

---

---

## Where The Faculty Are With WAC

by

**Robert Miller with Sally Boland and Mary-Lou  
Hinman**

---

*After eight years, Plymouth's Writing Across the Curriculum program may have reached a dangerous age; it may be just old enough to be taken for granted. Those of us who have become actively involved in the program only in the last few years may be unaware of the origins of the program in the collective concern of the faculty about the quality of student writing. The program has been successful enough to achieve institutional legitimacy in the form of administrative support and funding. But we, the faculty, must not lose sight of the fact that our concerns and energy not only created the program, but drive it as well.*

*This is the most important conclusion I've drawn during my first semester as WAC coordinator. I based the conclusion on interviews I conducted with my two predecessors, Mary-Lou Hinman and Sally Boland. I was not a part of WAC at the beginning, and I asked them to clarify the history and development of the program for me.*

*Several people had mentioned to me that Sally was responsible for bringing the idea of WAC to PSC. When I talked to her, the first question I asked was how she had first learned of Writing Across the Curriculum.*

**Sally:** I began to hear about it in journals like *College English* in the late 70s and the early 80s. But what really got me interested was a friend of mine from graduate school who had gone to teach at Hawaii. She opened one of the first university reading/writing centers and trained

tutors for it, and as part of that she learned about WAC theory and pedagogy. So I talked to her a lot about it and got interested in it that way. And, of course, more and more articles appeared in the journals.

**Robert:** You mentioned WAC pedagogy and WAC theory. I know something about WAC pedagogy from the workshops we've had. Tell me what I don't know about WAC theory.

**Sally:** The whole idea behind the pedagogy is that we don't know what we think till we hear what we say, as the lady says in the play. And that it's through speech and through writing and through language activities that we are able to synthesize, to formulate our thoughts, to really learn what we know, and to say things to ourselves in a form we understand. It recognizes a basic fit between thinking and language--that we can't do one without the other--and between learning and language. When you use language in the service of learning a content area or a discipline, you are going to learn more efficiently and you are going to learn better. Is that theory?

**Robert:** That sounds like theory to me. I'm told you were instrumental in bringing WAC to Plymouth. How did that come about?

**Sally:** Back in '83, '84, '85 we were revising the general education program, and as part of that there was the question of what we would do with the skills component, particularly composition. Some people said we ought to have two semesters of composition. Or we ought to have eight semesters of composition. Basically, people thought it was the English Department's problem and that if we just had more and more and more composition courses, people would get to be better writers, which I think has yet to be proven. But at any rate even if it had been proven, we were not in any position financially at that time to offer more than one semester of composition. WAC offered what I considered to be a better alternative. So I kept

banging away on that concept in the General Education Committee.

Finally we modeled the requirement in writing skills after existing programs elsewhere that have a required composition course for everybody followed by writing courses in the discipline, so that students would learn the conventions and the kinds of writing their own particular disciplines would require. We call that the W course model. It became part of the new general education program.

*I had heard that the WAC Task Force was created at the same time as the W course model, and I knew that Mary-Lou Hinman had been its first chair or coordinator. Mary-Lou, in fact, had told me that her own introduction to WAC had come when Sally called her and invited her to be a part of that group. She also told me that the Task Force had been given two initial charges: 1) to read the literature and learn what the Writing Across the Curriculum movement was all about and, 2) to survey the faculty. I asked Mary-Lou to tell me what the survey revealed.*

**Mary-Lou:** It revealed a real faculty interest in the writing of their students. Over half the faculty returned the survey even though we sent it out at the worst possible time, near the end of the fall semester. We asked faculty, "What role does writing play in your classes?" Almost every person circled "important" or "very important." And for "You view writing as?" everybody checked "a method of testing knowledge," but they also checked "a learning process." When we asked them what kinds of writing assignments they used, however, the assignments didn't match their view of writing as a learning process.

**Robert:** I see. Did they include just very formal things?

**Mary-Lou:** Yes, mostly essays, examinations, reports, and research papers. A few listed other interesting writing

assignments, but by-and-large faculty listed standard writing requirements. And when we asked them what kinds of writing assignments had been successful in their courses, essays or research papers were the ones they listed most, although many acknowledged there weren't many that had been very successful. Hardly anyone used ungraded writing assignments. When we asked about problems in student writing, they focused on spelling.

**Robert:** Why spelling?

**Mary-Lou:** I've discovered through my involvement in the WAC program, that instructors who are frustrated with student writing notice obvious things. For example, students don't use possessives anymore; they misspell; "women" is used both for the singular and the plural. Those obvious mistakes everyone notices and can address. They also know students aren't writing very well, but it's harder to identify structural problems so they focus on mechanics and spelling.

In the beginning the Task Force had lots of discussions about mechanics. Some people thought the Writing Across the Curriculum Program was meant to insure that students could spell and punctuate. In response we did what in hindsight was counterproductive. We started talking about the Reading/Writing Lab as a place where people could send students who had mechanical problems, so that they didn't have to deal with them themselves. We essentially were saying, "Here's the solution to those problems, now let's move on to other things." Now we understand that the Reading/Writing Center got labeled as a place for remedial students only, and it has taken a long time to change that perception.

**Robert:** Tell me more about the survey.

**Mary-Lou:** The answers to all of the questions were obviously the answers of a teaching faculty who were interested in their students, which was heartening to us all, but there was also an underlying despair there. I remember one

response vividly, "Why are you even bothering with this survey? Plymouth is a Burger King kind of institution. We're here to flip hamburgers. So why don't you just give up and pass the ketchup." Others voiced their frustrations more nicely, but an attitude existed that not much could be done, that it was too big a job to ever be accomplished.

We knew we had to reeducate faculty to view writing differently, but we also knew we had to pay attention to the despair. We hoped that Toby Fulwiler would show us the way.

*Mary-Lou emphasized that although there was that despair among some faculty, it was faculty concern that was the motivation behind the whole WAC program. Just as the new General Education program came from the faculty, so had the WAC Task Force. I began to see as I talked to her that a key element to the success of the program had always been that it developed in response to what the faculty wanted.*

*And WAC succeeded at Plymouth, I learned, only because Mary-Lou, Sally, and other faculty fought for it. Mary-Lou told of the difficulty she had persuading then Dean George Bates to pay the fee Toby Fulwiler was commanding to run workshops back in 1986. "I had a terrible time getting the money," she said. "Dean Bates said he was sure we could get someone cheaper, and I talked long and hard before he finally said, 'Okay, but just this once.' We planned to run our own workshops after this anyway, so I agreed."*

*She also told me that after the first Fulwiler visit she and other Task Force members took the workshop evaluations to President Farrell and argued the program be given its own funding. They found him to be supportive, but I heard what Mary-Lou was telling me. This program came from the faculty; it responds to the faculty.*

*It was obvious that the first Fulwiler workshop had been extremely successful, and had propelled the program's early development. I asked Mary-Lou to tell me why.*

**Mary-Lou:** We had a very interesting and interested group of respected faculty that first time. When they got through with the three-day workshop and said, "This experience is worthwhile; for the first time faculty sat down and talked together about teaching, learning, and writing," we knew other people would come.

And Fulwiler showed us exactly how to set up a workshop. I have said this over and over again, if I had been left to my own devices, I would have done everything wrong. I never would have done what he did.

**Robert:** What did he do that you would have done wrong?

**Mary-Lou:** I would never have developed the kind of hands-on workshop Toby presented, where participants completed freewriting activities which examined the writing process. Faculty answered questions like "What makes writing hard?" and "What makes writing easier?" I would have instead tried to lay the foundation for WAC theory. I would have had a much more structured kind of program, and, of course, it would have bombed.

His model workshop also placed people in group activities where they brainstormed, composed, and edited each other's work and where they could talk to one another. It became possible to know people from other disciplines. For me that was rewarding. I was new and I listened to the participants and thought, "God, they are wonderful."

