

Leveraging Institutional Circuits to Rethink Writing Across the Curriculum at Two-Year Colleges

TARA COLEMAN AND DOMINIQUE ZINO

Especially at large open-access institutions, WAC stakeholders face the challenge of understanding how particular writing skills are being reinforced (or overlooked) at various junctures during a student's career. For WAC to move beyond more isolated writing-to-learn scenarios and to shift how students engage in written communication during the two to three years most spend at a community college, WAC pedagogy needs to be coordinated with and built out of the existing institutional structures with which faculty members are already engaged. In this article, we use the concept of "institutional circuits" to identify networks of writing-related activity on our two-year college campus. Rather than presenting a specific set of recommendations for how to approach WAC at community colleges, this article offers a methodology for studying WAC work on campus that allows scholars and practitioners to think beyond the curriculum itself and attend to the forces that shape faculty choices within it.

Across all institution types, the first two years of higher education represent a crucial moment of exposure to critical literacy tasks, which present students with an opportunity to build on prior knowledge and establish productive habits. Given that nearly half of all recent baccalaureate graduates in the United States began their studies at community colleges, it is essential to develop our understanding of the role these institutions play in promoting writing across the curriculum (WAC).¹ Two-year institutions—sandwiched as they are between the K-12 system

1. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) has reported that among "graduates who completed a four-year degree in 2015-2016, 49 percent had been enrolled in a two-year college, and 63 percent of that group were enrolled in a two-year college for three or more terms." During the 2020-2021 academic year, 8.9 million students—41 percent of all undergraduates—were enrolled in community colleges.

and the four-year university, and between the opportunity for a liberal arts education and the demand for employable skills—are tasked with imagining an “elsewhere.” As Howard B. Tinberg writes, “To teach at a community college is to be ‘in translation’ or between places. . . . That complexity colors instruction at all times” (vii). Community college faculty are adept at working collaboratively across disciplines and job titles. For instance, faculty members may take on job duties that would be covered by student affairs staff in four-year colleges, and they sometimes work in departments comprising a range of disciplines. They are also often highly attuned to and accountable for intersecting and sometimes competing demands from various constituencies: college and university administrations, regional accrediting agencies, local government, the values and practices of their disciplines, their students, and the public that funds them. Moreover, because community colleges and other open-access institutions by definition do not select the students whom they accept at the outset—and yet have all the same requirements as any other higher education institution to teach students and assess their learning—they are under even more pressure to develop instruments and structures for producing, delivering, and ultimately assessing course content.

Writing across the curriculum efforts emerged in community colleges at the very start of the WAC movement in the 1970s. Scholarship documented these efforts and tracked their growth in the following decades, with some scholar practitioners highlighting an intrinsic alignment between community college missions and WAC principles. Linda Stanley and Joanna Ambron’s 1991 book *Writing Across the Curriculum in Community Colleges* showcased a variety of curricular approaches, including the incorporation of WAC into learning communities, writing-intensive courses, and service-learning courses. In the 2010 special issue of *Across the Disciplines* devoted to community colleges, Mary McMullen-Light noted several areas of overlap between WAC ideals and community college values: “inclusiveness, diversity, provid[ing] support, [and placing an] emphasis on learning” (2). However, after three decades of scholarship that made a point of including two-year institutions in the scholarly conversation about WAC (see Blau; Pacht; Reiss; Rose and Theilheimer; Stanley and Ambron), a dearth of research sources from the 2010s onward suggests that more recent attention to the various manifestations of WAC in two-year college contexts has been limited. During this period, several other institutional forces at two-year colleges have shifted, including but not limited to new demands for assessment, the retooling of general education pathways, and the adoption of new learning management systems and other digital platforms. At present, community colleges face a range of challenges, from enrollment declines (caused by a combination of

demographic shifts and the COVID-19 pandemic)² to growing pressure to increase retention and graduation rates, decrease time to degree, and justify the value of a two-year college education. What is the impact of today's institutional realities on the forms of engagement with WAC that we find at community colleges? And how can we adopt approaches to studying WAC efforts at these institutions that enable us to learn from and build on the forms of engagement that already exist?

In this article, our aim is not to measure the level of engagement with WAC at community colleges today—not to collect data on program size, the number of students taking writing-intensive courses, or the number of faculty certified to teach such courses—but to look more closely at the nature of that engagement. We examine the conditions in which faculty at our community college generate writing assignments; in particular, we are interested in the broader institutional forces that, from the perspective of faculty members, shape the culture of writing at the institution. As Mike Palmquist et al. have reminded us, the “use of writing to support disciplinary learning, a key tenet of WAC, is among the first pedagogical approaches identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities as ‘high-impact practices.’” Yet WAC can only be “high-impact” when an institution creates consistent pathways for faculty and other stakeholders to think and talk about how the writing happening in individual classrooms relates to what is happening across the entire curriculum. Especially at a large open-access institution, it is challenging, but necessary, for faculty to understand how particular writing skills are being reinforced (or overlooked) at various junctures during a student's career and adjust their pedagogy accordingly. For WAC to move beyond more isolated writing-to-learn scenarios and to shift how students engage in written communication during the two to three years most spend at a community college, WAC pedagogy needs to be coordinated with and built out of the existing institutional structures with which faculty members are already engaged.

We follow sociologists Alison I. Griffith and Dorothy E. Smith's use of the term *institutional circuits* to name how individuals coordinate their work with institutional expectations. Griffith and Smith define institutional circuits as “recognizable and traceable sequences of institutional action in which work is done to produce texts that select from actualities to build textual representations fitting an authoritative or ‘boss’ text” (12). As part of the methodology of institutional ethnography, following institutional circuits contextualizes the work taking place in classrooms within often invisible power relations at the local level, while also revealing how trends in the landscape of higher education play out in the particular contexts under examination. As

2. The CCRC reports that the pandemic “led to steep enrollment drops at community colleges but enrollment seems to be recovering. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center estimates that enrollment in public two-year colleges in fall 2023 grew by 4.4% from fall 2022.”

we will detail more fully below, we use the concept of institutional circuits to describe how we, as researchers and WAC proponents on our campus, identify networks of writing-related activity. WAC leaders can learn from the ways faculty members navigate institutional power dynamics and negotiate with textual representations of institutional priorities in order to promote writing amidst this ever-shifting landscape. In this article, rather than presenting a specific set of recommendations for how to approach WAC at community colleges, we offer a *methodology* for studying WAC work on campus that allows scholars and practitioners to think beyond the curriculum itself and attend to the forces that shape faculty choices within it.

Motive and Method for Our Study

This article reports on the results of a study of the factors that influence faculty decision-making around the incorporation of reading and writing assignments into courses at a large, urban community college. We both teach in the English department and currently serve as two of three codirectors of the writing program, which is notably separate from the college's writing in the disciplines (WID) initiative. As a result of significant changes to placement and developmental education in recent years, our writing program has been focused on how students arrive in our courses and how to prepare them for successfully completing our first-year composition sequence. In this research project, we wanted to shift the focus by learning more about the types of assignments being used outside our two one-hundred-level composition courses and how those assignments reflect faculty members' personal, programmatic, general education, and professional goals for their students.

Many larger-scale studies of faculty writing assignments across disciplines exist (e.g. Melzer; Soliday; Yancey, Robertson and Taczak). For example, while Dan Melzer and Mary Soliday focus primarily on analyzing features of writing assignments and the rhetorical situations students are asked to engage with, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak discuss how to support students' transfer of writing knowledge and practices. We wanted to know not only what faculty do but *why*, and how faculty choices may be influenced by the multifaceted mission of our institution. Our study foregrounds the experiences of faculty who are experimenting with WAC and WID concepts, and contextualizes this work amidst the complex institutional forces that they encounter. Inspired in part by the systems approach developed by Michelle Cox, Jeffrey Galin, and Dan Melzer, which offers a way of identifying various "moving parts" in large networks to support more sustainable WAC program development, we have tried to understand how faculty design writing assignments within a system of institutional directives and material resources. To unpack the relationship between the individual experiences of teachers using writing in their courses

and the institutional forces that influence their decisions, we turned to a methodology known as institutional ethnography.

Institutional ethnographers tie together “the local setting where life is lived and experienced by actual people and the extra-local that is outside the boundaries of one’s everyday experience” (Campbell and Gregor 29). They analyze the discourse individuals use to describe their practices and pay particular attention to institutional texts and their role in coordinating work. Michelle LaFrance calls this a process of “looking up” to “tell a story about the ways personal experiences and work practices have been reflexively contoured by the material and discursive conditions” of the institution, while at the same time revealing “variations, disjunctions, disagreements or absences” in those conditions (31). In this study, we reveal how the range of decisions faculty members make around the implementation of writing-based pedagogies are “reflexively contoured”—but not fully determined—by existing approaches to curriculum design and assessment at our college. Institutional ethnography as a method uncovers the “ruling relations”—or hierarchical social relations—that coordinate an individual’s activities, but it is equally interested in when and why the actualities of work fail to fully conform to the framework established by those ruling relations (Griffith and Smith 16). By tracing these realities which IE calls “problematics,” the institutional ethnographer identifies potential sites for productive intervention.

At the outset of our study, we identified two key sets of documents that we assumed would coordinate the work of faculty members at our college: faculty syllabi and the degree maps provided to students as a suggested sequence of courses for their program. Taken together, these documents (syllabi and degree maps) are examples of “powerful institutional apparatus[es]” that are “authorized through institutional procedures” (LaFrance 82–83). To understand how reading and writing are approached in a cross section of disciplines, we focused on the seven most popular majors at the college: business administration, criminal justice, liberal arts: math and science, liberal arts: social sciences and humanities, nursing, computer science, and psychology. Using the degree maps designed for these majors, we identified courses at the early, mid- and late stages of each program (see Appendix 1). We presumed that writing tasks would increase in complexity as students moved through their programs. After identifying full-time and part-time faculty members who had recently taught these courses, we contacted a faculty member for each one, inviting them to share their syllabus in advance and participate in a one-hour interview. We also brought the relevant degree map for the program containing that course to the interview. Although adopting a departmental syllabus is a clear attempt to coordinate faculty choices regarding course design, we wanted to know if the degree map similarly impacts how faculty design writing assignments in the context of the sequence of courses students are expected to take.

Hour-long interviews with faculty members helped us to learn more about the role of particular assignments and courses in serving the learning goals of each degree program. Initially, we targeted approximately forty-five courses for our study to “map” the types of assignments students encountered in these seven programs. We began our study in the fall of 2019, but the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 disrupted both our funding and our ability to conduct interviews. The following analysis reflects the results of the nineteen interviews we were able to complete (see Appendix 2 for our list of questions). At the time of our interviews, two faculty were adjuncts, one was a full-time lecturer, five were assistant professors, nine were associate professors, and two were full professors. Ten faculty from across the assistant, associate, and full professor ranks were either program directors or course coordinators; while these administrative roles vary across departments, they generally include scheduling sections, hiring and/or communicating with adjunct faculty, and coordinating curriculum and assessment processes, among other tasks.

We noticed that particularly when it came to the use of writing, participants reported a lot more variation in the assignments and activities used by instructors teaching the same course than we had expected—even in cases where a standardized departmental syllabus was used. While faculty members’ choices were still influenced by the ruling relations of the institution—particularly when it came to assessment—they were finding creative ways of working within, and sometimes around, the requirements in order to serve other learning goals, such as disciplinary or professional expectations for students. Our analysis below reveals the institutional and extra-institutional factors which influence a faculty member’s decision to assign certain types of writing in their course, as well as the extent to which they consider the types of writing students do at other stages of their program when making those decisions. By using institutional ethnography, we traced how faculty members’ participation in a variety of networks at the college, along with other professional experiences and/or disciplinary expertise, have led them to build writing into their courses. We followed how individual faculty members coordinate their work with writing in the course with what they understand to be the expectations and values of colleagues in the same department, at the college, at four-year institutions, or in their discipline or profession at large. Drawing on this methodology to identify and build on existing networks and values offers a prime opportunity for enhancing WAC in a community college setting, or at any institution where size, funding, or other institutional dynamics limit the potential for starting or expanding a formal WAC program.

Site of Study: Current Circumstances at our Community College

The WAC program at our college is limited in its scope and resources, primarily consisting of a semester-long writing in the disciplines professional development seminar

that prepares faculty to teach writing-intensive courses. In the seminar, faculty discuss how to implement writing-to-learn techniques, guide students through reading difficult texts, evaluate student writing, and so on. They also develop high-stakes and low-stakes writing assignments, a grading rubric, and a writing intensive course syllabus. Originally a year-long program with up to fifty participants a year, due to a gradual erosion of funding and administrative support, participation in WID has dwindled (Pacht, “Email interview”). Our situation mirrors McMullen-Light’s observation that although in the 1990s there was an emphasis on making sure WAC programs “institutionalized” rather than remaining at the level of an “initiative” or an “add-on,” many community college programs have been unable to sustain that broader institutional investment over time (13). Outside of the semester-long WID seminar, faculty do not have a formalized way to continue their exploration of WAC pedagogy. In addition, neither the college’s writing program nor its writing center have regular communication with the WAC program.

The current state of WAC at our institution is therefore in line with McMullen-Light’s observation that rather than fostering independent WAC programs, community colleges organically seem to “promote the infusion of various new initiatives that emerge through various institutional agendas and don’t require the same level of oversight [that] a WAC program does” (2). An example of such an initiative is general education outcomes assessment, which McMullen-Light notes became “a high priority of some accrediting agencies” in the 1990s (6). On our campus, general education assessment has indeed become an important site of faculty work with student writing across the curriculum. The college assesses courses across every program using three core competencies: integrative learning, inquiry and problem solving, and global learning. These competencies are demonstrated using three communication abilities: written, oral, and digital. Each program creates a curriculum map that specifies which courses are to be assessed for which competency and ability in the early, mid- and late stages of a student’s degree. The college collects written, oral, and/or digital artifacts from students which are assessed annually by faculty across the college using rubrics derived from the AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics. Annual benchmark readings, which include norming sessions and a post-scoring discussion, provide an opportunity for faculty across the college to discuss students’ written work. In the first few years after the college adopted the competency and ability rubrics, assignment-design workshops were regularly held with the goal of designing assignment materials to target these goals, while the data from annual assessments is used (to varying degrees, depending on the program) to inform assignment revisions and additional support measures for students.

The college provides strong administrative and financial support for this work, which has led to year-on-year improvements in scores for written artifacts from when

the rubric was adopted in 2015 through 2022. As we will discuss further below, many faculty have found creative ways to work both within and around this assessment framework at the college to promote writing within their programs and individual courses that meets their own pedagogical goals, while also helping the college meet its targets. At the same time, the intense focus on mapping assessment benchmarks onto the curriculum makes the existence of writing-focused assignment development outside assessment contexts nearly invisible at the college.

In the discussion of our results below, we will analyze the benefits and limitations of drawing on alternative networks for developing faculty engagement with student writing across the curriculum. McMullen-Light suggests that instead of mandates, such as a formal writing-intensive course requirement, a more effective way to grow a WAC program at a community college might be to “fold WAC into existing priorities and initiatives by demonstrating how it can assist with achieving their goals” (8). Our study identified several ways that writing work is happening outside the scope of formal curricular requirements. We argue that creating more opportunities for faculty to consider how their efforts connect to a student’s other experiences with writing at the college would be more effective than a one-time, classroom-centered WID/WAC workshop model in truly building a student’s writing skills over the course of their degree program. Learning from the most prominent of these efforts, such as reforms in assessment, can pave the way for identifying and building on a more diverse range of such opportunities.

