

Campus Leaders Reflect	2
Syllabi Review	3
From the Archives	6

Writing Across the Curriculum

Mason's WAC Program in the National News

It was a big year for Mason's Writing Across the Curriculum Program, with two high profile recognitions in the national news. For the 14th year in a row, Mason's Writing Across the Curriculum program was recognized as one of only 11 schools on the U.S. News & World Reports "best-of" lists for Writing in the Disciplines. Ranked alongside programs at Harvard, Princeton, and Duke Universities, Mason WAC is proud to be recognized for its contributions to writing excellence.

The rankings can be accessed here: <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/writing-programs>

Mason's WAC program was also profiled by U.S. News & World Reports in a piece on "high impact practices" in undergraduate education. The piece highlights the positive impacts of writing instruction for students in the first year of college. Like internships, first year experience programs, and undergraduate research opportunities, opportunities for writing in the disciplines benefit new and continuing students. From the article by Christopher J. Gearon:

"There is a clear connection between writing and students' critical thinking skills," says Michelle LaFrance, director of the Writing Across the Curriculum program at George Mason University in Virginia. Students who spend time perfecting the type of writing required by their disciplines "make better connections with one another and faculty, and they learn more deeply."

Read the full article on the high impact practice of undergraduate writing in the disciplines here:

<http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2015/09/23/colleges-take-aim-at-improving-student-success>

Supporting Faculty Writers: WAC's Writing Retreats and Write Ins

Each January and May, WAC collaborates with the Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence to coordinate support for faculty writers. This January, a two-day writing retreat was held on Wednesday, the 6th and Thursday, the 7th. Thirteen participants from across the disciplines enjoyed 8 hours of uninterrupted work time each day, lunches with fellow participants, and a supportive writing community.

Hongmei Sun, Assistant Professor of Chinese and facilitator for this year's retreat, noted that having designated time and space for writing, as well as a supportive peer group, provides more accountability for faculty writers. One participant attested

Continued on page 5

A note from the Assistant Director

When I first began working in the WAC program here at Mason, I was really excited to take part in such a highly regarded program. As the semester progressed, that initial sense of awe was replaced by another. When I first thought I was stepping into a great program, I began to realize that I was stepping into a great community. This new sense of awe originated in my conversations with the many dedicated faculty members who genuinely believe in providing our students the time and experience to more fully realize their writing selves. These faculty members and the administrators who support them are the single greatest part of our program, and the time we give our students is the single greatest gift.

In this year's newsletter, we have the opportunity to hear from some of those dedicated faculty members about their experiences administering, teaching in, learning from, and collaborating with the WAC program. Through their experiences, we can understand why Mason's program receives such acclaim.

Tom Polk, M.A., M.S.

Assistant Director, Writing Across the Curriculum

Campus Leaders Reflect

Earlier this semester, *The Writing Campus* interviewed Kim Eby, Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence and Associate Provost for Faculty Development, and later interviewed Greg Robinson, Chair of the Writing Across the Curriculum Committee and Associate Professor of Music, about their experiences with the WAC program and teaching writing. *The Writing Campus* is WAC Mason's blog for Professional Development conversations for WAC faculty.

Writing Campus: How would you describe your experience working with WAC? What is one thing that you have learned through your involvement with WAC?

Kim Eby: When I joined as a faculty member in New Century College nearly 20 years ago I was immediately brought into a curriculum that was Writing Intensive (WI). I worked with my colleagues in composition and literature and had the benefit of teaching both writing and literature in the Integrative Studies program. I learned so much through those experiences in terms of scaffolding writing assignments, incorporating effective peer review, [and] how to actually provide feedback that was about ideas and not [just] writing mechanics.

Since being the Associate Provost for Faculty Development and overseeing the Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence (CTFE), I have really carried all of those early lessons with me. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Students as Scholars initiative, led by Dr. Bethany Usher, has deep connections to WAC as many of the WI courses have also been identified as Research and Scholarship Intensive (RS) courses. Our collaborations have continued to grow, with the co-sponsored Friday Faculty Write-Ins and the faculty writing retreats.

Greg Robinson: Serving on the WAC Committee has brought me into contact with a lot of really brilliant people: amazing writers and outstanding teachers of writing. Their willingness to share their wisdom has shaped the way in which I approach



“When I first thought I was stepping into a great program, I began to realize that I was stepping into a great community... These faculty members and the administrators who support them are the single greatest part of our program, and the time we give our students is the single greatest gift.”

*-Tom Polk,
WAC AD*

Continued on page 4

WAC Syllabus Review

As part of its charge from the Faculty Senate to conduct ongoing assessment of the WI requirement, in Spring 2016 the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program conducted its fifth review of syllabi from all WI courses on record in all colleges and schools offering undergraduate majors (62 academic units in total). With the help of the Office of the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education, the program contacted all departments and instructors teaching a WI course to request WI syllabi from Spring 2015 and Fall 2015. In response, we received 108 WI course syllabi representing 81 WI courses. Approximately 27% of the 108 syllabi collected met all of the guidelines for WI courses as outlined by the Faculty Senate.

Guidelines established by Faculty Senate's Writing Across the Curriculum Committee include:

- WI syllabi should state explicitly that the course fulfills the WI requirement,
- Students will write at least 2 essays totaling at least 3,500 words,
- Students will receive feedback from their instructor,
- Students will receive specific information about how their writing will be evaluated.

Approximately 73% of the submitted WI course syllabi were missing information about one or more of these requirements. Overall, the reviewers were pleased with their ability to review at least one syllabus from nearly all WI courses. While a systematic review of WI syllabi allows for ongoing oversight of the WI requirements, it is important to remember that a review of WI syllabi alone cannot reveal the effectiveness of the writing assignments, the instruction in writing that is being given, or all aspects of an instructor's course planning. Nevertheless, the WAC program staff was able to recommend a few actions based on the review. These include providing professional development opportunities for interested faculty and honoring the efforts of faculty who teach WI courses.



Mason WAC

Mission Statement

Since 1993, Mason's WAC program has supported a campus-wide "culture of writing" via a commitment to student writers, writing-rich coursework, and writing in the disciplines. Central to our program's success is the belief that when students are given frequent opportunities for writing across the university curriculum, they think more critically and creatively, engage more deeply in their learning, and are better able to transfer what they have learned from course to course, context to context.



Editorial Board

Michelle LaFrance, Editor
Tom Polk, Associate Editor
Emily Chambers, Assistant Editor
Alisa Russell, Assistant Editor

All photos courtesy of Creative Services

Special thanks to Bryan Staudt for the technological support

Leaders Reflect, cont'd

“One semester I experimented with only responding to student writing with questions. It’s really hard to do, but I found that it helped students engage in the writing process differently.”

*-Kim Eby, CTFE
Director*



“I get a chance to see how students are responding to course materials, and I get a bit more insight into how they think. For me, writing has always served as a space for thinking.”

*-Greg Robinson, WAC
Committee Chair*

writing both in the classroom and in my own research. Serving on the WAC Committee has also expanded my awareness of some of the groups, offices, and people around the university with whom I share core priorities and with whom I’ve collaborated on new curriculum and policies. The formal work of the committee and the informal conversations that have come out of meetings have caused me to think deeply about how I can help students get the most out of writing assignments by tying them to larger learning outcomes.

Writing Campus: What is one writing assignment that you like to assign to students in your own classes?

KE: As an integrative studies faculty member, I like to encourage writing assignments that foster integrative thinking and identifying/creating connections across course outcomes, ideas, texts, and conversations. Whether using an integrative essay and/or blog format – which I’ve done for many years in the past – to more reflective essays, I think helping students to create meaning and coherence where maybe they did not see it before is really exciting.

GR: With input from several members of the committee over the past few years, I’ve put together a scaffolded set of assignments for my music majors’ world music class. Each student chooses one of the over 3,000 albums from the Smithsonian Global Sound for Libraries database and completes several brief research and writing assignments on the album, culminating in a final paper. By collecting, reading, and writing 200-word summaries on a handful of secondary resources that deal with the musical styles featured on their chosen albums, students gain more in-depth knowledge on the repertoire and put themselves in a strong position to write the final paper, which is a brief analysis of the album itself. Students end up accumulating much more information than they could use in a brief paper through this process, which in turn allows them to write with more command of the subject matter than they might have gained otherwise. I hope that by breaking up the research and writing process in this way, students discover the benefits of long-term exposure to their research subject and hone their research and writing skills.

Writing Campus: Can you give us a tip for dealing with some aspect of your student’s writing in a class?

KE: I’m a big fan of having students share in the process of generating evaluation criteria on major assignments (writing or otherwise). Having students discuss what matters in terms of evaluating ideas is often very productive for them and gives me the opportunity to develop shared language with them.

One semester I experimented with only responding to student writing with questions. It’s really hard to do, but I found that it helped students engage in the writing process differently.

GR: Over the years, I’ve created mini-units around questions like what constitutes plagiarism, or how, when, and how often to cite sources. Regardless of their experience or skill levels, students seem to benefit from this kind of discussion, and taking the time to cover this material has yielded better results in student writing.

Continued on page 5

Supporting Faculty Writers, cont'd

Beyond making progress on their writing goals, faculty writers who participate in the retreat benefit from collaboration with other participants. The retreat offers them the time and space to talk about their own writing and its importance in their research and teaching.

that these benefits extend beyond the retreat itself, writing in the online evaluation, “It was good to have a time set where I knew I was going to have to write, so I could prep ahead of time and knew I was going to need to budget not just the two days but also the set-up time.”

The retreat gives priority to new faculty, although several veteran faculty continue to attend as contributors and supporters. Participating faculty members come from all the colleges, in many different departments and disciplines across the university. They also come to the retreat with different goals, “including writing new words, revising, [and] processing data,” says Hongmei.

Participants were asked to set a goal each day, and at the end of the retreat they reported being pleased with their productivity. The timing of the January retreat allows participants to make great progress on writing goals before the start of the semester, and Hongmei shares that “most participants reported meeting and in some cases exceeding their goals, and in all cases the participants made significant progress.”

Beyond making progress on their writing goals, faculty writers who participate in the retreat benefit from collaboration with other participants. The retreat offers them the time and space to talk about their own writing and its importance in their research and teaching. As Hongmei explains, “when we talk about our concerns and anxieties as well as our strategies and tips, we build a community of writers.” These benefits also extend beyond the retreat as some participants form smaller, informal writing groups that continue to meet throughout the semester, as well as building a network of connections across departments and colleges.

Those who are not able to make it to the retreats can participate in WAC’s Friday morning “Write-Ins.” These weekly meetings seek to replicate the benefits of the retreat by helping faculty members set aside a weekly time to commit to writing, as well as providing a space and a supportive community for that writing to take place. Alternatively, Hongmei suggests individual writers set aside time on their calendars and find a place that minimizes interruptions, such as the spaces in the library that faculty can reserve. Finally, she encourages faculty “to form writing groups outside of these formal channels: ask colleagues and friends if they would like to try working together.” Writing communities such as these are essential to writers, and by making time and space for writing communities to form at the retreats, WAC and CTFE seek to support faculty writing, and through faculty, student writing.

Leaders Reflect, cont'd

Writing Campus: What is your favorite thing about including writing in your classes?

KE: The unexpected learning that happens because of it and being able to really know where they are in the evolution of their ideas around course questions. It really helps me to know the students individually and to know where they are in their thinking about the course material.

GR: I get a chance to see how students are responding to course materials, and I get a bit more insight into how they think. For me, writing has always served as a space for thinking. It’s one of the best ways I know to sharpen arguments, consider multiple possibilities, and follow ideas to their logical extensions. This seems to be true for many of my students as well.



Exploring the WAC Archives at Fenwick Library

By Emily Chambers, Writing Across the Curriculum Graduate Research Assistant

Mason WAC has a rich history of supporting faculty who teach writing across the disciplines. Last year, WAC worked with the GMU Libraries to archive over 30 years of the program’s historical documents. This fall, I searched through those archives for evidence of the history and work of WAC. What I found was documentation of the relationship-building work carried out across campus, by program and department faculty interested in supporting student writers at all levels. Documents reveal conversations with faculty in Nursing, Law, Psychology, Art, and more. Documents include meeting memos, reports, syllabi, student writing, and ongoing communications about course development. There are print and hand written notes from phone calls about writing contests, writing ambassadors, and other collaborations. Through these partnerships, a WAC Committee was formed in 1993 and began to define what writing across the curriculum meant. The Committee continues to do so, overseeing the approval and review of all WI courses on Mason’s campus. Here are three examples of documents in the archives:

In a memo to Christopher Thaiss, WAC Coordinator, William H. Adams, of the School of Law, wrote, “They need to understand the different writing techniques used in a variety of legal activities...to develop coherent legal arguments, students need both the ability to write clearly and a different kind of understanding of the legal process.” In response, Thaiss sent Adams materials on writing principles and characteristics that work across the disciplines.

On a handwritten note from a faculty meeting, titled “‘mini-version’ of 499 papers,” the author jotted down these notes: “Intro spells out how paper will engage in the debate; ‘I’ is often okay but must be strategic; Makes an argument even if flawed.” This note shows the ongoing collaboration between WAC and faculty in the departments, as they strive to define writing expectations in the disciplines.

In her New Century College Portfolio reflection piece, one student writes, “As a learner I am now better able to read and write, two things that seem more basic than they actually are...As a writer I have learned how to organize and explain my thought[s] more appropriately. I feel I have gotten away from the page filling method of writing. I am better able to write the necessary material to make my point and thoughts clear. Though I at one time was under the misconception that informative writing had to be plain and straight forward, I have learned to make my writing interesting to not only the reader but also me the writer.” This student’s rich metacognitive awareness is a model for writing students, and one that WAC aims to help students achieve through WAC’s support of writing teachers.

Mason’s WAC program continues to be grounded in this rich history of relationship-building and work across the curriculum, even as it seeks new ways to support and reach writing teachers across campus and to advance the conversation about writing course pedagogy.