**Robert:** And did Fulwiler help alleviate that despair you described?

**Mary-Lou:** Yes. Some people came because they thought they *should* come to the first workshop, and then they were converted. I don't know if we ever got the person who wrote the Burger King entry to come, and I know some despair about student writing still exists. But, on the whole, people who have come to the faculty training workshops

have been enthusiastic about what they've learned. They have successfully incorporated freewriting and brainstorming activities and process writing into their classrooms. Many have commented that they have better classroom discussions and receive better essays as a result.

*Using the workshop format Toby Fulwiler had modeled, members of the Task Force began offering faculty training workshops once or twice a year. Presently over 60 percent of the faculty have attended one of these. The Task Force has also sponsored brown-bag discussions, follow-up workshops, and reading/writing meetings for those who have already been trained. Fulwiler has returned every third year to lead follow-up sessions and advise the Task Force on the next steps for the program. When Fulwiler returned the first time, Mary-Lou told me, "He listened to people describe writing activities and assignments they had successfully incorporated into their course, and he said, 'Share your experiences. Let people know what you're doing,'" and this journal was born. I asked Sally how she accounted for all this success.*

**Sally:** Well, I think a lot of it was Toby Fulwiler's charisma. Going through that workshop for the first time, as one colleague says, is a conversion experience. I think that has a lot to do with it. And really we shouldn't sell our faculty short. I think we've got a faculty who really wants to make writing work for students.

*Mary-Lou, too, has been impressed with the faculty commitment to the program and told me that people from other institutions, whom she meets at conferences, are often amazed by the level of participation we've had on this campus. The program, of course, will succeed only with faculty support. It became apparent that even the charisma of Toby Fulwiler would take us only so far. To maintain*

*faculty support, the program would have to produce results.*

*Toby, of course, knew this too. When he made his first return visit to Plymouth--this would be spring of 1989 --he told the Task Force it was time to assess how the program was working. Mary-Lou and Dennise Bartelo, assisted by the rest of the Task Force, sent questionnaires to all faculty members who had been trained one or more years earlier. They followed up the questionnaire with individual interviews with all 88 respondents. I asked Mary-Lou to tell me some of what was learned from that assessment.*

**Mary-Lou:** Well, again with some exceptions--I remember one person saying, "You know, you didn't invent writing"--mostly people who had used the techniques had found their classrooms were much better places because of it. They especially liked using freewriting and journals, although in the early going they objected to the fact that lots of students had many journals to do. They had real enthusiasm for the program because they saw it as a way of faculty getting together and talking about teaching and ways of allowing students to learn more and better.

We also heard that a number of faculty had redesigned workshop activities to their own purposes: journals, logs, peer groups, collaborative writing, and process-oriented assignments had taken discipline-specific form in biology, psychology, history, marketing, and math classes. We discovered we had to work much harder at promoting the Reading/Writing Center, at reminding faculty about its possibilities. The people we talked to liked the publications, particularly the articles in *The Clock* written by people from the Reading/Writing Center.

Most importantly we saw a shift in how faculty viewed writing. Whereas before they said they saw writing as a learning process, yet didn't give process assignments,



now they saw the connection between process writing and student learning in their classes. That was the biggest shift of all.

**Robert:** The initial survey you took revealed considerable concern about student writing. When you surveyed this group a few years later you must have asked them whether they had seen an improvement. What did they say?

**Mary-Lou:** It ranged from "Yes, student writing is getting much better," to "I don't see any difference." We discovered, however, that most faculty don't include any questions about writing on their course evaluations, so they have no idea how students see this part of the course unless students walk in and say something about it.

