

## Enlivening WAC Programs Old and New

JOAN MULLIN AND SUSAN SCHORN  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

WITH THE CONTINUOUS GROWTH of WAC over time, new directors have a wealth of program models to adapt to their particular local setting (see examples in *Programs and Practices* by Farrell-Childers, Gere, and Young; *Programs That Work* by Fulwiler and Young; *WAC for the New Millennium* edited by McLeod, Miraglia, Soven, and Thaiss; and *Writing Across the Disciplines* by Young and Fulwiler). However, newer programs, as well as the established, may want to continually evaluate whether they have become like the walking dead: present, operating, but not quite “there.” Stagnation may result from new programs hitting a brick wall in their development; in mature programs, directors and faculty can get so used to their WAC program, or so sure that everyone else is doing their job, that the program becomes somewhat invisible or operates on auto-pilot. When successful WAC workshops, course development protocols, newsletters, and all other typical program elements are in place or have run their course, WAC directors and faculty often need to create other strategies to sustain or reinvigorate participation, interest, and engagement. The SWC requirement<sup>1</sup> at UT Austin, established in 1987, is a unique example of how a WAC initiative can be put on automatic and presumed to run effectively. While the unique structure of this particular institution may not directly match other school’s profiles, the results of its 20-year program are indicative of what happens in others when administrators cut support for WAC programs, when directors retire and are not replaced (or replaced with contingent faculty), or when a program continually expands and its center collapses. What is common to

---

<sup>1</sup> Substantial Writing Component (SWC) is UT’s name for writing intensive courses and WAC.

all these situations is that the program has repeated successful practices without accommodating the need for variation, without assessing changing disciplinary practices, or without challenging pedagogies that may have become too unreflective and automatic. This was the case at UT Austin.

The responsibility for offering WAC was decentralized, left to each college, and identified only as courses for which the required 16 pages and three assignments would “be an important component in determining the student’s course grade.” Revision was recommended, as was feedback. Not only did these minimal guidelines, originally meant to honor faculty and disciplinary autonomy, fail to sustain faculty over time, but they failed to produce any concerted efforts to measure the effectiveness of the WAC pedagogy that was employed. This resulted in a need for both self-examination of the program and its fault lines and for new strategies that would create a buzz about WAC. We needed—and we are suggesting that many programs we have reviewed need—a renewal of the institution’s WAC culture. Here we present an assortment of familiar WAC program elements—course design, faculty development, and assessment—and briefly outline how we used current institutional structures as a platform for redesigning, expanding, and revitalizing both SWC/WAC and faculty’s investment in it.<sup>2</sup>

### *Course Design*

A major flaw in the SWC system was the relegating of course approval to staff. Faculty had filled out a brief checklist every year for the SWC course they planned to teach, and sent it to the College, where the course scheduler approved it, providing it met the very minimal criteria (page length, number of assignments, percent of grade from writing). There was a clear need to redirect the approval process through faculty, and for this purpose we turned to our newly-appointed faculty writing committee. While programs in other institutions may have a faculty committee approving WAC courses, our corrective had multiple, positive results: it raised awareness of effective WAC methodology, improved our working knowledge of what instructors were doing in their writing classes, and provided a database of approved courses. With the College faculty writing committee, we created an online submission and approval system that equated the process with peer review rather than “oversight,” a strategic move that both mimics the publication review processes with which faculty are familiar (and raises the “currency” of WAC), and demonstrates to faculty that their colleagues value teaching.

---

<sup>2</sup> Work described here pertains only to the College of Liberal Arts, UT’s largest college, comprised of 14,000 students and over 600 faculty.

