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Another Look at WAC and the Writing Center

Judy Gill

In recent years, compositionists in writing centers and in writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines programs have addressed questions that faculty, students, writing center consultants, and administrators at Dickinson College, where I direct the Writing Center, grapple with regularly—in committee meetings, department meetings, staff meetings, and faculty workshops on writing: What kind of writing do we want our students to practice? Is there such a thing as generic academic writing? If so, what are its essential features? Or is academic writing discipline-specific? Who is responsible for "teaching writing"? What is the place, if any, of composition courses at a school committed to WAC? Are the goals and practices of WAC and writing centers incompatible? Should writing centers rethink some of their longest lasting, most deeply entrenched practices in light of social constructionist theories of writing inherent in most WAC programs?

What I would like to do in the following pages is take a look at the relationship between WAC and the Writing Center at Dickinson, which I believe is typical of many institutions with writing centers already in place that have instituted WAC programs. This look will be a critical one. My aim is not to hold our program up as a model, to be guilty of what Michael Pemberton calls conscious myopia—"choosing to ignore any problems, pretending they don't exist, or rationalizing them away" (119). WAC principles and practices have indeed prompted us to rethink the role of the writing center within the college and to examine our tutoring practices; the changes

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we’ve made have not compromised the tenets of peer tutoring nor placed the writing center in a position of subservience to faculty expectations. In fact, I would argue that these changes have made the writing center a more visible and effective force for changing faculty attitudes and for helping students accomplish their writing tasks more successfully.

As Ann Penrose and Cheryl Geisler have demonstrated in a recent article, asking students to perform academic writing tasks successfully requires them to operate on the basis of four epistemological premises: “Texts are authored. Authors present knowledge in the form of claims. Knowledge claims can conflict. Knowledge claims can be tested” (507-508). These premises are not, however, as Penrose and Geisler show, part of the world view of most undergraduate students, who, for the most part, see texts as containing “fact” and “truth”—especially texts written by “authorities” and “experts,” the kinds of texts we routinely ask them to read, analyze, evaluate and write about. So the complaint I sometimes hear from faculty that students can’t read and write really means that students don’t read and write as we do. Faculty want students to enter academic conversations, “speak with authority . . . [and] define a position of privilege” (Bartholomae 156), but we must teach them to do so, not assume that they somehow will pick it up over the course of their four years of undergraduate education by listening to our lectures and writing papers for us.

Thus, it seems to me crucial for the institution to formulate and articulate its goals for students as learners and writers and for the writing center to play a key role in that formulation and in assisting students in accomplishing those goals. In the spring of 1994, our all-college Subcommittee on Writing wrote a report to the faculty on the state of writing at the college in which we attempted to state these institutional goals and to describe the WAC Program we have in place—its rationale, history, strengths and weaknesses, possible future development, and its major components: the freshman seminar program, the writing center, writing enriched courses, writing courses in the English Department, and writing in departmental majors. As stated in the report, our WAC program is based on the belief that

writing is not a skill that can be isolated from the process of learning and knowing, nor can it be mastered in a one-semester composition course. While bounded by disciplinary differences, academic writing is generally critical and argumentative. It locates itself within interpretive discussion, takes a stance, and defends and examines that stance in ways judged to be logical, coherent, and convincing in the given context. (Subcommittee 1).

While not denying the existence of discipline-specific knowledge, methodology and communication, we believe there are common features among
the discourses within the academy. Moreover, writing is seen as an activity central to learning and communicating not only within but also among disciplines, particularly at a time when interdisciplinary programs of study are proliferating at our college. Thus, a major assumption underlying the program is the belief that there in fact exists something we can call generic academic writing standards and expectations that are cross- or trans-disciplinary.

