

## INTERVIEW

# Terry Myers Zawacki: Creator of an Integrated Career

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READERS OF *The WAC Journal* would agree, I wager, that it is no secret that WAC folks have a can-do attitude. Faced with problems, those who participate in and administer WAC programs pull together, think creatively, and find a way through. For those who have experience in more than one WAC setting, there is a recognition that migration from school to school and program to program tends to sharpen one's effectiveness. Patterns emerge, and one develops a keen sense of administrative savvy and methods of promoting strategic relationships to accomplish institutional, program, and personal goals.

Furthermore, the WAC professional is typically less concerned with credentials and status than with doing effective work with colleagues on behalf of students. By definition, WAC provides an interdisciplinary perspective that regards the whole curriculum, respects community, and seeks varied input on complex matters. Terry Myers Zawacki, my WAC interviewee for this issue, exemplifies the creative, energetic, effective outcomes of these professional attitudes. As you will see reflected in her own words, her WAC sensibilities have produced an exemplary result (not that she would ever characterize herself as exemplary, but still). I describe Terry as an interdisciplinary specialist—how is that for a paradox? Over time she has drawn deeply on varied experience in teaching, research, publication, administration, and service—to create a truly integrated career in what was first an administrative post and is now a tenurable faculty position.

With her longtime colleague Chris Thaiss, Terry co-authored *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*. Published in 2006, this important contribution to WAC scholarship reveals one of the most sophisticated discussions to date on what constitutes “standard” and “alternative” writing in the disciplines, for faculty as academic writers and for the undergraduate student writers they teach. Drawing upon results of research with faculty and students across disciplines, the authors describe teachers’ expectations for their student writers and students’ perceptions of these expectations. A final chapter discusses the implications of the research and makes recommendations for researchers, teachers, and program administrators across disciplines.

At George Mason University in Virginia, Terry directs the WAC program and the University Writing Center, and she co-chairs the University Writing Assessment Group. If her titles alone have you wiping your fevered brow, read on to learn from a woman who has assembled the most interesting and challenging components of an integrated professional life in the context of WAC.

*CR: Can you tell me what led you to writing center and WAC work? Were you groomed in grad school? Did you, like so many of our colleagues, sort of fall into it? Did you have a particular specialty that you moved away from in order to pursue these areas? We need a story.*

*TMZ: Well, this could be a very long “falling into WAC” story, since I started out way back when in El Paso, Texas, leading a team of junior high teachers in completely revising our curriculum into cross-disciplinary, cross-grade-level learning communities. Fast forward to Long Island and New York Institute of Technology, where I taught general English courses and a few of the required discipline-focused writing courses, e.g. writing in communications. I also taught basic writing in one of the first networked classrooms—this by virtue of location, not my technical abilities. At that time, my colleague and English chair Michael Spitzer was working with Trent Batson and other computers-and-writing notables on the Exxon-funded ENFI (Electronic Networks for Interaction) project, so several of us at NY Tech were fortunate to be among the first to experiment with the technology.*

*I’d begun doctoral work in New York, but, when my husband’s career took us to Virginia, I started all over again—with my own academic career and grad school (an ed degree with a composition focus). I was first hired at Mason as an adjunct and assigned to be “mentored” by Chris Thaiss, whom I hadn’t yet met as he was then directing*

an interdisciplinary program outside of English. When Laura Brady, a relatively new assistant prof, was asked to direct the comp program in Chris's absence, she agreed on the condition that she have a full-time assistant director, a position I then assumed. Even after Laura left Mason for a position at West Virginia University, she continued to be a wonderful friend and mentor. In fact, it was in large part due to her encouragement that I gained the confidence to submit the essay "Recomposing as a Woman—An Essay in Different Voices" to CCC; the essay appeared in the October 1992 and was recently anthologized in the 2003 *Feminism and Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*. I should add that I've been a women's studies faculty member since the early 1990s.

When Chris Thaiss returned to the English department, directing comp and WAC, I remained as associate director of both programs. At the same time, I also began developing and directing the Linked Courses Program, which I wrote about in "Is It Still WAC? Writing within Interdisciplinary Learning Communities" for WAC for the New Millennium. By then, I felt like I was a WAC person through and through, even though I'd just begun to steep myself in the scholarship. In 1997, I was asked to take over direction of the writing center, an opportunity I relished as I wanted to re-position the center as a vital and necessary support for WID. So it seems like I've always been running or involved in running at least two WAC-focused programs at the same time. I still find it ironic that long after the formal adjunct-mentoring plan was defunct in the department, Chris became, informally, my most valued mentor and collaborator.

