INTERVIEW

Martha "Marty" Townsend: A Different Kind of Pioneer

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WAC JOURNAL READERS KNOW that WAC programs thrive in various institutional settings, often driven by the energy and commitment of a key person or group who keeps WAC pedagogy visible and refreshes faculty and administrative understanding through assessment and faculty development. For fifteen years, Martha "Marty" Townsend and her colleagues at the University of Missouri (Columbia) have led such a program. Missouri has been the exemplar of a well-run, thoroughly established program that combines WAC and WID, drawing on support from all areas of the university and generating impressive student gains that are well documented through multiple assessments.

When I approached Marty for this interview, neither of us expected that the subtext might require an elegy for Missouri's wonderful, long-standing WAC/WID program. Nor did we anticipate Marty's personal changes, which include a transition year in Missouri's English department and a future move to the University of Vermont, where she will once again be in charge of a university-wide WID program. In fact, my original reasons for interviewing Marty had to do with her gender—previous interviewees have all been male—and her scholarship, which has foregrounded WAC since her graduate student days. Those reasons still obtain, and Marty's responses to such questions are included here.

I have to admit that I had one other criterion for seeking her out for this interview series: Marty is what we like to call a non-traditional student, a person

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whose education was parceled out over decades rather than following a continuous path from high school through the doctorate. She left college early to marry and finished much later, when her children were in school and her life as a "corporate wife"—her words—was becoming less satisfying. As a graduate student, she took the intellectual agility that made her a superb volunteer and civic booster, and applied it to scholarship that, as you will see, has made the WAC world a larger, richer, more inclusive educational endeavor. I am pleased to introduce readers to Marty Townsend, a different kind of WAC pioneer.

CAROL RUTZ: You are the fourth person I have interviewed in this series for *The WAC Journal.* Every one of you (John Bean, Chris Anson, Bill Condon, and yourself) is a WAC pioneer in some sense of the word. You differ from the other three in at least two important ways. First, you are female, and second, you have come to higher education with WAC as your scholarly focus, whereas the others were all trained in literature before taking on new interests in rhetoric, composition, and WAC. Can you tell us about your scholarly journey? Why WAC for Marty Townsend?

MARTY TOWNSEND: "Why WAC?" is fun to recount. I had just completed my first year of doctoral studies at Arizona State University when my dean's office was awarded a three-year Ford Foundation grant to develop a new "Literacy and Liberal Arts" program. Having been assigned responsibility for managing the grant, and seeking advice on how to proceed, Mary E. Green, the associate dean and a British literature professor with no composition background, enrolled in the 1988 WPA Summer Workshop. To my endless good fortune, she encountered my former University of Utah professor, Susan Miller, at the conference. Susan suggested that the Dean's Office hire me as the graduate research assistant for the project. I got to spend the next three years reading everything I could find on WAC and WID; planning faculty workshops; and serving as the "handler" for the likes of John Bean, Ed White, Chris Burnham, and Carole Holder when they came to consult for us. At this same time, David Russell had just published his first article on WAC in *College English,* and I called him out of the blue to talk about his research, as a means of informing our own program development. With opportunities like those, it was impossible not to see my professional future laid out for me.

I'd known going into my doctoral studies that composition, not literature, was my passion. It's not that I don't love literature. I do. But composition and pedagogy seemed more "practical" to me. I liked seeing the immediate results that composition

instruction produced. I liked knowing that my teaching was going to make a difference in my students' future study at the university. With the WAC research assistantship, I also found that I enjoyed the organizational and administrative aspects of composition work. Also, during my doctoral studies, I got divorced and became the single mother of two high-school-aged kids. I was concerned about helping them through college on what seemed to me the fairly meager entry-level assistant professor salaries. A WAC WPA position seemed the obvious choice for this confluence of reasons. I've never doubted the choice, nor regretted the career path. It's been tremendously rewarding.

CR: According to lore, WAC originated in small colleges, like my own, and as a pedagogical movement, it has swept through institutions of all kinds, enjoying greater or lesser success. Your program at the University of Missouri is among the largest and sturdiest examples of WAC in terms of longevity and broad disciplinary acceptance. As you step back from your experience there, what do you see as the factors that foster WAC's health at Missouri?

MT: The two-decade success of WAC at the University of Missouri is a remarkable record. The Campus Writing Program (CWP) was five years old when I came to it, and I've directed it for fifteen years. I've often remarked that CWP's longevity and vitality result from the "top down" and "bottom up" coming together in the middle. That is, the faculty wanted this program to happen. In 1984, a group of faculty took their concerns about student writing to then dean Milton Glick, and he appointed Winifred Bryan Horner to chair a task force to study the matter. A year later, the task force recommended a WAC program with a writing intensive requirement, and two years later, a college-by-college faculty vote endorsed the initiative. Equally important, the administration supported the new WAC initiative both fiscally and philosophically without getting in the way of faculty governance. Those two key factors, combined with a dynamic, professional staff, allowed us to create a robust program.

It's a bittersweet subject to address now, though, because in a very short time, all this may be changing. Faculty buy-in is still strong; their willingness to offer intellectually demanding WI classes is solid. But administration's support for teaching and learning initiatives in general has been gradually weakening over recent years, and the WAC program could change significantly. We've begun to refer to it as "Missouri's ECB Moment"—a reference to the demise of the English

Composition Board (ECB) at the University of Michigan a decade or so ago. Both my colleague Marty Patton and I are stepping down from our roles as assistant director and director, respectively, and are going into the English department as full-time faculty members. The administration is being very slow to announce any plans to replace us, and the system by which WI courses are approved is being altered. Ed White taught me long ago that institutions fund what they value. Sadly, the administration's valuing of the WAC program seems to be in question, despite the national and international reputation it has achieved.

CR: That's a hard story to hear. Picking up on the international reputation of your program, could you tell us how you got involved in international WAC? Do you expect WAC to gain acceptance in more educational systems internationally?

MT: Like my "finding" WAC, this, too, happened serendipitously. Jeff Chinn, the vice provost who handled the search when I was hired, is a political scientist who at that time had a large U.S. government grant to help rebuild the social science infrastructure at Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu, Romania. This was only six years after the fall of Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu and the first time in fifty years that Romanian universities had access to what had been happening in academe outside of the eastern block. Over the period of Jeff's grant, some forty faculty from our two universities spent a month or more on the other's campuses, observing, talking, learning, exchanging information. I spent March 1995 in Sibiu interviewing faculty about their teaching practices, asking especially about how writing was used.

As a sidebar to this story, Nicoleta Raileanu, the very bright young woman who had been assigned to be my "handler" in Sibiu subsequently came to MU and lived with my family and me. Her one-month visit extended to a semester, and that turned into three years, during which she earned her Ph.D. in our English Department. Her husband and twin daughters spent most of that time here, too, and our families are very close.

That initial experience in Romania heightened my awareness of the international possibilities in academe. Now, I search for similar opportunities to travel abroad to study how other academic cultures use writing in their curricula. I've been privileged to visit universities in South Korea, South Africa, Thailand, China, and Costa Rica. Once you start looking, you find ways to do this. In the decade that I've been studying writing pedagogy internationally, WAC's

international focus has expanded widely. In 2004, CWP hosted the National WAC Conference in St. Louis with its first international theme; over ten percent of our participants and presenters that year were from outside the U.S. Just one WAC Conference later, the event is now titled the International WAC Conference. The National WAC Network, too, has re-labeled itself the International WAC Network. It's all very exciting and fitting. And the National Council of Writing Program Administrators is exploring ways to expand their work internationally. I'm quite sure, though, that we won't be seeing wholesale promulgation of American pedagogies elsewhere. That would obviously not be appropriate for a host of reasons, not least that educational cultures vary widely. What works or what's right in one place is not automatically workable or right elsewhere. American WAC scholars must approach these exciting exchanges sensitively and guard against an uncritical assumption that we have the best answers. We have much to learn from our international colleagues, and the acceptance of WAC that I see will go both directions.

CR: Another of your strengths is assessment. How do WAC and assessment fit together in your work and within your institution?

MT: Good question! From my first semester as the WAC research assistant at Arizona State, I was aware of the importance of assessment. I learned early on that if the Ford Foundation's soft money was to translate into permanent, institutional funding for WAC, convincing evidence had to be presented that the program was making a difference.

Another sidebar here: again, serendipitously, I became the Ford Foundation's reviewer for the entire nineteen-grant Literacy and the Liberal Arts series. I knew that the Ford program officer in charge of the grants had resigned, and I asked if I could do this work. *Asked,* mind you—just called them up, noted that I was aware they'd need to have this evaluation done, and volunteered to review the grants as part of my dissertation. To my amazement, Program Director Peter Stanley agreed! It helped, I'm sure, that I was a non-traditional student. But the point I'm getting at is this: I was able to study how previous Ford Foundation reviewers and other philanthropic organizations had judged whether their grants had been effective. I looked at how each of the nineteen institutions had evaluated the grants themselves. And I asked key administrators on each campus how they determined the projects' effectiveness. I was surprised to learn that, while project directors were often scrambling to amass

quantitative data "proving" that students were writing "better," knowledgeable administrators didn't necessarily see this as necessary. University of Kentucky Chancellor Robert Hemenway (now Chancellor at the University of Kansas), for example, acknowledged society's bias toward quantitative assessment, but claimed that the evidence he looks for is that which comes from "common sense."

Of course, that was in 1991, and the assessment culture has shifted since then. In our work with MU's Campus Writing Program, we adopted Toby Fulwiler's admonition to collect everything you can and share it widely, in concert with Ed White's advice to assess yourself before someone does it to you. We see assessment as integrated into our everyday work, defining it as any information that can be collected, analyzed, and fed directly back into the instructional loop for use in improving teaching and learning. We use the terms "assessment" and "evaluation" more or less interchangeably. Missing by design from our work is (1) any university-wide, standardized assessment of student writing (since we believe assessment of student writing should take place in context), and (2) barrier or exit exams (since we believe resources to mount these activities are better channeled toward instruction). The set of multimodal activities that we undertake are characterized by an emphasis on qualitative measures using multiple methodologies, mixed with some quantitative measures using the simplest methodologies available. The various components are intended to be seen as a collective whole, with no one part used to determine high stakes decisions.

Among our regular, ongoing assessments are:

- Periodic and/or end-of-semester contact with WI faculty by CWP staff
- WI course approval by an eighteen-faculty-member Campus Writing Board
- WI course files showing historical development of each professor's course(s)
- Selected departments' direct, authentic assessment of student writing
- Student course evaluations
- Faculty workshop evaluations
- Annual program reports to the provost, dean, board, and interested others
- Student evaluations of WI tutorials
- Participant records of who attends our various functions

Among our occasional assessments are:

- Faculty and student attitude surveys
- Student petitions to waive WI courses (a portfolio process)

Among our single-instance assessments are:

- A formal internal and external program review, in 1993
- An Office of Student Life Studies survey of students' writing experiences, in 1995
- A transcript evaluation, to determine WI compliance by college, in the mid-1990s
- An alumni telephone survey of satisfaction with WI courses, in 2000
- A Student Success Center focus-group study of WI courses, in 2003-04
- A graduate alumni telephone survey of former WI TAs, in 2005

We would very much have liked to implement a system of electronic portfolios which students would keep over time, and which students' major departments would review as a process of awarding degrees. Faculty have expressed an interest in doing this. We have also been lobbying hard for the past five years for another internal and external evaluation of the kind that was done in 1993 by Lynn Bloom and Ed White. The administration, however, has been slow to commit resources for either of these two projects, and we are considerably behind other campuses in this regard. When the Conference on College Composition and Communication awarded CWP a 2004 *Certificate of Writing Program Excellence* (the first year these were given), the committee singled out our assessment program as one of the three main factors in our being selected. CWP staff are very proud of that. Ironically, one of the things administration is presently calling for, now that Marty Patton and I are stepping down, is an evaluation to determine how effectively the program is working. Something feels amiss to us.

CR: I find myself wondering about the "feminization" of composition/rhetoric in terms of faculty and administrative staffing in many institutions, and whether there are any gender moves that affect your experience of WAC administration.

MT: For fifteen years, I have not experienced any gender-related problems working with faculty, staff, or administration. However, a few months ago, when I realized that communication between our program and the male administrator to whom

we report had broken down, I tried what might be considered a feminist approach to resolve the conflict. I asked for a formal mediation—a process that has a long history at MU, a process with wonderful training that I had participated in myself. The mediation was arranged, but with only two hours' notice, the administrator refused to participate. Was that a failure of a feminist move? It could have been. At any rate, it was the wrong strategy for that particular moment.

With this single exception, I can confidently report that a spirit of inclusivity plus strong relationships has been effective in working through problems. The Program has had the support of an excellent faculty Writing Board, and we have worked successfully through the faculty governance system. The current situation has not been amenable to the usual remedies.

CR: What advice do you have for *The WAC Journal* readers who may be asked to defend WAC pedagogy and/or assessment?

MT: Read the now-voluminous research. Talk to scholars at institutions that have WAC programs. Heed the findings of Richard J. Light in *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Harvard UP, 2001), who reports, "Students identify the courses that had the most profound impact on them as courses in which they were required to write papers, not just for the professor, as usual, but for their fellow students as well" (64). Heed the findings of Langer and Applebee in *How Writing Shapes Thinking: A Study of Teaching and Learning* (NCTE, 1987) who report, "there is clear evidence that activities involving writing (any of the many sorts of writing we studied) lead to better learning than activities involving reading and studying only" (135). And for those who require quantitative data, read Alexander Astin's "What Really Matters in General Education: Provocative Findings from a National Study of Student Outcomes," *Perspectives,* Vol. 22, No. 1, Fall 1992, pages 23-46, especially Table 13, "Effects of Taking Courses that Emphasize the Development of Writing Skills."

CR: Finally, if you were to forecast the effects of WAC and assessment for the future of higher education, what do you see as the problems ahead? The successes?

MT: I see no slowing of interest in WAC/WID nationally, despite the Missouri program's current status. The lesson here, as others elsewhere have learned, is that only one or two administrators are capable of jeopardizing a healthy program.

However, many more institutions continue to be interested in the benefits of WAC/WID. The need for improving students' critical thinking and writing is certainly still high; the roadblock will always be securing ample resources. Aside from the funding issue, I have some concern that we're not producing enough graduate students who have formal training in WAC/WID. We're doing much better in Composition Studies as a whole field, but we need to enlarge the graduate coursework and experience we offer in writing to include WAC/WID. I know that my graduate preparation has made a substantial difference in my ability to work in the field.

Assessment is here to stay—as it should be. I look for it to become more sophisticated and nuanced—less focused on immediately measurable outcomes. With writing, outcomes can be notoriously difficult to document, not least since some of the desired outcomes don't manifest themselves until after graduation and students are in the workforce. My hope is that e-portfolios become the norm, portfolios that ideally would be evaluated by departments whose faculty take responsibility for articulating what they want and expect for their students.