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ABSTRACT

This paper explains why a comprehensive Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) program at the author/educator's university, the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia (USP), would encounter strong opposition. The paper first points out that the author, as the director of the University's Writing Center, has tried for 7 years to make a WAC program happen, since she sees a clear need for one. It then cites the following reasons why a WAC program has not been put in place: USP is and has always been a professional school and writing is seen as peripheral; nearly 70% of the students are pharmacy majors--although skills are changing to involve more writing, most of the students do not realize this; and the professional faculty and administrators cannot be persuaded that writing helps students to think. According to the paper, the best way for the author/educator to pursue her agenda has been to go about it subversively. The paper lists the following as some of the WAC program activities that have worked well: working with one pharmacy instructor on writing projects which introduce students to the profession and later, on helping fourth-year students prepare their resumes and cover letters; and still later, in a class on biomedical literature evaluation. The paper states that all students must pass a writing proficiency exam to graduate--an exam for which they have not systematically been prepared--and most come to the Writing Center to prepare. It also notes that some of the WAC program activities the author/educator undertook that did not work. (NKA)

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by

Charlotte Gale

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Going It Alone: Supporting Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) When There Is No
WAC Program

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Presented at the Fifth National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, Bloomington,
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There is no WAC program at my school. I'm the director of the Writing Center at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia (USP). When I started at USP seven years ago, I had the naïve dream of single-handedly making a WAC program happen—through example, persuasion, and what was obvious to me—a clear need. Now I know better. There is some WAC going on, but it's minimal, and only one part of it reaches all the students. What I want to do today is to explain why a comprehensive program would encounter strong opposition at USP, and what I've tried to do—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—to advance the cause of WAC.

First, why haven't we been able to put a real WAC into place? Some of the reasons are ones that would cause problems at any school, but other have to do with the nature of our school, our faculty, and our students. USP has been in existence for 180 years, under three different names, but it's always been a professional school. Most of our students come to us straight from high school, and they're very clear about why they come—to have a career. They don't want to hear that a college education might have other benefits, that intellectual curiosity is valuable, that we want to graduate students who can think--they're going to college to get a job, and that's all. They think that all

they need to get that job is information—facts. In general, they have a very low tolerance for ambiguity; they can't imagine, for example, that some people—especially those crazies in the Humanities Department—actually like the idea that questions can have more than one good answer, and might be more interested in the questions than the answers. As far as they're concerned, truth is knowable, truth is a collection of facts, and their professors are supposed to supply these facts. And, in fact, during most of their science and professional courses, that's exactly what happens—their professors give them information, and they memorize it for the multiple-choice exams. The writing program is in the Humanities Department, which has quite different priorities. Humanities faculty are located, both literally and symbolically, in a building called “The Annex,” on the very edge of the campus. Although there is a core curriculum, which requires humanities and social sciences courses, our students generally believe that the most important function of these courses is to raise their GPAs, since the science courses are so difficult. No matter what I did, writing was seen peripheral to what was really important to students--getting a good job after graduation and making lots of money.

There are other aspects of our school that make it an unfriendly place for writing USP started in 1821 as the first pharmacy school in the U.S., and nearly 70 percent of our students are still pharmacy majors. But the faculty have had to cope with a good deal of change, especially in the past fifteen years or so. We have more students who are not majoring in pharmacy, though they're still usually preparing to enter other health-care-related professions, like physical therapy, occupational therapy, physician's assistant, and in the basic sciences—chemistry, biology. We have a good number of students who go on to graduate school and medical school. Graduates of all these other majors need excellent

communication skills—to analyze, think critically, show good judgment, persuade patients and other professionals that they know what they’re talking about. And pharmacy has been changing; formerly, students earned a B.S. degree in 5 years, and usually spent their working lives behind the counter of a retail pharmacy. They had to be able to communicate orally, but they really did not do much writing. Now, all of our pharmacy majors spend 6 years earning a degree of Doctor of Pharmacy, and more and more of them are doing such things as conducting clinical studies for pharmaceutical companies, providing drug information for other health-care professionals, being part of a health-care team in a hospital, focusing on a specific health area, such as cancer care or geriatrics. They need good thinking and writing skills in these positions. And almost all of our graduates are involved in some way with matters of life and death. They had better be able to apply what they know, evaluate options, solve problems, and exercise good judgment. So the need for WAC has increased. But students don’t always know this. In fact, although almost all of them have chosen a career by the time they start at USP at eighteen, they often don’t know what their career involves; if they knew, they might have made other choices. (Actually, many of our students have chosen science and health-care majors because they think they won’t have to write.)

And then there’s the matter of persuading the faculty that writing is important.

Many of our pharmacy faculty and administrators graduated from USP a long time ago, when writing was not necessarily that crucial for pharmacists. Not all of them believe that much has changed--they didn’t have to learn to write; why should their students? Or if they do recognize the change, they’re hoping to hang on long enough so that they won’t have to change what they’ve been doing in their classes. There’s the usual fear of more

work; grading writing will certainly take more time than running answer sheets through the Scantron to get the students' scores on multiple-choice exams. And there's another fear that assigning writing will mean less time in class to provide those facts that are so important. (It's true that in many science and medical areas, professors are struggling to find time to integrate all the new knowledge that is being discovered almost daily. Class time is so precious at USP that exams are at 7:30 a.m. so that not a minute of lecture is lost.) So there's quite a bit of resistance to including writing in classes like pharmacology or physiology or pharmaceuticals. The result of all these fears is that while I'm promoting writing, I know that some faculty are telling their students that their writing assignments are pointless. Guess which side the weakest student writers believe?

So I had an agenda that was in conflict with that of some administrators and faculty and with the agenda of most of the students. I wanted to promote thinking and writing, while it seemed to me that all they cared about was remembering facts. What I found was that the best way for me to pursue my agenda was to go about it subversively. That is, I didn't talk about WAC (that sounds too much as if I wanted to transform the curriculum—a fearful idea), but I jumped at every opportunity to help those faculty who seemed to be in the least bit interested in having their students write. If I was working in the Writing Center with students on papers for any course, I used the opportunity to try to get the students to question their assumptions, consider whether the facts might lead to different conclusions, and, generally, shake up their certainties.

I was helped by the peculiar corporate-like atmosphere at USP. Many of our faculty and administrators have worked in the pharmaceutical industry. They assume that a 9-5 schedule is a given, and some believe that faculty with 10-month contracts actually

should be present on campus all day every day. But they're also very comfortable with a model in which outside experts or consultants are brought in to do special jobs, and, in fact, in the science and professional classes, experts were often brought in to teach about their specialty. I was the writing specialist, so it was natural for some faculty to ask me to come to their classes to present writing assignments. I always agreed. The professor and I would have meet and discuss the parameters and goals of the assignment. When I presented the assignment to the class, typically, the professor would take careful notes as I was speaking, and it was clear to me that after I had given the assignment for a couple of semesters, the professor could have done the same thing. But I was almost always asked back the next semester to give the assignment again. What this meant was that I gained credibility with students, the professors and I were seen by students to be united in our concern about writing, the Writing Center gained visibility, and writing became a legitimate academic expectation even at a school like ours.

The best classes for me to appear in were ones that were obviously connected to the students' professional goals—usually in their later years. It did not work so well for me to speak to students in their first- and second-year science classes—these students weren't even convinced that they needed biology, chemistry, and certainly not physics and math, in order to be pharmacists, so I had little chance of persuading them that they needed to be good writers. What I did was insinuate myself into the classrooms where professional instruction was occurring; that was where students could most easily see why good writing might be necessary. If I was really more interested in teaching them to think--in fact, to use writing to discover what they thought--to learn in other ways besides memorizing, it was best that I kept quiet about that.

Here are some WAC activities I've been involved in that worked pretty well:

Every semester, I go to two pharmacy classes: one an orientation class for 2nd-year students, and one a course in pharmacy systems management for 4th-year students. The purpose of the orientation course is to introduce the students to the pharmacy profession, so that they know what they're getting themselves into. The professor has discovered that assigning writing projects is the best way to make this happen; in one assignment, for example, the students interview pharmacists and pharmacy customers, and write up reports of the interviews, reflecting on some of the comments. This teacher has about 200 students in the course, but she is fully committed to using writing, and has been requiring more and more writing each year, despite all the papers she has to grade. The most recent assignment is a research paper on a current problem in health care--e.g., medication errors, the sale of cigarettes in pharmacies, prescription costs. At the start of each semester, she consults with me about the purpose of her assignments and the best way to word them: Our collaboration started with a resume and cover letter assignment that I would come to class to present, and has grown each year, until writing is the major component of the course.

I see the same students two years later, in their 4th year. At this point, they are closer to actually being able to practice their careers; they can apply for jobs as pharmacy technicians, and they will actually have to work for 1000-1500 hours as pharmacy interns in order to get their state licenses. They know they need effective resumes and cover letters to get these positions. On the surface, this kind of writing does not seem much like writing essays, but doing a good job with a resume and cover letter requires a clear purpose, good judgment about what to include and what to leave out, consideration of the

best order in which to present the information, precise language, and careful attention to details. In these ways, these assignments are not so different from writing essays, after all.

Later each semester, I see the same fourth-year students again, in another class—biomedical literature evaluation. There's quite a bit of writing in this class, mostly involving study of the literature that reports pharmaceutical research. The assignment that I give is the writing of an abstract of a drug research article. I discuss the relationship of the abstract to the full article, how to decide what to include in the abstract, what verb tenses to use, and how to avoid plagiarism (not so easy—quotations are not allowed, and often there are no synonyms for technical language). I use an example of an actual research article from the NEJM, and show students how information in the article is used in the abstract. Then they each get a scholarly article reporting pharmaceutical research, except that the abstract has been removed, and they have to write one. This is a difficult assignment for them, and the grade is important to their course grade. Our students are very grade-conscious, so they pay close attention. (Grades are not the ideal motivator, but they're better than nothing.)

In order to graduate from USP, all students have to pass our Writing Proficiency Exam (WPX). It's a 2-hour extemporaneous essay, taken for the first time by students in their 2nd or 3rd year, depending on their major. Originally, this exam was going to be the end point of an actual WAC program. Unfortunately, the program was never implemented, so we have an exam with none of the systematic preparation for it that had been envisioned. Still, it prevents students from graduating with writing that would embarrass them and the University. It's the only WAC activity affecting all students, and it's an opportunity to ensure that all of them can think and write at something approaching

college level. In the exam, students choose from two possible questions, and one of them is usually health-related (this year, we had a question about whether mandatory HIV testing should be done). Many students come to the Writing Center to prepare for the WPX, and if they fail it (39% did this year), they work on their writing and get a chance to take an equivalency exam. At the Writing Center, we have more than 200 practice questions that we use with these students, and perhaps a third of them involve health issues—usually with an ethical perspective—whether criminals on death row should be used to increase the number of organ donors, whether the woolly mammoth found in Siberia recently should be cloned. Getting students to think and write about issues like this is important, I think; it forces them to think about the implications of some of the scientific and medical discoveries that are occurring almost daily, it seems. Curiously, these kinds of issues are rarely raised in their classes, but when we work with students on the WPX, we force them to consider complex questions and come up with coherent and convincing answers. Sometimes they tell us that they've never had to do anything like this before. Well, we make sure that they don't graduate without having done it. When I'm helping students work on passing the exam, usually, all they care about is passing it; I'm more interested in getting them to think logically and learn how to express themselves convincingly. Sometimes I even tell students what I'm really up to, if I think they can handle it; usually I don't, but we can both pursue our goals at the same time.

I go to other classes to present writing assignments. I use what I have learned in the Writing Center about those aspects of the assignments that typically give students trouble. For example, 3rd-year occupational therapy (OT) students have to compare and contrast two OT theories; many of them will have forgotten how to organize a

compare/contrast paper, so I go over possible ways to organize their papers. In their 4th year, OT History students have to analyze the development of an area in the field; they need to hear about how to use cause/effect analysis in order to know what to look for as they're doing their research. In both of these cases, I meet with the professor before the semester starts to discuss problems that the previous year's students had with the assignments so that the assignment itself can be modified or refined. Half of the final grade for these students depends on their grade on these papers, so they take it very seriously..

In general, these WAC activities have worked well. There should be more, but this is a start.

Those activities that haven't worked well have been ones which, though they seemed to make writing important, actually accomplished the reverse. An example is an ambitious project I undertook with a biology professor during my 2nd year at USP:

I had a class of 25 first-year Freshman Comp students. There was an Introductory Biology class of about 100 first-year students—mostly pharmacy majors. The biology teacher and I prevailed on the registrar to put all of my writing students into that particular biology class so that we could have them do some assignments involving both writing and biology. A few of their assignments in my writing class involved ideas related to biology—ethical issues in genetic engineering. And in the biology class, all the students had four increasingly difficult critical thinking assignments that they did in pairs or small groups; they answered questions and wrote paragraphs and short essays on popular articles on such subjects as the scientific method, evolution, and global warming.

So far, so good. This sounds as the students would see how writing could be used to encourage thinking about important biological concepts. However, there were serious problems, some of which I didn't realize until after the course was over

- The biology class had 3 hours of lecture each week and one hour of recitation (often called a discussion section at other schools). The lecture was where students heard the facts—the important information that would be on the exam. The recitation was where students could ask questions about lecture or textbook material that they didn't understand. Attendance was not required, and perhaps 20 of the 100 biology students attended. Understandably, students decided that it was not important—anything that they needed to hear was presented in lecture. But it was at 4 of the recitations that the biology teacher and I presented detailed explanations and modeling of the critical thinking assignments. All of the students in my writing class were required to come to these recitations. We found out later that they were very angry about this. What we considered as an opportunity to get carefully prepared, detailed instructions about their assignments, the students considered a burden. They just wanted to have that time off. And the fact that most of the students were not required to go to those recitations gave the impression that writing could not possibly be important—exactly the opposite impression that I intended.

- A worse problem resulted from the way the final grades were calculated. The 4 writing assignments did not count for enough to raise the students' final grades higher than the average grade on the multiple-choice exams. Students, of

course, figured this out immediately. If we had intended to teach them that writing was unimportant as memorizing facts, we couldn't have done better.

- The third problem was that the biology teacher felt overwhelmed by the paper grading. Writing teachers accept that grading papers will take lots of time, but faculty in other disciplines may not. She did not. And then when she read the course evaluations written by her students, she found that they were furious that writing was assigned at all. She felt that the reward for was doing all this extra work was poor evaluations. She doesn't assign writing in this class any longer.

My hope had been that the success of this experiment would lead other pairs of science and writing teachers to work together in similar ways. Instead, I learned that such collaboration had to be less one-sided; I was contributing to the biology course, but the biology teacher had no contribution to my writing class. I learned that my participation in any WAC activity had to be seen as important by both the other professor and the students. To do this, the professor had to structure the course and the grading to be reflective of the importance of writing. I also learned that I could promote writing as the Director of the Writing Center, but I could not promote writing as a writing teacher unless I represented the thinking and goals of the other writing teachers in my department. That had not been the case; even if our experiment had succeeded, I had little chance of persuading my colleagues to consider such a collaboration.

I hope that as our faculty changes over time, there may be more value placed on writing, and therefore more opportunities for WAC. Meanwhile, we do WAC by stealth when we do it at all.



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