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Can[’t] Get There from Here

Four years ago, while meeting with a group of Eastern Oregon University (EOU) faculty to develop discipline-specific criteria for evaluating students’ writing in University Writing Requirement, or UWR, courses, a question about my position title, Director of the Writing Center and Writing Across the Curriculum, came up. One person stated, “I didn’t know we had a WAC program.” In truth, we didn’t. While faculty at EOU had long been committed to integrating writing throughout the curriculum, no grassroots effort had formed to build a visible WAC program. A previous Writing Lab Coordinator had promoted WAC but felt that her ABD status had put her at a disadvantage with tenure-track and Ph.D. faculty. Consequently, when the time came to hire a new writing center administrator, the English and Writing program requested a tenure line with half devoted to teaching and half to directing what is now called the Writing Center. Embedded in the position description for a Writing Center Director, however, were these words: “works with faculty across the curriculum through consultations and workshops” and preference for a candidate with experience in the “writing center and/or WAC/WID.” In my first weeks on the job, the former Writing Lab Coordinator encouraged me to adopt the title “WAC Coordinator,” and with my second Notice of Appointment, the Provost at that time, who is a former writing center director, officially added on to the title: “Director of the Writing Center *and Writing Across the Curriculum.*”

This background is important because as writing program administrators, we often hear that WAC programs need to rise from the faculty. For example, in “An Update and Brief Bibliographic Essay WAC Program Vulnerability and What To Do About It: An Update and Brief Bibliographic Essay,” Martha Townsend cites Mcleod and Miraglia’s summary of a 1995 survey of WAC programs, pointing to “grassroots and faculty support” as one of three characteristics having strong relationships to WAC program longevity (50). It’s clear that there is faculty support for writing and the teaching of writing at EOU, but as far as pushing for a WAC program from grassroots, that doesn’t necessarily follow. Regarding the other two criteria, we do have administrative support, including a small amount of funding, and for the present, we are striving to provide “strong, consistent program leadership” (50). But given the weak or missing grassroots genesis, the WAC program we are trying to build at my university may be at risk. My efforts, as director, to interest faculty in growing a WAC program, slouched into being under the urging of a former writing center coordinator, and have garnered past and current administrative support. The existing UWR provides a focal point for development. Some may say that we can’t get there—to a locally grown, dynamic WAC/WID program—from here—a collection of writing intensive courses and an institutional writing requirement. But can we? This discussion reviews some anticipated hurdles, unexpected roadblocks, and generative milestones that have occurred in this first-year story of a three-year assessment cycle with two primary goals: to build a collaborative and effective culture of writing at EOU, and to bring a WAC program to life.

I mentioned earlier that four years ago I was working with faculty on developing discipline-specific writing criteria. Having been invited to contribute to EOU’s team for the statewide Oregon Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), a grant-funded project, our work plan called for pilot development of qualitative outcomes for assessing discipline-specific writing.

The three programs were carefully selected, based on their commitment to teaching writing and/or positive approaches to collaboration. Using Bob Broad's method for Dynamic Criteria Mapping, including a hermeneutic dialectic process of recursive questioning, program faculty completed rubrics or maps (their choice) displaying what they value in their programs in regard to student writing.

From the DQP project, I learned that small stipends attached to specific work can stimulate productive work. But I also learned that some faculty resist work connected with outside funding sources, making rapport building and productive collaboration difficult. After the incentive was gone, attempts to continue work on discipline-specific writing criteria with other program faculty was interrupted by sustainability plans requiring significant curriculum changes. Some programs, along with their faculty, were terminated; some majors were reduced to minors; grievances were filed; and interim administrators are only now being replaced by permanent hires. Faculty morale plummeted, and understandably, collective program consciousness turned inward to preserve and protect students and program integrity. While writing continued within the university, many faculty had larger concerns than focusing on discipline-specific writing criteria. Such roadblocks to WAC work can be expected during institutional turmoil; however, individual relationships with faculty committed to writing can be established and nurtured during such times despite the larger institutional concerns.

The institutional University Writing Requirement, introduced in 2003, has been maintained in our curriculum, and as we strive to rebuild and attract higher enrollment, it seems an appropriate time to determine whether the UWR does, in fact, promote stronger student writing. When I heard White's law last year at a CCCC's workshop on assessment—"Assess

thyself or assessment shall be done unto thee”—I determined that now, in advance of our 2018 accreditation report, is the time to engage. So, I began reading and planning.

Leaning heavily on *Very Like a Whale* by Edward White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham, and after attending a 2015 CCCC’s workshop in Tampa, led by Norbert Elliot, Les Perelman, Chris Anson, Kathy Yancey, and other members of the CCCC Committee on Assessment, I designed and proposed a strategic plan and three-year assessment of the University Writing Requirement and other university-wide writing curricula (see Appendix A). Although each WAC program develops somewhat differently, some similarities do exist. A session at CCCC 2015 with Michelle Cox, Jeff Galin, and Dan Melzer, “Strategies for Launching and Developing Sustainable WAC Programs,” at which the speakers proposed systems theory as an approach to WAC development, was reassuring in that the assessment plan in development, in fact, considered most of the steps the panel outlined. In June 2015, I met with the Provost, who approved the project and allocated some funds for stipends. In July 2015, I attended another writing assessment workshop led by Nikki Caswell and Brian Huot at the CWPA conference in Boise, which supported a review of the project through a slightly different lens.

Working with the Provost and Deans of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Colleges of Business and Education, seven faculty with interest in writing—all tenure-track or tenured—were selected by the end of summer and invited to participate in the WAC Group. Representatives from Arts and Letters; Science, Math, and Technology; Social Sciences and Modern Languages; Education; Business; Physical Activity and Health; and the Library committed to devoting 8 to 12 hours per term to the WAC Group and were convened for the first time in September 2015. (At the end of winter term in March, one member withdrew to devote attention to a time-sensitive research project, and no replacement has been found.)

Over the 2015-2016 academic year, the WAC Group met regularly. Our first discussion focused on how we would make decisions, followed by revision of the mission statement I included in the draft strategic plan (see Appendix A). As a graduate student at Washington State University, I had participated in and observed some of the workings of the M-course (Majors course) WID program. The faculty committee was multidisciplinary, with the chair at that time from a science discipline. The Writing Center Director served in an advisory capacity, and as I recall, did not vote. I asked the EOU WAC Group to consider a similar structure, to which they agreed. Therefore, each member has a vote with the exception of the director, who will vote only in the event of a tie. (This hasn't happened yet but could since we now have an even number of members, not counting the director.)

Next, the WAC Group considered some of the targets listed in the strategic plan and a corollary assessment plan that maps out work for the three-year timeline, and began surveying UWR syllabi. To be designated as a UWR at EOU, a course must meet a specific list of outcomes that promotes writing at all levels and in all disciplines. "Defined as the results of a curriculum for those students it was intended to serve," state White, Elliot, and Peckham, "outcomes are expressed as statements of expected student performance at designated points in the curriculum" (173). These UWR outcomes do target expectations at the lower and upper division levels, but I often call the UWR outcomes a framework because they provides a generic description of what must be assigned in the course, with the exception of one qualitative requirement—a student must earn at least a C- in course for it to count toward the institutional UWR requirement. As the authors of the WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0 have done, the originators of the UWR outcomes "identified types of results" but left "precise levels of

achievement,” called “standards,” to be determined by individual programs and instructors, which ensures a WID focus (“Introduction”).

My goal in this presentation has been to provide a glimpse at how a WAC program might get its start. Recognizing from the beginning that this strategic plan is ambitious, we will address most, but probably not all, of the targets identified in the draft plan. I assured WAC Group members that I would not share data on our project at IWAC because we hope to present findings two years from now at the conference in Auburn. However, I can share what we’ve done so far and are planning for next fall. Of the four priorities identified in the strategic plan, we have addressed some targets in all except Priority 2, Student Retention and Achievement:

- This year, under Priority 1, we formed and convened the WAC Group; reviewed syllabi to see whether UWR-designated courses employ the UWR framework through syllabus review; reviewed minor checksheets to estimate the frequency at which UWR courses are required in minors; began a survey of 400-level UWR courses; and began to discuss current writing genres assigned in UWR courses through syllabus review.
- Under Priority 3, we collected high/medium/low capstone and ePortfolio samples, and developed a coding system for assessing capstones and ePortfolios.
- Under Priority 4, we have collected midterm and exit surveys from students to determine literacy support needs, and levels of awareness and availability of Writing Center support.

In addition, the WAC Group has planned ahead for work we will do in the fall. We have requested two one-hour faculty development sessions during orientation and began planning. If allotted this time, we will present two workshops:

- **What's in *Your* Syllabus? A WACky Workshop**

Faculty will be asked to bring a printed or digital copy of a syllabus with them and meet in the Library Computer Classroom to work together.

- **Writing Assignments that Matter: A WACky Forum**

Faculty will be asked to bring a writing assignment to share. This will involve a guided conversation around designing writing assignments to address outcomes.

Also, we have piloted a coding system for assessing capstones and ePortfolios, and we have requested and received data from the Institutional Research office (see Appendix B).

If the WAC Group persists beyond the three-year assessment period, and if faculty sustain their collaboration on approaches to teaching writing across the curriculum, I hope EOU will be able to say in a few years that we established our WAC program in 2015.

Appendix A

Eastern Oregon University Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Three-Year Strategic Plan

Mission: Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) at Eastern Oregon University supports the view that writing aids in learning and critical thinking, and should happen across the academic community throughout a student's formal education. WAC is committed to ensuring all students receive attention to writing throughout their studies in small class environments and, through Writing in the Disciplines (WID), students learn and practice discipline-specific conventions. Students will develop habits of mind and communication skills necessary to play productive roles in their disciplines, careers, and communities, and be prepared for responsible and reflective action in a diverse and interconnected world. (Aligned with the [February 3, 2004, University Mission](#) statement; approved by the WAC Group on November 20, 2015.)

Strategy Priorities: We will achieve our mission through strategic priorities aimed to promote writing and the teaching of writing at all levels and in all disciplines, to help students achieve mastery or acceptable writing fluency for careers beyond college, to support student writing through access to the Writing Center, and to support faculty design of writing assignments and assessments.

Impact: Over the three years of the strategic plan, we anticipate that a collaborative culture of writing, involving students, faculty, staff, and administrators, will grow from these efforts, enhancing students' learning and professional success.

Targets: Three targets have been identified: to ascertain whether UWR-designated courses employ the UWR framework, whether that framework is effective in teaching and promoting student writing, and whether use of Discipline-Specific UWR Criteria (maps or rubrics) gather useable data; to measure student awareness of Writing Center support; to promote genre diversification; and to offer writing courses and/or support for students whose needs are not being met.

Assessment: Using qualitative and quantitative methods, we will document efforts and efficacy of writing curriculum, outcomes, and support, and use the information to improve our writing instruction and understanding of how to support students' practices of writing to learn and communicate effectively.

Communication: To strengthen community involvement, we pledge to establish the EOU Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Group to collaborate on writing assessment efforts and to report our work to our constituencies—shared governance, administration, faculty and instructional staff, parents, students, professional societies, and the public—in ways appropriate to each.

Priority 1: Writing Across the Curriculum

Form and convene WAC Group.

Ascertain whether UWR-designated courses employ the UWR framework through syllabus review.

Determine whether the UWR framework is effective in attaining its stated goals (that students receive attention to writing throughout their studies, and that students demonstrate their mastery of discipline-specific writing) by reviewing signature assignments and sample papers (high, medium, low) from UWR courses.

Gather and assess disciplinary writing data through program-designed Discipline-Specific UWR Criteria maps or rubrics

Identify current writing genres assigned in UWR courses through syllabus review.

Identify UWR courses required in minors through checklist review.

Survey 400-level UWR courses.

Priority 2: Student Retention and Achievement

Assess writing proficiency in WR 115, WR 121, 200-, 300- and 400-level UWR with skill levels documented.

Identify any gaps in college-level writing instruction for specific student populations and develop plan of action.

Coordinate with academic programs and Career Services to prepare students for workplace and graduate-school success.

Priority 3: Writing in the Disciplines: Capstones/ePortfolios

Ensure student writing proficiency in genres required in the major.

Ensure student writing proficiency in genres required in the minor.

Promote and ensure that Capstones/ePortfolios are designated as UWR courses.

Offer workshops to teaching faculty on scaffolding writing curriculum and assignments.

Establish periodic review of capstone writing and readiness for career writing using the Written Communication VALUE rubric.

Ensure both print and digital writing exposure.

Query alumni regarding perceived readiness for career writing.

Priority 4: Writing Center

Ensure student awareness of Writing Center.

Broaden tutoring support to include not only writing, but also other literacies, including reading, English language learning (speaking, listening, reading, writing), and digital/visual rhetoric.

Offer support for print and digital assignment and assessment development to teaching faculty.

Appendix B

Questions for Data Request

1. What proportion of classes (not sections) are designated as UWR courses?
2. Are UWR courses accessible for students?
3. Do students who take more than the required number of writing intensive courses exhibit higher performance, as demonstrated by GPAs?
4. Do students delay completion of UWRs? When do students complete LD and UD UWR requirements? Do early completers fair better than late completers, as gauged by GPA?
5. Do UWR courses create a roadblock for retention and completion? If so, where do roadblocks appear?
6. What is the frequency of GECs combined with UWRs in LD to 300-level courses to provide early disciplinary writing experiences and double-dipping opportunities?

Works Cited

- Cox, Michelle, Jeff Galin, and Dan Melzer, "Strategies for Launching and Developing Sustainable WAC Programs." *Conference on College Composition and Communication 2015*, Tampa, FL, 2015.
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