Mutual Support: CAC Programs and Institutional Improvement in Undergraduate Education

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Writing- and communication-across-the-curriculum programs often develop as independent initiatives focused on improving students' writing and/or speaking by incorporating these activities into coursework and helping teachers to use them more effectively in their instruction.[1] However, there is now much anecdotal evidence of the conditions that work against the cultivation of cross-curricular programs: faculty complacency; the weakening of a program's original spirit; reduction or elimination of funding; and the continued avoidance of involvement by some programs, administrators, or faculty (see White).

We believe that such failures occur, in part, when programs become either isolated grass-roots efforts, struggling to scatter the seeds of change across a vast and sometimes arid curricular landscape, or isolated control units, empowered and supported by higher administration but unable to break the bonds of their authority in order to work collaboratively with the groups they are trying to change (see Holdstein). In this essay, we will first describe ways in which CAC programs can become an integral part of a broader, in-

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stitution-wide mission to improve undergraduate education through a stronger focus on collaborations and partnerships with organizations and administrative units that share commonalities of mission. We will then describe and assess the results of such a partnership at North Carolina State University, where we have teamed up with those responsible for a major, institution-wide initiative involving every undergraduate program in continuous cycles of program review and assessment. By analyzing the successes and limitations of our work, we suggest some fruitful directions for programs seeking mutual support for their efforts.

Pieces of a Puzzle

Early literature on CAC programs was generally silent about the prospects of collaboration, focusing instead—justifiably—on the nature of faculty development and questions of leadership and internal structure (see, for example, Young and Fulwiler). As CAC developed strongholds in many colleges and universities, program leaders became increasingly aware that isolation-based autonomy creates vulnerability and hampers effective curricular and instructional reform (see Gottschalk; Harris).

In the context of these concerns, many programs are now actively pursuing new partnerships and are considering greater integration with other academic and support units. Highly successful collaborations such as that between the College of Agriculture and CAC experts in the Department of English at Iowa State University are becoming more commonplace in many institutions, though still far from the norm. The advent of digital technologies has also created contexts for new electronic partnerships (see Reiss).

Most campuses have groups, committees, support units, departments, projects, or educational divisions with which a CAC program can work to effect change in the processes and practices of education. We visualize such possibilities using the conceptual metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle. In some ways, campuses are like partially finished puzzles. If we could see them in time-lapse photography, jigsaw puzzles move from a hundred disparate and disorganized pieces toward a final, complete, interlocked picture with only one "solution." But universities are more like puzzles whose pieces are continuously moved around and can fit into more than one space. Sometimes two pieces will lock together to form a bit of the

campus picture, but later are pulled apart again and relocated. On one campus, for example, a CAC program will be adjacent to and sometimes interlocked with other units—a teaching/learning center, or a tutorial service. In contrast, the WAC program on another campus will be designed to stand at the center of an undergraduate curriculum, providing help and reform to all units. But it has not yet partnered with other units on campus, existing as a lone effort that offers lots of output (workshops, resources) but gets little input from others—a puzzle piece with blank pieces around it. In visualizing programs in such a way, we do not want to imply that an autonomous or disconnected program is less functional or successful than one that is more interlocked. One program simply tries to operate in a more autonomous way, like a writer who works alone and shares her final product with an intended audience, while the other seeks out connections and partnerships.

Extending this metaphor a bit further, we can also imagine where the unit might be located in entire puzzle; it may be situated toward the edges, as a peripheral effort without much visibility across a campus, or near the center. An isolated WAC or CAC program might be partnered with only one or two units, or with none at all (surrounded by blank pieces). Some WAC programs that have strong ties to business and industry interlock with pieces that are part of other puzzles, beyond the administrative and physical domain of the campus.

Fitting with other pieces can be a challenge for a WAC or CAC program. Competition for scarce resources can pit units with shared missions against each other, or more subtly create anxiety about who will get credit for what. Some potential partners don't share the knowledge or perspectives of the program leaders, and agendas can diverge or become the source of tension. The fierce independence of some units, or their perception that they are "maxed out," may show up as resistance to collaboration. Or a unit may be poorly organized or on the verge of dysfunction, and end up sapping the energy of the CAC program by happily allowing some of its responsibilities to be managed or fulfilled by the program's more energetic leaders and staff.

These and related perils of partnerships between CAC programs and other administrative, academic, or support units on campus can be mitigated with a sensible approach

to collaboration. Collaboration is not a unitary process in which a CAC program always fully partners with another unit. Instead, collaboration is multifaceted and in a constant state of evolution. In our own work, for example, we have felt the bonds of collaboration change naturally in the course of a single semester, as a project involved intense, close work and then, reaching fruition, saw the partners become more distanced again, leaving behind not only the results of the work but a deepened understanding of one another's missions and a feeling of shared effort. Monitoring and talking about the fit or lack of fit between partnerships can help a program to decide whether to keep pursuing a relationship or move on, without animosity or regret, to establish new connections or strengthen existing ones.

Fitting Pieces of the Puzzle: An Integrated CAC Program at NC State

Our own Campus Writing and Speaking Program (CWSP) illustrates the kinds of partnerships that CAC programs may build across the campus. Indeed, the CWSP was initiated as a highly collaborative program and, in its history, has successfully sought to extend that collaboration. In the early 1990s NC State established the Council for Undergraduate Education to oversee the creation of a general education program, comprised of a set of requirements for all students across a range of disciplines. The original General Education Requirements for Writing and Speaking consisted of three parts: six hours of first-year writing, three hours of a more advanced writing or speaking course, and a vaguely worded paragraph encouraging faculty in the majors to use writing and speaking to enhance their students' learning.

This final paragraph, the only hint at communication across the curriculum in the general education program, proved to be so vague and difficult to assess that another committee was formed to rewrite it. That latter committee at first proposed a very modest set of writing-intensive courses in the majors, but there was a strong push for something more, a plan that better integrated writing and speaking in the academic majors and also had more teeth to it. The new wording, though unapologetic in its linguistic institutionalese, set forth a new direction: "In addition [to the other writing and speaking requirements], each curriculum is designed so that upper-level courses and other programmatic experiences

help students write and speak competently in the disciplines. In each curriculum, the design and delivery of that support are guided by *various form of programmatic assessment*" (italics added).

Unpacked, this statement meant, first, that responsibility for writing and speaking in the disciplines would reside in each department. There would be no campus-wide communication requirements, no mandated writing- or speaking-intensive courses, no portfolios from across the university—none of the usual models for CAC. Second, it meant that along with this responsibility, each department would be held accountable for its students' writing and speaking. Specifically, that accountability would take the form of outcomes-based assessment: each department should evaluate the ability of its majors to write and speak competently in the discipline according to department-specific writing and speaking outcomes.

In practical terms, this form of assessment required departments to: (1) determine writing and speaking outcomes for its majors, (2) create plans for assessing those outcomes, (3) implement those assessment plans, and (4) report its assessment findings to the Council on Undergraduate Education periodically and show how those findings have led to the improvement of students' writing and speaking through changes in courses or curricula. Nearly everyone involved agreed that we could not realistically expect departments to take on both the responsibility and the accountability without appropriate guidance. It was out of this need that the CWSP was created.

As it came into being, the CWSP developed two main areas of activity: cross-campus faculty development that supports the integration of writing and speaking effectively into courses and curricula; and departmental consultation in support of the writing and speaking assessment process we have described. In 1996 the CWSP initiated a five-year plan by which it would work with two of the nine undergraduate colleges per year for five years. It developed an intensive procedure for collaborating with faculty committees in the various colleges to identify writing and speaking outcomes and generate plans for assessing those outcomes (Carter; see also sample outcomes at http://www2.chass.ncsu.edu/cwsp).

The CWSP was in its inception, therefore, neither an isolated grassroots effort nor an isolated control unit. Rather,

it was fully integrated into the university, working in partnership with other units in the institution. It was directly linked to the general education requirements and the Council for Undergraduate Education. It was linked also to all the undergraduate academic departments through the shared goals of improving students' writing and speaking. This integration was symbolized by the Campus Writing and Speaking Board, an advisory group to the CWSP consisting of representatives of all nine undergraduate colleges and other members of the university community associated with writing and speaking.

In the third year of our five-year plan, CWSP leaders (Anson, Carter, and Dannels) came across a bootleg draft of a memo from a faculty-based university committee we'd never heard of, a committee (chaired by Rust) that was proposing university-wide outcomes-based assessment. According to this memo, all undergraduate academic programs would be asked to submit assessment portfolios that would, among other items, contain: (1) student learning outcomes for their graduates, (2) methods the program uses to determine whether its graduates are achieving those outcomes, (3) results from the assessment, and (4) how the results have been used to improve the program.

These four items looked distinctly familiar to us. Our first response was to feel threatened. Even in the midst of our own connections with other units, we felt invaded, our territory and expertise undermined by outsiders claiming to be doing similar things. Who were these people coming into our neighborhood and throwing their weight around? Like many CAC program leaders, we were immediately suspicious, sharing a belief that assessment initiatives are often planned and overseen by some administrative office removed from the CAC program, an office whose members do not share the CAC program's student-centered, contextually sensitive, longitudinally oriented, and developmentally preoccupied ideology of assessment.

An Unlikely Fit? A Partnership with Institutional Assessment

In light of this natural move toward defensiveness, our most fortuitous response to the committee's memo was not to rush to judgment. Instead, we began to learn more about the committee that had drafted it. Assessment-based undergradu-

ate academic program review had begun years earlier at NC State University and paralleled the efforts of institutionalizing CWSP. As the five-year plan of working with the undergraduate colleges was launched, another initiative was underway: a faculty ad-hoc committee was formed to study how program review could be improved to include the concepts of continuous improvement, respecting departmental autonomy and being sensitive to outside accreditation needs to which many programs on campus were subject. The recommendations of that ad hoc committee included the above-mentioned goals, adding suggestions that the assessment process be team-based, faculty driven, focused on learning outcomes, and overseen by a task force to explore models for implementing university-wide assessment. The newly formed task force then created guidelines that have, at their foundation, commitments to respecting departmental uniqueness, both in what was to be assessed and in how it was to be assessed, and to facilitating a process that allowed departments to make the curricular implementation process meaningful.

Following the approval of the task force guidelines, the Committee on Undergraduate Program Review (with membership from all nine colleges) was formed to carry out the assessment plans and guidelines. The charge to CUPR was to implement assessment-based program review across the campus. The CUPR faculty members began the first year at various levels of awareness of assessment methods in undergraduate education. Most were novices, some had minimal experience, a few had a lot of experience. The varying levels of experience required an initial stage of group formation—where members asked questions, raised challenges, and addressed confrontations within the group. This process had several steps: identifying a common assessment vocabulary, identifying best practices to use as models campus-wide, refining program review guidelines, and setting a timetable that took into account outside accreditation requirements. The outcome of this process was clearly defined guidelines for programs across campus that include:

1) drafting student learning outcomes, 2) implementing a plan for measuring those outcomes, 3) collecting and analyzing data, 4) drawing conclusions from those data, 5) making programmatic changes as a result of data analysis, and 6) and and ensuring that the process was continuous and ongoing.

It was at this point that the CUPR members realized the time was at hand to begin the actual implementation. And simultaneously it became painfully obvious (since most members were novices themselves—albeit committed novices) that CUPR might have difficulties leading others down a road they had not been down—a road that could have obstacles of which CUPR was not entirely aware. Under the leadership of its faculty chair (Rust), CUPR turned to CWSP for help.

Having learned this history of CUPR and its goals, those of us in the Campus Writing and Speaking Program began to think positively about a possible partnership with the committee, especially because we recognized in it a certain degree of shared understanding and similarity of assumptions about assessment. Perhaps we could form a relationship with this other committee, one that could be mutually reinforcing and beneficial to all of us and to our university. Thus began a productive collaboration between the CWSP and the Committee for Undergraduate Program Review (CUPR).

Since CUPR was devoted to the concept of implementing an assessment-based program review process, the appeal was not only to assist in this implementation through the continued outcome-driven efforts of the CWSP, but also to help guide the CUPR members to be effective facilitators of the process so that the number of assessment-based program review facilitators on campus could grow —quickly.

Mutual Support in Practice: A Collaboration between CWSP and CUPR

As illustrated, the CUPR, having gone through multiple iterations of building common definitions and working through committee members' challenges to the new Undergraduate Program Review process, represented a fairly cohesive unit. They were now faced, though, with the daunting task of spreading information about a widespread assessment initiative to faculty across campus, answering questions from faculty that they had only recently answered for themselves, and doing these tasks with an attitude that would combat the expected "just another fad" response. Therefore, to assist CUPR members with these issues, the CWSP provided a "train the trainers" program for faculty on the committee. Upon consultation with CUPR leadership, we developed a two-phased model for training CUPR members to work, as col-

lege representatives, with small groups of faculty engaged in the outcomes-development effort in their departments.

The first phase of the train-the-trainer program focused on providing a model of outcomes-based assessment consultation for CUPR members to reflect upon in guided ways. We were committed to capturing the consultation process "in action" (as opposed to simply telling trainees about it), because many of the complex issues that arise in faculty consultations are about the social, personal, and inherently political nature of curricular reform that can only be appreciated having "been there." Therefore, we videotaped a faculty consultation that was facilitated by a member of our CWSP team working with a group of faculty through the initial stages of the outcomes development process.[2] The 12-minute videotape was divided into five different sections: explaining the outcomes-based assessment process; handling resistance; asking questions to facilitate discussion; encouraging participation; and moving forward after the initial outcomes consultation. To accompany the videotape, we constructed a series of training questions to help faculty, organized into smaller focus groups, to think deeply about the issues involved. For example, in the section titled "handling resistance," training questions included the following: (1) What kinds of resistance can you discern in the video? (2) What are some other possible sources of resistance? (3) What are some strategies for handling this resistance?

Phase two of the train-the-trainers model included a workshop focused on providing CUPR members with an opportunity to role-play faculty consultations in which they practiced working with mock faculty members. We designed five role-play scenarios to address the most common situations CUPR faculty might face in their consultations, each targeting a particular challenging situation. We designed each scenario so that the trainee would know the rank and disciplinary affiliations of the mock group of faculty they would be working with. For example, in the scenario " What About Assessment," three faculty members, one from forestry, one from plant pathology, and one from statistics, bring to the table different ideas of what assessment means, and expect clear answers about what is to be done. The faculty member in forestry is concerned about the issue of measurability, arguing that some important educational goals in forestry cannot be measured. He gives the example of the following objec-

tive and challenges the facilitator to show how it can be assessed: "Students will generate an ethical stance and reverence for the environment and the natural world." The other faculty bring contradictory ideas about assessment. The statistician believed that the only way to assess these outcomes is through clear, valid pre- and post-tests. The plant pathologist reports on several situations in which his colleagues were able to assess their students by reviewing their field journals. The conversation that emerges forces the facilitator to explain the issue of assessment and deal with differing assessment questions and concerns.

In the role play itself, we had three trainees sit with the mock faculty group and asked each person to work with the mock faculty for a set time period. When that time was up, the next member of the faculty group picked up where the previous one had left off. This arrangement allowed trainees to try on their facilitator hat with minimal risk (they knew that if they got in trouble, time would run out and they would be saved by the bell), and to engage in peer learning (often the person who started where the previous trainee stopped was able to provide a fresh perspective on the situation).

Following this role-play session, we provided the CUPR faculty with a training guide for their consultations. This training guide included a model structure and process for them to follow, if they still felt unsure about how to run the consultation session. Additionally, we attended the larger CUPR sessions where facilitators worked with faculty and acted as "roaming facilitators"—providing support to any facilitator if asked.

Mutual Support: Larger Issues for CAC and WAC Programs

In this abbreviated example of one partnership between the Campus Writing and Speaking Program and the Committee for Undergraduate Program Review, we see several larger issues emerge for CAC programs. First, in training faculty to become trainers themselves, we had to let go of the notion that we, as CWSP administrators, were the only people who could and should work with faculty in this arena. We had to approach the faculty facilitators with a genuine desire to give up our power and control so that they could take over the task of spreading the word to faculty across campus. In fact, in the large workshops where the trainees were actually

working with faculty groups, we sat back and did not participate with their groups so that they would have more control over their own consultation group without the perception that we were running the process.

As a program, we also had to be willing to adapt some of our faculty development practices to the needs of the CUPR facilitators. For example, the CWSP typically runs workshops that help faculty to pay more attention to writing and speaking in their courses. Our partnership with CUPR required us to engage in a different type of faculty development in which writing and speaking were present, but not as the guiding force of the training. Essentially, we were training faculty facilitators to participate in important writing and speaking activities (helping other faculty write objectives and outcomes; facilitating difficult discussions with colleagues) but we had to adapt our standard faculty development practices to focus more centrally on training facilitators for outcomes-based assessment processes, not training teachers of writing and speaking.

Although the Campus Writing and Speaking Program had to be willing to accept these issues of power, control, and adaptability, we believe the rewards far outweigh the costs. In our partnership with CUPR, we moved the program to a central position in larger institutional initiative. We provided assistance and training to facilitators that allowed us to continue working toward the long-term sustainability of our program. Our position in our institutional puzzle moved as we found a place where we could fit with another important piece, a piece that itself had created alliances with various departments and colleges, with our Division of Undergraduate Affairs, and with the Provost's Office.

In their cross-curricular and cross-campus work, CAC programs are central to certain kinds of curricular and pedagogical reforms. Our story illustrates for us the principle that the mission of such programs is not to keep handing out sustenance; rather, it is to help others to learn ways to become self-sustaining in their own continuous improvement. Such an attitude does not, as some have suggested, spell the demise of the program that has worked toward change; instead, it promises that it and the units with which it has partnered can support each other mutually as we all continue to face new and ever more complex challenges in higher education.

End Notes

1. For convenience, hereafter we use the acronym "CAC" to mean both writing- and communication-across-the-curriculum programs, since the latter are broader and encompass the former.
2. CWSP received permission from one of the departments it was working with in the outcomes-development phase to videotape an already scheduled meeting as the "data" for this training video. Video production students edited the tape according to CWSP guidelines.

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