In 1998, when Chris became chair of English, I became WAC director and have been directing both that initiative and the writing center ever since. Demanding work, but now I find it hard to imagine not doing both, as each provides me with enormous insights into how best to manage the other. Similarly, when the mandate came for all state institutions to assess our students' writing competence, among five other competencies, I knew it was a WAC opportunity and that I had to be involved with shaping our response to the mandate.

*CR: When job postings come out on professional listservs, many of our colleagues comment about rank, tenure status, compensation, and so on. When jobs with responsibilities for WAC, a writing center, and teaching come up, one can expect someone to scream that such a job can't be done. How do you respond?*

*TMZ: Since I'm doing the jobs, I know they can be done. But that doesn't mean I'm not overworked and underpaid for what I do. That said, I have a one-one teaching load and an assistant director for the writing center and, very recently, one for WAC as well.*

Plus, the members of the cross-university WAC committee, a standing committee in the Senate, are helpful, informative, and a lot of fun to work with. As is the associate provost for institutional assessment—Karen Gentemann—who co-chairs with me the writing assessment group, comprised of more hard-working, cross-curricular folks. I feel very lucky to be able to work with such good colleagues and to have the kind of institutional support for writing that has become part of the culture at Mason. I should mention too the close working relationship I have with the director of our Center for Teaching Excellence; she is a huge WAC champion, organizing and sponsoring the faculty development workshop series I do every year. Sadly, she's leaving Mason for other opportunities; however, the interim director is another close colleague who has worked with me on several writing initiatives. These kinds of ties are, of course, not news to WAC folks, who generally find that people who care about teaching and teaching effectiveness are our strongest allies.

These ties are further forged through regular workshops and other gatherings. The teaching-with-writing series consists of three workshops—designing assignments, responding effectively and efficiently, and how to work with less able writers in the course. There's a heavy ESL emphasis in the latter given our highly diverse student population. I do these every fall; the CTE publicizes the workshops and pays for faculty lunches. From time to time, I also give workshops for specific departments, e.g. holistic scoring sessions designed to help faculty articulate expectations for student writing across courses or learn how to read and evaluate portfolios for accreditation purposes. We don't typically bring in speakers on teaching and/or teaching with writing, as we have so many good folks in our institution. At my recommendation, however, the institutional assessment office did bring in Bill Condon (Washington State University) to do a day-long workshop on assessing critical thinking, another of the competencies we are in the process of measuring.

In addition to CTE and the assessment office, I work with a good number of other administrative units. To give you a sense of the importance for WAC folks of developing strong relationships across campus, I'll describe a few here. The English Language Institute, for example, funds two ESL specialists assigned to the writing center; athletics supports a half-time TA/tutor; and the Office for Postgraduate Fellowships and Scholarships another. In collaboration with this office, the writing center developed a personal statement workshop, by far our most popular, and, I'm happy to say, several of our writing fellows and peer tutors have been among the elite student finalists competing for high profile fellowships. University Life has also been an ally; they have funded our IRB-approved WAC/writing center research project on the experiences of

non-native writers in the US academy. We plan to put the data we're gathering from our student informants on the WAC and writing center Web sites, and *University Life* is publishing it as part of a series of monographs on diversity at Mason. I'm also a faculty advisor for the student-run *GMU Review*, a publication showcasing student writing across disciplines. I could go on, but then, as you know all too well, so could any WAC director; it's what Barbara Walvoord means by that "dive in or die" attitude that must be hard wired into us even before we take the job and that is crucial to sustaining our programs (from "The Future of WAC").

*CR: Somehow, you fit a very respectable assessment program into your work. How have you managed that? What have you learned about introducing assessment to a university that others might benefit from understanding in some detail?*

*TMZ:* As I said in the question above, one way I manage this is to have the support of some very good people and to work closely with institutional assessment. The latter is a relationship that goes back to my days directing Linked Courses, when funding depended heavily on proving the program was helping the university to retain first-year students. Of course, WAC folks have known all along that the assessment office is one of our best institutional friends. Even before the state mandate came, Karen had helped me convene the writing assessment group; I wanted to find out what writing tasks faculty were typically assigning and what they thought of our students' ability to successfully complete those tasks. I also wanted to know to whom they turned for advice on teaching with writing and their impression of the effectiveness of the writing center in assisting their students. To that end, our newly-convened assessment group developed a survey we sent to all faculty. So we were well poised, in the midst of this effort, to devise a plan for responding to the state mandate, one that would focus assessment on WI courses in the majors and give us valuable information about WAC and WID. I've put a lot of information on Mason's WAC site ([wac.gmu.edu](http://wac.gmu.edu)) about our assessment program, and Chris and I have written about some of the things we've learned from this process in *Engaged Writers* and *Dynamic Disciplines*, so I won't go into that here.