The Web-based system is designed not only to collect information for online writing committee review, but to educate faculty about what an SWC course might include—to widen their repertoire and show them possibilities (see Appendix A for visuals of the main proposal sections). Instructors are given a choice of informal and formal writing assignment categories; for many, this may be the first time they've seen the term “informal writing” or been made to consider the levels of writing possible in their SWC class. They then proceed to describe formal writing assignments. Not only has this structure awakened faculty to the use and integration of informal and formal writing, but it compels them to consider their role, that of the TA, and that of students, in evaluating the writing assigned. Though the format seems to systematize courses, flexibility is built in to the process. Most fields allow text response, so instructors are free to choose, for example, how they will describe the length and frequency of their assignments (“Half a page, every week,” “Two five-page papers, submitted in the middle and at the end of the semester,” “Four hundred words, daily,” etc.).

Another benefit of the online system is that each writing committee member sees at least 10 percent of the submissions (over 700 the first year as the system transferred to the new format!). In the first round, the committee quickly came to realize the limits of our minimal requirements.<sup>3</sup> As is true of editors in a peer review publication, faculty approval may be accompanied by course design suggestions operating on multiple levels (explicit and subtle): “Reviewers hope you will consider incorporating revision into your assignments so that students can benefit from your feedback.” In the rare event that a proposal does not meet the minimum requirements for an SWC, the instructor is emailed with suggestions about how the course might be altered. Thus, the system becomes another means of educating faculty.

Committee members have also used the data collected automatically by the new approval system to look at the types of writing being done from department to department; to compare the ratio of lower- to upper-division writing classes, and to examine questions about common—or uncommon—SWC practices (for example, where informal assignments are most often used). Writing committee members have not only learned more about WAC just by participating in the approval process, but they now have data (information familiar to faculty-researchers) to make policy decisions and resource recommendations. They have become our advocates in the College.

---

<sup>3</sup> The committee is now working to strengthen those requirements and, as shall be briefly described later, this task has affected the new core curriculum requirements.

The SWC approval system perhaps best illustrates an essential fact that underlies our efforts at UT: if you ask people for information (or compel them to provide it), you should give it back to them in some familiar form that lets them see how it is useful or interesting. They will then be less inclined to resent your asking in the first place, more inclined to be curious about the relationship of their work to others', and more open to considering its implications—especially if it helps them make arguments for more resources.

## FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

### *Retreat*

Another important profile-raising element for early WAC programs has been the annual retreat. Lean times for institutions have reduced the likelihood of this element generally, but we think it worth revisiting in the form of departmental retreats, curriculum or accreditation retreats, or even by using grant or one-time faculty development or assessment money to jump start or reinvigorate a program. We were fortunate to have two summer retreats, each with 21 faculty members.<sup>4</sup> Participants *applied* with a brief statement about their writing classes, and were chosen in consultation with the dean and chairs; as with any academic reward that is valued (grants, fellowships, travel funds) faculty had to be selected for this honor.

Over three days, faculty learned basic WAC theory, re-worked their courses, and developed specific assignments and syllabi (see the schedule in Appendix B). For their valued work, faculty received a \$1,000 stipend and the opportunity to earn an additional \$500 over the course of the next academic year if they led a WAC workshop in their home department. While this may be sumptuous for some institutional budgets, stipends can always be adjusted to suit the context, and rewards can come in other forms if WAC directors are creative and work with their chairs and directors. The suggestion for the platformed stipend came from an associate dean, working with the writing committee, and the rewards have been worth the investment. Not only have faculty offered workshops in their departments and received credit on their service reports, but one of our largest units now has two annual, collaborative writing workshops that they run themselves. Retreat faculty have also established informal networks (including a WACulty listserve), and we hold an annual reunion lunch to

---

<sup>4</sup> The three days were carefully planned at a high-end venue (an inn) near, but not on, campus (to discourage “running over to the office”), where faculty could be well fed and comfortable and have space outside during their thinking and working times.

exchange ideas, problems, and solutions. Finally, we use the retreat attendees as a talent pool from which we draw instructors for all faculty workshops and for the writing committee, and they get priority treatment when requesting a writing mentor for their SWC class.