The writing center, as Mark Waldo notes, is essential to the success of a WAC program such as ours that “decenters” the responsibility for teaching writing, “preserve[s] the rhetorical integrity of the disciplines,” and establishes common expectations and goals (21). When the Writing Center at Dickinson was established in 1979, however, it was a modest affair, both in its facilities and its mission. In its early years, the center advertised itself as reflecting the college’s “commitment to educating students in essential communication skills,” to providing “special support to freshmen,” and to giving “all students the chance to polish their grammar and punctuation” (1983/84 Catalogue). This description projects an image of the Writing Center, all too familiar, as a fix-it shop, emphasizing as it does attention to skills; it further implies that the writing center can and should do the job once done by mandatory freshman composition courses, which had been abolished in 1970.

With the death of freshman composition at Dickinson, many conceived of the Writing Center as place to send students with writing problems, especially first-year students, since these problems were no longer being taken care of in English Department writing courses. Several changes occurred in the Writing Center during the 1980s: larger staff, improved facilities, and more responsibility for faculty training. At the same time, the college was expanding its WAC program, and it hired a Writing Program Director in 1990. The WPA’s primary responsibilities and goals were to make WAC a reality at Dickinson, not just a concept faculty agreed to in principle, while in their hearts and in practice they still looked to the English Department to teach writing in its elective composition courses and to the Writing Center to help students deemed poor writers.

The Freshman Seminar

The 1994/1995 College Catalogue includes a description of both a Writing Program and a Writing Center. The first sentence of the Writing Program entry announces that “writing is taught across the curriculum, in all departments, at all levels,” with the centrality of WAC and the role of the Writing Center in this enterprise announced in the first sentence of the Writing Center entry as “a resource to assist students in all courses, from Freshman Seminar to Senior Seminar.” We are thus representative of the pattern described by Pemberton: a writing center in place, the introduction
of WAC, and an evolving partnership between them (116-117). Freshman seminars are designed to engage faculty and first-year students in exploring a topic of common interest, ranging from “The Impact of AIDS in the Twentieth Century,” taught by a biologist, to “War and Memory: World War II on Film,” taught by a historian, to “Science Fiction: Visions of the Future,” taught by a mathematician. The seminars are not discipline-based or content driven; thus, they emphasize the shared conventions and practices of academic discourse. Moreover, since faculty are not teaching their scholarly specialty, they are less experts and more fellow learners with their students.

Writing is “a central aspect of all freshman seminars, and writing not simply as a mechanical skill, although we hope to improve our students’ technique, but as one of the most important academic modes of thinking, learning, and communicating” (MacDonald 4). The freshman seminar is the site for showing students the ways in which written discourse informs the way we define knowledge and communicate with each other in the academy. In these small classes, writing is not divorced from context or subject matter, as it so often has been in traditional composition courses; nor is the expectation that students will master transferable writing skills that will equip them to enter as full participants into the discourse community of their major field. The focus in these classes is on the introductory nature of the enterprise; we acknowledge that writing is always situated and contextualized and that students, as they enter and progress through their majors, will engage more and more in the specialized conversation of their field.

For many faculty, a freshman seminar is the first or only time they venture pedagogically outside their field of expertise, the first time they self-consciously teach writing. Many express concern and skepticism about their ability to teach writing. For some, this concern arises from a resistance to use valuable class time to talk about writing, time that could be used to teach the subject matter of the seminar. Accustomed to the coverage model in their other classes, they may be reluctant to cut down on the reading or to omit a particular book or author. For others, their anxiety arises from the notion that emphasizing writing means they are being asked to teach grammar, mechanics, and punctuation when they are only qualified and accustomed to evaluating student writing for content. They protest that they don’t have the vocabulary to describe writing problems or knowledge of how to help students become better writers. Some are not accustomed to reading and responding to writing-in-progress, which requires a very different response from evaluating finished products. They fear that responding to drafts and conferencing will take unreasonable amounts of time.

