in the 70s and before.

While it was (usually) agreed that in some supernatural fashion se-

niors seemed to have learned to write better than incoming students, there were disturbing anecdotal exceptions even here. Disaster stories of seniors unable to write their senior papers, or (perhaps more frightening) unable to construct respectable job application letters, proliferated.

The fact that the sub-committee on the assessment of the Writing Program never actually read any student writing suggests that faculty, students, and staff had to tell stories about the problems before attempting any systematic analysis. Therefore, the surveys, focus groups, and meetings with departments provided a forum for concerns to be voiced, even if solutions seemed unlikely, perhaps impossible, given the imagined trade-offs: If we are going to teach writing differently, what would that look like? Who would do it? How will they be compensated? Can the curriculum afford a return to a required writing course? If English can't accommodate such a course, where would it be taught? If we're going to evaluate student writing differently, how can we accomplish that? What would be the role of advisors? What's so bad about what we do now? And so on. The circular, ruminatory approach had to run its course before we could move beyond dithering toward change.

The report did have one fairly immediate result. In the next year the faculty voted to institute a writing placement exam for incoming students, with which they would be able to determine whether students needed immediate assistance with their writing in a designated writing course, or whether a WR course in any department would adequately address their needs. This was an attempt to deal with the problem of students who waited too long to attempt the requirement, or who floundered around failing it too long before being directed to a specific writing course for help.

But the larger problems of consistency in the standards of the requirement—or the amount of writing necessary to fulfill it—remained. And the specter of assessment was not going away; under the college's plan, each of the nine educational goals we had specified had to be assessed every three years. The conclusion of the 1996 report (Hardy) suggested that in the next round, some system of student portfolios would allow actual assessment of student writing, as opposed to assessment of attitudes about it.

Slouching Toward Assessment

In 1998, the Bush Foundation approached Carleton's administration

with an invitation to apply for a planning grant for faculty development. We decided to take advantage of the momentum produced by the 1996 Hardy report on writing—both as a feature of the curriculum and as a site for faculty development. If we had learned nothing else from previous studies, we knew that faculty wanted help in addressing writing in their courses. Offering that help within the existing WAC context seemed sensible, and if our concerns about assessment could also be addressed, so much the better. The proposal that we submitted to the Bush Foundation was, to be honest, rather lame. The site-visiting team patiently asked us questions that we lacked the knowledge to answer. We didn't know how much our students were writing. We could not compare the writing our students were doing with the writing at similar schools across the country. Nor did we know anything definitive about the quality of student writing, although many anecdotes were forthcoming about egregiously awful student papers. We could not evaluate our current Writing Requirement except in quantitative terms—e.g., how many students fullfilled it before the end of the sophomore year. To the site visitors' credit, they were able to look past the gaps in our knowledge and help us recognize that what we were really proposing was to 1) teach ourselves about writing assessment and 2) prepare to write a more detailed proposal for a faculty development program with writing assessment at its center.

The planning grant allowed us to bring in some outside experts (Bill Condon from Washington State, Kathleen Blake Yancey from Clemson, Martha Townsend from the University of Missouri, Richard Haswell from Texas A&M-Corpus Christi), offer workshops on writing assessment theory and techniques for interested faculty and others, and develop a plan.

As we gained more knowledge about writing assessment in a WAC context, mid-career portfolios emerged as a good alternative for us. In fact, many of us were resolved to implement a portfolio system, even if we could not obtain external funding, because we could envision a much better environment for teaching and learning with the help of portfolio assessment. Hard on the heels of that revelation, we wrote a proposal to fund a pilot portfolio at the sophomore level with volunteers from the Class of 2004. The proposal also featured:
- faculty stipends for workshops on WAC and portfolio assessment;
- faculty stipends for reading placement exams every fall;
- summer support for faculty to retool or develop courses with assign-

ments appropriate for the portfolio;
- follow-up grants to help faculty write up their experience with new assignments and/or courses;
- conference funding to encourage faculty involvement in writing as a discipline and in writing program administration;
- course release for three faculty to serve as Writing Advisors to help administer the program;
- a retainer for an outside consultant to the project;
- expenses and honoraria to continue to bring in outside writing experts once a term;
- expenses and honoraria for outside facilitators for annual workshops on WAC and portfolios;
- partial funding for a one-term rhetorician-in-residence for the second and third years of the grant;
- supplies and administrative costs for the portfolio itself;
- training for peer tutors to specifically address the portfolio; and
- a budget for library acquisitions (journals and monographs).

The Bush Foundation funded the proposal in full, as well as a second, smaller proposal for partial funding for an assessment position in the Institutional Research office. As we define our data base—derived from portfolios of student writing—we now have the personnel to help capture data that can support a wide range of research questions.

For a program like this to be successful, faculty participation is the key. The long-standing WAC-ish culture at Carleton has paid off in many ways, not least of which is an appreciation for writing as a pedagogy— even if that appreciation is sometimes couched in terms of despair. We're fortunate to have a core of people who have wanted change for a very long time, and they are being rewarded for their advocacy with stipends, access to summer funding, and great workshops. Without them and support from the dean's office, this would never fly. Along the way, we have gained additional faculty support from some who were never particularly interested in the problem. Thanks to abundant opportunities to participate in workshops, interact with speakers, or serve on relevant committees, they have learned that talking about student writing means good things for pedagogy. To that end, our parade of outside speakers has kept writing visible in a wonderful way. Faculty now participate in workshops who were completely off the radar screen a year ago. Some of them will adopt and extend the kind of leadership that Clara Hardy and others have

shown so diligently for so long.

To summarize, we aren't there yet. But we can now identify the factors that have yielded movement away from a vexing status quo toward a pilot program that blends WAC and writing assessment theory in the context of faculty development: 1) historical interest among faculty in the teaching of writing as well as writing assessment; 2) support from the administration; 3) external funding; and 4) the help of a congenial and vigorous rhet/comp community. People—and institutions—make changes when they are ready. Readiness can certainly be inspired by emergency: we are fortunate that we did not have to take on this complex project in the face of a damaging accreditation report, declining enrollment, student revolt, or some equally difficult situation. Instead, we have been able to harness faculty energy and goodwill, enlist administrative support, earn external funding, and benefit from the knowledge and generosity of a professional community that has been welcoming, critical in the most benevolent and constructive sense, and respectful of our institutional context and goals.

WAC at Carleton is clearly engaged for the long haul, having shown the flexibility to last through two cycles of reform and renewal. We expect, as the results from the current portfolio project roll in, to gather information that will allow us to demonstrate—not merely claim, as in the past—which strategies are working vis-à-vis writing and which need more attention. Students' reflections about their experiences during their first two years at Carleton, the papers they include from their classes, and the data about assignments that are attached to the papers will tell us a great deal about students' experiences writing at Carleton. The degree to which that evidence matches the expectations of the faculty who rate the portfolios will tell even more. Indeed, this matchup provides a new and crucial opportunity to assess students' writing and make necessary interventions; it also provides an almost unprecedented opportunity to keep the faculty's finger on the pulse of instruction in many ways. Faculty raters will come face-to-face with student learning outcomes in writing and, assuming our experience parallels Washington State University's (see Haswell, 67-68), with student learning outcomes in every department and program at Carleton. The writing portfolio thus presents opportunities to learn directly how faculty might improve their classroom practice, and it provides the institution with a rich set of data describing and evaluating what students have learned, what they know and are able to do, at mid-

career.

Only by focusing our evaluative lens on actual student learning out-comes can we gain such a rich set of data and make such fine yet sweep-ing analyses. As Leonhardy and Condon argue:

> If we were not examining actual samples of writing, we could not ask the questions we have asked. Because our assessment exists within our local institutional context, it gives us information that helps us improve the way that context functions. Because the as-sessment is tied to specific programs' currricula, we can ask ques-tions that help us learn how better to meet students' needs. Finally, because we are gathering a rich set of data, we can…turn the lens back on ourselves to evaluate the strengths and needs of our own…program. (Haswell, 79)

Establishing a strong assessment component within a WAC program not only provides grist for the accountability mill, it also provides the kinds of specific information that faculty want and need in order to ensure that the curriculum is serving students well. For these reasons, we see the evolution of WAC as bound up with assessment and program evaluation, to the benefit of all three.

Finally, we expect that our new model will incorporate the traditional emphases of WAC: faculty and curriculum development. In fact, these important functions of WAC, rather than being its *raison d'être*, become significant by-products of involving assessment with instruction. As fac-ulty design their courses and assignments, they are aware that the learn-ing outcomes from those designs will end up in writing portfolios. Fac-ulty are therefore motivated, first, to think of assigning writing as an inte-gral part of their jobs, no matter in what department they reside, and, second, to participate in the various faculty development programs of-fered to support effective assigning and evaluating of writing. In addi-tion, as Washington State University's experience has shown, the annual portfolio rating sessions will provide significant faculty development, since the raters will have ample opportunity to learn how—and how well—their colleagues are incorporating writing into their courses, to learn what kinds of assignment or other learning opportunity seem to work best for students, and to learn first hand—by helping develop them—the stan-dards for good writing at Carleton. This system invests faculty in WAC by giving them clear and substantial input into the system and by making their participation necessary for the program's very survival. Thus, one of

WAC's biggest challenges—faculty ownership—is a central feature of this design.

Our formula may not be the right one for other schools, even schools that are similar to Carleton. Any planning strategy will require at least these two essential steps: 1) patient problem identification through whatever processes are comfortable and effective on a particular campus, and 2) as those problems begin to be consistently articulated, investment in professional consultants as teachers—not as SWAT team members. One of the best features of Carleton's developing program is the growing ownership fostered by faculty development. Administration of the program requires attention to that ownership—to continue to distribute the control of and pride in the program as it develops around us.

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