### *Writing Mentors*

We continue to offer the expected faculty development workshops on grading, plagiarism, and “grammar,” and take pains to balance these with more complex, less general topics that draw on our retreat attendees. However, our most successful faculty development strategy that has generated renewed interest in WAC is our writing mentors program.<sup>5</sup> Beginning with five peer tutors in fall 2005, the program has now grown to 20 peer tutors attached to 22 SWC classes. Following writing center pedagogy, their primary function is to work with student writers, but mentors also have an impact on classroom pedagogy.

Before the semester begins, mentors and faculty sit down with us to discuss the syllabus and writing assignments for the class. In determining how the mentor will fit with the class, the instructor re-thinks the how and then he or she assigns writing. A mentor works with the assigned faculty member throughout the semester, attends every class, and conveys the instructor’s expectations to students while working with them, while also providing feedback from students to the instructor about each assignment. In this way, mentors build a rhetorical bridge on which both students and faculty can meet. Based on student questions, mentors might tactfully suggest changes to assignments that the instructor might not otherwise recognize are needed. Mentors, meanwhile, can model for students ways to meet disciplinary expectations outlined by the instructor. As an anonymous anthropology professor put it: Mentors “give [instructors] a vocabulary with which [they] can talk about writing to their students.” In this way, mentors model for instructors effective writing-specific feedback that helps students revise their papers and improve as writers.

The growth of the mentors program is an obvious indicator of its success. That growth has also been a challenge, as the buzz about mentors has exceeded our program’s ability to train and supervise a larger staff. Serious discussions are now underway across campus at UT Austin about the role mentors could play if more resources were devoted to them, about the most effective size for such a program at an enormous institution

---

<sup>5</sup> Also known as “writing fellows” or “writing associates” at some schools, we chose to distance our in-class tutors from TA and other teacher-titles. “Mentors” also more closely describes these peer tutors’ unique roles, but names chosen should match WAC goals and institutional cultures.

like UT Austin, and about how writing mentors contribute to the mission and work of the Undergraduate Writing Center. Success breeds such “problems.”

## ASSESSMENT

### *Course-Instructor Survey Questions*

Assessment of the writing program at UT Austin had been limited to the usual general accreditation review and a one-time mandate from the University’s Board of Regents to “assess undergraduate writing.” This mandate was answered with a quantitative study of final papers in freshman composition classes. Assessment seemed to function only as a means to an end (accreditation, increased resources, faculty lines) or as a means to placate outside stakeholders. Our office initiated assessment efforts with two goals: first, to alert faculty to the fact that someone other than SACs and the state legislature was interested in the success of their efforts; second, to provide a broader and more focused picture of writing instruction that would inform all stakeholders’ subsequent decisions about writing instruction.

While course-instructor surveys are required, adding questions relevant to writing classes had been talked about but never implemented at UT Austin. This was an obvious place to begin assessment efforts, since the mechanism was already in place and accepted (if not always with open arms) by instructors. With the assistance of the Office of Measurement and Evaluation, our faculty writing committee created a seven-question supplemental form specifically for writing classes that Measurement and Evaluation would attach to the usual course evaluation forms for SWC classes. The committee’s involvement was very important, since we knew that peer-generated questions informed by multiple disciplinary perspectives would better serve the majority of practices across the College (see Appendix C). We then secured a directive from the dean that the form be used in all SWC classes. Remarkably, little grumbling resulted from this mandate.

With these seven questions, instructors now have individualized student feedback specific to each writing course they teach. This information allows them, if they wish, to adjust their teaching methods. It also *requires* them to think, at least once per semester, about critical elements of writing instruction, such as feedback, assignment design, and articulation of criteria. It is a simple way to teach or remind instructors in all disciplines about these important pedagogical components. Also, since teaching evaluations are used in merit, promotion, and tenure, these additional SWC questions gain stature—and flag the teaching of writing as valuable.