Discussion of Results

Searching for “Boss Texts”

Through this study, we intended to trace how curricular frameworks may have impacted our participants’ course design and pedagogy. Before turning to a discussion of institutional circuits, we want to acknowledge that we entered our investigation with certain assumptions about the impact of what institutional ethnographers call *boss texts*. Boss texts are documents that organize people’s activities and “*transmit ruling relations between sites—carrying rhetorical influence, granting agency and authority, casting representations of people and their work, and sanctioning activities*” (LaFrance 42; original emphasis). In other words, boss texts represent individuals’ work within the “objectified categories and concepts of the institution,” making the actualities of the work “institutionally actionable” (339). Given our interest in understanding how and why faculty across the curriculum assign writing in their courses, we identified two types of boss texts we imagined might have influence on their decisions: degree maps and course syllabi. We focused on how our interviewees described these

documents in order to explore the extent to which these texts structure the choices faculty members make about writing in their courses.

Degree maps, created for each major or program, recommend a course sequence, semester by semester, that enables students to graduate in two years. Students, faculty members, staff, and administrators all engage with them. We targeted faculty participants who frequently taught courses listed on the degree map; some also coordinated those courses, meaning they were responsible for determining the curricula and ensuring instructors followed it. We asked interviewees to discuss whether they thought students were generally following the sequence of recommended courses presented on the degree maps before and during the semester in which they took the target course, and then, what types of reading and writing experiences they thought their students had been exposed to previously. Despite the fact that administrators, department chairs, and program directors devoted significant time and effort to making these maps, and they are used regularly for advising purposes, we were surprised to discover that they did not guide faculty choices with regard to how they assigned writing in their courses. Even those faculty with experience as program directors or course coordinators tended to focus on program's core course sequences rather than the relationship between general education courses and their own programmatic requirements. The responses we received indicated to us that degree maps do less to aid faculty members in thinking about their course as part of a broader curriculum than one might expect given their widespread use for program development and advising purposes.

Participants pointed to two specific challenges that might indicate why degree maps organize behavior to a lesser extent than we anticipated: first, faculty recognize that a sizable number of students deviate from the suggested pathway, making it difficult to presume much about their prior learning experiences; students may put off courses they perceive to be most difficult, retake courses they previously failed, transfer in from another institution, or change programs midway through the course sequence. Secondly, faculty participants did not seem to view these recommended course sequences as prompts to inquire about their students' prior reading and writing experiences. Only seven of the nineteen faculty members we interviewed named a specific type of writing assignment or skill they expected students to have encountered previously. These participants mentioned either research papers or knowledge of citation formats, with only faculty members who had taught the previous courses themselves giving further details. Eleven of the nineteen participants mentioned English 101 (the only course required of all students at the college) as a prerequisite for work in later courses, but most faculty members simply discussed their general impressions of students' reading and/or writing abilities coming into their courses.

After asking faculty members about how their course relates to other courses students take, we asked them to discuss the assignments on their syllabus in more detail. We were especially interested in how they spoke about the role of writing in achieving course goals, as well as the various departmental, college, and professional expectations that impact course design. Some courses have a departmentally designated syllabus, but even in those that do not, an individual faculty member's syllabus needs to adhere to course requirements approved by departmental and college curriculum committees. We asked faculty members to discuss writing assignments on their syllabus as well as any other writing opportunities they provide in their classes. In some courses, where calculations, homework, and exams were the focus of the assignments on the syllabus, faculty members spoke about incorporating writing that is not a required part of the course. In some cases, this additional writing was low-stakes while in others, it involved replacing an exam with a term paper as in one accounting course. Several faculty spoke about personal or disciplinary motivations for these choices. For example, a natural sciences professor explained that he was working with a colleague to develop scientific literacy among students who were taking their one and only science class as a graduation requirement, inspired by a desire to make his course more like the liberal arts classes he took in college which "were more about thinking about the subject, not about . . . facts and figures." A social science professor, meanwhile, described how her expertise in developmental psychology informs her approach to teaching, where she tries to help students understand how learning happens. Rather than a lecture-based approach, she said that "the bigger thing is to try to engage them in the doing. And that's one of the big reasons for doing the writing because the more they write, the better they're going to get at what they're doing." In other cases, participants were influenced by what they had learned in a professional development seminar about the use of writing to achieve pedagogical goals, such as one mathematics faculty member, who learned about short, generally writing-based classroom assessment techniques in her new faculty seminar and still uses them in her class several years later. In all of these instances, participants expressed a sense that colleagues teaching the same course were likely not doing the same things with writing as they were, though these participants did not see themselves operating in a vacuum. Those who felt that their practice was not shared by colleagues in the same program aligned their choices with what they understood to be the expectations or practices of colleagues at other institutions, especially four-year colleges, or in the profession. At the same time, those in positions of leadership for their course or program expressed hesitation in pushing colleagues to change their approach too quickly, mentioning considerations of workload (for adjunct colleagues in particular) and academic freedom.

Like degree maps, syllabi also turned out not to be productive boss texts for learning about what happens with writing at the college. Tracking syllabi across programs was less effective than we thought it would be for learning about how writing is used in each academic program, and it proved to be an unreliable guide to what kinds of writing were actually happening in individual classrooms. Although deviations from the syllabus sometimes revealed exciting experiments with writing, they also reminded us that these innovations were far from being widespread enough to be considered part of the curriculum. At community colleges, a focus on “momentum” and degree completion has put strong pressure on faculty and staff to prioritize student movement through the defined pathway above all else (see Isserles). Yet our faculty interviews revealed a large degree of variation from the picture these standardized documents present of the curriculum. We assumed our public, two-year college was the kind of text-saturated and document-driven environment that would align with the operating procedures of the public sector workers that institutional ethnographers like Griffith, Smith, Marie Campbell, and Frances Gregor study. For example, Griffith and Smith’s book *Under New Public Management* is a collection of institutional ethnographies that describe how institutional mandates and corresponding boss texts shape the work of public sector employees. Instead, we found that the boss texts rarely standardized faculty behavior to the extent they appeared to do. Faculty members’ choices were clearly informed by these texts, but they were often actively negotiating with them rather than simply finding ways to serve their mandates. As Griffith and Smith write in their introduction to *Under New Public Management*, a collection of institutional ethnographies that describe how institutional mandates and corresponding boss texts shape the work of public sector employees, “when services provided directly to people are required to be performed in ways that are representable textually in a standardized and measurable form,” and “[h]owever ingenious the technologies [for doing so], the disjuncture between textual realities produced to fit frames established in boss texts and the actualities of what is going on in people’s lives remains as an obstinate presence” (18).