One other thing I will say, though, in response to your question about introducing assessment to the university is that, while we've developed an assessment process to be implemented across the curriculum, I'm always open to alternatives if a plan suggested by a department will better serve their goals while giving us the information we each need. So, for example, our history department requires writing in all of their courses and most of their faculty are extremely conscientious in working with

student writers; however, being an independent group, they don't like state mandates, especially unfunded ones, and have resisted our assessment efforts. Instead of inviting me to lead an assessment workshop, as other departments do, their undergraduate committee asked me to help them in reading papers from their gateway course to establish benchmarks to be used for measuring students' progress as writers in the capstone course. They want the results to inform some curricular revision they think is needed. That made me—and the assessment office—very happy, as this is just the kind of feedback loop any worthwhile assessment program should be trying to accomplish. Our School of Management has developed a similar plan as they need data on student writing for their accreditation. I think John Bean and Mike Carter—and you, Carol—are the masters of this kind of “How can I help you achieve your goals?” approach. I'd love to be able to work much more broadly with faculty, as you all do, on the front-end process of defining learning and writing outcomes for courses and curriculum, another huge undertaking.

I mentioned earlier Barbara Walvoord's observation about WAC programs needing to “dive in or die” and that has been on my mind lately, as I try to balance all of the commitments I've made. And this relates to your second question: I think it's because we're willing—and uniquely qualified—to dive in that we WAC folks take on so much work, albeit valuable and fulfilling work. At the Clemson WAC conference Bill Condon led a session on sustaining WAC programs, and, when the importance of “diving in” came up, I remember someone saying that, for our own personal survival, we also had to learn when to say no. Right now I'm feeling proud of myself for resisting efforts to involve me in the critical thinking assessment, even though that's another natural WAC alliance. I doubt I'll be able to stay uninvolved for long, however, as we are launching a Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum initiative, modeled, as the provost says in his e-mail inviting faculty to participate, “on the success we have had with our highly touted Writing Across the Curriculum program.” I knew this was in the works, as a couple of administrative folks had asked for my input on the idea before it was proposed to the provost; I advised that, if they wanted to model CTAC on WAC, they needed to secure faculty buy-in from the outset, involving them in the planning and development process, which they have been doing with good results.

*CR: On the WAC Clearinghouse site, you maintain an impressive list of Writing Fellows programs, including your own. As you learn about these programs, can you identify common characteristics? Common goals? Organizational structures? If you were to advise a school about starting such a program, where would you begin?*

TMZ: I've just been writing about this topic in an article for a writing fellows-focused issue of *Across the Disciplines*, so my response might seem a little rehearsed. Let me begin with the last question in your list: Just as WAC programs—and assessment programs—are structured in response to local concerns and institutional ecologies, so too should be fellows programs. While anyone starting a program should certainly be aware of the goals and ideals articulated most notably by Tori Haring-Smith, they also need to be mindful of their own institution's educational mission and structures. I would say the programs on the Writing Fellows page of the Clearinghouse all echo Haring-Smith in their goals (to be agents of change in student and faculty attitudes and approaches to writing and teaching writing), but they are also remarkably diverse in their organizational structure, size, and curricular focus.

My program is quite small; in fact, the only reason I happen to be the Writing Fellows section editor is that I suggested to Mike Palmquist, when I was creating my program, that it would be very useful to have a central repository for advice and models. Mike endorsed the idea and then asked if I would be responsible for the section. Be careful what you wish for. I'm glad I took on the task, however, as I've learned a lot about other programs, which has enriched my own program and enabled me to develop materials for my site that other programs have found useful.