The evaluations are also being used as part of reflective classroom research, not a usual practice in an institution that highly values publications. For example, some faculty wondered whether they received lower evaluations because students simply did not want to write: lower evaluations can make faculty cut back on the writing they assign, or even cut back on teaching SWCs. Faculty can now see what elements of their SWC course, if any, led to student dissatisfaction. In a dual role, not only do these forms help faculty collect data on writing in their courses, but the writing committee can also measure ways to support SWC or change policies to reflect teaching realities.<sup>6</sup>

Combined with other assessment data, the Course-Instructor Survey responses can give hints about strengths and weaknesses at the programmatic level. Why, for example, might a department's SWC course evaluations indicate relatively high levels of student satisfaction, while an alumni survey (discussed below) shows that graduates from that department are *not* satisfied with their writing instruction? Data can not only direct departmental attention to SWC, but provide evidence for high-stakes departmental decisions: for teaching evaluations, curricular revision, and program review.

### *Alumni Survey*

We wondered whether a 20-year-old SWC requirement was worth the investment: were our alumni prepared for the writing they did after they graduated from UT? An extensive online survey of college alumni produced valuable qualitative and quantitative information. As was made plain in a report to the upper administration, these findings, in aggregate, demonstrated that SWC, while fairly successful in the College, could be substantially improved in some very specific areas:

1. Alumni from virtually all majors wished they had done more writing in college.
2. Alumni from all fields also wished they had had more dedicated writing instruction.
3. Alumni wanted more and better feedback on their writing and felt somewhat cheated that they had not gotten it.
4. Many alumni found it hard to adjust to new audiences outside of college, and they cited conciseness as a particular challenge in their post-college writing.

We made further use of the alumni survey by flagging narrative responses that made positive mention of specific instructors. Each instructor who was still at UT received

---

<sup>6</sup> The discovery of consistent lower ratings of informal writing, across disciplines and levels, caused more research on our part; an early indication is that faculty either are not connecting informal writing to high stakes assignments or that students are dismissing or not understanding the value of writing to learn activities.

a letter from our office quoting the positive comment or comments, explaining their context, and thanking them for the impact they had on an alumnus. Copies of these letters were also sent to the faculty members' chairs and the dean, advertising the fact that we were interested in success, and eager to praise, support, and reward it. In turn, we received many comments from faculty who were pleased to have received such recognition for their efforts. Not only was it the first time they were so recognized with a letter for their files, but the first time anyone connected the teaching of writing to something that faculty value highly: student success.

### *Departmental Status Reports*

After identifying the five departments teaching the most SWC courses, the WAC office extracted alumni survey data for each major and combined this information with additional sources to paint a rich picture of writing in the department: Registrar's data were examined to determine average class sizes and ratio of lower- to upper-division writing courses in the major; course evaluation data was compiled; aggregate course-instructor survey data were included, allowing ratings for specific elements of writing courses in the college to be compared to ratings in other departments; information from the new course approval system was culled and charts were generated showing the types of writing reportedly taking place in classes. These data were presented in a carefully designed format. Rather than including conclusions from the dean, each section of the departmental reports ended with a series of questions generated by the data. These questions drew possible inferences from the data and directed attention to connections between teaching and outcomes. Thus, departments with high levels of alumni satisfaction could ask "What are we doing right, and how can we do more of it?" Departments with lower satisfaction ratings might ask "What are the successful programs doing that we aren't? What resources do they have that we might ask for? And is there something we don't know about the career paths of our graduates that is keeping us from giving the writing education that they need?" In each of these cases, the alumni SWC data provided information that could again be used for departmental high-stakes decisions: curriculum design, program review, resource requests, faculty development funding.

We discussed these tailored documents in meetings with the chairs, and sometimes other faculty responsible for curriculum, using the College report—and all the charts and graphs (with all general and departmental data aggregated)—as a reference. The reports have been met with enthusiasm, in part because it is the first time many departments have heard from their graduates about their writing experiences and because the data provided again serve departmental ends. Chairs are eager to see how their



programs measure against others (writing-intensive honors programs, for example, fared predictably well). Such comparisons can be useful especially if they are steered toward program evolution and curricular improvement, which is how our format works.

## CONNECTING TO INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES AND PRIORITIES

UT recently completed a wide-ranging institutional review that concluded with a call for revamping the core curriculum. When the resulting Core Curriculum Committee sought advice on writing from the WAC office, we took the opportunity to share with them our alumni's concerns about the need for more writing in the undergraduate curriculum, the insufficient resources in writing classes, how this hampered their development as writers, and the extent to which these concerns colored alumni's overall assessment of their writing instruction at UT. As a result, writing received renewed and better-informed attention in the new core curriculum.

Under the old SWC system, students took two courses that carried the “-w” designation—awarded for meeting minimal criteria centered on page counts. Under the new core curriculum requirement, students will be required to take three courses with “writing flags.” The criteria for writing flags are much more WAC-inflected than those for SWC courses. Courses that carry the writing flag must:

- Require students to write regularly—several times during the semester—and to complete writing projects that are substantial. It is only through the practice of writing that students learn to improve their writing.
- Be structured around the principle that good writing requires rewriting. Students must receive meaningful feedback from the instructor (or teaching assistant) so they can improve successive drafts.
- Include writing assignments that constitute at least one-third of the final grade in the course. These assignments must be graded on writing quality as well as content.
- Provide an opportunity for students to read each other's work in order to offer constructive criticism. Careful reading and analysis of the writing of others is a valuable part of the learning process.<sup>7</sup>

The Core Curriculum Committee responded, as have chairs and faculty, to what is most valued at our institution: research, data that informs the research, and decisions that are made based on that data.

---

<sup>7</sup> “Faculty Council final version of the amended motion to change the degree requirements for all undergraduates at UT Austin,” [www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/2006-2007/legislation/final\\_core\\_motion.html](http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/2006-2007/legislation/final_core_motion.html)

All of the seemingly small initiatives listed here have likewise brought attention to and revitalized WAC because we have integrated our efforts into accepted structures within the current system, structures that are not only recognized but valued as part of faculty's professional reward system. For example, the online approval system is technologically advanced, can be done on professors' own time at home rather than in committee, and is similar to peer review. The retreat is a familiar venue, but one has to apply for it as if it were a grant or fellowship, and a faculty member then gets a monetary reward. It also explicitly values faculty time by paying instructors for course design and pedagogical development—honoring teaching is given more than lip-service. Mentors are student-tutors with acknowledged expertise in writing. Though they are reminiscent of TAs, they don't grade, teach class, or evaluate the instructor; instead, they become within the class a unique partner with both students and faculty, perhaps a visible sign of the serious role writing plays in an SWC course. Our assessment efforts have connected WAC with teaching evaluations, a valuable currency for merit, tenure, and promotion. In addition, faculty and administrators resonate to the "value-added" dimensions of writing once they see alumni feedback. Finally, our reports to departments give them the data they need not only for SACs, but also for an evaluation of their curriculum, as well as evidence for additional resources.

It is often the case that new program initiatives or veteran WAC directors attempt to start or enliven programs by creating new, unfamiliar elements or eye-catchers (e.g., in-house publications, speaker series, flashy Web sites). These inevitably lose their luster, especially as other new initiatives vie for faculty attention along with the day-to-day obligations: e.g., classes, research, annual reports, curriculum design, the mentoring of majors, and the ongoing incorporation of new technology into their lives. Choosing program elements that at least look familiar increases the likelihood that faculty will be receptive to them; making sure that those elements are advantageous to faculty work will also increase the likelihood of them being integrated into the academic cycle. Programs with deep roots buried under an existing culture may not be widely visible, but ultimately these roots are what sustain continued viability.

## Works Cited

- Farrell-Childers, Pamela, Anne Ruggles Gere, and Art Young. *Programs and Practices: Writing Across the Secondary School Curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1994.
- Fulwiler, Toby, and Art Young. *Programs that Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990.
- McLeod, Susan H., Eric Miraglia, Margot Soven, and Christopher Thaiss, eds. *WAC for the New Millennium: Strategies for Continuing Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Programs*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2001.
- Young, Art, and Toby Fulwiler. *Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1986.

