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*To:* Writing Across the Curriculum Committee Members

*From:* Michelle LaFrance, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum  
Thomas Polk, Assistant Director, Writing Across the Curriculum

*CC:* Bethany Usher, Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education  
E. Shelley Reid, Director Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence

***Subject:* A Review of Faculty-Librarian Collaborations in Writing Intensive Courses**

### **Executive Summary**

In the spring of 2017, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program conducted a review of collaborations between subject librarians and faculty members who teach writing intensive (WI) courses. The collaborations generally placed, or embedded, subject librarians into WI courses as a means of supporting and enhancing information literacy instruction<sup>1</sup>; this instruction occurred over an expanded timeframe (i.e. more than one class period). The impetus for this study was to learn about the actual experiences of collaborators who were currently or had recently been active in a partnership. We wanted to use their experiences to learn what practices facilitated and constrained these partnerships.

Based on this research, we recommend that collaborators 1) begin planning before or early in the semester; 2) integrate library instruction into assignments, outcomes, and evaluation; and 3) plan for post-instruction review. In each of the most successful partnerships, librarians and faculty worked together substantially to integrate the support the librarians offered and to draw upon the most useful resources and research strategies for particular assignments. Despite the perception that these collaborations take considerable effort, collaborators believed the effort was eclipsed by the value of these partnerships.

We hope that our observations lead to more frequent and more effective collaborations between WI and Library faculty.

The following report details our study and the major findings.

### **Detailed Report**

In order to learn the practices being enacted in the faculty-librarian partnerships, WAC staff developed a set of questions for WI and Library faculty, with the central intent of learning how the collaborations began, unfurled, and ended; what advice participants would offer to future collaborators; and how participants believed the collaborations impacted student learning. We

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<sup>1</sup> The American Library Association defines [information literacy](#) as “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.”

conducted six interviews with active collaborators (three faculty members and three librarians who work at Mason). Our interviews (of between 30 and 60 minutes each) were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviewers also took notes during the semi-structured interviews.

WAC staff also interviewed six control participants (three faculty members and three librarians who work at Mason) who had not been active in a collaboration of this type at Mason. These interviews were conducted in the same manner as the collaborator interviews but with a different script. (For our complete set of questions, please see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2).

## **Findings**

After transcribing the interviews, WAC program staff conducted an initial reading of the transcripts to establish a set of core themes: resources, communication, instruction, assessment, and other. A second reading produced a more refined set that we used in this report. These core themes are planning, role identification, resources, in-class instruction, assessment, and program development. The following is a description of key findings from our interviews organized by each theme and their subthemes.

### ***Planning***

- **Timing:** Planning occurred pre- and mid-instruction, and most of the collaborators were clear that effective planning began well in advance of instruction, with one informant saying that she and her collaborator began planning two months prior to the semester. Most collaborators met in person early and continued planning through email exchanges, sometimes meeting in person a second time.
- **Alignment:** Informants generally described planning as “being on the same page.” Thus, several informants discussed that the central work of planning was to make sure that the librarians would be informed about and prepared to support the teaching outcomes of the course. When both collaborators were aware of the teaching outcomes, the lessons related to research more effectively aligned with the course and assignment outcomes.
- **Access:** Librarian informants all said that having access to course materials, such as syllabi and assignments, was integral to their developing an understanding of course expectations. One librarian mentioned that having access to Blackboard was also helpful and allowed her to maintain contact with students.
- **Openness and Receptivity:** Some collaborators worked together on assignments, which seemed to positively impact assignments, teaching, and the collaboration itself. One collaborating pair separately discussed the importance of keeping an open mind and being receptive to feedback during planning; they believed this openness created better assignments and learning experiences for students.

### ***Role Identification***

- **Expectations:** Several participants mentioned that understanding each person's role and the expectations of that role was integral to effective collaboration. One librarian mentioned that the role a professor was expecting her to fulfill did not really fit her specialty; because of their pre-instruction planning, she was able to pair that faculty member with a more appropriate librarian.
- **Instructional Services:** Our librarian informants also believed that many faculty saw librarians as citation instructors, a role they admitted was important but limited their ability to offer what they felt were more important instructional services integral to supporting information literacy development, such as how students locate, evaluate, use, and share information.
- **Clear Boundaries:** One participant mentioned that sometimes roles can become blurred by students who will seek assistance on assignments that librarians are not well situated to offer – particularly when questions are concerned with evaluation. This blurring becomes important when thinking about how several informants believed that librarians could be most effective when they are seen by students as a trusted ally; the role of evaluator, they believed, would diminish their role as an ally.

