Whither WAC? Reflections on the Silver Anniversary of Writing Across the Curriculum

Susan McLeod
Professor of English, Washington State University

Keynote speech presented at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing 1996 Conference "The Status of Writing Across the Curriculum: Its Future at Minnesota"

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Preface

On February 29 and March 1, 1996, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing held its seventh annual colloquium, on the topic “The Status of Writing Across the Curriculum: Its Future at Minnesota.” The colloquium offered a forum for discussions of the history of “Writing Across the Curriculum” (WAC) and the role it could play at the University of Minnesota. We invited Susan McLeod, Professor of English and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Washington State University, to deliver the keynote address published here.

Professor McLeod is an authority on both the history of WAC programs and on ways to administer them. Her research has chronicled the rise of WAC programs in higher education over the past 25 years. Her publications include Strengthening Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing Across the Curriculum: a Guide to Developing Programs, and the multicultural textbook Writing about the World.

Professor McLeod’s keynote address, “Whither WAC? Reflections on the Silver Anniversary of Writing Across the Curriculum,” gives a historical overview of the changing nature of WAC philosophy and programs. Her descriptions of varying approaches to WAC, and of the requirements for successful programs, provide a useful context for understanding how writing can be used as a pedagogical tool in a range of disciplines.

The colloquium and Professor McLeod’s speech challenged faculty and administrators at the University of Minnesota to find concrete approaches that will work here. These activities, together with ongoing Center projects, should result in improved under-graduate writing, the Center’s primary goal. Along with colloquia, conferences,
publications, and other outreach activities, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- characteristics of writing across the University’s curriculum;
- status reports on students’ writing ability and the University;
- the connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction.

We are pleased to present Professor McLeod’s keynote address as part of the ongoing discussion about Writing Across the Curriculum. One of the goals of all Center publications is to encourage conversations about writing; we invite you to contact the Center about this publication or other Center publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Kim Donehower, Editor
April 1996
Whither WAC?

Reflections on the Silver Anniversary of Writing Across the Curriculum

My title is "Whither writing across the curriculum," which is also the title of a research project that I’m involved with right now that was funded by the Council of Writing Program Administrators to take a look at the state of "Writing Across the Curriculum" (WAC) in the country at this particular moment in time. Why this moment in time? It’s the silver anniversary of Writing Across the Curriculum, and so what I want to do tonight is just reflect on the history of Writing Across the Curriculum, and tell you a little bit about how it developed over the last three decades.

This is my own personal idiosyncratic history of Writing Across the Curriculum, and then I want to speculate on its future. I will not be talking about the National Writing Project, which is a parallel but separate story to the story I’m going to tell. I’m just going to focus on higher education.

The Writing Across the curriculum movement—and I use the word movement deliberately; I think of it as an educational reform movement—began in the early 1970s. It was during this decade that there were some vague stirrings abroad about the quality of student writing in higher education. This is one of those things that surfaces periodically—people notice that students have problems writing. In the 1970s it was a wake up call in terms of some of the curricular and other kinds of changes that went on during the 1960s. As with a lot of movements, WAC got its start before it had a name, before anybody really knew what to call it. Its story is also the story of the key people as well as key events during that time. The key people that I’m going to be mentioning are people whose names are familiar in WAC. I like to think of them as agents of change
within their institutions because all of the people I’m going to talk about are people who know not only what the research is in a particular area, they also know how to get things done programmatically.

The story begins in 1970, in Central College in Pella, IA, a small liberal arts institution. When Barbara Walvord’s Chaucer seminar didn’t make enrollment, she asked the dean if she couldn’t convene the faculty who were interested to talk about student writing and see if there wasn’t something they could do about it. The issue of student writing was already a focus of faculty conversation, sort of like the weather. But, Barbara decided that maybe they could do something about it if they got together once a week and talked about it in productive ways. So every Tuesday afternoon, Barbara and a group of interested faculty met. They read what literature was available in 1970, and for those of us who were around during that time, that wasn’t much. I like to tell my graduate students that when I started in this business I owned every single book that was ever published about composition and it all fit onto one shelf. The faculty read student papers and tried to figure out how to respond to them, they talked, they argued, and they tried to figure out a way of addressing the issue, not only in their own classes but also programmatically as an institution. I might add that their institution was 2000 students. With a small institution like that, you can practically convene the whole faculty to talk

About this same time, Dean Harriet Sheridan at Carleton College was hearing the same kinds of complaints from her faculty and trying to figure out ways to address the issues. She established a program of writing fellows, where peer tutors were trained to work with a faculty member to respond to drafts of student writing. This turned out to be an enormously successful program. She transplanted it to Brown when she went to be
dean at Brown, and that program is still going at Brown, at Carleton and several other institutions as well.

Then in 1975, *Newsweek* magazine had a cover story. “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” and the literacy crisis was born. Whether or not this is a real crisis or whether it was a media event, it was discussed for sometime. It’s not really clear.

The basis for the story was the publication of the National Assessment for Educational Progress results for that year. It’s what’s called the nation’s report card—you probably hear periodically that once again they have published student scores in reading and in mathematics. This particular year it looked like there was a dip in student writing abilities compared to the previous year. Whether or not they interpreted the data correctly is not clear, but it is true, looking back historically, that during this decade of the late 1960s early 1970s, some of the curricular reforms particularly at the secondary level, meant that students really were not writing as much as they had been—due in part to increased class size, and in part due to other kinds of issues. There was a move away from writing quite as much and a move towards other kinds of assessment—scantron sheets, multiple choice, true/false, that kind of assessment.

1975 also marks the publication of two books, one of which gave Writing Across the Curriculum its theoretical underpinnings and the other of which gave it a name. James Britten and his associates published a book called *The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18*. This came out of the London School’s Council project. It was a very long and detailed study of the kind of writing the students were doing in the London schools. One of the things that Britten and his associates found was that the primary kind of writing that teachers were having students do was writing to the teacher as examiner.
Writing was considered a test. There was synonymous almost with testing. There was very little of what Britten called “writing to learn.” The recommendation that came out of that book and the subsequent publication from the London Schools Project emphasized ways teachers could use writing as a mode of learning. Britten and his associates developed a concept of expressive writing—that is, writing for the self—being the matrix out of which transactional writing and poetic writing arose. Transactional writing was the kind of writing that was most often assigned in the schools. This became the theoretical underpinnings for many Writing Across the Curriculum programs to come.

The second publication in 1975 was the Bullock Report, called “A Language for Life.” The Bullock report, commissioned by the British government, was a study of the teaching of English in the entire British educational system. One chapter in that report was entitled “Language Across the Curriculum” and talked about the importance of English and English studies not just in English classes. It argued that English should not just be focused in English classes, otherwise, students got the idea that writing skills and other kinds of clear communication were not important in biology or geography or any place else. This phrase, "language across the curriculum," was then picked up in the United States and turned into Writing Across the Curriculum.

These two books were picked up and used as a basis for a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar, which a number of folks in the United States attended. One of them was a person by the name of Toby Fullweiller, a young teacher who had just been hired by Art Young at Michigan Tech.

About the same time that Toby was attending this Rutgers seminar, reading James Britten’s book and hearing Britten speak, Elaine Mammon who was a part time teacher in
charge of the writing program at Beaver College, a very small women’s school in Pennsylvania, was called into the dean’s office. The dean was reading the *Newsweek* magazine article “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” He waved it in her face and said, “You need to do something about this.” He sent her to Modern Language Association convention, of all places, to try to figure out what to do about student writing. The sessions at that time had very little to do with writing, but the conference was in San Francisco that year, and Elaine just happened to bump into Harriet Sheridan on a streetcar. It was that session with Harriet on the streetcar that got Elaine interested in Writing Across the Curriculum. She went back and wrote a grant proposal, as did Toby. This was era when you could get very large outside funding for Writing Across the Curriculum.

These two programs and these two people have become identified with the theoretical foundations for Writing Across the Curriculum. At Beaver, Elaine’s program stressed what we might call a rhetorical approach to Writing Across the Curriculum—that is, it focused on "Writing In the Disciplines," the discourse of the disciplines, what we now refer to as the discourse community. In the introduction to the book that they developed at Beaver College, “Writing in the Arts and Sciences,” Elaine says, "Writing is a form of social behavior in the disciplines." So this particular approach to Writing Across the Curriculum focuses on the disciplinary differences as well as the similarities among the rhetoric and the disciplines.

One example of this is our American Studies program, in which the graduate students go back and forth between seminars in history and seminars in literature and English. They were having a terrible time with their verb tenses. In each class they were
getting the verb tenses circled. The teacher would say "tense," but couldn’t tell them what was wrong with the verb tense, there was just "something wrong." It was happening in both seminars. So we sat down and looked at the papers and tried to figure out what was wrong. We finally figured it out: In literature we use the present tense to talk about people who have been dead for hundreds of years. Shakespeare says “Milton said.” I mean we have a lot invested in the fact that these folks are not of an age but for all time, right? But in history they care about whether people are dead. You have a time and a place where people wrote. You can not say “Gibbon says;” you have to say “Gibbon said” because he is marked by dates and what he says and how you take it depends a lot on when he said it. Similarly, APA style and MLA style are very different but it’s not just a question of where you put the date, it has to do with very different epistemologies. What counts as data is very different in these two approaches to writing.