These concerns are genuine and ought to be taken seriously by writing program and writing center directors. Many faculty do not think of themselves as writers, but as biologists, or sociologists, or art historians—
although writing is what they do all the time, the way they participate in the conversation of their knowledge community. Confronted with these concerns, Sharon Stockton, our WPA, and I offer faculty workshops about such topics as designing writing assignments, responding to writing in progress, conducting conferences, incorporating writing activities into the classroom setting, and integrating reading, writing, and research projects. We talk to faculty about different kinds of writing assignments: having students keep reading journals, react to readings in short response papers or via electronic mail, write position statements to present in class, or write critical essays analyzing and evaluating different points of view on an issue. We talk about the importance of introducing students to writing as a recursive process and to the practice of meaningful revision. These workshops give us the opportunity to acquaint faculty with the theories and practices that have informed writing center work for years: peer response, in-progress intervention, collaborative writing.

In addition to workshops, we spend a lot of time talking to faculty individually about their writing assignments, about commenting on students’ papers, about the progress (or lack of progress) of their students’ writing, about the kinds of errors they are encountering in student writing and how best to deal with them. Often, after instructors have received the first and second set of papers, we start to hear the complaints that students can’t write, students can’t read, and students can’t think, along with the litany of usual explanations: too much television, poor preparation, passivity, apathy, laziness, lack of discipline. And when, after experimenting with various new writing strategies, instructors don’t see the improvement they had hoped for, they are frustrated and their earlier anxieties and skepticism may return. So, it’s not enough to encourage faculty to try nifty new techniques and strategies; we need to talk to them about the more fundamental issues that underlie these so-called writing problems, especially issues of power and authority. As David Bartholomae has said, “Every time a student sits down to write for us, . . . [h]e has to learn to speak our language . . . to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting . . . concluding and arguing the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the various discourses of our community” (“Inventing” 134).

Most of us have been in the academy most of our adult lives; hence, despite our different disciplines, certain habits of mind, ways of thinking about knowledge and texts and the world, have become so familiar as to seem obvious, natural, almost innate. When we ask students to write, we ask them, using our language, to do what we do and “to assume privilege without having any” (Bartholomae, “Inventing” 135). The problem of student language not being the language academics use (Harris 36) is most acute for first-semester freshmen, and writing center consultants can perform what Harris calls their
Consultants provide valuable help for first-year students in making the sometimes painful transition from writing for high school teachers to writing for college professors. All consultants have taken a freshman seminar themselves and understand the particular stress, anxiety, and insecurities of students in their first writing-intensive college course.

Thus we make a special effort to inform first-year students about the Writing Center and to encourage them to make use of our services. I send copies of our writing center brochure to all freshman seminar faculty to distribute to their classes; these brochures briefly describe who we are, what we do and don’t do, how we can help. Faculty are encouraged to bring their seminar classes to the Writing Center early on in the semester for a brief (15-20-minute) presentation by me or by one or two of our consultants. Since we are a small school, it’s feasible for the class to come to the Center so they can see our facilities and perhaps be less hesitant to make a first appointment and less apprehensive when arriving for that first appointment. These presentations are also an excellent opportunity for us to dispel student (and faculty) misconceptions about the writing center. While we do not see all first-year students through these visits (about half the seminars came to the center last fall), our records indicate that students from the seminars who visit the center are more likely to make appointments later; our records show, moreover, that these students come to the center for papers in other classes as well.

Writing Enriched Courses

Taking our cue from Brown’s Writing Fellows Program and adapting some of its features to fit the nature of a small liberal arts college, the distinguishing features of Writing Enriched courses are: 1) students must have the opportunity for revising papers in progress, and 2) writing center consultants are linked with each course. Each semester twelve to fifteen WE courses are offered with two to four consultants linked to each, depending on the number of students in the class. Because we want the writing center to be available for students not enrolled in WE courses, consultants are assigned to work with no more than eight students in a WE course.

