

The Man Behind the WAC Clearinghouse: Mike Palmquist

CAROL RUTZ

First, the disclaimer: *The WAC Journal*, among many other resources devoted to WAC, is housed on The WAC Clearinghouse, a site hosted by Colorado State University: <http://wac.colostate.edu/>. We are delighted to be available to readers through that link in addition to subscription. So what is this site, and how did it find its way to the web?

The answer to that question requires a narrative about the site's founder and chief maintainer, Mike Palmquist, currently Associate Provost for Instructional Innovation at Colorado State University. This interview may dispel a great deal of ignorance among the WAC community about Mike and his derring-do as a higher-ed innovator—and perhaps raise more questions that could be pursued in another venue.

To begin, consider this recipe for a career path:

Take one childhood in the Northern Minnesota woods, add a Merit Scholarship, awards in track and cross-country competition, and the initiative to edit an underground newspaper in high school.

Add a liberal arts education at a small college, a post-graduate job as a VISTA volunteer and work as a free-lance writer.

Stir in a doctorate in rhetoric that leads to an R1 job teaching writing, promoting technology in pedagogy, and advocating for imaginative administration.

Cook at high heat for a few years.

Remove (using heat-resistant mitts) and admire the result: a career that includes the WAC Clearinghouse and multiple awards for teaching and publications based on strong research on technology and assessment, as well as tireless work on faculty development and important student outcomes, including retention.

Clearly, Mike's current administrative responsibilities were divinely ordained. Or maybe not.

Fortunately, I have had a chance to ask Mike about his origins and career, and I owe him thanks for his willingness to exchange correspondence as well as for a dandy deli lunch in Tampa during the 2015 CCCC convention.

Carol Rutz: I will begin with an apology for taking so long in this interview series to approach you. You are, after all, the founding editor and nurturing parent of The WAC Clearinghouse: <http://wac.colostate.edu/>. I will ask later how that important project began, but first: how did WAC become important to you?

Mike Palmquist: WAC was something I became aware of in the mid-1980s as a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon. I had the good fortune to take a seminar on WAC and WID from Richard Young. We focused on a wide range of issues, including technology. He and Christine Neuwirth had recently submitted a funding proposal to the Buhl Foundation for a distributed, technology-based writing community that, had it been funded, would have led to the first OWL. It's pretty interesting to look at how they were configuring what would have been a social network built around writers sharing their expertise with less-experienced writers through commenting tools, chat, and access to network-based resources. This was long before the web, but Carnegie Mellon had a robust network that allowed for easy sharing of files and access to some fairly interesting writing tools. In Richard's seminar, we covered most of the major work in the field up to that time and I came out of it with a fairly good familiarity with the issues—at least theoretically.

CR: So are you saying that you learned about writing in various disciplinary contexts among researchers rather than through other means—e.g., personal interaction with faculty outside of the humanities?

MP: I hadn't thought about that until you asked it, but I think that's right. I was completely unfamiliar with writing studies when I went to graduate school. I'd worked as a professional writer for a few years and thought that was going well—right up to the point where my wife said, "Let's go to graduate school." We ended up at Carnegie Mellon on the basis of a recommendation from some faculty at the University of Minnesota, where my wife had taken some courses. The faculty at Carnegie Mellon challenged just about every assumption I had about writing and what it means to be a writer. A big part of that was my exposure to WAC. Richard and Christine weren't running a WAC program, but they provided me with a theoretical framework that has continued to shape my thinking about how to work with faculty—and very importantly, with students—on WAC initiatives. For Richard, WAC was both an interesting problem and a way to connect with faculty from other institutions. He'd been working with Robert Morris College on their WAC initiative and had compiled a collection of writing activities that spanned several disciplines. (With Richard's permission, I ended up turning that into a small book that's now available on the Clearinghouse.) But since he hadn't established a WAC program at Carnegie Mellon, my early exposure to WAC was very much a theoretical experience.

After I completed my degree, I found myself in meetings at Colorado State with Kate Kiefer, Dawn Rodrigues, and Don Zimmerman (a colleague from our technical communications program). Kate and Dawn had been involved in a decade-long effort to establish a WAC program at Colorado State. Unfortunately, while the faculty members who had become engaged in the program were enthusiastic, the number of participants was quite low (about twenty people from a faculty of one thousand). Dawn and Don had been approached by the dean of engineering about improving student writing and speaking skills. We used that invitation as an opportunity to seek funding for a more robust program. We ended up getting a large state grant that led to a network-supported program that combined some of Richard Young's and Christine Neuwirth's ideas with ideas that Kate and Dawn had been pursuing for several years. I added a focus on hypertext/hypermedia and we ended up, over the next few years, creating resources that students could consult through the network (guides to writing particular genres, videos that helped students prepare speeches and presentations, online tutorials, and tools that allowed writers to share their work with and get feedback from consultants in our writing center).

CR: That effort must have required considerable IT infrastructure. Did the grant support equipment and staff for the program?

MP: It did. We ended up hiring a full-time programmer and spent a lot of money on computers, software, video cameras, and so on. Initially, we were setting up our program on individual computers, so we weren't using anything that even remotely resembled a server.

CR: Your program seems much more attuned to students than mine at Carleton, for example, which began with an institutional recognition that students were assigned writing widely, but writing instruction was largely missing.

MP: One of the big changes for us was shifting from a top-down approach to WAC (the then-standard train-the-teachers model in which WAC specialists focused their efforts on helping faculty members get ready to teach writing and speaking) to a mixed model in which we provided support not only to faculty but also to students. We called it an integrated model since we were looking at both top-down and bottom-up (writing-center-based) models. We had found, through about a year of studies of students and faculty at our research-intensive university, that our colleagues in other disciplines were resistant to the idea of introducing activities that would increase the amount of time they were putting into their courses. Given the rewards structure in place, which privileged funded research and publication, that was understandable. Our goal was to reduce the barrier to adopting WAC practices by providing resources directly to students. We thought that if we could reduce the

time commitment required to assign and respond to student writing from, say, forty hours to twenty hours over the course of the semester, we might see higher levels of faculty involvement.

CR: That was a practical and humane idea. What came of it?

MP: The good news was that we saw higher faculty involvement in WAC. We ended up growing our writing center (we characterized the “new” writing center as “the visible face of writing on our campus”) and increasing student visits to it fairly substantially. The writing center consultants spent a fair amount of time running workshops for student writers. And faculty members used the resources we’d made available to support writing in their classes. It wasn’t perfect, but it was a major improvement over the program that had been running through the 1980s.

CR: And what led to the Clearinghouse?

MP: In 1996, we had configured about four hundred or so computers on campus to use our “Online Writing Center.” It was getting tedious to update everything manually on a regular basis. We recognized that the web (which was still quite new then) could help us distribute our materials far more easily and widely. The only downside was that the web was pretty primitive and we’d lose a lot of the media elements (video, audio, and some interactive content) if we moved to the web. But we also thought it would eventually catch up. So we moved the Online Writing Center to the web.

Shortly after that, it occurred to me that we could also offer resources to our faculty via the web. It took me about three minutes to realize (duh) that anything we put on the web would be accessible to everyone. There were already some good websites focused on WAC at that time, including the Northern Illinois site and the Language and Learning Across the Curriculum site. I didn’t want to duplicate what they were doing, so I looked for other ways to design the site.

CR: You were remarkably prescient.

MP: I suspect it was one of those fortunate insights that changes a career—or perhaps I was just in a good place and working with the right people. In any event, at the CCCC convention in 1997, I talked about the idea of establishing the WAC Clearinghouse with Christine Hult from Utah State and Bill Condon from Washington State. They agreed to join the project and we recruited a small group of folks who helped plan the site. By fall 1997, we had a website up and running. There’s a fairly clear history of this on the Clearinghouse at <http://wac.colostate.edu/about/history.cfm>. We had some early problems keeping people involved in the project, largely because the folks in English departments who were running annual performance reviews didn’t know

what to make of this kind of work. I think a lot of them thought that creating web-based resources was kind of a frivolous activity.

CR: No doubt—fortunately, you and your colleagues have outlasted that attitude. Throughout, I assume you have tallied the traffic on the site. Which pages are accessed most often? The journals? Individual WAC programs? Other links?

MP: The books and journals see the most traffic. We get quite a bit of traffic on our specialized resources, too. The bibliography that pulls from the CompPile database gets visited quite often; so do the L2 Writers and Writing Fellows pages. One of the most visited parts of the site is Kate Kiefer's introduction to WAC. She and I have revised that, and we should be putting the new version up soon. She really put a lot of time and effort (and a great deal of hard-won experience) into that resource.

CR: WAC is often characterized as a faculty development program that brings faculty from all disciplines into dialogue with writing pedagogy and assessment. Does that understanding have anything to do with your current post at CSU as Associate Provost for Instructional Innovation?

MP: I think so. My work with WAC and, more generally, the university composition program, put me into discussions with the provost's office pretty early in my career. That brought me into conversations that I might not otherwise have been invited to join.

In terms of my approach to supporting innovation in teaching and learning, WAC has been essential. I've learned about resistance to innovation. I've learned about the complex challenges posed by the rewards structures in place at my own and similar institutions. I've learned that change requires a great deal of patience and a great deal of clarity, particularly clarity about the benefits of putting the necessary time into making change—and that's true both for myself and for my colleagues at the university. And I've learned that you need to assess outcomes carefully and wisely—there's nothing worse than assessment strictly for the sake of assessment.

CR: No kidding. People do not appreciate assessments that waste their time, but they do appreciate findings that help them make constructive changes. What else are you learning?

MP: One of the more interesting things has been the parallel between resistance to using writing in classes and resistance to using technology—even in the face of faculty recognition that the wise use of writing or technology can lead to improvements in student learning and success. And that extends to shifting to more active forms of teaching and learning in our courses. We're focusing right now on active learning,

increased interaction among students and faculty, and, as a way to support those two focuses, technology-enhanced learning. Over the past few years, I've been learning a great deal about the role of technology in supporting innovation. My work in computers and writing has been extremely influential in the development of my thinking about both WAC program design and instructional innovation in a wider sense. It probably seems like a more natural fit now than it did in the early to mid-1990s. Certainly, a few decades ago, there wasn't a great deal of overlap between technology, WAC, and general improvements to teaching and learning. Now, it makes more sense to think about the connections among these areas.

