URSC and WAC: A Mutual Future?
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Background

With a required senior project for students in all majors, a growing program of undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activity (URSC) and a WAC program in need of a fresh look, we began to study how perspectives from URSC and WAC could provide new insights to improve students’ abilities to produce high-quality senior projects. We conducted a survey of faculty, studied senior exit surveys, and conducted a literature review. Not surprisingly, faculty were more satisfied with their students’ writing and research skills as expressed in the senior project than they were in freshman or writing emphasis courses, but even at the senior level they identified severe problems in using evidence to support generalizations. In senior surveys, students rated their overall satisfaction with gains in writing only slightly higher than did faculty.

Lessons from the Literature

Although little work has been done on the intersections between URSC and WAC, we found useful parallels in the literature. Philosophically, the movements are both rooted in constructivist approaches to knowledge creation. Both face institutional barriers such as securing consistent funding and ownership. However, WAC and URSC arose from differing disciplinary perspectives and have evolved to occupy different niches in institutional hierarchies, with URSC more often associated with honors programs and elite status.

Writing and Research Across the Curriculum:
A Holistic Approach to Inquiry

Philosophical Sympathies

- Constructivism: “writing to learn”; “becoming a scientist”
- Situated cognition: knowledge as a set of domain-specific conceptual tools (Kardash 2000)
- Shared dilemmas: correctness vs. creativity; fostering habits of mind; encouraging independence
- Active learning
- Authentic problems

Overlapping Activities

- Faculty workshops
- Undergraduate journals

Interdisciplinary Histories

- Both movements instigated by academic departments or splinter factions (WAC – English; UR – Chemistry) before spreading
- Pedagogical advocacy; limited power

Institutional Barriers

- Inconsistent funding, leadership
- Securing disciplinary / interdisciplinary ownership and balance

Convergences

Evolving Differences

- WAC: humanities origins; early emphasis on diversity, empowerment, voice, broad reach. Led by large universities; growth in 1970s with NEH funding; later reliance on institutional support; little governmental lobbying
- URSC: science origins; early emphasis on “cognitive apprenticeships”/professionalization; end products; elite students. Led by small colleges; growth in 2000s; range of federal funders for science projects; lobbying presence in Washington (Council on Undergraduate Research)

Programmatic Emphases

- WAC: writing emphasis/intensive courses in the disciplines; standalone Writing/WAC Centers
- URSC: incorporating undergraduates in ongoing faculty research projects; summer enrichment programs; festivals

Institutional Positioning

- WAC: high percentage of part-time, adjunct, administrative faculty
- URSC: high percentage of tenured faculty in established departments

Works Cited


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