*In part because of that discovery, the next year the Task Force decided it was time to assess students' attitudes toward writing. To accomplish this Mary-Lou and Dennise developed an integrative course in which they taught a group of students WAC theory and ethnographic research and then set them to work interviewing other students. The eight students in the course developed their own inventory of questions and interviewed 100 seniors chosen to represent all the different majors. Mary-Lou summarized what the seniors had to say.*

**Mary-Lou:** We asked whether their attitude toward writing had changed and got some interesting information. A number of students said yes, their attitude toward writing had changed. They thought they were better at it, and the more they wrote the better they seemed to feel about it. Other students were terrified to leave Plymouth; they were scared about their writing skills.

*One theme that emerged from the interviews, Mary-Lou told me, was that many students wanted more writing assignments. Some of those interviewed claimed to have*

*done very little writing in their major courses. Mary-Lou and Dennise felt in some cases the students may have been thinking only of formal writing and have disregarded the kinds of informal writing WAC also encourages. Mary-Lou continued.*

**Mary-Lou:** When we asked the seniors what makes writing hard and what makes it easier, they mentioned predictable obstacles. They didn't know what the faculty person wanted. The assignment wasn't written down. Oftentimes the person just said, "Write a paper." It was difficult to get started, to get motivated, and to find a quiet place to work. When we asked them about giving advice to professors, they asked for clear guidelines, for their work to be read in draft, for comments on their papers negative or positive, for relevant topics and materials; they also asked to see their professors' writing.

Then we asked what piece of writing they were most proud of, and mostly they were proud of work that had stretched them. It was usually something that they had worked hard at, a particularly long or difficult assignment.

So out of this interviewing process the two things that astounded us were first, that students wanted more writing and second, that they really liked to be pushed.

*At the time I interviewed Mary-Lou, I had just visited Bob Garlitz's Composition class and discussed with that group, most of whom were first-year students, the writing experiences they were having in all their courses. I was struck by how similar the kinds of things they said were to what the seniors in the student assessment had said. The first-year students, too, seemed to welcome writing assignments, wanted more, and wanted their instructors to respond to their writing in ways that would help them improve.*

*By now I had a pretty good grasp of the history of the program. I also asked each of my predecessors to comment on where we are now and where we are going. Mary-Lou gave me some specific advice. She told me to make sure we keep evaluating everything we do; assessment becomes important in convincing new administrators to continue funding the program. But she advised that even more important is to remind the faculty that although administrative support is helpful, ownership of this program continues to reside with the faculty.*

*Sally answered the question in a more general way.*

**Sally:** I guess if we were just going to say what we've got right now, what we've got is a group of maybe 40 deeply committed faculty who show up for workshops and are really interested in it. It sounds as if a lot of writing is happening in general education courses, and every department has at least one W course. Fulwiler tells us that we're way out front compared with just about anybody in the country, in terms of the writing courses we require, faculty participation, and administrative support.

What does WAC do for people? Well, I would observe that I think it eliminates fear if it's used properly. People begin to see that writing is really their friend. It used to be that writing was used to punish people. If you did something bad you had to write an essay about it or you had to write a thousand times that you wouldn't do this anymore. That was a terrible thing. It just reinforced a lot of insecurities that people had about writing anyway. I think that WAC can get people away from those feelings and make them more confident as writers and as learners.

Whether you're just doing routine writing, or whether you're doing formal writing, or writing poetry, you have to feel that what's inside you is worth expressing. You need to learn that it's even worthwhile looking at what's inside and that it's important to look at it and keep it

straight in a journal or whatever. Faculty and students are much more willing to see that now, much more willing to learn that.

*Mary-Lou and Sally helped me understand where the WAC program came from and where it is. They each gave me a bit of advice about where to go from here. Try to keep the program funded. Provide more support for part-time people. Get new people involved in the program as soon as possible. Give faculty who teach W courses support and attention. But neither of them could tell me just where the program is going. I think I know why. I think it is because that is going to depend on where we, the faculty, want it to go, just as it has every step the past eight years. I learned that as WAC coordinator the best thing I can do is to listen, listen to the faculty and also to the students—they seem to have some interest in all of this, too, and some interesting things to say.*