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Definitions

What are “Writing Across the Curriculum”(WAC) and “Writing in the Disciplines” (WID)? Essentially, these are approaches to writing that are based on the following assumptions:

- writing promotes learning
- writing is the responsibility of the entire academic community,
- writing must be integrated across departmental boundaries,
- writing instruction must be continuous during all four years of undergraduate education, and
- only by practicing the conventions of an academic discipline will students begin to communicate effectively within that discipline.

(excerpted and adapted from the “WAC Clearinghouse,” housed and maintained by Colorado State University at <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop3a.cfm>)

These two approaches are complementary. WAC has most often been understood as Writing to Learn, in which faculty in all disciplines use writing assignments of various lengths and types to support student learning. An example of this might be a biology professor assigning students to write a short explanation or summary of a principle or a mathematics professor asking students to write down a narrative of the process they used to solve a particular equation.

WID pedagogies give students an access point to their chosen discipline through sustained analysis and production of writing that conforms to the conventions of that discipline. For example, when an engineering professor wants her upper-division students to ‘write like engineers’ and structure their lab reports in a particular way, she is articulating learning goals consistent with WID.

National Contexts

Programs that might be labeled WAC or WID have a long history in United States higher education but began to emerge and be named as such in the 1980’s. Whereas individual programs have waxed and waned over the years, the principles and pedagogies of these movements are still present. There is still a need for them on college campuses.

Onondaga Community College

Writing is an excellent tool to help students “Explore, Discover, and Transform” in their academic work at Onondaga Community College. Onondaga’s current Framework for Success 2006-2011, as well as the college’s future strategic plans, emphasize increased student engagement, learning and performance, and ultimately retention. A WAC program will support all of these efforts. Additionally, instituting WAC initiatives would help ensure quality educational programs, transfer to four year colleges, and fulfillment and infusion of General Education goals. More so than ever before, local and national employers want employees who can communicate effectively in writing. A WAC/WID program can help the college increase its competitive edge. Much of the expertise needed to create a program at OCC is already available through current faculty members and/or readily accessible in the form of books, articles, and conferences. Additionally, the Writing Skills Center already exists to provide writing support for instructors seeking help with WAC/WID features.

What We Found Elsewhere

There are many successful Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines programs at two and four year colleges and universities, such as the award winning program at George Mason University in Virginia and the program at Metropolitan Community College-Longview in Missouri. Nonetheless, the members of this ad hoc committee decided to focus on models in the SUNY system and, to a more limited extent, the CUNY system. We saw these as sister and peer institutions from which we could learn and on which we could possibly model a program. Several SUNY and CUNY programs at both two and four year schools have a WAC/WID program or elements of such a program. In contacting faculty and administrators at these schools, we also learned what was working well and what was not working so well.

Each of the programs we examined, both formal and informal, fall into one of three categories. For ease of discussion, these are the Plattsburgh model, the Suffolk County Community College model, and the Monroe Community College model.

What follows is a brief description with pros and cons.

SUNY Plattsburgh

This is a four year school with a strong WID component. As part of their curriculum, every student is required to take at least one, upper division course designated as Advanced Writing Requirement (AWR) in their major. These courses are taught by faculty in the major, incorporate a specified amount and approach to writing, and faculty are supported with resources and workshops by the University Center for Teaching Excellence. The benefits of such a program are that all students are exposed to writing in their chosen field of study (it is a graduation requirement) and it is integrated across the entire college.

The drawbacks to a model like this for us at OCC are that students in these types of programs are usually in their junior and senior year when they take their AWR course. These students are already deeply engaged in a specific content area at a relatively advanced level. Students on the freshman and sophomore level may not have the content

expertise or experience to fully engage in a WID model. (It should be noted, however, that, according to the SUNY Plattsburgh Academic Plan for 2006-2010, the administration is considering adding a sophomore level requirement.) Additionally, it would require faculty from across the college revising courses en masse to meet this new requirement. Essentially, this is a top down model.

Suffolk County Community College

SCCC in Long Island, NY implemented a system in which professors could apply for a Write to Learn (WtL) designation for individual class sections or entire courses. This designation lets a student know that this particular section or class will use writing to enhance the learning of course content. The pedagogical support available to instructors focuses on a WAC model in which different kinds of writing exercises, assignments, etc. can be incorporated into a variety of specific content courses.

The benefit of this system is that faculty and (theoretically) students self-select for these courses. No one is forced into teaching or taking a class that they did not know was going to be writing intensive. Drawbacks to this system include a lack of incentive (either carrot or stick) for both teachers and students to actively seek or create these courses. Faculty who have created these courses were supported through one time grants which allowed them to explore WAC pedagogy and redesign existing classes. One of the administrators of the program reported in a telephone conversation that faculty who took part saw improvements in student learning, but it is difficult to entice faculty to take part (especially when grant monies cannot be counted on). A program like this suffers from the fact that it is too piecemeal to accomplish much. It suffers from a lack of systematic integration into the curriculum as a whole. This program shows that the proper support (workshops, resources, tutorials, etc.) must be made available, but the desire must also be present in faculty and students.

Monroe Community College

An especially well-developed and mature model of WAC in the SUNY system is in place at Monroe Community College, a large two-year institution in the Rochester area. Initiated in the early 1990's, the program allows students to earn a formal Writing Intensive designation on their transcripts and an embossed seal on their diplomas if they accumulate thirty credits of Writing Intensive courses. Such courses are distributed widely throughout the disciplines, and in several—English, Philosophy, and History, for instance—virtually all class offerings are so designated. According to WAC Coordinator Tony Leozzi, students interested in the WI option very rarely find themselves unable to complete the program because of course offerings, especially if they have intentionally pursued the option from their first year.

The program has a clear set of objectives and anticipated outcomes, and they highlight the role WI courses play in enhancing student understanding, expression, critical thinking, engagement, and community-building. While they have not formally assessed their program, Leozzi reports that there is overwhelming anecdotal evidence that the WI courses themselves are increasing student performance in the individual classes, and, as

importantly, that the transcript designation is helping to distinguish students entering increasingly competitive transfer and job markets. The courses themselves stress formal and informal writing, and instructors are supported in their work by the WAC Coordinator, The Teaching and Creativity Center, and The Writing Center.

What We Recommend for Onondaga Community College

The ad hoc committee has come up with three recommendations for the faculty to consider. One is long term and two are short term recommendations. They are:

Long term goal

1. Onondaga Community College's faculty and administration seek to adopt a system similar to MCC in which students can take a certain number of Writing Intensive designated courses to work toward a designation on their degree and transcript. This option presents us with the best mix of flexibility, individual faculty member control, and rigor.

Short term goals

2. Seek volunteers from various curricula and disciplines to experiment with WAC/WID pedagogies and/or identify those that already do and ask them to report back on what works and what doesn't. We would look for a broader selection of volunteers to start teaching with WAC/WID in the Fall of 2011. This would give us a semester plus a few months to work up materials and workshops for interested folks.

3. To help achieve the first two goals, we recommend that the faculty vote to form a permanent committee to investigate and provide resources for WAC/WID to interested faculty. This committee would begin work in the Spring 2011 term.

Committee structure and charges

Proposed structure:

A total of 12 faculty members, as follows:

One faculty member from each of the eight group-department categories

One at large member

One adjunct member

A representative from the Teaching Center Advisory Committee

The Writing Program Coordinator from the Eng/Rdg/Com department

The term on the committee is for a period of three years. Faculty members may serve on the committee for more than three consecutive years.

Proposed charges:

1. The committee shall further investigate and learn about WAC/WID programs and approaches.
2. The committee shall seek to generate support for the use of WAC/WID pedagogies and provide workshops and generate resources/materials for interested faculty.
3. The committee shall be responsible for establishing a procedure that will enable interested faculty to designate a course as Writing Intensive.
4. With appropriate help and input from the faculty, staff, and administration, the committee will work to investigate, design, implement, and submit for faculty approval a Writing Intensive certificate or degree designation.
5. Develop, share, and implement measures to assess the impact of explicit WAC/WID strategies in classes.

Members of the Task Force

Malkiel Choseed – English/Reading/Communications

Merdeth Cantor-Feller – Photography

Frank Doble - Library

Fred Jacquin – Chemistry/Physical Science

Valerie Melburg - Social Science

Christian Sisack - English/Reading/Communications