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WAC Revisited: You Get What You Pay For

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In 1982, I wrote an article for the second issue of *The Writing Instructor*, "Approaches to Comprehensive Writing: Integrating Writing into the College Curriculum," reviewing the early stages of the modern Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) / Writing in the Disciplines (WID) movement. Looking back almost thirty years later from the perspective of directing a large and successful communication in the disciplines program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I am struck by my own naiveté in that article and how much I have learned since then. I am also struck by the varying fates of the six programs I described in 1982.

Various definitions and distinctions have been proposed around the terms *WAC* and *WID*. Although *WAC* emphasizes writing as an essential mode of learning discipline-specific subject matter and *WID* emphasizes learning to write within the conventions and genres of specific disciplines, they are often used interchangeably or as terms sharing key characteristics. Consequently, I will use the term WAC to describe the movement as a whole.

In 1982, the modern WAC movement was still in its beginning stages. Today, there are journals such as *Writing Across the Curriculum* and *Across the Disciplines* devoted to WAC. There are regional, national, and international conferences on WAC. There are volumes of books dealing with various aspects of WAC, and several web sites, most notably *The WAC Clearinghouse*. Composition theory has also embraced WAC through the current emphasis on genre and activity theory. The International WAC / WID Mapping Project (2009) has published the statistical results of its survey of American and Canadian colleges and universities conducted from 2006 to 2008, and is about to publish a book profiling WAC programs at forty colleges and universities in more than twenty countries. The survey of American and Canadian colleges and universities received responses from 1359 institutions, a return rate of 50%. Of these reporting schools, 638 or 47% have some sort of WAC program or initiative in place, a significant increase from McLeod and Shirley's 1987 survey that reported that 38% of the institutions surveyed had a WAC program in place. Another 219 schools (16%) reported plans to begin a WAC program. However, another 149 schools or 11% of the schools responding reported that they once had a WAC program but no longer did.

In this article, I will briefly outline the various forms of WAC / WID programs, reexamine the six programs I discussed in the 1982 article, and then discuss the evolution of WAC initiatives at MIT. The point of this discussion is to demonstrate that WAC efforts require money and resources. No matter how great the enthusiasm for WAC is at the beginning, without an institutional commitment to support these efforts, they will often whither. Moreover, there will always be competing programs that will seek to appropriate the resources allocated to WAC, and a strong commitment from the central administration and faculty is often necessary for a WAC program's continued success, and, in some cases, even its continued existence.

Although the modern WAC movement can be traced back to Barbara Walvoord at Central College in 1970 (McLeod, 1992), a major influence for early WAC programs (and for my 1982 article) was Elaine Maimon's program at Beaver College (now Acadia University). The starting point of Beaver's curriculum was a two semester first-year class "Thought and Expression" that included readings from different disciplines, different writing genres, and sometimes allowed students to write papers based on subjects covered in other classes. After the first year, writing was integrated in courses by means of short in-class papers and longer assignments. The Beaver College model contained some common elements of both past and present WAC programs. At first, the interdisciplinary first year course appeared to be a viable model. But as WAC / WID matured as a discipline and its theoretical

basis in genre theory and activity theory grew, it became clear that it was impossible to teach students how to write and think in different disciplines within the context of a first-year writing (FYW) class. What skills from FYW are transferable to disciplinary writing was the subject of a still relevant essay by W. Ross Winterowd in the same second issue of *The Writing Instructor* and is still the subject of much current debate. What is clear is that there is a set of very large skills that are discipline and genre specific and that need to be taught within the context of those activity systems. Consequently, although textbooks such as Elaine Maimon's *Writing in the Arts and Sciences* enjoyed a limited success in the 1980's, their disappearance in the 1990's provides compelling evidence for the failure of the first-year WAC model.

There is a variant of the FYW model, however, that has had continued success, disciplinary first year seminars with an emphasis on writing. This model has been in place at small liberal arts colleges such as Grinnell and large land-grant universities such as Cornell since the beginning of the modern WAC movement. These classes do not attempt to introduce students to all genres of academic writing, but only to the genres associated with a specific academic discipline. At Grinnell, these seminars are all taught by regular faculty; at Cornell, these seminars are taught by regular faculty from departments throughout the university as well as by teaching assistants from the same departments with the faculty seminar leaders supervising the graduate student TAs.

The Beaver College model described in 1982 also contained two other types of WAC configurations. First, it tried to coordinate in a limited way assignments in FYW with subject matter in other classes students were taking. A stronger version of this kind of coordination was the hallmark of WAC efforts at Gonzaga University and the University of Southern California. At both schools, students were co-enrolled in a first-year general education class and affiliated sections of FYW, which would then construct writing assignments based on the course material of the general education class. Although FYW at Gonzaga University is still taught in conjunction with other required first-year courses, the co-registration experiment at USC was short lived because of logistical problems in trying to have a whole class of FYW students take the same general education course.

The Beaver College model also included seminars for faculty in all disciplines and efforts to integrate writing into classes throughout the curriculum and this model has become one of the dominant forms of WAC. Often labeled as "Writing-Intensive" or with similar terminology, these classes, often upper-level in the major, are taught by faculty within the specific discipline. One variant of this model has the faculty teaching these classes going through some sort of training. Another variant just has classes that are labeled as Writing-Intensive through some sort of approval process or by meeting some set of mechanical criteria, such as a minimum amount of writing or one or more required revisions. The final variant of this model is the one we currently use at MIT. Classes designated as *Communication-Intensive* are often supported by lecturers from the WAC program, who supplement the class with instruction and tutorials in writing, speaking, or both. Such an approach is expensive, but, I will argue, is the most effective and the most sustainable.

The final model is the stand-alone upper division class. Usually these classes are not discipline specific but are often taught by writing faculty under rubrics such as "Writing for Arts and Humanities," "Writing for Health Sciences," "Writing for Natural Sciences," or "Writing for Social Sciences." The problem with such an approach is that the categories are too broad to capture authentic boundaries. The genres of writing about music and painting are often quite different than some of the genres associated with literary criticism. The genres of anthropologic writing, especially its key genre of the ethnography, is not anything like the mathematically based genres of modern economics. Moreover, even the two social sciences that most incorporate mathematics into their discourse, economics and linguistics, incorporate entirely different genres of mathematics. Modern generative linguistic discourse derives primarily from set theory while economics relies heavily on statistical modeling, especially multiple regression. The discourses in these two fields of mathematics are quite different. It is difficult to see how these classes can be effective in introducing students to specific genres and discourse communities.

The WAC Programs Described In the 1982 Article[1]

Many WAC programs appear to have a bounded life cycle. They are not immortal, but appear to die or metamorphose into another form. As noted before, the 2008 survey reported that while 219 schools reported plans to begin a WAC program, another 149 schools reported dropping them. Given that not all the schools planning programs will actually implement them, the number of programs ending seems to be close to the number being created. In 1982, one of the flagship WAC programs was the one at Beaver College, founded by Elaine Maimon. Yet no trace of the program appears in the catalogue of the renamed Acadia University. Arts majors are now required to take either two semesters of a traditional composition course or a writing about literature class. Science majors have the choice of substituting two semester of a foreign language for a writing class.

The University of Michigan still has a required upper level writing class, but most of them no longer

appear to be specifically connected to disciplinary genres. Students can select any upper level writing class regardless of their major and the selections includes courses such as "Museums and American Culture," in which the sole writing assignment is a term research paper "reviewing and critiquing a regional museum using the critical tools developed in the course."

The University of Maryland has continued its stand-alone writing classes in broad categories such as the social sciences or technical communication. USC has also developed similar generic upper-level writing classes in place of the failed experiment in co-registered Freshman classes. At Grinnell College, in addition to the freshman writing, students take courses designated as Writing-Intensive. In 2003, Grinnell began a longitudinal study of the writing abilities of the class of 2007. The final report (2008) indicated that there was little improvement in student writing skills between the first and fourth years of a student's academic career. In response, Grinnell began a program to train undergraduate Writing Fellows to assist faculty in the teaching of writing. (Grinnell College, 1987) These fellows are nominated by faculty, take a semester long course in writing pedagogy, and receive a small stipend. In sum, Grinnell added resources to try to make these writing intensive courses effective.

The MIT Writing Requirement

In the early 1980's, MIT faculty complained that although students were highly numerate, the undergraduate population varied considerably in their ability to write both in their humanities and social science classes and in the advanced classes in their majors, at MIT usually science or engineering. After debating various options and cognizant of the administration's desire to limit costs, the MIT Faculty instituted with the class entering in 1983 a new Writing Requirement. This new MIT undergraduate requirement had two principle objectives:

- To ensure competency in writing of all undergraduates, with special emphasis on writing in professional contexts; and
- To see that clear, effective writing is valued and fostered throughout the curriculum as an essential part of an MIT education.
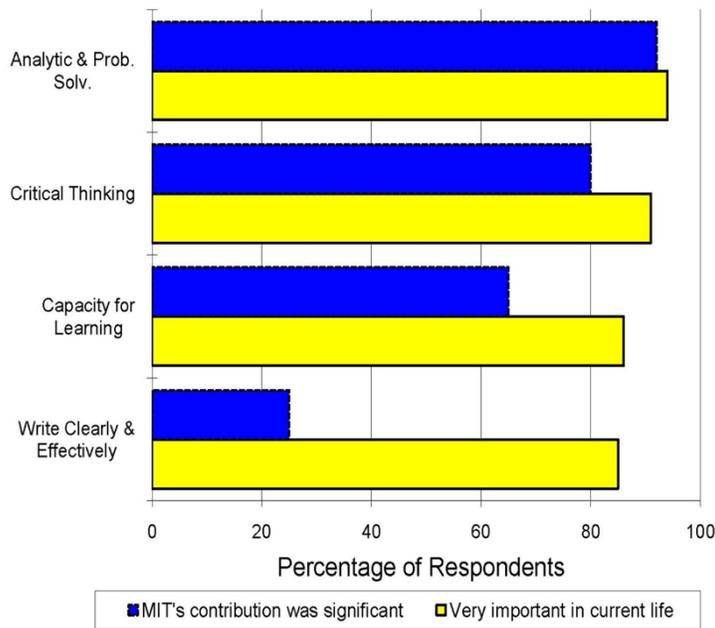
Minutes of the February 1982 Meeting of the MIT Faculty. Archives, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

> *This requirement, however, was primarily a proficiency requirement consisting of two phases. The first phase required students to demonstrate proficiency in expository writing through AP or SAT Writing Test Scores, a timed impromptu writing test given during placement, passing a first-year writing class, or submitting a paper from any humanities or social science class and having judged as acceptable by a reader for the Writing Requirement Office. If a paper was judged not acceptable, readers would write comments on the paper and students could revise it until it deemed acceptable. The second phase of the Requirement was concerned with students' writing in their majors. Students would have to submit a paper from and upper-level class in their major that was then evaluated by readers for the Writing Requirement. Again, if the paper was judged not acceptable, the reader wrote comments on the paper and the student was required to revise it. In reality, the amount of actual instruction in writing mandated by the Writing Requirement was minimal. Although students could make use of MIT's Writing and Communication Center, there were no provisions for students to conference with the evaluators of their papers. They received only written comments. After a few years, because of budgetary considerations, the then Provost shifted the responsibility for evaluating the second phase papers from the Writing Requirement Office to individual departments. (Deutch, 1986) Some science and engineering faculty, decrying what they saw as an unfunded mandate to improve student writing, just began to pass the majority of student papers. (Walters, 1987) Consequently, the Writing Requirement had little effect in improving student writing.*
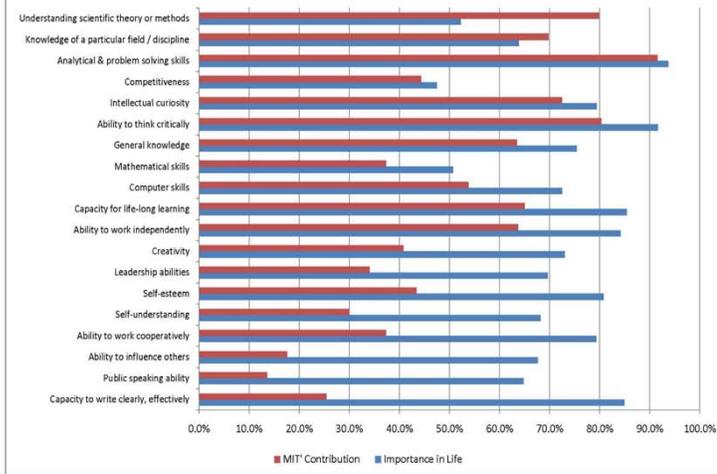
Initiatives towards a New WAC Curriculum

The individuals who were most aware of the failure of the Writing Requirement were the Writing Program faculty directly involved in evaluating student papers. Fortuitously, one of them became Dean of Undergraduate Education and Student Affairs and with other members of the senior administration began to work to develop an instructionally sound and effective new WAC program. One of the principal motivations behind this new initiative was the disconnect between what MIT's alumni reported in formal surveys of the classes of 1992, 1987, 1982, 1977, and 1972 as the importance of the abilities to speak and write clearly and effectively and their report of MIT's contribution to these skills.

MIT Alumni Survey: Abilities Ranked Most Often as Currently Very Important

Analytic & Prob. Solv.	
Critical Thinking	
Capacity for Learning	
Write Clearly & Effectively	

Percentage of Respondents

■ MIT's contribution was significant   □ Very important in current life

19 Abilities Listed in Descending Order of MIT's Contribution Meeting Current Importance in Life

Understanding scientific theory or methods
Knowledge of a particular field / discipline
Analytical & problem solving skills
Competitiveness
Intellectual curiosity
Ability to think critically
General knowledge
Mathematical skills
Computer skills
Capacity for life-long learning
Ability to work independently
Creativity
Leadership abilities
Self-esteem
Self-understanding
Ability to work cooperatively
Ability to influence others
Public speaking ability
Capacity to write clearly, effectively

■ MIT' Contribution   ■ Importance in Life

Grants from the National Science Foundation and a private foundation allowed MIT to begin to establish pilot WAC classes that integrated instruction and practice in writing. (NSF, 1996)

At MIT the basic model developed during this pilot period is to add writing instructors to classes. In the case of humanities and social science classes the lecturers serve as writing advisors, helping faculty design writing assignments, give presentations on writing, and provide feedback to students for revision through comments and writing conferences. In the upper division science and engineering classes, the roles of the WAC lecturers vary greatly. Rather than one size fits all, the teaching configuration is designed jointly by the content instructor and the WAC staff to fit the class. In design project classes, lecturers often work with individual or teams of students in all aspects of the process, from the first proposal, to oral and written progress reports, to the written design report and the oral design presentation. In laboratory classes the lecturers often work with students in preparing and revising laboratory reports. In some classes, the writing lecturers have weekly or biweekly section meetings where students can practice presentations and workshop papers.

The pilot phase was successful and in 2000 the MIT Faculty voted to establish a new, instructionally-based Communication Requirement requiring students to take four communication-intensive (CI) classes paced throughout their undergraduate careers. The first two CI classes are usually in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, and the last two are usually part of a student's major requirements. The faculty enthusiastically supported the new curriculum because during the pilot phase, many faculty recognized that not only had student papers and presentations improved, but that because students had worked on their writing skills, their papers were better organized, followed genre conventions, and therefore could be read and commented on for content much more quickly. At MIT, as at most research universities, faculty time is an extremely valuable commodity, often more valuable than money.

The WAC program at MIT is large by any standards. We have 36 full and part-time lecturers supporting (financially equivalent to approximately 19 assistant professorships in the humanities at MIT) an undergraduate program of slightly more than 4,000 students. (The first-year writing program and the Writing and Communication Center are separate.) An assessment of the new curriculum, which was completed in 2008, reported overwhelming student and faculty support and satisfaction. (Subcommittee on the Communication Requirement, 2008). There are many reasons for its success, but sufficient funding is clearly a major factor. Lecturers have time to consult with faculty and work intensively with students. The greatest testament to how well the program is valued occurred in 2009, when MIT like almost all educational institutions, faced a massive budget shortfall, necessitating cuts in almost all programs. Originally, the WAC staff time was going to be reduced significantly. The reduction did not occur, however, because of widespread push-back from faculty in all the CI courses. The WAC program had become too essential and too integral in these classes to be cut back, and, consequently, almost all the budget was restored and funds were reduced somewhere else.

The point of this narrative is that the program is valued across MIT because it is funded sufficiently to make a difference to faculty. Having faculty attend a weeklong workshop and then ask them to comment on two or three sets of student drafts of reports along with the final version may be feasible at some small liberal arts college but certainly not at most research universities. Moreover, even a liberal arts college such as Grinnell has realized that it needs to provide faculty with additional help to make writing-intensive classes effective. Of course, being well funded produces its own dangers, especially in times of shrinking budgets. Other units may want to siphon off resources by merging or co-opting the program. At some schools, the money is diverted to fund graduate student TAs, who are designated as writing-intensive TAs but receive little if any instruction or mentoring. Another common tactic is to designate classes as writing-intensive largely to try to recruit majors. Often these classes spend very little time or effort teaching writing. A successful and well liked program, however, is difficult to destroy. To become a successful program, however, there must be sufficient resources. Or as the old TV commercial has it, "You get what you pay for."

Notes

[1] My 1982 article derived much of its information from a survey article "Comprehensive Writing Programs," in *The Forum for Liberal Education*, 3, No. 6 (1981). For this current article, I was able to obtain all necessary information from the web sites of the various institutions.

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