

**LEVERAGING PLACE-BASED APPROACHES TO SUSTAIN WAC:
EXAMPLES FROM HAWAI'I, VIRGINIA, AND CALIFORNIA**

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Jim Henry, Terry Zawacki, and Chris Thaiss have clearly described WAC programs that work very successfully. Let me start by identifying some common threads. The three programs (like most successful WAC programs):

- Share the goal of improving student writing, thinking, and learning;
- are informed by the theories and practices of our field;
- focus on disciplinary intersections and the connections between ways of writing and knowing (Carter);
- rely on rich, local research studies to explore both student and faculty experiences and to connect research and teaching.

This panel focuses specifically on leveraging place-based approaches. The central question becomes: how do place and space matter?

By studying place, we study relationships. We examine boundaries as well as crossings. Even though the details of these three WAC programs cannot be simply exported and duplicated, we *can* benefit from the insights and conceptual frameworks that structure this panel.

Jim Henry cites Nedra Reynold's assertion that "[W]here writing takes place has everything to do with *how*." I would add that *where* also determines *why*--why the programs exist, work, and evolve. That is, place determines relationships and priorities, and those relationships and priorities are, in turn, determined by histories, habits,

conveniences, etc. This idea recurs in the passages that Terry Zawacki cites from Keller and Weisser (about how writing spaces always relate to other places inside and outside the discipline) and to that great line from Edward Casey: "places not only are, they happen."

Place is always something dynamic and changing. It requires us to look beyond a simple linear logic to a multi-dimensional ecology of place that emphasizes contingencies more than causality. Chris Thaiss uses ecology as a metaphor to look at the diversity that now characterizes UC-Davis's rural locale.

What emerges is a conceptual ecology of place. To describe what I mean by this, I keep coming back to varied images of mapping such as the different forms and functions of road maps, topographical maps, thermal maps, population maps, and interactive maps. Yet even a series of transparent overlays would remain fairly static. Terrain and physical space matters, but it's hard to chart daily interactions and dynamic relationships.

But instead of *mapping* WAC, a river metaphor may work better. WAC principles and practices flow at different rates across varied terrains with different elevations, obstacles, tributaries, and so forth. While this river metaphor is more active, I'm still limited by the duality of upstream and downstream. I need more dimensions.

A **multi-dimensional ecology of place** needs to include interactions and relationships and changes that occur in an environment over time. Darwin's finches are a better model. Darwin's finches adapted to different environmental niches on the Galapagos, with the most relevant factor being the type of available food ranging from *seeds, insects, and flowers to the blood of seabirds and leaves*. In a different place, predators might have led Darwin to study to adaptive coloration.

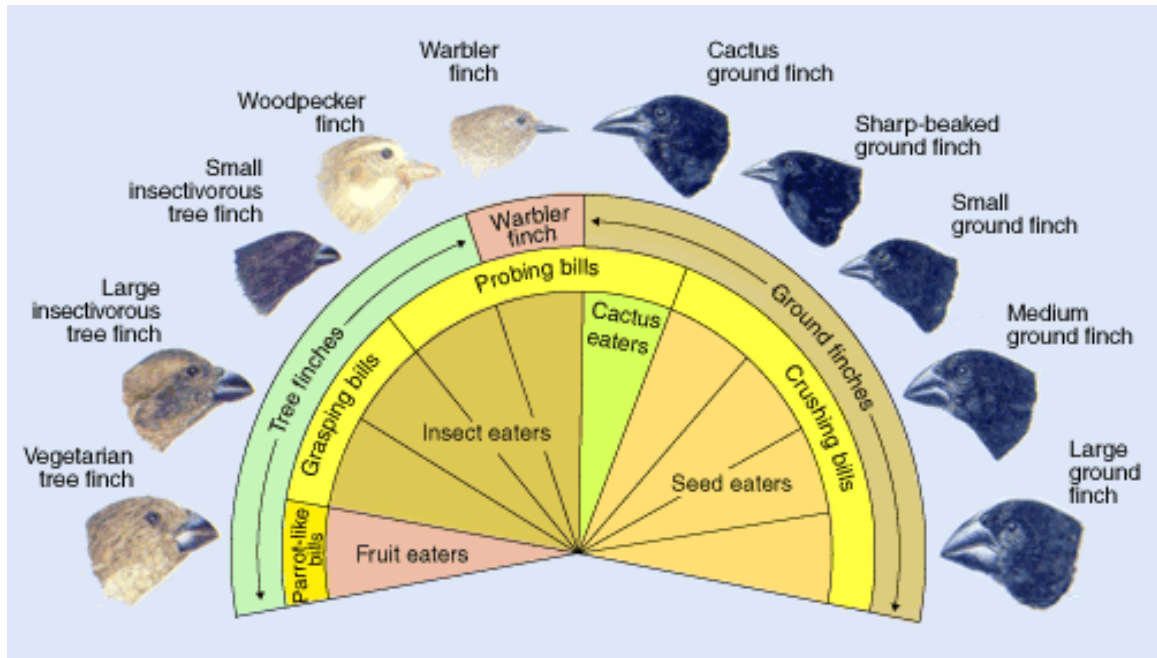


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WAC also speciates by adapting to its local environment. Different species of WAC share common goals for writing, thinking, learning, and knowing, but adapt to the social, intellectual, and physical elements of their home environments. For instance, the case examples presented today suggest that we pay attention to:

- existing populations, habits, and habitats within our home university;
- the landscape of culture and community outside the academy;
- the scarcity or abundance of resources such as funding and support structures;
- external resources in terms of national and international research and practices; and any threats to a program's survival.

Local and situated knowledge helps us all consider:

- strategies for adaptation that might be structural, behavioral, or physical;
- adaptive compromises because of complex and intertwined systems;

- or co-adaptive alliances where the survival of a WAC program may depend on partnerships with the composition program, with the writing center, with campus leaders, or possibly an alliance with the assessment office or new initiatives arising from accreditation, etc.

In the article “*WAC Program Vulnerability and What to Do About It*,” Marty Townsend uses an ecological metaphor to suggest “Symbiosis with the Institution’s Mission and Linkages with Other Programs” (51).

WAC Adaptations at UHM, GMU, and UC-Davis:

Today, Jim and Terry and Chris draw our attention specifically to the way in which place shapes their programs and defines key relationships and alliances.

For Jim Henry at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, the local history and demographics shape **curricula and connections to community**. Hawaii’s history and culture becomes an important part of the students’ education and experience. Strategies for connection and community rely on writing not only *about* place but *for* place.

In contrast to Hawaii’s strong local culture and history, George Mason University is characterized by diverse cultures and communities, due in part to its location in the Washington DC metro area of northern Virginia. Terry Zawacki thus shifts our focus to the dynamics of institutional space with **strategies for sustaining WAC** through actions ranging from creating archives, assessing programs, and managing transitions in leadership.

Like Jim and Terry, Chris Thaiss draws our attention to features that make UC-Davis unique in terms of its history, its students, and its curriculum. Where Jim’s current priority

at the University of Hawaii is on outreach and Terry's priority at George Mason University is on sustainability, Chris focuses on the space between: he notes the constant **movement between our local campus cultures and national and international research and practices**. Chris uses ecology as a metaphor to show this movement at UC-Davis.

SOME QUESTIONS

While the programs at Hawaii, Mason, and UC-Davis are uniquely responsive to their own local ecologies, they also give us new ways of looking at the places where writing happens on our own and other campuses.

I've listed a few questions that we might explore:

1. What **structures or supports** do you consider most essential if another school wanted to adapt your program's model?
2. What **factors pose obstacles or encourage success** for those of us who may want to leverage place-based tenets on our own campuses?
3. In 1990, Fulwiler and Young noted that "few mechanisms have been available for disseminating information about WAC programs in a systematic and comprehensive manner"(2). In 2012, the Web has done a good deal to address that challenge thanks to the [WAC Clearinghouse](#) and the [International WAC/WID Mapping Project](#), but new technologies present new questions. How does technology continue to change the way we write, read, communicate, and teach?
How is technology changing our notions of space?

4. In 1990, most programs started in English departments. Fulwiler and Young asked a question that still resonates today: “Are there any successful programs which entirely bypass the English department? **Under what circumstances [is it desirable to bypass the English department]?”** (4)

Much more important are the questions and comments that you all have for this panel.

Let’s hear from you all.

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- Value of balancing continuity and change; value of paying attention, of rhetorical listening; value of archives (150)