Leveraging Institutional Circuits to Strengthen WAC’s Impact on Campus

Although our data revealed the limitations of boss texts in providing a map of how writing is used across the curriculum, our conversations with faculty members indicated that institutional ruling relations still impacted their decision-making around writing, only in more complex ways. When discussing their choices about assigning writing, the faculty members who spoke most comprehensively about the link between their course and writing taking place across the curriculum were those actively involved in initiatives at the college which gave them consistent opportunities to communicate with colleagues about their courses. In other words, these faculty

members were participants in key institutional circuits—processes in which they coordinated their work with colleagues in alignment with institutional priorities. For institutional ethnographers, identifying the circuits is not the *product* of the research but the *method* through which the researcher comes to understand how the individuals under study produce texts to enable institutionally sanctioned action. Our interviews with faculty demonstrated that boss texts did not fully prescribe faculty choices, but they did often create the framework within which faculty could make their assignments institutionally legible and therefore actionable. In this context, the concept of institutional circuits highlights how texts must be activated within existing networks and pathways of meaning to have an impact. Understanding how faculty work within existing frameworks to achieve goals that meet, sometimes exceed, or evade the aims of the institution provides insight into how WAC work can be woven into preexisting efforts on campus. In the remainder of this article, we will focus on general education assessment and ePortfolio as two prime examples of institutional circuits.

Assessment as an Institutional Circuit

The most prominent example of how faculty worked together to build writing assignments that fit an existing institutional discourse was in relation to assessment. Faculty members who were (or had previously been) a program director or course coordinator expressed a sense of responsibility to show that their program had met the relevant benchmarks. Yet program directors also seemed to understand how to work within assessment requirements to achieve a range of goals for their course. A coordinator in the mathematics, engineering, and computer science department described doing research into how to design open-ended assignments for his general education mathematics course where students must “expound upon their thinking.” As a professor in his tenth year at the college who previously worked in industry, he expressed a personal inclination to adopt writing-to-learn pedagogies, but used the college’s general education assessment categories to institutionalize this approach:

I would [teach this way] anyway . . . but the fact that there is an IPS core requirement [i.e., a general education assessment of inquiry and problem solving skills] allows me to find one high-stake or medium-stake assignment in there. In terms of the norms of the department there’s no post-req, so I don’t have that requirement. Systemically. It’s more a question of, you know, my own conscience. . . . I’m the course coordinator and I do try to leave my faculty, my colleagues, with free reign.

He understands this assignment, which is assessed for both IPS and the written ability, as part of an important set of skills for “composition in general.” To him, this

means the “idea of trying to write about things that are inherently quantitative and trying to be clear,” which he emphasizes over preparing students for future mathematics courses, because they are not likely to have any. Although he expressed frustration about seeing a faculty syllabus and assignment that presented the course he coordinates as something closer to a remedial algebra course, rather than one focused on quantitative reasoning and using written responses to explicate mathematical equations, he hoped that situating his assignment within the IPS requirement would make it more likely that colleagues will eventually adopt the approach.

In another case, a natural sciences course coordinator, who was making curricular changes in response to programmatic needs, strategically aligned these efforts with assessment targets to gain institutional support. This faculty member was working with his department chair to improve how their program teaches students to write lab reports. He explained that the assessment process provided an opportunity for his faculty to discuss student writing, but that it was difficult to use a college-wide written communication rubric to assess writing in lab reports, so his department was now developing its own rubric. Taking a scaffolded approach to building students’ skills in writing lab reports, he helped to implement a series of ten lab reports over the course of the semester, with the first five providing an opportunity for students to become familiar with the genre of a lab report and the last five serving as parts to be compiled into a final, larger lab report. When we asked about the use of low-stakes writing to explain a scientific concept, however, he noted that in order to meet digital and oral communication requirements, the program asked students to verbalize a narrative of what they were doing in an experiment and post that on their ePortfolio. This example reveals one of the limitations of relying on the assessment process to help implement writing across the curriculum, because the separate assessment of the written, oral, and digital abilities leads to a segmented approach. Conceptualized from the perspective of WAC, this course could use writing to support these low-stakes assignments by asking students to script or, after the fact, to transcribe their recorded narratives. Instead, the potential role of writing in building analytical skills is less visible because assignments are treated as individual artifacts separate from the broader learning context.

By contrast, a faculty member who came to the college with experience at writing centers, and who coordinates the college’s technical writing course, created what she calls a “global technical report,” that is assessed as a global learning assignment while still reflecting her own expertise in writing-to-learn approaches. She told us that the assignment was influenced by both her humanities background and research into engineering pedagogy (the course is required primarily of engineering students). She said,

If you follow the trends in engineering education, engineering scholars want to help engineering students develop a more global learning mindset because engineers do work a lot in places that they're not familiar with and cultures they're not familiar with. So this technical report asks them to identify some kind of global problem that happens in the world. . . . [T]hey find out what's causing the problem, what's the background, the cultural context, the political scenario around this problem. . . . Then they look at what solutions engineers can provide. . . . The goal of this is to get them to enlarge their understanding of what engineering is. . . . [I]t's about the people who use [a certain tool] and how it might help or hurt the local environment.

This faculty member pushed to get this course, previously overlooked both in the English department and at the college, put “on the map” as a global learning course. At the same time, her knowledge of writing pedagogy led her to approach this assignment with a focus on process: “I want [students] to understand that there's more to being an engineer than just devising the product.” Not only did the faculty member revise the technical report assignment, but she adapted the entire course to “enlarge students' understanding” of the role of writing in professions like engineering. She emphasized “clear, concise writing” as integral to technical writing, as well as attention to the “rhetorical aspects of writing” on all assignments. In this case, rather than just bringing in writing to serve assessment targets, the faculty member leveraged assessment targets to incorporate writing-to-learn throughout the course.

While the frequency with which general education assessment came up in our interviews revealed that it was an important organizing framework coordinating the use of writing in a range of programs, presenting writing as only one of six competencies and abilities at the college has the potential to undermine WAC's guiding principle that writing is a tool for learning in all situations. In order for WAC to flourish on community college campuses (or any campuses where general education assessment reigns supreme), WAC coordinators can use examples of how faculty members successfully worked within assessment mandates to achieve writing-to-learn pedagogies; in this way, they can “flip” the assessment script and demonstrate for faculty across disciplines how writing is not a singular component but, rather, the backbone for the full body of competencies and abilities being assessed.

ePortfolio as an Institutional Circuit

Like general education assessment, an institutional circuit related to the use of ePortfolios at the college provides both a challenge and an opportunity for building writing across the curriculum. Every entering student creates an ePortfolio in a first-year seminar, using a template and a series of writing prompts that are customized to their

major. They then return to these ePortfolios throughout their career at the college, to varying degrees depending on the program. In our interviews, multiple faculty referenced ePortfolios as a site of writing: the natural sciences course coordinator discussed above mentioned uploading labs to ePortfolio to create connections for students between general chemistry I and II; a lecturer in business and technology mentioned assigning an ePortfolio reflection for extra credit; and a nursing faculty member described ePortfolio reflections students wrote about their clinical experience as well as assignments like “data action responses,” a description of patient symptoms and the resulting action taken. In programs like nursing, where ePortfolio prompts are the main vehicle for writing and assessing student writing, the college’s promotion of ePortfolio has clearly enabled greater engagement with certain modes of and contexts for writing.

ePortfolio is a flexible tool to which the college devotes significant budgetary and administrative resources. In the prior examples, we see faculty members leveraging this institutional circuit to do work that meets their own learning goals. At the same time, this approach has its limits in terms of what it can provide for students: in the nursing program, for example, the pressures of an extensive course of study culminating in a stringent licensing exam leave faculty members little time to work with students on writing, so these reflections are graded pass/fail and do not allow time for drafting. Considering how the built-in ePortfolio writing prompts tend to be designed by the college’s ePortfolio support team, we realized that they, too, can act as digital boss texts that structure how faculty assign, how students complete, and how the college assesses student writing. (In fact, one social science professor noted, “Maybe writing on ePortfolio makes [students] feel like they can write less.”) As with assessment efforts, ePortfolio as a platform provides many opportunities for integrating writing across the curriculum both horizontally (across departments) and vertically (throughout the student’s time at the college). To marshal the latent potential of this institutional circuit, WAC coordinators would need to give faculty the opportunity to reflect on how their use of writing in ePortfolios relates to students’ broader writing development. Doing so might encourage both faculty and students to engage with ePortfolio as a space of exploration through writing that captures a student’s holistic growth over time, rather than as a checklist of items to complete to meet certain course requirements.

As members of the institution ourselves, these interviews helped us to remember that even in the case of externally driven institutional priorities, the texts which coordinate faculty work within institutional circuits are often composed predominantly by faculty and, as such, are capable of being revised by faculty. As Griffith and Smith remind us, institutional circuits “impose an order of standardized representation on the tough recalcitrance of people-work actualities that *never quite fit*

the frames established by the institutional boss texts” (16; emphasis added). Our interviews revealed the productive potential of thinking about curricular work, not in the binary terms of fealty versus resistance to administrative demands (communicated through boss texts), but in terms of coordinated efforts to negotiate within and respond to those demands over time. By observing how faculty work within these different institutional circuits, we can learn about effective approaches to developing writing-oriented initiatives from the inside out, rather than from the top down.

Conclusion

Rather than identify model pedagogical approaches that distinguish the work going on at our institution, we have sought to demonstrate a methodology that can enable both WAC leaders and faculty members to think more systematically about how their work in individual classes fits into larger initiatives related to writing. In our college, we found that although certain documents, like degree maps and course syllabi, were products of faculty members’ collaborative curricular efforts, there was no sustained circuit of activity surrounding these documents after they had been created. By contrast, general education assessment and ePortfolio practices had significant administrative support, which provided regular opportunities for faculty members to communicate and coordinate their work in these areas. Faculty members looking to incorporate more writing into their courses had a variety of reasons for doing so, but several had strategically linked those efforts to these preexisting institutional circuits, providing a model for how to make WAC work more effective and sustainable in the long term.

Notably, the faculty members who were most successful in navigating institutional circuits were those with experience as program directors or course coordinators, roles that combine curricular responsibilities with a range of other administrative duties. Faculty members without this expertise may not be aware of how to enter into these circuits and/or produce the textual representations necessary to make their work legible within them. This study suggests that documents intending to coordinate individual work need to be made more visible and accessible to those who may wish to take them up. For example, while degree maps are often used in advising conversations with students, faculty members who are neither program directors nor mentors may not regularly consult these maps; as a result, they do not have the opportunity to reflect on both students’ prior knowledge from past courses and how to prepare them for courses to come. Likewise, as part of this study we requested from assessment coordinators on our campus the list of which courses in our seven target degree programs submit student artifacts annually to be assessed using the college’s written ability rubric. While faculty generally know when a course they are teaching requires an assignment to be deposited for assessment, and while those involved in

programmatic decision-making are aware of which courses across the program are assessed for which competencies and abilities, only those involved in assessment leadership at the college typically review the full set of courses being assessed. We noted that none of our participants spoke about their assignments designated for assessment as part of a sequence in which students build writing skills over time, from their first semester up through their capstone course. This was unsurprising, given that none of them had access to the document listing the full set of courses being assessed for their program and that the document itself only included which courses deposit for which competencies and abilities, not the types of writing being done for each deposited assignment. Having access to information about the assignments being assessed in the courses on students' degree maps would help faculty begin to consider their writing assignments designated for assessment as part of a broader developmental sequence.

As the Statement on WAC Principles and Practices reminds us, "WAC is not a 'quick fix,' but an initiative that requires sustained conversations among faculty that extend beyond a single workshop or consultation" (Cox et al., "Statement" 1–2). Opportunities for sustained conversations are mostly lacking at our college, though our interviews showed that there is clearly an appetite for it among colleagues across the institution. In a time when ongoing budgetary constraints make initiating or expanding a formal, freestanding, and securely funded WAC program nearly impossible, our research reminds us that such an effort is neither necessary nor likely to be the most effective. Instead, community college faculty and administrators should consider how to adopt WAC principles to support existing goals and structures, such as general education assessment and other high-impact practices, in order to stitch WAC pedagogy more intentionally across and throughout the curriculum.

Looking ahead to the next steps for our college and other two-year, open-access institutions, we have sought to demonstrate that rather than envisioning a stand-alone "program" as the inception point for WAC work at community colleges, it may be more useful to study how WAC efforts correspond with other college initiatives and goals, to ask faculty across disciplines how they are engaging their students through writing and then to facilitate connections between people, processes, and goals in order to make this work legible within institutional priorities and therefore ensure its lasting support. This work may come more naturally to faculty members at two-year colleges who (as we have detailed above) are accustomed to working in interdisciplinary environments, are attuned to the range of transfer and career options their students may pursue, and are generally accepting of the reality that they are accountable to various constituencies at once. Regulatory frameworks and calls for compliance will persist, but institutional ethnography as a methodology can support two-year faculty members' professional authority by highlighting institutionally

specific, actionable circuits and by helping faculty draw insights from them. Taking up institutional ethnography as a methodology requires us to ask not only what is happening with writing on our campuses but also *how* it happens.

Works Cited

- Blau, Sheridan. "Academic Writing as Participation: Writing Your Way In." *What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples*, edited by Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau, National Council of Teachers of English, 2010, pp. 29–56.
- Campbell, Marie, and Frances Gregor. *Mapping Social Relations: A Primer in Doing Institutional Ethnography*. Garamond Press, 2004.
- Community College Research Center. "Community College FAQs." *Community College Research Center*, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Community-College-FAQs.html>. Accessed 16 Jan. 2024.
- Cox, Michelle, et al. "Statement of WAC Principles and Practices." *WAC Clearinghouse*, Dec. 2014, <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/principles/statement.pdf>.
- Cox, Michelle, et al. *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2018.
- Griffith, Alison I., and Dorothy E. Smith. *Under New Public Management: Institutional Ethnographies of Changing Front-Line Work*. University of Toronto Press, 2014.
- Ihara, Rachel and Annie Del Principe. "What We Mean When We Talk About Reading." *Across the Disciplines*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1–14, <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/articles/ihara-delprincipe2018.pdf>. Accessed 23 June 2025.
- Isserles, Robin. "Make Community Colleges More Joyful." *Inside Higher Ed*, 28 Aug. 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/08/29/make-community-colleges-more-joyful-opinion>.
- LaFrance, Michelle. *Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studies Researchers*. University Press of Colorado, 2019.
- McMullen-Light, Mary. "Great Expectations: The Culture of WAC and the Community College Context." *Across the Disciplines*, special issue of *Writing Across the Curriculum at the Community Colleges*, vol 8, no. 3, 2010. *WAC Clearinghouse*, doi:10.37514/ATD-J.2010.7.2.02.
- Melzer, Dan. *Assignments across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing*. Utah State University Press, 2014.
- Pacht, Michelle. Email interview. 4 Oct. 2022.
- Pacht, Michelle. "Overcoming Obstacles: How WID Benefits Community College Students and Faculty." *Across the Disciplines*, special issue of *Writing Across the Curriculum at the Community Colleges*, vol 8, no. 3, 2010. *WAC Clearinghouse*, doi:10.37514/ATD-J.2010.7.2.03.

Palmquist, Mike, et al. "Introduction: Fifty Years of WAC: Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going?" *Across the Disciplines*, vol. 17, 2020. *WAC Clearinghouse*, doi:10.37514/ATD-J.2020.17.3.0X.

Reiss, Donna. "From WAC to CCCAC: Writing Across the Curriculum Becomes Communication, Collaboration, and Critical Thinking (and Computers) Across the Curriculum at Tidewater Community College." *Education Resources Information Center*, 1996, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED412553.pdf>.

Rose, Lisa, and Rachel Theilheimer. "You Write What You Know: Writing, Learning, and Student Construction of Knowledge." *The WAC Journal*, vol. 13, 2002, pp. 17–29. *WAC Clearinghouse*, doi:10.37514/WAC-J.2002.13.1.03.

Soliday, Mary. *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments across the Disciplines*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2011.

Stanley, Linda, and Joanna Ambron, editors. *Writing Across the Curriculum in Community Colleges*. Jossey-Bass, 1991.

Tinberg, Howard B. *Border Talk: Writing and Knowing in the Two-Year College*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1997.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake, et al. *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*. University Press of Colorado, 2014.

Appendix 1: Targeted Departments and Courses

Departments	Target Courses from Programmatic Degree Maps (Early-, Mid-, and Late-Stage)	Number of Faculty Participants (n = 19)
Business & Technology	BTF101 (First-Year Seminar for Business) BTM101 (Introduction to Business) BTM103 (Principles of Management) BTA111 (Principles of Accounting) BTC200 (Intro to Info Systems)	2
Health Sciences	HSF090 (First-Year Seminar for Health Science) SCR100 (Fundamentals of Nursing) and/or SCL101 (Fundamentals of Practical Nursing) SCL 103 (Concepts in Pharmacology and Nutrition) SCL114 (Parent-Child Nursing) and/or SCR270 (Parent-Child Health Nursing) SCB203 (Anatomy and Physiology) SCR 280 (Leadership and Delegation)	3

Departments	Target Courses from Programmatic Degree Maps (Early-, Mid-, and Late-Stage)	Number of Faculty Participants (n = 19)
Natural Sciences	SCB/C/P101 (Topics in Biological Sciences/ Chemistry/Physics) SCC201 (General Chemistry I) SCP231 or SCP232 (General Physics I or II)	4
Social Sciences (Psychology, History, & Criminal Justice)	SYF101 (First-Year Seminar for Psychology) SSP101 (US Politics and Power) SSY101 (General Psychology) SSH102 (Themes in American History since 1865) SSA101 (Cultural Anthropology) SSS100 (Introduction to Sociology) SSN 187 (Urban Sociology) SSN204 (Crime and Justice in Urban Society) SSY230 (Abnormal Psychology)/SSY240 (Developmental Psychology I)/SSY250 (Social Psychology) CJF101 (First-Year Seminar for Criminal Justice) SSJ202 (Corrections and Sentencing) SSJ203 (Policing)	6
English	ENG101 (Composition I) ENG102 (Composition II) ENG103 (The Research Paper) ENG259 (Technical Writing)	1
Math, Engineering, & Computer Science	MAT107 (Mathematics and the Modern World) MAT115 (College Algebra and Trigonometry) MAT120 (Elementary Statistics) MAT201 (Calculus I) ECF090 (First-Year Seminar for Engineering) MAC102 (C/C++ Programming) MAE219 (Thermodynamics I)	2
English Language Acquisition	ELL101 (Introduction to Language)	1

Appendix 2: List of Interview Questions

1. What is your current title and department affiliation?
2. How long have you been teaching at [our college]?

3. Have you taught elsewhere prior to or in addition to teaching here? If so, where?
4. What courses do you usually teach?
5. Based on the degree map (provided for reference), is it your sense that students enter your course having completed the recommended courses listed prior to your course on the map? When they are in your course, is it your sense that they are simultaneously enrolled in the recommended four to five courses listed on the map?
6. What is your sense of the types of reading and writing students have done prior to your course?
7. What, if anything, do you do to assess the reading and writing ability of your students when they enter your course?
8. What is your sense of the change, if any, in students' reading and writing abilities from the beginning of the semester to the end?
9. Which of your high-stakes assignments on the syllabus involve writing? Could you describe what kind of writing students do?
10. What are your learning goals for those assignments? If the goal is not to improve writing skills specifically, how does writing help you achieve the objectives for the assignment?
11. How do you scaffold or otherwise prepare students for writing assignments?
12. Do you assign low-stakes writing or in-class writing?
13. Can you tell us a little about the reading you assign in your course? (Do you assign a textbook or other types of reading? About how many pages of reading do you assign for each class session/week? Is this reading mandated by your department?)
14. What are your goals in assigning reading for students to complete outside of class?
15. Do you assess students' reading compliance? If so, how?
16. How would you describe the connection, if any, between the reading assignments and writing assignments in your course? (Possible follow-up: do students write about the texts they read, and if so, how do you expect them to engage with those texts?)
17. What is your sense of the types of reading and writing they will go on to do after your course?
18. Do you see reading and writing instruction, or helping students with reading and writing, as part of your job? Why or why not?

19. To what extent are the reading and writing activities in your class assigned based on requirements from your department, the college, or professional standards?
20. Are there any projects you are engaged in outside of your class in which students are doing reading and writing activities related to your discipline(s)?³

3. Questions adapted from Ihara and Del Principe, "What We Mean When We Talk About Reading."