Something Larger Than Imagined: Developing a Theory, Building an Organization, Sustaining a Movement

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One of the things that I love best about working in writing across the curriculum (WAC) is the opportunity that it gives me to connect with faculty across my campus and to learn more about the work they do: what kinds of research they conduct, what communities they connect with, and how they engage their students. But, I've always enjoyed learning about the person behind the work more: why they do these things and how they came to do them. Hearing their stories helps me to better understand their work—and mine.

The interviews Carol Rutz conducted for *WAC Journal* for many years offered me similar context. I could listen to John Bean, Chris Thaiss, Mike Palmquist, Terry Zawacki, Martha Townsend, Chris Anson, and many other scholars important to our field telling me about their motivations, challenges, and stories of becoming professionals in the field. Through their stories, these scholars offered me a kind of mentorship, informing my development as a WAC scholar and practitioner, that I draw on in my daily work.

Recently, I was fortunate enough to interview three scholars who I admire very much: Dan Melzer, Jeffrey Galin, and Michelle Cox. Each is an accomplished scholar in their own right, but together they are the co-authors of *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs* and are the principle organizers behind the formation of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum (AWAC). These collaborations have made what I expect will be a lasting impact on the field and, as I learned in the interviews, a reflexive illustration of WAC pedagogy at its most foundational: using writing to learn and then to communicate a vision for the field, with their work on AWAC putting this vision into practice. What could be a better endorsement for the theory they articulate in their book?

As a current graduate student and chair of the AWAC Committee for graduate students (WAC-GO), I wanted to learn more about how they came to be the WAC leaders that they are today and what advice they have for the next generation of WAC

scholars. I saw their work as offering a new form of identity for developing practitioners like myself, and I was curious if they had this vision from the beginning. They didn't, but, as Dan told me, they realized they were onto "something larger than [they] had imagined" when they first started collaborating. So, I was curious to learn more about how these collaborations developed and how their work on AWAC and their scholarship on sustainability influenced each other. I sent these and other questions to each of them in writing, and they each returned immensely generous, written responses. I wish I were able to share all of their incredibly illuminating observations here, but I have edited their responses to create a more concise and coherent narrative. And to set up the larger context of that narrative, I began by asking them about AWAC.

Thomas Polk: How did you know that it was time to have a national organization dedicated to WAC?

Jeffrey Galin: The discussions actually started in the summer of 2015, just after Anne Ellen Geller, Michelle Cox, Dan Melzer, and I all responded to Chris Thaiss' call to replace him as the leader of INWAC. As the four of us began talking with each other, Chris Thaiss, and the INWAC board, we were asked to determine whether the INWAC SIG might be better served as a CCCC Standing Group. That conversation led us to consider what role a standing group would play, whether it would differ from the INWAC SIG structure that Chris had led for thirty-five years, and whether such an organization could serve the larger community of WAC nationally.

[A brief summary of the formation of the organization is provided on the AWAC website and a subset of the planning group that drafted the organization's articles of incorporation and bylaws published a chapter on its founding (Basgier et al., 2020).]

Michelle Cox: Yes, the three of us had all been involved with INWAC for some years, as we were on the INWAC Board of Consultants. So, we were connected with different people who had played large roles in the WAC community. We knew that people were worried about what would happen to the field when folks starting retiring and stepping away from WAC.

THP: So, a driver of developing the organization was ensuring the sustainability of WAC as a field?

Dan Melzer: All of us agreed that we wanted to develop a more expansive charge for INWAC and find a way to reach out to and welcome more members. We realized that there weren't formal structures in place to rotate in new WAC leaders, and we were especially concerned about the lack of diversity in WAC leadership—with an

awareness, of course, that the three of us were also a reflection of the racial homogeny of WAC.

MC: We also started to explore the history of INWAC, the roles of the group, and how the group was related to other WAC organizations in the field, and we started to realize that the field of WAC had many nodes, but no hub, and talked through the problems associated with this.

JG: Right, a significant moment for us was when we created a visual representation of the field's organizational structure (Figure 1). It became immediately clear that the network of relationships governing the field were loose and not apparent. We wondered if this was a historical moment during which making those relationships more apparent might benefit the field.

DM: The initial conversations we had about forming AWAC at the IWAC and CCCC conferences were not always easy, and understandably the founders of the WAC movement did not want WAC to lose its grassroots spirit or to lose resources that were already in place. But I think the turning point for the acceptance of AWAC was when folks came to understand that we weren't trying to replace existing resources or impose a top-down hierarchy on the WAC movement. Once folks understood that our goals were to coordinate WAC efforts to make them even stronger and more sustainable, and to create new opportunities for more people to get involved in the WAC movement, the momentum for AWAC became undeniable.

THP: What about your book: how did you know it was time to have an explicit theory of WAC administration?

DM: As is true of many things in WAC, Michelle Cox was the one who brought us together. The three of us had gotten to know each other through our participation in INWAC and the WAC Clearinghouse, but it was Michelle's idea to write a book about WAC program development.

MC: At first, we didn't realize that it was time for an explicit theory of WAC administration. We had started talking about co-authoring a practical book about program administration—a book with tips and advice—and I had reached out to Victor Villanueva to see if he would be interested in such a book for the *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric* series. When we all met, he told us that tips and advice wouldn't be very useful given that the contexts for WAC vary so widely and practical advice doesn't stand the test of time. He told us that what was really needed was a theoretical framework.

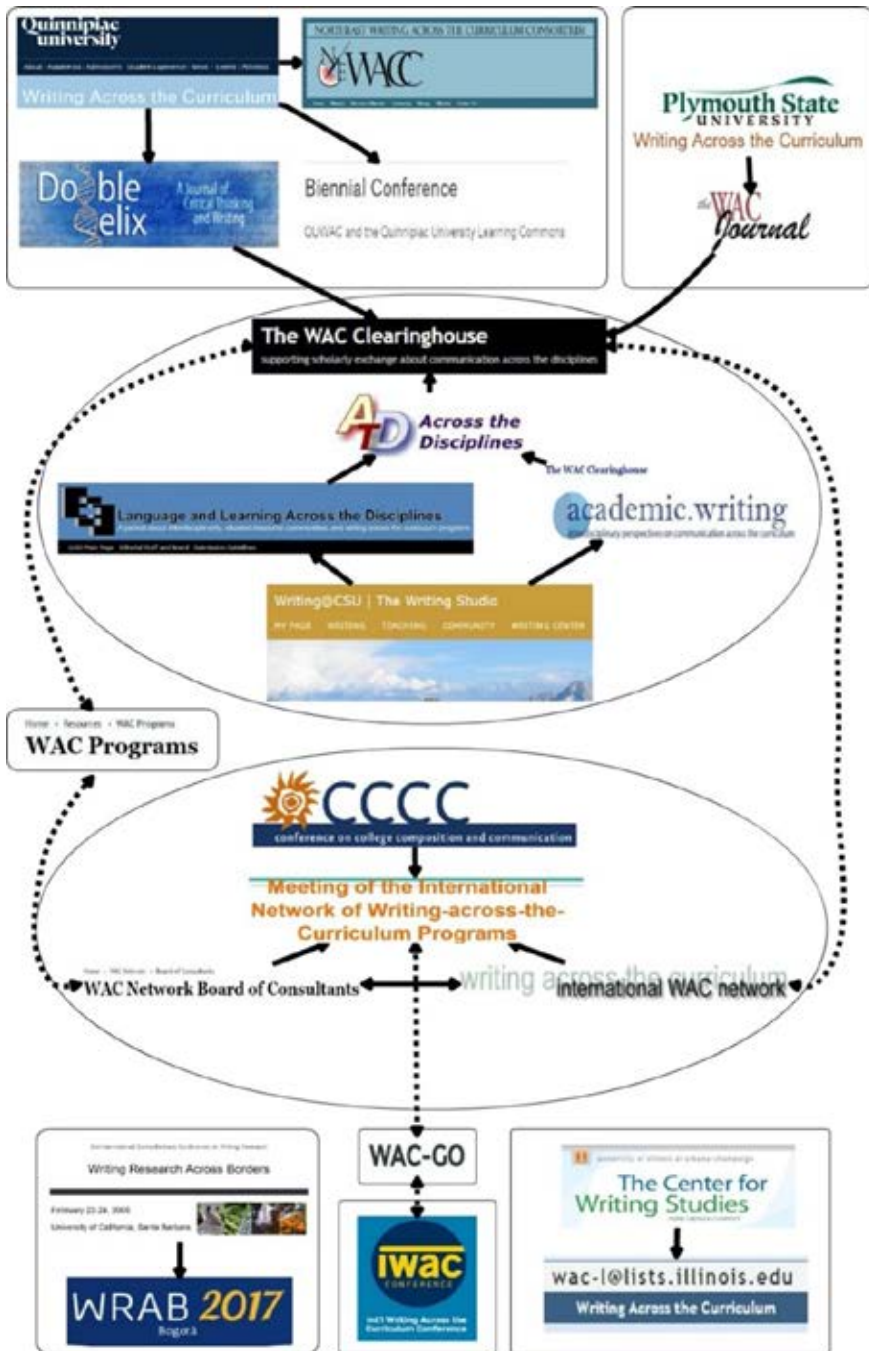**THP:** So, which came first—the organization building or the theory building?

Figure 1: Mapping WAC as a field (Cox, Galin, & Melzer, 2018, p. 225; also shared in correspondence)

JG: The theory came first.

The theoretical framework for the book was a strongly collaborative process, but I had started developing it back in 2006 when I presented a talk at the IWAC conference about how WAC programs could benefit from sustainable development theory. The following year at CCCCs, Bill Condon participated in a panel about why WAC programs fail and introduced the framework for the taxonomy he would publish with Carol Rutz in 2013. I remember being frustrated by the taxonomy, thinking that it just wasn't a sharp enough tool to understand the diversity of WAC programs that were regularly failing. I raised questions during that presentation and then decided to go study Condon's WAC program at Washington State University as well as the program that Terry Zawacki had taken over from Chris Thaiss at George Mason to see if I could develop some sharper tools.

THP: You recount some of this in the book?

MC: Yes, Jeff had already been working with sustainable development theories and Dan had already been working with systems thinking, but we then spent a full year reading theory together and meeting weekly to share notes, piece the theories together (which also came to include more complexity theories, such as resilience theory), and think through how they applied to WAC program administration.

JG: I think it is fair to say that our work on the book led us to ask a set of questions that led to the discussions and stakeholder conversations that would eventually lead to the formation of the organization.

MC: So, during the three years we worked on the book, we started talking about the need for a professional organization. These conversations arose partly in relation to our evolving theory, but also in relation to other things that were happening in the field.

THP: The concerns about retirements and the broader connections across the field?

DM: Right. At first, we didn't anticipate applying our principles to the WAC movement itself or using what we'd learned to help make a national WAC organization a reality.

The assumption of the INWAC leadership role was fortuitous for us because it happened while the three of us were drafting *Sustainable WAC*. We knew that in the final chapter of the book we wanted to make an argument for the creation of a national WAC organization along the lines of CWPA and IWCA, but we weren't sure if we should focus on developing INWAC or propose the creation of a new and more ambitious WAC organization. The three of us and Anne Ellen Geller met to

debate this, and in the end, we decided that this was the right moment to propose a formal WAC organization.

THP: I see. That's really interesting how all of the work came together like that. So, I'm curious: what qualities or experiences do you think prepared you to really connect this work and leverage those opportunities?

DM: I think the three of us had similar perspectives on WAC in part because we'd had similar experiences. We were all in the second generation of WAC leaders, but we'd worked closely with many of the founders of the WAC movement as well as the next generation of leaders as represented in WAC-GO. So, in many ways we were well positioned to reflect on the history of WAC, but also open to significant changes and applying new theories and methodologies to WAC. We were equally concerned with sustaining the momentum of the WAC founders and welcoming in new and more diverse voices. We also each brought different kinds of expertise to the project.

MC: None of us felt especially confident going into the book or starting the organization. We felt like we were taking risks and didn't know how the work would be received. In terms of the book—we knew that we were drawing from theories that would feel foreign to many in writing studies and would get some pushback. In terms of AWAC—we knew that some people would really react negatively to the idea of an umbrella organization for WAC. So in response to your question: we were willing to take the risk of a negative response. Sometimes we would pause to ask ourselves if we were the "right people" to lead these efforts. We finally realized, if not us, then who? We really care about WAC—about WAC programs and about WAC as a field—and this motivated us to stick our necks out and propose new ways of thinking about how to push WAC forward.

JG: We were hoping to make a contribution that recognized the important work of those who have preceded us and provided new ways of thinking and program building. I think we have managed to accomplish both goals. There have been voices of concern and dissent during the process, but the overwhelming responses have been positive.

THP: To me, your responses speak about identity, both of the field and of the individuals who make up the field. On the WAC listserv recently, a number of people discussed the professional identity of WAC administrators: is there a unique WAC administrative identity? Do you think there is? How would you describe your own administrative identity? What do you think most shaped it?

MC: One thing that surprised me during both the book project and the development of AWAC is that some people do not see WAC as a field, and thus don't see WAC as a professional identity. I always have. When I was a graduate student, Cinthia Gannett brought me into different WAC projects, such as being a graduate writing fellow for a master's program in communication science and disorders, teaching a section of first-year writing linked to a nutrition science course, and developing a section of a technical writing course linked to an engineering course. I was brought into the WAC community at CCCC and attended the annual INWAC SIG meetings. So, to me, there is a unique WAC identity. But I think that professional identity is contextual. Those who are both WC directors and leaders of WAC efforts (led out of the writing center) may not see the two identities as distinct, nor would directors of WAC-informed first-year writing programs.

JG: I would say there is indeed a WAC administrative identity in the same way that Michel Foucault talks about the identity of authors by their functions. That identity looks different on most campuses because the roles that WAC directors play are so diverse. However, anyone who runs a university-wide program that is significantly integrated into the university likely serves on university committees, manages multiple program projects, and is likely involved in assessment and curricular change. Each of these roles carries with it sets of functions, strategies, techniques, and expectations. But, we say in our book that "A WAC director applying a CST [critical systems thinking] approach would be especially focused on exposing the ideologies that underlie the way writing is taught on campus." I would say that description defines my public role as an administrator.

DM: In *Sustainable WAC,* we also call into question the traditional identity of a WAC program director as a charismatic leader or singular campus writing guru. In a systems perspective, being a WPA is more about developing transformative, sustainable structures than it is about any one actor in the network. My own career reinforces for me that a WPA identity is less about individual roles or individual personality and more about building structures and working collaboratively. In my first position, as a WAC director at Cal State Sacramento, there was a tendency for folks on campus to either identify me as a writing guru ("Dan will help us 'fix' student writing by sheer force of will") or the person to blame if students "can't write a complete sentence" ("Dan has been here ten years and students still can't write"). But the reality is that whatever developing identity I grew into as a WAC director was always subsumed by distributed and collaborative leadership. I was always working in collaboration with my writing program colleagues, and the reforms we were trying to make to a stagnant and outdated culture of writing had a lot to do with changing the structures of the system and very little to do with my own identity.

THP: You bring up collaboration as central to WAC work. Can you talk some about your collaborations? How did the three of you collaborate?

JG: I have written collaboratively for most of my career, but I have to say I have never had such an exciting, productive, and enjoyable experience as I had with Michelle and Dan. Part of it was that we were working on a project that none of us could have written on our own, but each of us had specific expertise in areas that complemented each other. Also, we all have different styles of writing that made editing quite productive because each of us focused on different things. And Dan made sure we had several laughs each meeting.

MC: The collaboration evolved over time too. Week by week, we came to trust each other more, get to know each other better, and figure out collaborative processes that worked for us. If one of us couldn't get that week's "homework" done, we would say, "no problem; we all have weeks where we have too much on our plate." We'd each take the lead on certain parts or chapters, develop drafts, and then meet to review drafts, with all of us making revisions and edits only after it was agreed upon by all three of us. We figured out ways to move in step, by using Google docs and emailing to tell each other when we had finished drafts, so that reviewing could start ahead of a meeting.

DM: We also set a tone right from the start that we weren't going to be married to our own individual writing or perspectives, and that we were going to compromise. Using Google Docs helped emphasize that the writing didn't belong to any one person. And as we were getting deeper into the book, and at the same time beginning the conversations about forming a WAC organization, we had a growing sense that what we were doing was as much about WAC as a movement as it was about the three of us as individual authors. What started out as a "how to" book for developing WAC programs grew into something that was more about the sustainability of the WAC movement and the creation of a formal WAC organization. I think we felt an extra sense of responsibility as we came to the completion of the book, knowing that we'd tapped into something larger than we had imagined when Michelle conceived of the original idea for the book.

THP: I'm wondering about how you developed into these roles as scholars and leaders. Did you have good mentors who encouraged you?

MC: I have had many wonderful mentors. Cinthia Gannett was my first mentor for WAC, as I mentioned earlier. Terry Zawacki has also been a really important mentor. When Terry and I collaborated on our book collection and the special issue in *Across the Disciplines* on second language writers, she really taught me how to think

about scholarship and modeled mentorship for me. She showed me how to think critically about a manuscript and give feedback that was in itself mentorship. She also helped me take steps into the WAC community as a leader. I had asked her why there were no WAC statements, and she told me to talk with Chris Thaiss about drafting one sponsored by INWAC. This led to the "Statement on WAC Principles and Practices." My work on this led Chris to ask me to be on the INWAC Board of Consultants. I had also asked Terry why there were no materials on the WAC Clearinghouse on multilingual writing. She recommended that I raise this question with Mike Palmquist. I did, and he asked me to join the WAC Clearinghouse as editor of a page on this topic. Terry helped me turn my questions into actions, and she knew who I should contact and how I should approach them.

I've also had shorter mentorships—sometimes as short as one conversation at national and regional conferences where I've talked about challenges I was facing as a scholar, teacher, program administration, or simply as an academic/parent/woman. These conversations helped me figure out next steps as well as put the challenges into context.

JG: Honestly, the only mentors I had were the scholars I met and worked with at enumerable conferences, workshops, and campus visits. I would probably say that Bill Condon, Terry Zawacki, Paul Anderson, and Chris Anson have played the biggest roles as mentors in my career. I met Paul Anderson at an IWAC conference after attending a presentation he gave on teaching WAC in large section courses. I invited him to my campus to help us deal with that exact issue. He proved to be a fantastic ally and thoughtful facilitator of conversations when he visited that enabled us to move through a crisis in the program concerning large section courses. I met Chris at conferences over and over, sharing rides, getting rides from him, and taking the same train in from the airport one year. We started talking a bit more as the AWAC organization began forming, and then he agreed to join Terry, Paul, and I to help develop the AWAC WAC Summer Institute. I really got to know him during that time frame. The four of us invited Alisa Russell to join us in developing the institute. She proved an invaluable asset to the institute, helping us organize and stay focused. I would say that Alisa was a kind of collaborator mentor to me as well.

DM: I went to an MA program in literature at Colorado State University, and it was lucky for me that there were WPAs there like Jon Leydens and Steve Reid and Mike Palmquist who helped me recognize that Rhetoric and Composition was a better fit for me, and who served as role models for effective WPAs. I then went to Florida State University to study with Rick Straub and Wendy Bishop, and it was a blessing to be the beneficiary of two different but equally effective mentoring styles from them: Rick's way of pushing you to be your very best, and Wendy's way of flattening

hierarchies and bringing you along with her on the million projects she was always working on. Rick and Wendy are gone, but they're with me always in my WPA work. But the person at Florida State who had the biggest influence on me as a mentor was the director of first-year composition, Deborah Coxwell Teague. Deborah is collaborative, conscientious, strategic, graceful, current in the field, caring, a great teacher—the full WPA package. Serving as a junior WPA under her mentorship influenced the way I went about my business as a WPA for the rest of my career.

THP: The idea that systems or movements are more important than individuals has come up a couple of times now. So, I'm wondering a little bit about how recent inter/national events (COVID-19 and the protests advocating for racial justice) have prompted you to rethink WAC programs and the institutional work of WAC practitioners? Has this moment made anything more plainly visible to you?

JG: For me, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a dislocating one. WAC directors are network specialists, building webs of relationships. COVID-19 has shut down so much faculty interaction that it has meant many programs have moved into maintenance mode. It is hard to build new programs when there is so little opportunity to meet face-to-face and in an environment of dwindling resources. So, I have been less engaged in program building this year than I have since I started working as a WAC program director.

DM: One of the primary motivations for writing *Sustainable WAC* was to address the problem that half of WAC programs don't survive, and I'm very worried that the economic impacts of the Trump administration's failure to respond to COVID-19 are going to have a devastating effect on WAC programs. Newer WAC programs that aren't deeply integrated into their institutional network will be low hanging fruit for administrators looking to trim budgets. This is one reason I feel so strongly that it's a strategic mistake to locate WAC programs as English department appendages. I think WAC programs located in independent writing programs, or centers for teaching and learning, or writing centers are more likely to survive the ebbs and flows of funding to higher education.

THP: I'm also interested in this question because part of your administrative theory suggests that WAC practitioners "go slow." Are there moments when we might not want to go slow—when we should "dive in," to echo Barbara Walvoord? If there are moments like this, what might diving in look like?

MC: "Go slow" doesn't mean never moving quickly. "Go slow" also means working to position the program well so that when opportunity opens, you're ready for it—a kind of "ready waiting." For instance, a WAC program that already has a relationship

with a diversity and inclusion office might be able to respond quickly to calls for increased diversity and inclusivity efforts on campus by reaching out to collaborate. The WAC program could also use some of their existing projects—like teaching circles or workshop series—to respond quickly to current needs. In other words, a WAC program that has taken its time to become integrated into the university, develop collaborative relationships with other units, open lines of communication, and develop projects in tune with its mission and resources is well-positioned to respond nimbly to new challenges and needs.

