

Introduction to Writing Across the Curriculum at the Community Colleges: Beating the Odds

Clint Gardner, Salt Lake Community College

Leslie Roberts (2008) notes in her analysis of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) section of the 2005 National TYCA Research Initiative survey that WAC/Writing in the Disciplines (WID) programs have struggled to gain a foothold at community colleges after a promising start in the 1980's. Only 18% (62 out of 338) of respondents indicated that their two-year college had an "Institutionally designated WAC/WID program" (p. 141). Roberts compares those results to an earlier study by Stout and Magnotto (1991)¹ that showed greater presence of WAC/WID at the time of their survey. While various two-year institutions may have invested in WAC/WID in the 80's, the dice appear to be loaded against their survival, or the further development of such programs at other institutions. The odds against developing a sustainable WAC/WID program at a community college seem to be hard to beat.

The lack of development of community college WAC/WID programs, suffice it to say, is a controversial subject. Anne Ellen Geller, a colleague teaching a WAC/WID course at Saint John's University, recently emailed me to ask why no two-year colleges are listed under the "best" WAC/WID programs from US News and World Report (2010). The answer to that simple question is quite complex, of course, and rife with the socio-political firestorm that is the general reputation of community colleges. Anne anticipated the trouble with a colloquy to her question: "no, don't answer that." As scholars at two-year colleges, however, I think we should feel compelled to answer that question. Many of my colleagues at two-year colleges will talk about the problems with WAC/WID off the record, but few seem to be willing to commit to having their ideas explored in academic scholarship. By that, I don't wish to imply that there is no scholarship on community college WAC/WID programs. Such scholarship does exist, but there are far fewer articles and books which focus on the two-year college than other types of postsecondary institutions.

A variety of reasons are put forward as causes for the lack of programs, but they generally seem to boil down to issues of institutional support and institutional status. Many years ago, while talking with a community college colleague about the struggle to establish a sustainable writing across the curriculum program at a two-year college, I was struck by his strong thoughts on the issue: "You can't really have a writing across the curriculum program at a community college because you can't have a writing program at a community college." While this colleague's position may seem defeatist, he went on to explain that writing programs and WAC imply the existence of clearly defined disciplines in an academic setting and, in his opinion, two-year colleges don't have clearly defined disciplines. Many fields or disciplines may be represented at community colleges, but the focus on first and second year college students, and the emphasis on general (liberal) education, makes generalist

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writing more prevalent than discipline-specific writing. Students are less-actively engaged in their prospective major fields of study, since the courses they take for their major are usually designated at the junior and senior level.

However, Roberts believes that status isn't as important an issue as institutional support through funding and coordination of WAC/WID programs: "Almost one-third of the nearly 200 open-ended comments about overall satisfaction mention that...there was still a need for more elements of a program, including release time for coordination, more attention to scheduling issues, and ongoing staff development" (p. 143). Furthermore, Roberts claims the satisfaction survey shows that two-year college faculty are more than a faculty of generalists masquerading in the disciplines: "[M]any comments...stated that interdisciplinary cooperation is a barrier to WAC programs" (p. 149). If clearly defined disciplines exist at the two-year college, in other words, then it follows that the discipline's discourse will also be ensconced. For Roberts, the systemic problem is not that the nature or academic culture at two-year colleges is different from other institutions, just that other institutions typically have better working conditions for faculty and sustainable support from the institution itself.

To further complicate the situation, writing centers at community colleges have become more common, but are not seen as WAC/WID programs. The results of the National Survey of Writing Centers of Writing Center Research Project (WCRP, 2001-2008) substantiate the presence of writing centers at community colleges given that 20% of respondents indicate that they direct a writing center at a two-year post-secondary institution.

Most respondents to the TYCA survey, however, don't appear to consider writing centers WAC/WID programs, even when, in most cases, they clearly serve as the only place on campus where students enrolled in any class and in any discipline/department may work on writing assignments in specialized discourses. Roberts notes that 77% of the respondents indicated that their institution had a writing center of some sort, and yet only 18% of the same respondents claim to have institutionally supported WAC/WID programs. The disparity between these two numbers indicates that faculty are either not generally well-informed as to what constitutes a WAC/WID program or that the traditional definition of WAC/WID differs at the two-year college because of received notions about writing centers, community college students, faculty, and administration.

A very important fact to note is that WAC/WID initiatives may founder at two-year colleges because faculty (including faculty writing center directors) have far heavier teaching loads than typical four-year colleges and universities—usually 4 to 5 courses—and reassigned or "released" time is a rare commodity (MLA 2006; WCRP 2001-2008). Faculty interested in WAC/WID (including some writing centers) will often take on administrative duties without any sort of compensation, or with only one course of reassigned time (Roberts, 2008).

So what are we to make of the state of WAC/WID at community colleges? There are various factors at play: the "grade level" of students; the working conditions of faculty; the relationship of faculty to administration; and an unclear notion of what WAC/WID programs are. The situation is complex, as are two-year institutions themselves. It is too easy to deny the existence of WAC/WID at community colleges, or to decry the inability of community colleges to sustain such programs, even though nearly 1,200 of these colleges exist in the United States, and over 12,000,000 students are enrolled in a variety of programs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010). WAC/WID does exist at community colleges. It is just not well-understood, well-studied, or well-publicized.

Along with the few other valuable publications dedicated to community college WAC/WID, I hope that this special issue of *Across the Disciplines* will be used as a starting place for research into two-year college WAC/WID programs. When I agreed to guest edit this special issue, I wanted to explore

the difficulties and the triumphs of community college WAC/WID programs. I noted the dearth of research into such programs, and encouraged authors to not only celebrate the work they had done, but also cast a critical eye on that work. This issue features four articles that show that WAC/WID programs can thrive at two-year colleges--that they can beat the hard odds often presented by our two-year college academic setting.

While each article features a successful WAC/WID program or gives advice about best practices, they also explore the difficulties that must be faced and overcome in order to successfully complete the program, such as I've mentioned above. Mary McMullen-Light, for example, delves into the difficulties of creating and sustaining successful community college WAC programs and then explains how the Metropolitan Community College-Longview has created a program that is sustainable. From that experience, she offers several key guidelines that answer concerns of sustainability. Next, Michelle Pacht offers us a teacher's journey into learning how to teach an effective WAC course and demonstrates success through a unique project in New York City's 5Pointz arts project that included an impressive video project created to help other faculty understand the educational benefits of incorporating writing into any curriculum. In the next article, Veronica Campos, explores and explains methods to approach English language instruction to non-native speakers of English with a selection that bridges various areas of concern for anyone interested in WAC/WID at the community college, and the role that tutoring plays in student success. Finally, Renee Bangerter, explores how current and future technology will impact the work of WAC/WID in two-year colleges and how instructors can use these technologies to the advantage of students in any course. Each article strives to connect WAC/WID work with the two-year college setting and offers practical advice for program directors and classroom teachers.

I hope that the work represented by these four authors will help to spur further discussion and prompt efforts to build more sustainable WAC/WID programs at two-year colleges. This issue of *Across the Disciplines* is not just a celebration of WAC/WID work at the community college, but a clarion call for more scholarship. I don't believe the dice are loaded against WAC/WID at two-year colleges. I think we just need to take a step back and really see what is on the table.

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Notes

[1] I feel compelled to note here that the study commissioned by TYCA was completely voluntary and not compulsory of the some 1,173 two-year colleges recognized by the American Association of Community Colleges (2010). I also note that the Stout and Magnotto study was completely voluntary. These studies, therefore, are not comprehensive, but they do indicate the general interest of two-year college faculty in WAC/WID programs and their existence at a random sampling of institutions.

Contact Information

Clint Gardner
Administration Building (AD) 235
P.O. Box 30808
4600 South Redwood Road
Salt Lake City, Utah 84130-0808
Telephone: 801-957-4842
Email: clint.gardner@slcc.edu

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