CR: You are a graduate of St. Olaf College, the cross-town rival of my employer, Carleton College, both in tiny Northfield, MN. Tell The WAC Journal readers a bit about your Minnesota experience.

MP: I grew up on the Mesabi Iron Range in northern Minnesota, a working-class area that draws most of its income from mining, lumbering, and tourism (I think there are a dozen lakes within a ten-mile radius of our house). My family (my parents, four brothers, and two sisters) and I lived a fairly rustic life on forty acres several miles north of the nearest small town, Chisholm. We heated our house with wood, grew a lot of our own food, gathered a lot of berries and nuts (who knew that hazelnuts were anything special—they literally grew on trees all over our forty acres), and raised hogs for the meat. It was a good life, but I was pretty clueless about everything from college to athletics.

Fortunately, I ended up becoming a fairly successful distance runner and was recruited by a number of colleges in the Midwest—except for the one place I would have gone to in a minute, the University of Minnesota. Had their track coach ever called me, I would have enrolled immediately, but he pretty much ignored me. (I got my revenge over the next four years, when I beat most of their runners in various meets.) Worse, I'd qualified for a National Merit Scholarship and sent my application to the University of Minnesota, but I didn't hear anything from their admissions office either. Anyway, one night, while I was chopping wood before dinner, I looked up at the pines around our house and the stars above them and thought, "There's no way I can move to a big city like Minneapolis or St. Paul." I decided at that moment to attend St. Olaf, largely because I'd been impressed with the quality of their recruiting materials and because, unlike the University of Minnesota, they'd offered me a great financial aid package. They gave me a full ride for academics and need (it helped immensely that my dad was out of work after breaking his leg—for the second time—while working as a lumberjack). I ended up getting a great education there. It was a pretty amazing experience, although somewhat challenging at times, given the rivalry

between the Norwegians and the Swedes and the failure of my parents to become Lutherans.

CR: One of St. Olaf's signature programs, now defunct, alas, was the Paracollege, which encouraged special majors and attentive mentoring. You told me you participated in that program. Tell us about your experience.

MP: I went to St. Olaf with the intention of becoming the editor of a small-town newspaper. Along the way, I double-majored in English and political science, thinking they'd help me with writing and practical politics. But my English major had almost nothing to do with writing (except, as I recall, writing papers that used New Criticism to explore literature) and my political science major had nothing to do with practical politics (did I not say I was naïve?), so I designed a major in writing through the Paracollege. The Paracollege was one of the experimental initiatives that sprung up in a number of small colleges during the 1960s. It was based on the Oxford-Cambridge tutorial model and allowed me to take courses on a one-on-one basis with a faculty member. In fact, one of my Paracollege courses, which focused on designing publications, involved two faculty members. It was an incredible experience. My advisor, Paul Kirchner, who has since passed away, made me write a paper every week and then read it aloud to him while he drank his coffee and smoked his cigarettes (a perfect setting for a distance runner). He kindled my interest in rhetoric. I recall reading several of the Platonic dialogues and having some wonderful discussions about them. As part of my work in the Paracollege, I wrote a novel and explored everything from poetry to journalism. I was disappointed when they shut down the program a few years ago.

CR: Would you like to say something about motorcycles? For example, there must be a connection between helmeted, leather-clad cyclists and WAC. Help us out.

MP: I'm sure there is. No doubt it's the mindfulness required to stay upright for long periods of time while being ever watchful for distractions, diversions, and roadblocks. It's also connected, I think, to the need for escape. I started riding while I was working as a VISTA volunteer with the Community Design Center in Minneapolis. I was a community organizer working on urban gentrification issues in a neighborhood in St. Paul. I couldn't afford a car (the stipend was eighty dollars per week with no benefits), so I was taking the bus, and most of the time I was spending about two hours getting back and forth. One of my younger brothers, who was serving in the military in Germany then, suggested that I borrow his motorcycle. I was hooked after a few weeks of riding and have been riding ever since. I usually get at least one long ride in each summer, sometimes en route to the IWAC or C&W conferences. Last summer, I rode Route 66 with another brother (four of the five of us ride, although one rode a

little too aggressively and has chosen to retire after a near-death experience). It was a great time and we're planning to head north to Glacier this year.

But I don't wear leather. Instead, I wear ballistic nylon and Kevlar and a bright yellow helmet. I saw a study of fatal motorcycle accidents sometime back in the 1990s that noted that none of the fatalities involved people wearing yellow helmets. I wear the most obnoxious yellow helmet available. Even Harley riders shy away when they see me coming. Come to think of it, I think a lot of department chairs do that, too, whenever they think I'm coming to talk with them about using writing in their courses. So, yes, I'm sure there's a connection between motorcycling and WAC.

CR: Well said! I'm going to start wearing my screaming yellow bicycle helmet to faculty meetings as sort of a WAC emblem. Thanks so much, Mike.