Our arrangement resembles in many key ways the model described by Tori Haring-Smith in “Changing Students’ Attitudes: Writing Fellows Programs.” Writing Center consultants serve as first readers for papers written in selected courses throughout the curriculum (Haring-Smith 177). As at Brown, in most WE courses papers are first given to the consultants to read and comment on; next the student writer and consultant meet to discuss the paper; then the student revises the paper and submits two drafts to the teacher—the one with the consultant’s comments and the final version. Unlike the Brown program, our linked consultants also tutor students in
courses other than the WE course and hold most of their conferences in the Writing Center during their regularly scheduled hours.

Having consultants linked with specific courses indicates that we have adopted what Harvey Kail and John Trimbur call a “curriculum-based” model of peer tutoring (5); our consultants are part of the course and are “written into the plan of instruction” (6). This arrangement does not, I would argue, make peer tutors an extension of the faculty (8); unlike the TA, who serves the curriculum by serving the instructor (Healy 20), linked consultants’ primary purpose is to aid the student. Linked consultants do not perform teacherly roles of helping students understand the subject matter of the course or reading and grading papers, tasks often assigned to TAs. As Dave Healy has noted, “[W]riting centers do not constitute an authoritative or evaluative vacuum.... Tutors exercise authority and engage in evaluation” (21). Tutors are peers and not peers at the same time, a situation that exists whether an institution adopts a curriculum-based model, a writing center model, or a hybrid model such as ours.

This hybridization, to borrow Mary Soliday’s useful term, may result in the blurring of distinctions between the classroom and the writing center and may complicate the role of the tutor. But, like Soliday, I believe that associating tutoring with the regular daily life of the curriculum (65) has the potential to effect many positive changes in the teaching and tutoring of writing across disciplinary boundaries (70).

One positive change we have noted is an increased communication, understanding, and trust between faculty and the writing center. Sharon Stockton and I conduct workshops for faculty teaching WE courses, monitor the class/consultant link, and intervene if any problems arise. Consultants interact with faculty in WE courses in a variety of ways. They meet with the professor before or at the beginning of the semester to discuss such topics as the writing assignments, logistics for receiving drafts from students and arranging conferences, and the professor’s criteria for evaluating student writing. The consultants receive the syllabus and often papers from previous semesters which the professor has judged successful or unsuccessful in meeting the requirements of an assignment.

This awareness on the consultants’ part of teacher expectations and disciplinary conventions helps them to know what sorts of things to look for in reading drafts and talking with students. The consultants visit the class early in the semester to introduce themselves to the students and talk about how they will be assisting them with their writing. Additionally, if their schedules permit, consultants may attend classes the days an assignment is handed out and discussed and may attend classes to facilitate peer response or workshop sessions. Consultants also report that faculty confer with them in designing writing assignments, using the consultant’s student perspective to try to assure that assignments are clear and comprehensible. Faculty
conferring with consultants on assignments often results in assignments more accessible to students and in more informed tutoring; faculty often need to be educated in how to devise good assignments just as students need to be educated in how to understand and interpret writing assignments.

In the Writing Enriched arrangement, then, there is clearly more contact between consultants and faculty than usual. For the most part, consultant-faculty interaction consists of consultants sending a written report to a professor after a conference; occasionally an instructor will ask for elaboration or clarification from the consultant about the session, but this is not typical. We have been pleased by the greater consultant/faculty interaction, often collaboration, because it builds up faculty respect for student tutors, and the consultants’ comments on preliminary draft(s) also offer the teacher a model for commenting on student prose (Haring-Smith). But there is, at the same time, the concern that consultants will begin to lose their peer relationship with students, begin to be perceived as teacher stand-ins or authority figures, and that the student-consultant conference will come to resemble a student-teacher conference in which the student is told what to do, what to fix, and how. For us, though, it seems these fears are unfounded.

In evaluation forms completed by students in WE courses, students praise consultants for doing what we hope consultants do in any successful, productive conference: reduce stress and anxiety, help interpret academic writing assignments and expectations, provide a fresh perspective, offer strategies for identifying and fixing problems. Consultants also report that students in WE courses are not passive, intimidated, or anxious to give up authority over their writing to the consultant. In fact, the evaluations from faculty, consultants, and students indicate that the arrangement confirms and highlights the role of consultant as occupying Harris’s middle position between student and professor. This is the case even when the consultant is a major and/or has taken the class herself from the same professor. For example, each semester consultants who are senior French majors and who have studied in France during their junior year are linked with sections of French Composition (a 200-level course). Here one might think it most likely that students would perceive the consultants as experts and that the consultants would be tempted to correct the students’ writing. But because the professors, consultants, and students have a clear understanding of the consultants’ function, particularly the nature and extent of the help students can expect to receive, consultants have not become graders or teaching assistants, a danger Haring-Smith reminds us to be aware of (179).

Through cooperation between faculty and the writing center, the role (both responsibilities and limitations) of linked consultants can be successfully negotiated. Courses at all levels and in all disciplines are eligible to be writing enriched. Increasingly, faculty have asked to have a middle- or upper-level course be writing enriched or a course that introduces students to the
methodologies and discourse practices of a discipline. In the past two years, for example, psychology research methods courses have been writing enriched, with three consultants who were senior psychology majors linked to the course. Although this sort of arrangement pleased faculty, tutors, and students, I continued to be concerned about whether our practices were running counter to two established tenets of writing center ideology: that “anyone who is familiar with the writing process can be of help to anybody” (the ideal of the generalist tutor), and that “students possess sole ownership of their texts” (Shamoon and Burns 136).

Consultants reported that they found themselves employing at times a more directive approach, that they were tempted to do things that violated writing center orthodoxy. This in turn led me, as it has Shamoon and Burns, among others, to examine critically these tenets themselves. While not denying that there is the possibility of abuse in a more directive approach to tutoring—especially in cases where the tutor is familiar with the subject matter of a paper, with the course, and/or the discipline in which it is written—I would argue for a more eclectic, flexible approach. If a tutor knows the answer to a specific question about the structure of a biology lab report, it seems inefficient, disingenuous, and coy to pretend ignorance, asking questions of the student to which she obviously doesn’t know the answer.

While I am not promoting efficiency as a goal of a writing tutorial, we have all had the experience of working with students who have specific, pressing questions about some technical aspect of their paper (documentation, citation, format) that we can answer directly and thence can proceed to address other (perhaps, to us, more important) aspects of the paper. Similarly, when a tutor provides appropriate terminology for a student struggling with unfamiliar discipline-specific language, “the changes usually strengthen the disciplinary argument and improve the connection to current conversation in the discipline” (Shamoon and Burns 146). Here, the tutor is not appropriating the student’s text, but instead is introducing the student to one way of articulating her ideas. My experience, and that of most tutors, is that the incorporation of directive strategies in tutoring sessions can reduce frustration for both tutor and student as well as open up opportunities for discussing, explaining, and analyzing disciplinary practices and conventions.

Generalist Tutoring

I am not here advocating a writing center in which tutors only work on papers for courses in their major, because, particularly for first-year students and those in introductory level courses, the generalist consultant has an important role in a WAC program. But I am suggesting that perhaps we have adhered too rigidly to an orthodoxy based less on principle and more on a fear, held over from the early days of writing centers, of institutional distrust.
(writing centers write students’ papers for them) and on the Romantic myth of the autonomous writer. The generalist consultant (or outsider tutor), familiar with the shared qualities of academic writing, can assist students on assignments in introductory/intermediate courses where faculty are normally looking for the presence of a thesis, argument, and supporting evidence. Tutors, though students themselves, tend to have a more highly developed sense of themselves as members of an academic community, and students tend to view tutors as more experienced practitioners of academic writing.

