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Welcome to Babylon: Junior Writing Program Administrators and Writing Across Communities at the University of New Mexico

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Abstract: Writing program administrators need to be as concerned about sustaining the cultural ecologies of our communities as we are about the material economies of our institutions—we need to attend to the diverse linguistic and rhetorical ecologies within which twenty-first century student writers are exercising agency. In order to respond productively, ethically, and appropriately to the increasingly diverse language and literacy practices of 21st century college writers, this profile will focus on a program that reconfigures the intellectual operating spaces of Composition Studies by training junior writing program administrators in how to promote rhetorical action alongside the study of composition pedagogy and praxis and by advocating on behalf of ethno-linguistically diverse communities within and beyond the university.

What would a college writing program look like if we situated discursive diversity at the center of our pedagogical enterprise? What if the literacy lives of our students were as important as the cultural, linguistic, and rhetorical ecologies that inform them? What if ethnolinguistic pluralism and social justice were the first concerns of literacy education? For over nearly forty years since the release of the 1974 CCCC statement of "Students' Right to Their Own Language," the field of Composition Studies has been calling for culturally and linguistically-sensitive approaches to teaching writing (Committee on CCCC Language Statement). Largely, however, we have been talking to ourselves and, unfortunately, replicating the dominant discourses of the prevailing power structures that condition our colleges and universities (Smitherman and Villanueva).

As compositionists debate the pedagogical value of inviting students to write in their "home languages," the rhetorics of the public sphere have become anything but inviting (Bean et al). "For years, I was as baffled, bewildered, confounded, puzzled, and perplexed as any other writing teacher as to how to handle the numerous non-standardisms in the writing of too many African American students," confesses Arthur Palacas in "Write about Ebonics." The prescriptivist project of Composition Studies and the preoccupation with error have contributed to a kind of disciplinary tunnel vision obscuring focus on the bigger picture. Steve Parks's argument that "composition studies too quickly appropriated African American struggles for social and economic justice into educational paradigms that reinforced hegemonic understandings of how race and class work in the United States" rings all too true (5). While we have been gazing inward toward our classrooms, democratized spaces outside our classrooms productive to inclusive and vigorous public engagement have been shrinking. As many of us have come to discover, simply recognizing diverse discourses in our composition classrooms is insufficient in confronting social disparities and linguistic racism (Trimbur).

Whereas the so-called multi-cultural composition classroom offers a safe haven within the college writing program, classroom pedagogies alone fail to confront structural discrimination and the insidious means by which educational and social contexts replicate linguistic racism (Kells "Tex

Mex"). In his recent article, "WAC/WID in the Next America: Redefining Professional Identity in the Age of the Multilingual Majority," Jonathan Hall recognizes the possibilities of Writing across the Curriculum(WAC)/Writing in the Disciplines (WID) programs for acting as change agents within university-wide writing programs (including First Year Writing) and calls for a "thorough and fundamental transformation of WAC" (33) that can be responsive to multilingual realities in the U.S. Similarly, Nancy Welch observes, "Even as our field has increasingly focused on the public dimensions of student writing and writing pedagogy, the national turn has been in the opposite direction, toward increasing privatization" (7). Under the current economic constraints, the internal and external pressures to tame, claim, and contain literacy education through the totalizing rhetorics of traditional models and mechanisms of First Year Writing, Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing Program Administration, and Writing Centers are overwhelming. As we witness our writing program budgets slashed or erased altogether, it is tempting to accept and promulgate the myths of language and literacy that most closely align with the dominant narratives in circulation. This profile, however, argues for and describes the generative possibilities of a Writing Across Communities model of WAC as a means for advocating on behalf of ethnolinguistically-diverse communities within and beyond the university as well as for training future writing program administrators. As it has developed at the University of New Mexico, Writing Across Communities represents not only an approach for teaching writing within our classrooms but functions as a deliberative entity for social action by mentoring junior writing program administrators in leadership, scholarship, and civic engagement. In what follows, I will explore how Writing Across Communities is, among other things, an experimental space for promoting public rhetoric and democratic practice among diverse constituencies and a conduit for circulating a multiplicity of perspectives on issues relevant to literacy education within our local communities.

Institutional Silos or the Tower of Babel?: Confronting Institutional Constraints

The political undercurrents and fiscal constraints in states like California, Arizona, and Texas demanding that universities abandon ethnic studies curricula and diversity programs have been gaining traction since the onset of the "Great Recession" of 2008. Regretfully, our own professional organizations find themselves caught in the political crosscurrents. The recently released statement, "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing," developed collaboratively by the NCTE, National Council of Writing Program Administration, and the National Writing Project, provides a model of literacy education informed by current research and best practices currently endorsed by experts in the field of Composition. Nevertheless, the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" unwittingly adopts a culture-neutral, linguistically-homogenizing portrait of language learning. Although promising in many respects, the report suffers from what Paul Matsuda calls the "myth of linguistic homogeneity" (81). The corporatization of higher education relies on the adoption and replication of a homogenizing neoliberal rhetoric that ignores difference and sanitizes dissent. [1](#) [\[#note1\]](#)

Sustainable communities exist through the daily discursive acts of linguistic and textual contact—culturally diverse interactions that challenge linguistic homogeneity. The current boom, for example, in internet text messaging across geographic and generational distance signals the importance of semiotic engagement for social cohesion at both the micro and macro-level. Juan Guerra offers the term "transcultural citizenship" for these types of literacy practices and processes of critical engagement. This term aligns beautifully with what we are trying to do locally as well as nationally in the field. As Guerra argues, "[E]ducators must signal and privilege our students' local communities as forcefully as they signal and privilege the influences of globalization on them" ("Writing for Transcultural Citizenship" 299).

As literacy educators, we need to be playing advocacy roles within our institutions by confronting linguistic racism in (and beyond) the disciplines and resisting the myth of an English monoglot standard. Writing program administrators need to be as concerned about sustaining the cultural ecologies of our communities as we are about the material economies of our institutions. Moreover, we need to complicate, *not* contain, literacy education. I stand by Juan Guerra's lament that "I have finally given up trying to put literacy in its place" (1643). Scholars in Sociolinguistics, Discourse Studies, and New Literacy Studies have been reminding us for decades that language and literacy place us as writers, but cannot be put into place (Johnstone; Gee; Fairclough; Street). Every discursive act situates us, places us in "positions of articulation" (Bawarshi 9). As a field, Composition Studies has envisioned and re-envisioned First Year Writing in a multiplicity of approaches from a broad range of theoretical modalities, but in the process, I am afraid that we have over-determined the role of First Year Writing in the literacy lives of our students. We need to be attending not only to the stories we tell about our writing lives inside the classroom but beyond the curriculum (Parks and Goldblatt). We need to attend to the diverse linguistic and rhetorical ecologies within which twenty-first century student writers are exercising agency (Kells "Mapping the Cultural Ecologies").

Undergraduate students as well as junior writing program administrators must respond to rapidly emerging exigencies of diversity and scarcity by creating new strategies to communicate with each other, essentially co-constructing knowledge by employing technology and new media; building relationships across disciplinary boundaries; cultivating and circulating new knowledge; creating and critiquing multi-media/multi-genre texts; and attending to the ethical responsibilities of changing and complex social environments. Preparing future writing program administrators to meet the needs of twenty-first century students and institutions demands reconfiguration of the intellectual operating spaces of Composition Studies. Graduate education programs need to promote approaches to knowledge-making, strategies for community activism, and opportunities for writing program administration at the intersections of both composition studies and cultural rhetorical (as well as discourse) studies.

In order to respond productively, ethically, and appropriately to the increasingly diverse language and literacy practices of 21st century college writers, therefore, I contend that junior writing program administrators need training in how to promote rhetorical action alongside the study of composition pedagogy and praxis. Economic scarcity and global geo-political trends will demand that emerging leaders in the field become active agents in knowledge-making and writing program resource allocations within their institutions that respond to the ways that the struggle for power happens through legitimate social institutions as well as outside sanctioned social institutions. In the CCCC Statement on Diversity, I argue that we need to incorporate deliberative democratic practice into writing program administration:

Diversity invigorates a deliberative democracy. Diversity perpetually complicates deliberative democratic institutions, including our colleges and universities. Difference challenges us to adapt, change, grow, respond. If we live in an exponentially diverse social world, how do we construct our relationships to one another? How do we distribute our cultural, political, and material resources equitably? Rhetoric then becomes the means by which we (as teachers, scholars, and citizens) constitute and protect the presence and participation of the diverse groups within a deliberative democracy. Reflecting on the practices of activists in civil rights, labor, human rights, women's rights, indigenous sovereignty, I am impressed that all exercised a rhetoric of presence through discursive identification with a people, a place, a moment, and a vision of social justice. These should be our models as educators of an endangered generation. (Kells "Diversity, Metaphorical Constructions")

The project of Composition Studies, generally, and my own research in civil rights rhetoric, more specifically, represents an exercise in mapping, tracing the process from rhetorical imagination to rhetorical efficacy (Kells *Hector P. Garcia*). The measure of an academic career, I have come to believe in the ten years since I was a doctoral student, is mapping this very same process. The apprenticeship of graduate school through the tenure review process is a journey tracking our trajectory of authority (influence). What are we doing as scholars, writers, and teachers if we aren't circulating rhetorical agency? Sociolinguist Barbara Johnstone defines agency as "an individual's ebbing and flowing ability to shape the activity at hand" (*Discourse Analysis* 130). Certainly, our preoccupation as a field with the living processes of literacy and the individual's "ebbing and flowing ability to shape" writing is, in fact, a study of agency. It is in this operating space that we find ourselves joining the conversation about the commodification of community and culture; it is where we find ourselves in resistance to the neoliberal discourses of privatization. And it is in this precarious place that we at the University of New Mexico have conceptualized and mobilized the "idea" of Writing Across Communities.

The Writing Across Communities Initiative

The impetus for Writing Across Communities at the University of New Mexico began over five years ago with some nagging questions about sociolinguistic diversity: How do we resist homogenizing linguistic identity? How do we change the stories of literacy education that extend beyond the curriculum and, in the process, acknowledge and advocate writing practices that support the diverse cultural ecologies within and outside the classroom (Adler-Kassner; Goldblatt; Kells "Writing Across Communities")? In a nutshell, the vision of the UNM Writing Across Communities initiative is to help students cultivate communicative alacrity across the disciplines in order to promote the knowledge, understanding, and ethical habits of mind for citizenship in intellectually and culturally diverse academic, professional, and civic communities. In this way, the Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM departs from traditional WAC models. