Plenary Address

Fearlessness, Sustainability, and Adaptability via WAC in a Small School

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I am honored to be paired with Chris Thaiss for this plenary address, and I look forward to attempting to field questions.[1] As you have just heard, Chris presents a marvelous, longitudinal view of WAC from the perspective of an early and ongoing participant. I will say up front that Chris grants me a longer tenure as a WAC scholar than I deserve; while he was indeed doing WAC in the 1970s, WAC was a feature at Carleton College at that time—but well before I was on the scene. The story I offer is more of a case study of a place that stumbled into WAC for local reasons and has since taken on some status as an early adopter. As much as our field, rhetoric and composition, has striven to establish itself as a full member of the humanities, writ large, our history is spotty. This summer's conference provides a chance to dip into the history of WAC as well as its current manifestations, mindful of the protean nature of the beast illustrated by three key terms we have agreed to feature: fearlessness, sustainability, and adaptability.

Fearlessness

Harriet Sheridan's story of "Teaching Writing Extra-Territorially" provides an ideal example for our rubric of fearlessness. (See her 1979 piece in *ADE*.) Harriet Sheridan had been a fixture in Carleton's English department for many years when she was promoted to dean of the college during the presidency of Howard Swearer. Later, after Swearer assumed the presidency at Brown University and Sheridan had served as Carleton's interim president for a year, Sheridan followed him to Brown. The Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning is named in her honor. She was a powerhouse.

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Figure 1. Photo of Harriet Sheridan courtesy of the Carleton Archives

Back to Carleton in the 1970s. The college's catalog listed a writing requirement for graduation at least since 1960. The requirement began as a two-course sequence, was shortened over the years to one course, and, eventually, to a five-week course—half of one of Carleton's ten-week terms. Sheridan was in a position to observe these transitions as well as participate in them as an instructor, department chair, and dean. She faced irrefutable data showing that the courses, even the five-week version, were not particularly appreciated by students or faculty. Students complained bitterly about the courses, and finding faculty to teach them became increasingly difficult.

Nevertheless, college-wide, faculty expected high quality student writing, and where students did not meet a professor's standard, writing instruction from the English department was clearly at fault. (This complaint, in some form, probably dates to the ancient Greeks.) Recognizing that writing *instruction* differed from the *assigning* of writing, Sheridan decided to initiate a reform designed to 1) take some pressure off the English department; 2) spread responsibility for writing instruction to faculty in other departments; and 3) mobilize the writing skills of selected senior

students to serve as rhetoric assistants to the participating faculty in departments other than English.

To get this innovation off the ground, Sheridan organized a two-week rhetoric institute in the summer of 1975 for the first set of faculty who agreed to include writing instruction as well as delivering their usual disciplinary material. Readings for that early faculty workshop included Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, as well as an exercise in norming grades for student work. Next, faculty writing was subjected to the same treatment, which resulted in an assignment for them: an essay describing their learning about how to teach writing based on what they could expect of students and how their own writing fared upon close examination.

To support this curricular experiment, the Educational Policy Committee's minutes (2/4/1975) include this resolution:

> Resolved: that at all course levels, where appropriate, all members of the Carleton faculty should require term papers and other written work of their students. We do not think it appropriate that at an institution such as Carleton such written work should be returned to the students with little or no evaluation beyond a letter grade. Therefore we further resolve that, as a matter of policy, written work be returned with detailed commentary by way of evaluation not only of the accuracy of the content of the paper but of its form. As part of the evaluation of the effectiveness of written work in all courses, errors of spelling, grammar and style should be explicitly noted.
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> In order to establish common bases for judging writing skill and providing guidance for improvement, summer Rhetoric Institutes should be arranged annually to include interested faculty from all disciplines and student rhetoric assistants, until it is determined (by the Dean of the College) that they are no longer needed. Although for the present the object is to increase the options for fulfilling the writing requirement, **in the long run the goal is a continuing college-wide involvement in developing all students' writing skills**.

Despite the current-traditional language in that resolution, the intended goal was to spread the responsibility for writing instruction across the college via dedicated instruction in all departments.

When the program was launched, about half a dozen faculty agreed to design extra writing experiences for a subset of students in designated courses. A student rhetoric assistant worked with each faculty member to facilitate the writing goals of the course for those students attempting to satisfy the graduation requirement through the course. The final decision, separated from the grade in the course, was an up-or-down decision on the part of the professor.

Sustainability

This system, with minor changes, persisted for about twenty-five years. Elaine Maimon, who knew Sheridan, notes in her chapter in Fulwiler and Young (1990), that Sheridan simultaneously invented the faculty workshop, what we now call WAC, and also fielded the notion of a writing center that would employ peer tutors. Sheridan deserves that credit and more. After her departure, the English department continued to provide stand-alone courses in writing, and the "extra-territorial" courses expanded beyond the humanities to include introductory courses in the sciences and social sciences.

Eventually, though, as Thomas Kuhn might predict, the paradigm wore thin. Students learned via the grapevine which professors were likely to award "WR" and which to avoid. Faculty continued to complain about student writing, no matter who was teaching it. In 1996, a faculty task force examined the problem and produced a report that noted that, in contrast to the homogeneous student body of 1975, growing diversity among students presented a serious concern, with faculty confessing to their own shortcomings when encountering dialect or ESL features in student writing. Writing instruction, never a straightforward matter, now seemed deficient for cultural reasons.

Even though not one example of student writing was read and evaluated, the report's recommendations were rather far-reaching. In addition to hiring and supporting qualified ESL staff, there was the notion of a portfolio system that students would keep with them, adding written material throughout their four years. However, the mechanics of collecting and evaluating such an artifact were considered beyond the capacity of the college to manage at that time.

Adaptability

Change arrived in the form of new personnel and new pedagogy.

A little personal biography: I worked on the Carleton staff for ten years in a variety of jobs, leaving in the fall of 1992 to pursue a doctorate in English with a rhetoric and composition emphasis at the University of Minnesota. In 1997, to my great surprise, I was hired back as an ABD for a one-year, half-time job in faculty development for writing. I had an office, a nice computer, and a door I could close to work on my dissertation when I wasn't working with former colleagues—and those who had arrived over the previous five years—on WAC. I quickly learned that the Sheridan program that featured a subset of students attempting writing requirement in a range of disciplinary courses was a matter of faculty habit but not a healthy pedagogy.

The 1996 review of writing had surfaced problems but few solutions. Fewer faculty were willing to put in extra effort for the WR students in their courses, and those who were willing to provide the assignments often requested specific senior students

as writing assistants as a means of reducing their own effort for commentary or conferences to address writing problems.

Shortly after I arrived and began to understand faculty worries about writing, Carleton was invited to submit a grant application to a St. Paul-based foundation that had supported us before, most notably for our learning and teaching center back in 1992 (very early for a small school). The grant was for faculty development, and my supervisor, an associate dean, and I decided to improve programming for faculty in WAC. The preliminary proposal was deemed interesting by the site visitors, but they complained that we did not include any assessment. Gulp.

So *fearlessly* feeling our way toward a diktat we did not completely understand, we decided to make writing assessment the center of the proposal, launching our sophomore portfolio as a means of faculty development supported by visiting speakers, workshops, support for conference attendance, summer funding for revising or creating WAC courses, and reading the portfolios themselves. My boss and I intuitively understood how this kind of assessment would be meaningful and even fun for our colleagues. We suspected that faculty would initially balk at reading student work they had not assigned and was outside their areas of expertise, and we hoped that cautiousness would lead to curiosity about how writing could be successful in a variety of forms and disciplinary contexts. We were right.

One feature of the grant that turned out to be essential involved senior faculty in promoting the assessment project. An investment in course releases for professors of classics, economics, and astrophysics paid off handsomely as these colleagues recruited others to participate in various ways—including getting the new assessment program approved by the faculty as a whole.

The initial three-year grant was renewed for a total of six years. With a focus on new faculty as well as anyone else interested, one can do a lot of WAC-related damage over six years! Whatever I know about assessment started with *doing* it; formal learning through the literature, conferences, and so on came later.

Remembering that WAC as introduced at Carleton by Harriet Sheridan began as a faculty development activity, we were able to add assessment to her insight that writing *instruction* differs from *assigning* writing. As the portfolio recipe was *adapted* with ample faculty input, the assessment instrument itself spoke to a shared goal of promoting communication within and among discourse communities. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary design of the portfolio brought that same goal to the attention of students in an unavoidable way. No student could just submit her favorite papers; she had to show breadth of material as well as form.

Regarding *sustainability*, the portfolio assessment began as a pilot in 2004 and continues today, outlasting my tenure as director and prospering under a new director who has ably coped with the challenges of the pandemic by shifting the reading

and scoring processes online. The faculty development benefit of reading work that a) one has not assigned and b) ranges beyond one's disciplinary expertise continues.

Many of us will recall Ed White's frequent caution that WAC is subject to cycles that depend on leadership, budget, curricular fads, and so forth. My experience at Carleton and as a consultant to a range of other colleges and universities points me toward a different metaphor. I see WAC as more of a sine curve that fluctuates according to various influences. As a WAC leader, my job is to keep the amplitude up, to anticipate the dips and offer support as needed.

As I have worked with many campuses on WAC, I have learned that size matters. Therefore, I want to briefly address the difference among community colleges (where about half of the college-level writing courses are taught), universities (where writing instructors earn credentials), and small liberal arts colleges, where WAC often thrives.

Carleton is a dinky little place in Northfield, Minnesota, with about 2,000 students and about 280 full and part-time faculty. (Northfield is also home to St. Olaf College across the Cannon River, which serves over 3,000 students.) Small schools tend to engender fierce loyalty among their alumni, faculty, and staff. Although the small-school percentage of higher education offerings nationally is around five percent and declining, small schools foster achievement, promote their graduates, and, to a considerable degree, populate their boards with plenty of alumni. Details differ from school to school, of course. Until fairly recently, however, as consortia and other combinations have developed to address issues in common, small school administrations were loath to reach out to peers for ideas, data, or other information. Even with an early WAC program, Carleton was no different: a report naming problems with student writing did not engender an SOS to any outside institution.

I well remember a gathering convened by the Teagle Foundation during an AAC&U convention early in this century, where grants were being offered to small schools—with the requirement to partner with at least one other institution to address some mutual assessment effort. The attendees had many questions, and a few administrators showed interest in collaboration with other schools. In a dramatic counter to the Teagle agenda, a dean of a small school in the Northeast categorically denounced the value of combining personnel and data, arguing that sharing data was dangerous to that or any institution's well-being. A hush followed that outburst. (Parenthetically, invitations from Teagle and other foundations accomplished good work with partnerships among small schools all over the country. Carleton participated in at least three.)

Back to the outburst: To be fair, that dean was speaking out of a moment similar to Harriet Sheridan's approach to tackling the writing curriculum at Carleton in the 1970s. Sheridan did not care about writing at other schools; she did not pick up the

phone to ask for advice; she assumed that the Carleton environment was *sui generis*; therefore, she proceeded with institutional legislation and a whole lot of arm twisting.

From what I have observed as a consultant to about thirty small schools, defensiveness persists in some quarters, yet more faculty and administrators seem increasingly open to collaborative ideas that are well supported in the literature and in practice. This is a healthy shift, and it augurs well for WAC overall. As I have reviewed the program for this conference, I see just a handful of folks from small schools. The virtual format may be the main reason, which is understandable. I do hope that virtual access brings in plenty of attendees from small school WAC programs. There is great work going on and more work to be done.

Works Cited

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