DM: Even though we argue in *Sustainable WAC* that incremental change is usually the way that stagnant and complex systems transform, sometimes there are tipping point moments where the mood is right for rapid change. I hope that we're at a tipping point in our perspectives on race and writing, and that we use this moment of amplified attention on equity to amplify anti-racist work. WAC has always had that element of reform and resistance, starting with James Britton and Art Young and Toby Fulwiler bringing process pedagogy and writing-to-learn to the disciplines, and continuing with Victor Villanueva and Donna LeCourt and Asao Inoue and Mya Poe's calls for a critical WAC pedagogy. A reckoning about racism and white privilege is certainly the right time to aim for rapid transformational changes to WAC and the way writing is taught in higher education.

THP: A lot of this conversation points toward the future of the field. So, I'm curious: what advice do you have for graduate students and junior scholars in the field?

JG: I think it's important to know that program planning and building require a skill set that is acquired through practice, good mentorship, and a bit of confidence that is built on the small successes over time and across multiple opportunities. Also get involved at the national level. AWAC did not exist when I was emerging as a scholar and administrator, so I gravitated to the INWAC SIG (now WAC Standing Group) at CCCC. I developed relationships with other scholars in the field that have proven invaluable. You will form mentorship relationships with those with whom you work.

DM: When I was in graduate school, I sought out opportunities to receive mentoring from WAC leaders, whether it was driving Chris Anson around during his visit to FSU or attending the INWAC meeting at CCCC every year. So, be proactive and take advantage of formal opportunities to develop relationships with more experienced WPAs. AWAC also provides a variety of ways to connect with experienced scholars and WPAs; by joining an AWAC committee, you can rub elbows with more established WAC WPAs in a reciprocal way. You don't need to be shy about reaching out. I'm always happy to provide feedback, help, or advice to a new scholar or WPA.

It's paying it forward for me, since there were so many established WPAs who lifted me up when I needed mentoring.

MC: I would say to do the work that is meaningful to you, and let that lead you to a professional identity. For example, I've always worn three hats: WAC, multilingual writing, and graduate writing. When I was a graduate student, some scholars told me that I had to choose, or else people wouldn't know who I was. I never chose. I continued to do work in all three areas. Now at Cornell University, I am embedded in a WAC program (the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines), where I direct a writing and speaking support program for multilingual graduate and professional students. I simply continued doing the work that was meaningful to me and pathways opened that allowed me to wear all three hats at the same time.

THP: What's next for the three of you?

MC: We received a CCCC Research Initiative Grant to conduct longitudinal research on universities using the whole systems approach (WSA) to launch and develop sustainable and transformative WAC programs. This grant allowed us to form the Sustainable WAC Consortium—a group of six universities. For the past two years, we have been guiding WAC leaders from these universities in using the WSA, and the participants have been collecting data from their programs. Ultimately, this work will result in a book comprised of case studies written by the participants and an introduction and conclusion in which we analyze the case studies in order to refine the WSA.

THP: What's next for AWAC and the field?

MC: AWAC has started offering benefits to members, by offering two webinar series (one on WAC administration and one on WAC pedagogy), offering a summer institute focused on developing WAC programs, creating a board of WAC consultants, collaborating with the CCCC WAC SG to offer online discussion groups, collaborating with the WAC Clearinghouse to offer a set of awards for publications and service to the field, and collaborating with different organizations to provide discounts to related conferences and events. We are hoping to develop an increased focus on WAC in secondary education and to continue thinking through how AWAC can support anti-racist pedagogy and programming, as well as help WAC programs survive COVID-19 related austerity measures taken by universities.

DM: There are important issues that my generation only began to pursue that I think the next generation of WAC leaders are poised to take on: issues of writing transfer, multimodal literacies, anti-racist WAC work, feminist approaches to WAC, WAC

WPA identities. One thing I admire about the next generation of WPAs is how they have spoken out about sexism and racism in spaces that have often been dominated by whiteliness and masculinist discourse. I think the next evolution of WAC would benefit from having the structural and impactful features that more formal organizations like NCTE and CWPA and CCCC have: position statements, outcomes statements, policy papers, research grants, political advocacy efforts, coordinating efforts across WPAs and institutions.

JG: AWAC has a bright future because there are so many folks involved at the leadership level. The more members we can get actively involved, the more we can do for the field. I hope that AWAC will provide a springboard for more scholars to get involved in leadership and that the projects in the organization will lead to productive mentorship relationships and research opportunities. And I hope that more graduate students like you will continue asking these kinds of insightful questions to keep the engine running.

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