APPENDIX A

# Online course proposal form

Page 1: Basic Proposal Information

Proposal Number **29**  
 Instructor Name **Rubeus Hagrid**

Instructor Email \*   
 Instructor Phone \*

Have you attended a Writing Across the Curriculum workshop or presentation? \*  Yes  No  
 Have you previously taught an SWC course before? \*  Yes  No

Proposed Course Title \*

Proposed Course \*  Number \*   
 Proposed Offering Semester \*

**To assess the writing component of your course, we need to collect information about both formal and informal writing assignments. You will be asked additional questions for each "kind" of assignment that you select from this listing:**

**Informal Writing Assignments** (please check all that apply)

- Class Web forum or listserv, MOO, or MUD participation
- Freewriting, microthemes, comments, questions on readings, journals (online or one paper)
- Flowchart, storyboard, outline
- Peer Review
- Informal Writing: Other

**Formal Writing Assignments** (please check all that apply)

- Case Study
- Essays, analysis, argument (books, articles, film, video, web, or other texts)
- Group Project
- Lab Report
- Letter, memo, resume
- Poetry, narrative, fiction
- Position Paper, reaction paper
- Poster Presentation
- Research Paper
- Summary, abstract, literature, review, prospectus
- Take-home essay exam
- Web site or MOO space development
- Formal Writing: Other

Required fields are indicated with an asterisk ( \* )

**Substantial Writing Component Proposal**

Page 2: Formal Writing Assignments

Proposal Number: **29** for Rubeus Hagrid  
 Course: **ANT 131 - Dragon Taming**

Please provide the following information about **Formal Writing Assignment(s)**:

Type of Writing:	Case Study
Frequency/Number of Assignments	<input type="text" value="5"/>
Length (words/pages)	<input type="text" value="200 words"/>
Number of Drafts	<input type="text" value="1"/>
Percent of Final Grade	<input type="text" value="20 %"/>
When does this assignment occur within the course structure?	<input type="text" value="before midterm"/>
Assessed by Instructor	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No
Assessed by TA	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No
Assessed by Peers	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No

Required fields are indicated with an asterisk ( \* )

Save and Review

Are you ready to save and review this request?  
 You will have a chance to make changes before you print.

Formal Writing Assignments - Instructions

For each category (type of writing assignment), answer each question indicated.  
 If you do not plan to have any writing assignments for a given category, then you must return to the Course Information page and uncheck the selected category.

APPENDIX B

College of Liberal Arts Writing Across the Curriculum Faculty Retreat Schedule

TUESDAY, MAY 23	WEDNESDAY, MAY 24	THURSDAY, MAY 25
8:30-9:00—Breakfast and discussion		
Writing to learn	What makes writing good?	Assessment rubrics
10:30—Break		
Writing and course objectives	Defining disciplinary writing	Formative assessment
Noon—Lunch		
Assignments and assumptions	Articulating and meeting expectations	Assessing ourselves
2:30—Break		
Writing in the major	Syllabus design	Feedback and exchange of course work
4:00—Dismissal		

Course objectives for faculty participants:

- to understand how writing
  - can be used as a tool for teaching/learning content
  - familiarizes students with the language of the discipline
  - improves through practice, feedback—and having opportunities for both
  - serves as an induction into disciplinary ways of thinking
- to understand how to design writing criteria that best suit course objectives
- to be able to apply formative and summative assessment in courses
- to leave on Friday with a plan for incorporating writing and its assessment into at least one SWC course.

## APPENDIX C

### Course-Instructor Survey Questions for SWC Courses

1. The non-graded, informal writing assignments were relevant to what I learned in this course.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
  - Not Applicable
2. The graded, formal writing assignments were relevant to what I learned in this course.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
3. My instructor provided expectations and criteria for grading in written form for each assignment.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
4. My instructor provided sufficient, useful comments about my writing.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
5. The writing assignments in this class helped me to understand the course material (e.g., Victorian literature, microbiology, government).
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
6. As a result of taking this class, I have improved my ability to organize what I write.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
7. As a result of taking this class, I can better express what I mean to the reader.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree