WAC/WID, General Education, and Assessment Report

Definitions

- **What is WAC/WID?**
  - The acronym WAC/WID stands for Writing-Across-the-Curriculum/Writing-in-the-Disciplines, two different but related movements that encourage the adoption of writing components in courses across the curriculum in all years of study.
  - WAC/WID is based on the premise that frequent writing assignments assist in the development of critical thinking skills.
  - WAC/WID pedagogies are diverse. Methods vary widely from school to school, from discipline to discipline, and from teacher to teacher, but often include both informal and formal sequenced writing assignments and writing-to-learn activities.
  - WAC/WID is a mandate at CUNY.

Task

- **Compile a list of resources on WAC/WID, general education, and assessment.**
  - This list can be found in the form of an annotated bibliography attached to this document.

- **Analyze areas of consensus and disagreement between WAC/WID researchers.**
  - Results can be found in the section labeled findings.

- **Prepare recommendations based on this research.**
  - The recommendations here are offered with an eye towards creating a general education program that works for the whole college community while meeting the WAC/WID CUNY mandate.

Findings: WAC/WID and General Education

The following are points on which there was consensus amongst the various authors:

- **The content of a general education program is less important than the degree to which it fosters student-student and student-faculty interactions.**
  - Alexander Astin’s 1992 study of 159 four-year colleges with different approaches to general education concludes that the form and content of any given general education program had little impact on the quality of the student outcomes.

- **Writing fosters student-faculty interactions and is positively associated with self-reported growth.**
  - Astin lists “courses that emphasize writing” amongst the key characteristics of successful liberal arts programs (xii), and Richard J. Light points out that “Students identify the courses that had the most profound impact on them as courses in which they were required to write papers, not just for the professor, as usual, but for their fellow students as well” (64).

- **Frequent writing activities improve student learning.**
  - Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee report in How Writing Shapes Thinking that “there is clear evidence that activities involving writing … lead to better learning
than activities involving reading and studying only,” in part because such activity prompts student engagement and fosters critical thinking (135).

- **Writing activities improve student engagement, a measure positively linked to retention.**
  - Freshmen and sophomores particularly need many opportunities to practice academic writing, both in preparation for the discipline-specific writing that will be required by their major and for the multiple types of writing they will encounter outside the academy.
  - See Astin “Student Involvement”

- **WAC/WID helps solve challenges inherent in general education curriculum.**
  - Christopher Thaiss identifies seven obstacles to implementing successful general education programs: 1. Student resistance; 2. Student inexperience; 3. Larger class sizes; 4. Student unfamiliarity with discipline-specific techniques, language, and modes of thought; 5. Faculty inexperience and isolation; 6. Vague general education goals; and 7. The lack of continuity from one general education course to the next.
  - WAC/WID helps to overcome these challenges by encouraging writing activities that help students to meditate on the importance of required courses, gain experience with college writing, communicate with professors more directly, and practice discipline-specific language. WAC/WID techniques offer inexperienced faculty new tools and can assist in clarifying course goals and establishing a common language between the disciplines, helping students to connect ideas from one course to the next.

- **WAC/WID offers faculty in different disciplines a common language.**
  - Terminology faculty use to describe student tasks varies widely across the disciplines, causing students confusion. WAC/WID can provide a common language for general education instructors, fostering consistency and clarity across the curriculum. See Yvonne Merrill “Writing as Situated Thinking in General Education”

**Recommendations**

- Insert language describing WAC/WID methods into the general education catalog description.

**Findings: WAC/WID and Assessment**

The following are points on which there was consensus amongst the various authors:

- **WAC/WID program assessment poses unique challenges.**
  - Because “[w]riting is not a set of discrete skills that lend themselves to the kind of atomized testing that we see in multiple-choice texts, but rather is a way of learning and performing that is philosophical and epistemological as well as behavioral in nature,” developing methods to test improvement in writing can be difficult (Yancey and Huot 10). In addition, WAC/WID programs differ from campus to campus and tend to change rapidly in response to new data on student learning

- **Assessment goals and methods should be established locally.**
  - Consensus suggests that WAC assessment should be governed by the direct needs of stakeholders in the WAC program — faculty, administration, students, and WAC/WID coordinators: “contextual evaluation efforts will help provide the most
useful information when they are designed and enacted locally, by groups of WAC Program participants who have some personal knowledge of — and stake in finding out — what is happening in a particular situation.” (Selfe 59). See Selfe, Yancey and Huot, Michael Williamson, Beason and Darrow.

- **Faculty participation and input is crucial.**
  - Writers agree that the goals and methodologies for assessment should be established by a team that includes both administrators and faculty, and faculty members should included in every step of the assessment process; “WAC program assessment is as much about faculty development — about how faculty develop and monitor their teaching and about how their understanding of learning changes — as it is about student development,” so it is important that faculty members play an integral role in both the design and implementation of assessment protocols (Yancey and Huot 11).

- **Both qualitative and quantitative assessment methods should be used.**
  - A number of assessment tools are available including student and faculty surveys, focus groups, portfolio reviews, course evaluations, syllabi analysis, faculty self-evaluations, artifact collection and analysis, interviews, and classroom observations. Most writers are adamant, however, that assessment methods chosen should include both qualitative measures (like focus groups, portfolio reviews, and interviews) and quantitative measures (like surveys and course evaluations). See Thaiss and Zawicki, Beason and Darrow, Kinkead, and Williamson.

- **Assessment should avoid standardized testing and methods that take time away from student learning.**
  - Standardized tests for writing are generally ineffective, produce unclear results, and take time away from coursework. See Townsend.

- **Results of assessment should be made available to those who might benefit.**
  - It is important to establish a feedback loop for assessment results, so that faculty, administrators, and WAC/WID coordinators can see what is working and what needs improvement. Yancey suggest that “the results [of assessment] are valuable and valid to the extent that they can and are used to inform the program” (11).

**Recommendations**

- **Establish local assessment goals and methods.**

- **Balance qualitative and quantitative modes of assessment.**

- **Involve faculty in the entire assessment process.**

- **Establish feedback loop to ensure all who need the results have access to them.**
**Print Resources**


Beginning with the premise that general education forms the core and foundation of the undergraduate learning experience, Allen offers a pragmatic guide to the development, support, and assessment of general education curriculum, presenting a variety of approaches for administrators and teachers looking to make informed decisions about their own general education programs. *Assessing General Education Programs* includes a step-by-step breakdown of assessment planning and implementation, suggestions of potential assessment methods (including published tools for assessing general education and first-year programs), strategies for articulating outcomes, discussion of accreditation concerns, and advice for developing campus infrastructure to support assessment and student success, along with numerous examples of learning outcomes and assessments from over 100 colleges and universities.


A collection of essays, primarily aimed towards writing instructors, though applicable across the disciplines, *The WAC Casebook* brings together numerous real and realistic scenarios encountered in undergraduate writing. An excellent resource for those wishing to gain a better understanding of the unique challenges faced by writing instructors in the classroom or wishing to become more reflective about their own teaching. Topics covered include, writing to learn, effective assignment design, evaluating student writing, the role of graduate students, and program development.


Astin’s report on the results of a comprehensive study of students at 159 four-year colleges conducted in 1991. He demonstrates that the frequency and quality of student-student and faculty-student interactions has the greatest impact on a wide variety of student outcomes in general education; by comparison, the form and content of the general education curriculum has little to no impact on student achievement and development. He concludes that the use of writing in fostering these interactions has a beneficial effect and that “the number of courses taken that emphasize the development of writing skills is positively associated with self-reported growth.”

An insightful article detailing Astin’s theory of student involvement, an idea he developed as a result of an extensive research project. Astin posits an alternative to models of successful colleges that rely on the quantity of research, quality of faculty, or content of curriculum, instead outlining a model that reflects student outcomes as a result of what he deems “student involvement,” a complex term encompassing both the quantity and quality of time spent interacting with things related to the college. He argues that “[t]he effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.” Also of note is his conclusion that “frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic … Thus, finding ways to encourage greater student involvement with faculty (and vice versa) could be a highly productive activity on most college campuses.”


Though this article presents evidence drawn primarily from the study of K-12 education, it offers numerous insights on the use of writing to promote general education access for learning disabled students. Focusing on strategies that can improve reading comprehension and writing capabilities, the researchers demonstrate the success of many methods already promoted in the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum movement.


This collection of articles examines the relationship between writing centers and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs and argues that, contrary to popular misconception, writing centers need not be, and indeed are not, marginalized from larger writing movements campus wide. Thirteen essays, from writers ranging from composition instructors to writing center administrators, focus on fruitful collaborations between writing centers and WAC programs and provide numerous helpful models for fostering these connections across university campuses.


This collection of sixteen essays addresses the challenges faced by teachers and administrators in quest of a method to reliably assess student outcomes in general education. Standardized testing, the option repeatedly offered by a variety of sources, is shown to be inadequate, but the essayists present a selection of other potential solutions. These articles look at the skills desired in college graduates (including effective writing,
information literacy, and critical thinking) and explore the difficulties that must be surmounted if we would arrive at satisfactory measures of success.

Beason, Larry and Laurel Darrow. “Listening as Assessment: How Students and Teachers Evaluate WAC.” Yancey and Huot 97-121.

An article exploring WAC assessment at Eastern Washington University. Beason and Darrow explain the methods they used in conducting an assessment of their WAC program. Of particular note is their emphasis on faculty-led assessment; assessment goals were set in collaboration with faculty and with careful attention paid to the needs of students. A combination of surveys and interviews offered a “bottom-up” approach that they highly recommend.


Intended primarily for faculty and administrators responsible for outcomes-based program review, this book attempts not merely to offer an overview of the principles of assessment, but also to provide many models of good practice. Bresciani compiles the best practices of forty different institutions that have been noted for significant improvement in teaching, learning, research, and service, and a number of case studies are presented with suggestions for adopting and adapting them in different settings. The text links assessment to program review and demonstrates how assessment can have far-reaching implications for program review, strategic planning, and accreditation.


This text offers more case studies of good practices in assessing general education programs. It provides a broad overview of a variety of possible approaches and suggests the strengths and weaknesses of each. Thirteen institutions noted for good practices in general education assessment are featured, and an introductory chapter points to a number of vital questions to be addressed when planning assessment strategies.


This book features thirty articles on the work and practices of Writing Program Administrators, ranging from the professional, “Writing Program Administration as Preparation for an Administrative Career” to the political “Politics and the WPA: Traveling Through and Past Realms of Expertise.” *The Writing Program Administrator’s Resource* confronts the challenges facing WPAs and proposes multiple solutions all pointing towards change and the ongoing improvement of writing programs across the country.

This book offers extensive exploration of methods and strategies for evaluating composition instruction ranging from student writing performance and attitudes about writing to training activities and program administration costs; it describes different types of evaluation, their phases and implementation and even suggests language for describing composition instruction. A case study for evaluation is offered, as well as several vignettes demonstrating the assembling of evaluation components.


An interesting and informative summary of five different approaches to general education, along with examples of curriculum from the universities that practice them. These include the Great Books approach (Columbia University), which emphasizes the classics of history, art, music, and literature in standardized courses; the To Each His Own approach (Brown University), in which general education is dropped in favor of student-driven education; the Balancing Science approach (Johns Hopkins University), which attempts to balance the campus-wide focus on the sciences with core courses in the humanities and social sciences and emphasizes writing in four required writing intensive courses; and the Modes of Inquiry approach (Duke University), which requires that students take two courses in each of five broad subject areas. While Dizikes summary is hardly comprehensive, it offers an overview of the possible approaches to general education along with the benefits and drawbacks of each.


A somewhat dated critical examination of evaluation practices at four major universities, this book offers practical as well as theoretical guidance for formulating assessment strategies, including key questions to ask before embarking upon program evaluation.


Fulwiler addresses the difficulties inherent in attempting to evaluate the success of Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs, and he offers simple methods for overcoming them. His suggestions range from simple head counts of faculty workshop participants and quick surveys to in-depth interviews, student evaluations, and comparative experiments designed to test students’ improvements in writing.

Fulwiler’s analysis of Michigan Tech’s WAC program at the six-year mark. He discusses at length his experiences leading workshops with faculty and describes the various barriers to success for WAC programs — including foreign terminology, funding, and faculty resistance — as well as many of their unlooked benefits, such as improved faculty relations. He reaffirms his belief that interdisciplinary writing workshops are the best way to introduce and maintain WAC programs at the university level.


An important early text on successful WAC programs, *Programs That Work* describes fourteen successful WAC programs, including those located at the Michigan Technical University, the University of Massachusetts, the Minnesota Writing Project, and the University of Michigan. Utilizing materials written by the program administrators themselves, this text details successful WAC practices on campuses ranging from two-year community colleges to four-year PhD granting universities.


An excellent resource for composition teachers and writing program administrators, this collection of eleven essays focuses on the training of teachers for composition instruction. Very up-to-date and informed, *Negotiating a Meta-Pedagogy* offers the latest in the “pedagogy of pedagogy.”


Though now outdated, this report of the results of a survey of writing programs at forty-four colleges and universities (all belonging to the Association of American Universities) provides an interesting window into the evolving practice of program assessment. Descriptions of administrative structures, program design, staffing, and campus attitudes toward writing are included, and best practices are brought to light. The results suggest that good programs are aided by writing program alliances within the university, the pedagogical skill and scholarly visibility of the director and staff, and a campus commitment to liberal education.


A collection of essays analyzing the development of the writing assessment and instruction program at Washington State University. The essays challenge the use of standardized placement tests as the primary mode of writing evaluation, arguing that such evaluations should evolve at the local level, and suggest useful ways of initiating dialogue between faculty, students, and administrators.

*Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education* provides material for those involved in the process of higher education outcomes assessment. The book addresses assessment from the perspective of accrediting bodies, as well as that of faculty members and administration, and provides numerous practical examples for strategizing and establishing assessment programs. Stressing the permanence of outcomes assessment regardless of its unpopularity, *Outcomes Assessment* offers a pragmatic rather than reflective approach program evaluation.


This scientific study challenges some of the fundamentals of WAC by suggesting that skills learned in general education English courses do not successfully transfer to later general education course work. Though the sample size was quite small, twenty-one students tracked from an English composition course to one in the social sciences, such studies provide interesting opposition to the general consensus that general education writing courses provide an adequate foundation for later general education work.


Focusing on secondary schools rather than colleges, Langer and Applebee explore the role that writing plays in critical thinking and how certain kinds of writing can be used to teach specific kinds of critical thinking. They also reiterate a point made by many researchers: that writing combined with reading and studying lead to more and better learning than reading and studying alone.


A report detailing the result of research on WAC at one urban college. This article concludes that teachers were the most common audience for student writing, and that notetaking was the most prevalent writing activity. The writers suggest that modifying assignments to include different kinds of audiences for writing and different kinds of writing activities would improve student experience.


A collection of twelve essays offering advice for WAC program designers and teachers. This collection addresses issues of design, funding, operation, pedagogy, writing-in-the-
disciplines, writing-to-learn, writing intensive courses, first-year writing programs, writing and general education, and the role and development of writing centers. Includes Christopher Thaiss’s very useful “WAC and General Education Courses.”


This collection of 12 essays both highlights the successes of WAC programs and suggests ways in which WAC must adapt to meet the challenges of the New Millennium. Of particular interest are William Condon’s “Accommodating Complexity: WAC Program Evaluation in the Age of Accountability” and Martha Townsend’s “Writing Intensive Courses and WAC.”


A case study of University of Arizona’s successful attempt to integrate writing-to-learn into their general education curriculum. Merrill describes useful approaches to gaining faculty support through workshops and suggests the important of low-stakes writing assignments as a measure of students’ critical thinking skills.


This article discussing the primary features of assessment — goals, program objectives, performance criteria, implementation strategies, evaluation methods, logistics, and feedback — and briefly describes some of the methods that have been found successful, including surveys, interviews, and portfolios.


Argues for a “contextual model” of WAC program assessment, one that regards faculty as major participants in, rather than merely subjects of, assessment. Selfe supports local, site-based assessments that “involve teachers in the design, analysis, and interpretation of data from multiple perspectives and using multiple methods of inquiry” (52). Smaller scale methods, such as classroom observations, are preferred above standardized tests in part because they grant teachers agency within the program, but also because teachers are in the best position to provide information about that program.

Slevin, James F. “Engaging Intellectual Work: The Faculty’s Role in Assessment.” *College English*. 63.3 (Jan 2001) 288-305.

An article exploring the question of how the university can put the intellectual work of its faculty back in the center of its curriculum. Primarily focusing on the first-year required composition course, Slevin argues for a more organic approach, one that views
composition not as foundation but as a legitimate part of the whole of the curriculum, one that begins the student’s education, rather than simply “preparing” them for it.


An interesting exploration of the meaning of terms like general and liberal education, in both their historical and current context, edited by the Dean of Undergraduate Education at the City University of New York and an assistant professor at Queensborough Community College.

Thaiss, Christopher and Terry Myers Zawicki. “How Portfolios for Proficiency Help Shape a WAC Program.” Yancey and Huot 79-96.

Thaiss and Zawicki detail the ways in which they used an already extant curriculum measure, proficiency portfolios, as an indirect method for evaluating WAC program success. They argue for the importance of holistic assessment tools like portfolios and against simplistic measures of student achievement.


The 125th issue of the quarterly journal *New Directions for Higher Education*, this edition takes on the reform of general education curriculum, suggesting new and better ways to connect with students, accomplish academic goals, and provide the best collegiate experience possible. Chapters address the results of a national survey on changes in general education, four case studies of institutions undergoing such change, and the obstacles to achieving the changes suggested.


Writing program directors seeking to design or redesign a program can plan for organic development by taking a comprehensive view of the many separate activities that constitute a good program. Ten concise chapters examine the campus climate for writing programs (the roles of the English department, the writing program administrator, and the administration), research on existing programs, prevalent teaching methods, course designs, assessment issues and practices, instructor evaluation, administration (setting policies on placement and credit for remedial courses, setting up ESL and writing-across-the-curriculum programs), training and support of faculty, and evaluation of the program.

Williamson argues for a holistic approach to student and program evaluation, particularly in the form of the portfolio review, which he recommends as a “messy” but rewarding measure of student learning. The article also reviews several key mistakes made by those attempting to conduct WAC assessment; he cautions assessors against the use of multiple-choice exams and reminds them to treat faculty as partners in assessment.


A collection of fourteen essays addressing the issue of assessment in Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs and offering a number of informal and formal methods for conducting such assessment. Of particular interest are Martha A. Townsend’s “Integrating WAC into General Education: An Assessment Case Study” and Michael M. Williamson’s “Pragmatism, Positivism, and Program Evaluation.”


Young and Fulwiler offer a detailed explanation of the nature and history of WAC programs, their challenges, and the specific WAC techniques used in the individual disciplines. The second section is particularly noteworthy as it focuses primarily upon the evaluation of the program at the six-year mark, offering suggestions for how such investigations can be conducted and describing their findings.

**Web Resources**

*Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Speaking Across the Curriculum (SPAC).*  
<http://www.csuohio.edu/academic/gened/courses/gened-wac.htm>

*Writing Across the Curriculum Program website.* Lehman College, CUNY.  
<http://www.lehman.edu/lehman/wac/>

*Writing Across the Curriculum.* Brooklyn College, CUNY.  
<http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/undergrad/bcwac/>

*WAC Requirements.* York College, CUNY http://www.york.cuny.edu/wac/resources-for students/requirements

*WAC Program Website.* Hunter College, CUNY <http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/wac/index.html>

*The WAC Clearinghouse.*  
<http://wac.colostate.edu/>

*Writing Program Website.* University of Washington. <http://www.writingprogram.wsu.edu/>