These are the sorts of thing that those of us who are involved in the rhetoric of disciplines are interested in. So when people talk about learning to write or discourse communities or the Beaver approach, that’s really what they’re talking about, a rhetorical approach, what we might call learning to write in the disciplines.

At Michigan Tech, Toby’s program was funded by an absolutely enormous grant from General Motors the likes of which none of us will probably ever see again. I mentioned earlier that he was very much influenced by the work of James Britten and his colleagues who advocated the use of writing as a mode of learning. We might call the cognitive approach to Writing Across the Curriculum. Other people have called it other things, but that’s my name for it.
This is what we might also call the writing-to-learn in the disciplines, rather than learning to write in the disciplines. The journal is the most obvious and the most ubiquitous curricular manifestation of this particular approach. I can’t tell you what a revolution this particular assignment has brought about in a lot of institutions. I go someplace where Toby has been before me and everybody’s using journals—it's the journal is the place where students think out for themselves their own ideas before they go ahead and write.

At this point around the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, Writing Across the Curriculum just took off. This is where I entered the scene. If 1970s were the formation decade for WAC, then the 1980s were sort of the go-go years. Everybody wanted WAC. I was on the national network of Writing Across the Curriculum programs as a Board of Consultants, which holds meetings at CCCCs and at NCTE every year. Those sessions were always packed with people who’d been sent there by their deans to get WAC. Sometimes the dean wasn’t just sure what that was, but they were supposed to get it and bring it back and start a program on their campus.

I did a survey in 1987 to see what the national picture looked like because I was interested in this sort of boomlet of Writing Across the Curriculum programs. The results of the survey was written up in CCC, titled “Writing Across the Curriculum: The Second Stage and Beyond” because those of us involved in it kept saying “Wow, this is a second stage of WAC.” We were not just seeing workshops. We were really seeing curricular change; it was becoming entrenched in the campuses.

Writing Across the Curriculum looked pretty healthy at that time. The survey showed a really rosy picture—there were a lot of programs, a lot of people responded to
the survey by saying, "We don’t have Writing Across the Curriculum, but we want it, we’re going to get it, we have funding for it, we’re starting a program." There was quite obviously interest in Writing Across the Curriculum, even though some of the funding had dried up. It was still a going concern.

And then came the 90s. And as you probably know, the 90s, so far at least, have been a period of retrenchment in higher education. This is a time for budget cuts, for downsizing; a lot of outside funding has dried up for everything, not just for Writing Across the Curriculum. One of the things I was interested in was this: Now that things are kind of pulling back, now that programs are being cut, now that institutions are pulling back from initiatives that earlier they seemed to be invested in, what’s happening to WAC?

So I sent out a second survey, titled “Whither WAC,” that was funded by the Council of Writing Program Administrators. It's like a panel study, which takes a look at a group that was surveyed at a certain period of time and then surveys the same group, asking some of the same questions, to see how things have changed since the last time we talked. I sent a follow up survey to all the people who had responded to the previous survey in 1987. I sent them their responses to the previous survey, so that they’d remember what it was they said the time before, and I asked them to reflect on those answers that they’d given me and tell me a little bit about how things had changed since then.

I don’t have the complete data as yet—the surveys are still coming in—but I am ready to tell you a little bit about what I’ve learned in terms of what’s happening to WAC. I want to give you a couple of definitions first so you know what I’m talking
about. I’ve already talked a little bit about what it is that people mean when they say WAC. It doesn’t just mean more term papers, though sometimes faculty members seem to think that that’s what it means. It doesn’t mean every faculty member is a grammar teacher. But it does mean either using writing as a mode of learning or thinking about what constitutes the rhetoric of a discipline and trying to make that apparent to the students.

In terms of practicality, one of the things I was after when I looked at my survey data was: Was there really a program? You can have Writing Across the Curriculum activities on a campus and still not have a Writing Across the Curriculum program. So I looked for particular elements on the campus in order to define what I meant by a Writing Across the Curriculum program.

First of all, there was some sort of support system, support for faculty and support for students. So I asked: Do you have faculty development workshops? Have you had faculty development workshops? Do you also have support services for students? Do you have a writing lab or writing center? Do you have peer tutors who work with students in the classroom?

I also looked for curricular elements. Was the freshman composition program considered part of the Writing Across the Curriculum program or was it set aside? Was there writing in general education courses? The most common curricular manifestation of Writing Across the Curriculum is the writing intensive course in the discipline where there’s a certain amount of writing that is required or writing in the major class.

Was there evaluation going on? Was evaluation of the student’s writing and then evaluation of the program happening?
Finally, was there some kind of administrative structure? Was there someone people could point to or some entity or body or board on campus that people would say these people are the one who are in charge of the campus writing program?

When we got back the survey from an institution, which shall remain nameless, the response said: "We had Writing Across the Curriculum before anyone ever knew what it was; we had a term paper in every class." For me that did not count as a Writing Across the Curriculum program. I think the program has to be in concert with other things that are going on the campus. My definition of a Writing Across the Curriculum program in this survey is that there has to be some kind of administrative structure or person. That's how I'm defining it within this survey. For it to count as a Writing Across the Curriculum program it had to have some kind of administrative structure or entity and it had to have at least one of these other elements.

What did I find? Well, as one might expect, a few programs had died. In fact, not only have a few of the programs died, one of the schools involved has gone under, which says something about the economy and the rising costs of private education. We asked the people whose programs had died to tell us why and to give us some insight into what went wrong. So far, the answers have fallen into exactly four categories. It’s very interesting—there's one of four reasons or perhaps a combination of these four reasons, why programs do not survive.

The most common one so far has been funding. People will say: "The funding was cut, or the funding dried up; there was not continuing funding, we had a grant and then it wasn’t picked up." This seems to be the most common reason, and when you
think about the 90s, it makes sense. In a period of budget cuts, something that looks like you don’t really need it in terms of administrative or instructional needs can go.

Another common answer was that the old dean or the president or the provost left and the new one is interested in Total Quality Management but not interested in WAC. Or they're interested in technology, or virtual education, or something like that. In other words, WAC was something that belonged to the old dean and went on his vita but this new person wants something else on her CV.

A third common reason was that a key Writing Across the Curriculum person left and was not replaced. These were programs that had individual who was associated with the program. When that person left he or she was not replaced or was replaced with someone who was not effectual. As a result, the program died for lack of leadership.

Finally, the least common reason was that faculty was not interested in or supportive of the idea. For whatever reason, the program could not get grassroots support from the faculty. No matter what else they did, they couldn’t get people involved in the program.

When we looked at the continuing programs we found a mirror image of this same information, which leads me to the following fairly tentative conclusions about what it takes to continue a healthy Writing Across the Curriculum program.

First of all, administrative support is crucial. I don’t’ know how you can have a viable Writing Across the Curriculum program without at least the tacit support of the administration. I don’t think it can be top down from my experience; it’s very hard to mandate Writing Across the Curriculum by fiat. But unless there is at least some vocal support saying, "Yes this is a good thing; we support it; we want this to happen," it’s very
difficult to do anything in terms of continuing a Writing Across the Curriculum program. This is just because of the hierarchical nature of the academy. You need some support from the visible leadership of the institution.

Second, you need grassroots support. You have to have a critical mass of faculty who are interested in their teaching and who are interested in their students or it’s not going to happen. In institutions where the local culture is just not supportive of teaching, you can’t have a Writing Across the Curriculum program. If you do, it happens in ways that are very precarious.

Budget is important. There has to be some kind of monetary commitment. It doesn’t have to be magnificent, but it does have to be there. The most common kind of budget support I have found in the continuing programs is release time. The person who is in charge gets release time, or other people there get release time, to run faculty workshops and work with faculty who are interested in using writing in their teaching.

One of the interesting things that I’ve found about budget is this: At the Council of Writing Program Administrators meeting last July, I had a focus group where I asked people to come and talk to me about their Writing Across the Curriculum programs. These were all Writing Across the Curriculum directors who were at this meeting. There were representatives of twenty different institutions at that particular focus group, and out of twenty only one program had had its budget cut in the last five years. All the rest either had the same budgets or their budgets had been increased. This is during a time of real retrenchment in terms of budgets in higher education. To me, this indicated a real commitment to the program. Clearly the administration felt that it was worthwhile; it was successful; it was doing what it needed to do.
Finally, there needs to be strong, consistent leadership. There has to be a person or a body—like the English Composition Board at Michigan, or like the All University Writing Committee at the University of Missouri—that people can point to and say, "That’s the person or the group that’s in charge of Writing Across the Curriculum on this campus." They’re just identified with WAC.

Here’s an interesting fact. Of the respondents who reported continuing programs, 41% of them had only had one director since the beginning of the program. All of these are programs that have been going since 1987. You might think of this as the graying of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement. What’s going to happen when those folks retire? Clearly they have become identified on their campus as the writing person and they have been doing this for over ten years. My next step is to interview some of these folks and talk with them a little bit about what they’ve been doing, what their plans are, and how their program has transformed and changed over the years.

Back to my original question: Whither WAC? Now what? David Russell, who is our Writing Across the Curriculum historian, talks about various movements since the 1880s to improve student writing. He gives us some cautionary tales about these movements, which simply died out after a brief flowering. Is that what’s going to happen to this movement? Will it just die out? I think not, for two reasons.

First of all on a very practical level, Writing Across the Curriculum can adapt itself and has adapted itself to whatever is happening on campus at a particular moment. It is a pan-discipline. Many of us, for example, have folded Writing Across the Curriculum into general education reform, which has been a part of most campus discussions for some time.
If outcomes assessment comes to campus, it’s very easy to fold Writing Across the Curriculum. To give you an example, I want to show you what we've done with our program at Washington State.

We were mandated by our higher education board to gather baseline data on our students, to do a midpoint assessment, and to do an end of program assessment. So, as soon as students come to campus the first thing they do is they take a writing placement examination, right at matriculation. That’s our baseline data.

We then put them in the appropriate writing course. We have three choices: basic writing; English 101; and 101 plus 102, which is a 4 credit rather than a 3 credit composition class, in which students who need more help with their writing have the 4th credit as a one hour lab where they meet with a tutor.

Then students take a series of general education courses, all of which must have some writing component in them. After 60 hours, there’s a midpoint assessment. We have students do a writing portfolio, in which they collect three papers that they’ve done in their general education courses and do a timed writing. The timed writing is usually a controversial paragraph or two, in which they are asked to summarize the main idea in the passage and say how one might have another view of that particular controversial issue. We’ve done this long enough now so that we’re beginning to gather some longitudinal data. We can look at the same student’s writing as a freshman and as a junior. It's fascinating data.

If students do not pass the portfolio, they must take another writing class rather than just keep taking the portfolio over and over again. When that’s completed, they take
two "writing in the major," courses which focus on the discourse of the discipline. In the psychology department, for example, they learn APA style.

Then there’s what I consider the weak point in our program—the end of program assessment. Each individual program decides how it's going to assess the writing of its majors. Some have chosen simply to say: "Well, that’s our senior seminar is good enough." But there are two programs that I think are model programs. One is Sociology, in which students keep a sociology portfolio from the time they certify a major right up to their senior year. And they keep every paper they’ve written in sociology and they’re asked to reflect on their major—what was helpful, what wasn’t. The other program, interestingly enough, is mathematical sciences. The queen of the sciences has decided that they also need a writing portfolio as end of program assessment.

This is what I mean by folding Writing Across the Curriculum into other initiatives on campus. We had money for assessment, we had money for general education reform, and that’s how we got the money we needed for folding Writing Across the Curriculum into those reforms.

The National Endowment for the Humanities is now funding programs for technology in education and I’m there. There’s no reason in the world that we can’t fold out Writing Across the Curriculum program into that kind of initiative.

The second reason that I think Writing Across the Curriculum will continue has to do with the core of Writing Across the Curriculum as a reform movement that can be found back in its beginnings, back in that first seminar that Barbara Walvord ran. The core activity in the Writing Across the Curriculum movement is faculty talking to faculty about student learning and student writing. My observation is that the pendulum in higher
education is swinging back towards teaching. We have rediscovered undergraduate education, even those of us in research institutions. Boyers last book, “Scholarship Reconsidered” talks about the scholarship of teaching and how we need to validate that as well as the scholarship of discovery.

On my campus we now have to document our teaching for annual review, for tenure and promotion, and for our teaching portfolio. Other campuses are doing this as well. Last year, we had our first instance of someone who was turned down for tenure because he was a bad teacher and someone else who was promoted who was turned down for tenure because he was a bad teacher, and someone else who was promoted who had not published all that much but who was a good teacher. Now those two had things I think happened in tandem by accident. But that is a nice message to be sending to our new faculty that, yes, we value your teaching. We think your teaching is important.

One development I’ve been watching with some interest is the mushrooming of teaching and learning centers on campuses. I don’t know if you’ve read much about this in the Chronicle of Higher Education, but with this new interest in undergraduate education, suddenly we have funding for teaching and learning centers. Writing Across the Curriculum is a natural part of such a center.

So here’s my prediction about the Writing Across the Curriculum movement: It will survive. It may not survive under that name. It may survive in a very different form. It may look like something that is not anything like what I just described. But as long as there are people in the academy who care about the relationship between language and learning, I think there will be WAC.