### ***Resources***

- **Librarian and Faculty Expertise:** Librarians and faculty both reported that recurring presence of librarians in the classroom helped students develop trust with librarians and feel more comfortable using the library and librarians as resources in their studies. Librarians and faculty also agreed that librarians are able to show faculty and students more resources and more appropriate resources for research projects. The librarians' knowledge of the resources in the library can also help faculty develop more effective assignments; several collaborators revised assignments based upon the advice of librarians and their knowledge of available resources.
- **Library Holdings:** Multiple faculty admitted that they often learn about new and very useful resources because of their interactions with librarians. Librarians also think this interaction is positive because it helps them gauge the usefulness of holdings and the need for new ones.
- **Librarian and Faculty Time:** Our participants mentioned that partnerships like these take a lot of time and effort to work effectively. This seemed to be a factor as to why some control faculty members chose not to engage with a librarian (the other being a lack of awareness); faculty felt that they would have to give something up and weren't sure how to balance schedules in already constrained curricula/courses. One control librarian suggested that librarians often don't think about what instructors have to sacrifice in order to engage in these collaborations. While these control informants discussed time in terms of sacrifice, those who were the most active collaborators didn't see time as something that they were giving up; the collaboration seemed to be a worthy investment.

### ***In-class Instruction***

- **Instructional Design:** The informants who discussed in-class instruction emphasized the importance of hands-on activities and chunking information. Participants also mentioned that situating instruction into authentic or real-life contexts and assignments helped engage students and made the library instruction more relevant.
- **Time Constraints:** Several librarians noted that time constraints could often inhibit their ability to deliver instruction with an activity; for this reason, they emphasized the importance of pre-instruction activities (as noted below) and multiple sessions in the classroom.

### ***Assessment***

- **Pre-instruction:** Multiple librarians discussed using pre-instruction assessments to gauge the research skills students possess; they felt these assessments would help them tailor instruction to students' needs and to make in-class instruction more effective and efficient. Librarians noted, however, that students did not always complete pre-instruction activities and recommend that faculty should require these assignments or give them some weight in order to ensure or improve completion.
- **Post-instruction:** Many participants believe that library instruction positively impacts student learning, but our librarians report that post-instruction assessment typically does not include them, so they remain curious about the impact of library instruction on student writing. The desire for assessment is ripe for follow up.
- **Grading:** Some librarians expressed interest in grading student writing in order to better observe the impact of their instruction; however, some informants (both faculty and librarian) thought that librarians were able to build trust with students because they were not involved in student evaluation.

### ***Program Development***

- **Visibility:** Our librarian informants believed that being embedded in a course increased their visibility and helped them to make more connections with programs. The visibility provided a number of benefits for librarians: they thought students were more likely to contact them for support, other faculty members were more likely to collaborate with them on a class, and they felt more involved in the life of a department.
- **Expanding Instruction:** Librarians (both collaborators and controls) noted that coordinated and consistent library instruction is rarer than they would like. They observed that some students they work with will see them in five or six different classes and other students will not have any contact with a librarian across courses.
  - One of our control librarians noted that an effective way to establish library partnerships is at the programmatic level, not the course level. The implication here seemed to be that it would be more effective to work with departments to establish a place for library instruction in the majors rather than work with instructors to establish a place for library instruction in a course.

- Another librarian, however, was concerned about the limited number of staff and noted that the university has grown at a rate that has far exceeded the growth rate of librarians, particularly in her academic unit.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of our interviews, we would like to offer a few practices that our informants suggest lead to successful librarian-faculty collaborations.

1. Reach out to potential collaborators in advance of instruction; multiple collaborators connected before the semester to begin planning
2. Discuss how library instruction will support course objectives and assignments
3. Share relevant materials
  - a. Faculty should share course materials, particularly syllabi, prompts, and other materials relevant to assignments and library instruction
  - b. Librarians should share relevant databases, collections, and resources
4. Openly discuss connections between library instruction and course outcomes
  - a. Faculty should discuss outcomes for the course, assignments, and activities; solicit feedback on assignments, activities, and materials and be willing to adapt them based on librarian expertise and available resources
  - b. Librarians should share instructional activities and assignments; solicit feedback on assignments, activities, and materials and be willing to adapt them based on instructional needs and purposes
5. Schedule library instructional dates; integrate activities into assignments and grading scheme
6. Plan for post-instruction communication, review, and assessment
7. Use review and assessment to refine future planning and instruction

## **Conclusion**

WAC staff are inspired by the work of these librarians and faculty members. Both faculty and librarians perceived these collaborations positively, despite the time and effort invested. These interviews hint at the collaborations' potential impact on student learning and student comfort with research and library resources (including librarians); and these interviews uncover areas where the collaborations might be improved: in fact, one of our strongest findings points to the need for ongoing assessment of student writers as researchers.

*WAC staff would like to thank the librarians and faculty who shared their time and experiences with us so that we might compile this report. We would also like to thank all university members who are dedicated to teaching (with) writing and helping our community of writers grow.*

## **Appendix 1: Interview Protocol for Librarians**

### **Overview**

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program is undertaking a strategic review and survey of the writing intensive course with embedded librarian collaboration. The project will seek to learn best practices for faculty-librarian collaboration and design strategies for future collaborations.

### **Instruction for Interviewer**

Please ask the participant to confirm if he/she has collaborated with at least one writing intensive course instructor. If yes, please follow the questions in Part A; if not, please skip Part A and follow the questions in Part B.

[Part A]

### **Interview Questions – For librarian involved in collaboration**

1. Tell us the history of your collaboration with faculty of writing intensive courses.
  - If you have worked with multiple faculty, please tell us about the differences you have encountered between courses, specifying which faculty did what.
  - How and on what did you collaborate pre-instruction?
  - How and on what did you collaborate during the instruction?
  - How and on what did you collaborate after instruction?
  - How would you describe your role and the instructor's role in this collaboration? In other words, what activities were you each responsible for?
2. Did any aspects of the course change because of your collaboration? (Note: Interviewer can clarify that this question refers to changes over semesters.)
  - If you are working with multiple faculty, please specify which faculty and courses changes occurred in.
3. If you were advising other librarians and faculty collaborators about similar opportunities, what advice or strategies would you offer?
4. What challenges or differences in pedagogical understanding might you prepare other collaborators, faculty and librarians, to expect.
5. From a librarian's perspective, how does this collaboration with faculty enable you to support disciplinary research?
6. What improvements did you see in student disciplinary writing because of this collaboration?
7. Do you have any additional thoughts that you would like to share?

[Part B]

### **Interview Questions - For librarian NOT involved in collaboration:**

1. What have you heard about the collaboration between writing intensive course instructors and embedded librarians?
2. How have you collaborated or considered collaborating with a writing intensive course instructors in teaching a writing intensive course?
3. What benefits or drawbacks have you experienced or would you anticipate from embedded faculty-librarian collaborations in WI courses?
4. What kinds of benefits or drawbacks have you experienced or would you anticipate for students because of these sorts of collaborations?
5. Do you have any additional thoughts that you would like to share?

## Appendix 2: Interview Protocol for Faculty

### Overview

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program is undertaking a strategic review and survey of the writing intensive course with embedded librarian collaboration. The project will seek to learn best practices for faculty-librarian collaboration and design strategies for future collaborations.

### Instruction for Interviewer

Please ask the participant to confirm if he/she has collaborated with an embedded librarian in writing intensive course or not. If yes, please follow the questions in Part A; if not, please skip Part A and follow the questions in Part B.

[Part A]

### Interview Questions - For faculty involved in collaboration:

1. Tell us the history of your collaboration with librarians in writing intensive courses.
  - How and on what did you collaborate pre-instruction?
  - How and on what did you collaborate during the instruction?
  - How and on what did you collaborate after instruction?
  - How would you describe your role and the librarian's role in this collaboration?  
In other words, what activities were you each responsible for?
2. Did any aspects of the course change because of your collaboration? (Note: Interviewer can clarify that this question refers to changes over semesters.)
3. If you were advising other librarians and faculty collaborators about similar opportunities, what advice or strategies would you offer?
4. What challenges or differences in pedagogical understanding might you prepare other collaborators, faculty and librarians, to expect.
5. From a faculty perspective, how does this collaboration with librarians enable you to support disciplinary research for your student writers?
6. What improvements did you see in student disciplinary writing because of this collaboration?
7. Do you have any additional thoughts that you would like to share?

[Part B]

### Interview Questions - For faculty NOT involved in collaboration:

1. What have you heard about the collaboration between writing intensive course instructors and embedded librarians?



2. How have you collaborated or considered collaborating with embedded librarians in teaching a writing intensive course?
3. What benefits or drawbacks have you experienced or would you anticipate from embedded faculty-librarian collaborations in WI courses?
4. What kinds of benefits or drawbacks have you experienced or would you anticipate for students because of these sorts of collaborations?
5. Do you have any additional thoughts that you would like to share?