I don't think you can overestimate the importance of being attuned to one's own institutional culture in creating a program. My program, for example, is an outgrowth of the writing center's peer tutoring initiative. When I took over as director of the writing center, all of the tutors were MFA grad students on teaching assistantships; I wanted to give our undergrads this opportunity, as I knew that by recruiting strong undergrad writers across disciplines I could further WAC goals, enhance the expertise of our tutoring staff, and help these accomplished students achieve some of their own goals. I designed a tutoring course that would be given a college prefix (CAS 390) to signal its cross-disciplinary intent. When I presented the college council with a course proposal for a three-credit course, they turned me down, saying it wasn't sufficiently academic. I tried again with a proposal for a one-credit course repeatable up to three times. This model appealed to them as long as I set a high bar for acceptance into the course. Subsequently, some of our best tutors have been undergrads from courses outside of English Studies. As another benefit, the recruitment process itself allows me to educate faculty and administrators about the aims of both WAC and the writing center.

Once the peer tutoring course was up and running, I began working on a writing fellows initiative, with select peer tutors being given this opportunity. I decided that it

would make sense for the fellows initiative to be folded into the undergraduate research apprentice program run by the Center for Teaching Excellence, so I partnered with the director on a funding proposal for additional stipends earmarked specifically for writing fellows. This has been a good relationship; besides taking responsibility for administrative oversight, she's been helpful in identifying teachers who might really benefit from having a writing fellow, such as the non-native professor from Eastern Europe who was assigned to teach—and was eager to teach—a writing-intensive course in her discipline. One reason upper administration is so receptive to these kinds of initiatives comes back again to assessment: for example, NSSE (National Survey for Student Engagement) results cite students' experiences with writing across the curriculum as one of the reasons for our strong scores on the five benchmarks they measure—active and collaborative learning, student interactions with faculty members, supportive campus environment, level of academic challenge, and enriching educational experiences (<http://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/NSSE/NSSE.html>). Similarly, the site-visit team from DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practice) also credited the WAC program with “creating and sustaining a focus on rigor and excellence across majors and courses.” (<http://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/Other/2003/DEEP/DEEPFinalReport.pdf>)

*CR: What am I not asking that you would like to talk about?*

TMZ: Let's see. I guess what's been on my mind lately is the need to work more closely with our technology across the curriculum program, as teaching with new instructional technologies typically involves a lot of writing as well. I'm also exploring ways the writing center can be more responsive to students writing in these new spaces. And then there's the potential of electronic portfolios for assessing student writing and program effectiveness. Darren Cambridge, associate director of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research and a Mason colleague, is a member of the writing assessment group, yet we've not really taken advantage of his expertise to figure out how to sell faculty on the benefits of e-portfolios for them and their students in tracking writing development.

But thinking about projects I have been doing, not just those I wish I could do, I was gratified to find out in interviews with undergrad coordinators and associate chairs in our new College of Science (split off from Arts and Sciences) that there's an awful lot of writing going on that is not being counted as writing. With the WAC assistant director, I'm creating profiles of writing in the majors, an idea I got from Vicki Tolar Burton at



Oregon State; we'll include writing to learn, informal writing, and formal writing and also a list of courses where writing is occurring. The associate dean of the College of Science has been very supportive of this mapping project, as he believes the information will be useful in making arguments to both internal and external audiences about the amount of writing currently being assigned, the need for smaller classes, and faculty development related to teaching with writing.

Speaking of mapping projects, Chris Thaiss and I continue to work together on a project mapping WAC/WID programs in the US, and, with Tiane Donahue, on mapping WID transnationally. Last July, I had the good fortune to spend a day with WAC colleagues at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenborg, Sweden—Magnus Gustafsson, Ann-Marie Eriksson, and Linda Bradley—learning about their writing program and, more generally, approaches to WID in Swedish institutions. In May, I'll meet with colleagues in Florence, Italy to talk about the impact of the Bologna Agreement on higher ed in Europe.

One of the things I most value about my WAC/WID work is the opportunity it gives me to get to know and interact with so many wonderful, like-minded colleagues at my own institution and at institutions across the country and, increasingly, across national borders, some of whom I've named here. When I reflect on what has been most important to me as a program builder and leader over the years, what first comes to mind are the many good friends I have made—mentors, models, and colleagues who make up the generous and supportive WAC community, a community that continues to nourish and enrich the work I do. The challenge to those of us with well-established programs is, I think, to make sure that our new WAC colleagues are welcomed into that community and feel the same sense of generosity and support as they grow their programs.

## Work Cited

Thaiss, Chris, and Terry Myers Zawacki. *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2006.