In working with students in content-area courses, particularly at the introductory and intermediate level, tutors again perform the bridging or translating function that even the most supportive and understanding faculty member cannot; consultants translate—down, from teacher to student, and up, from student to teacher. The writing center’s assistance at this level presupposes, of course, that students are assigned meaningful writing tasks. If academic writing is what we expect our students to engage in, albeit as novices, in the papers we assign we must show students how that writing is part of an ongoing conversation in which writers build on previous writing, and we must give them the opportunity to enter into that conversation.

The few faculty I know who adhere to the banking model of education don’t assign critical/analytical papers in their introductory courses because, they allege, students don’t know enough about the subject to have any legitimate ideas to contribute. Some more enlightened faculty may ask students to write informal reaction exercises or keep reading journals; here students are encouraged to record and reflect on their personal responses to the reading. Often, however, this writing is not graded (to encourage spontaneity and risk taking, the thinking goes) and the writing students are asked to do in formal, graded assignments has no relationship to the informal writing. Once again, students are allowed to have opinions and ideas, to express personal views, but these have no place in the serious place of academic discourse until they have the knowledge base to establish credibility and authority.

I would argue, with Bartholomae, that we should ask students to do what we as academics, as writers do: “work with the past, work with key texts” (“Writing” 66). Moreover, we need to show students that these key texts were themselves products of situated writers, not repositories of truth to be accepted uncritically, to be cited as authoritative. Content-area courses seem to be the logical place to make the past come alive for students in this way, to make them see that academic writing does not mean producing “stuffy, lifeless prose or . . . mechanical, dutiful imitations of standard thoughts and forms” (63).

**Composition Courses**

The third component of our WAC program is composition courses
taught in the English Department. Some faculty have asked me, “If writing is contextualized, if it’s being taught across the curriculum, if there’s a writing center where students can get help on their papers, why do we still offer composition courses?” It seems to me that the composition classroom is also a place for teaching academic writing broadly defined. If, however, the composition classroom is perceived as the one place in the academy where students are empowered and encouraged to develop their own voice, their own authority, if it becomes an expressivist haven, then we are sending a mixed message to students.

Peter Elbow makes much of the conflict between the role of writer and the role of academic reader (“Being” 72). I would argue that most academics read as writers; in other words, when we jot notes in the margins or scribble comments on a pad of paper as we read, we are in dialogue continuously with the text—agreeing, questioning, opposing what’s on the page. While the interests of writers and these kinds of academic readers may be in conflict, as Elbow asserts (75), I think we need to model for students the ways in which the roles of academics as readers and academics as writers are complementary.

I might seem to be leading up to an argument for abolishing composition programs and writing courses; however, as Elbow notes, a writing course is the one course where writing is at the center (75). And while faculty in disciplines other than English may be making space in their courses for attention to writing in their discipline, they are rightfully obligated to cover certain material, key concepts and texts, and to assign reading. Creative writing courses exist side by side with literature courses in English departments in which students read and write about contemporary literature, but the former’s focus is on the process and production of student writing, on reading and critiquing that writing. So I would argue for the maintenance of composition courses that incorporate the shared goals of Bartholomae and Elbow: courses that provide a context for the kind of writing academics do and, at the same time, place student writing at the center. More and more, faculty teaching composition courses try to find this balance by providing both a context for student writing (it may be genre-based, topic-based, rhetoric-based) and a focus on student writing.

The Writing Center and the Curriculum

Just as “pure” composition courses are sometimes seen as a utopian space where the autonomous writer reigns, “pure” writing centers may be perceived as a refuge from the academy; a site of subversion of authority and hierarchy; a place to nurture the student writer’s autonomy and self-confidence through nonjudgmental, egalitarian, collaborative interaction with peers; a place highly motivated students seek out and where they participate enthusiastically in the task of becoming the “best they can be” as writers. I am uncomfortable with the notion of the writing center as refuge, as site of
subversion. It places the writing center in an adversarial relationship to faculty who assign and evaluate the papers that students bring to us. It is, as Soliday notes, based on a “dualistic perspective” (60) that tends to polarize “insiders” (faculty, curriculum, classroom teaching) and “outsiders” (tutors, the writing center, tutoring). With more faculty at more schools participating in writing-across-the-curriculum programs, writing centers must be there to work with them to help students facing the challenges of academic writing and disciplinary discourse. Increasing communication and cooperation with faculty is time consuming and often frustrating for writing center directors. And if writing centers are to be a part of and have an impact on WAC programs (as I think we should), then we will spend even more time and energy working with faculty.

Recently, Stephen North has called for “a situation in which we are not required to sustain some delicate but carefully distanced relationship between classroom teachers and the writing center” (16). To achieve this situation, the Writing Center at SUNY Albany is tied to a writing program within the English Department which involves “the approximately 10 faculty members, the 20 graduate students, and the 250 or so undergraduates” in the program that the Writing Center hopes to bring together (17). This solution might indeed make our lives easier, but does, I think, a disservice to students.

I believe our mission is to serve all student writers, not just those “motivated about, engaged in their writing” (North 16). Perhaps because I never believed it was, or even could or should be, a reality that all students who come to the writing center are there freely, enthusiastically, it is not a situation I seek. In many ways, it is far more rewarding to convert an unwilling, passive, disengaged, even hostile student writer into one who cares about her writing for herself. Why preach to the already converted? Certainly, we have our share of conferences in which the student seeks a quick editing or proofreading job or in which the student remains silent and uncooperative, and those sessions can be dispiriting, unsatisfying. One sometimes feels that all of our efforts to enlighten students and faculty about what we do and why fall on deaf ears, that the Jiffy Lube or Emergency Room metaphors still dominate others’ perceptions of us. And yet, as Harris points out, we can all tell stories of a sullen student required by a teacher to go to the writing center, or a student who just wants a quick proofread a few hours before a paper is due, who has one productive session and who calls back for appointments with that tutor who was so helpful. And even if we never see the student again, maybe something happened in the session that will help her as a writer at some later time; we never know, but again that’s something as teachers we’ve learned to live with: not seeing the fruits of our labors.

North also wants a situation in which the writing center’s mission matches its resources and, to whatever extent possible, its image. “I do not
believe it is finally a good thing for a writing center to be seen as taking upon its shoulders the whole institution’s (real or imagined) sins of illiteracy, either: to serve as conscience, savior, or sacrificial scapegoat” (17). We are fortunate at my school in having an administration that has financially supported our continued growth and our requests for equipment, secretarial help, increased staff (professional and student), tutor training, etc. We are fortunate in having faculty, in increasing numbers, willing to rethink the role of writing in their courses, to participate in WAC workshops, and to implement changes in their course design. And I am fortunate in having a collaborative and mutually supportive relationship with a writing program director who shares a commitment to WAC/writing center cooperation. Within this institutional context, we have chosen not to position ourselves against the institution, but rather to work with its various constituencies to further what we see as a shared goal to help students become more self-consciously and thoughtfully engaged in their writing and learning. Again, perhaps because we don’t have to butt heads with advocates of a mass-education, information-transfer model of teaching/learning, we don’t define ourselves in opposition to the system. In large part because of the arrival of WAC at Dickinson, the writing center does not shoulder the burden of being the sole locus of writing instruction; it does not have the responsibility of remediating bad writers or the blame for failing to do so.

I’m not suggesting that the relationship between WAC and writing centers or between faculty and writing program folks is a completely harmonious one, but I do believe that fundamentally our goals are in accord, not in opposition. And while not everyone at our school involved in the ongoing conversation about writing answers the questions posed at the outset of this article in the same way, and while we have our share of sometimes heated debate, we are talking to each other. And that’s a good thing.

Works Cited


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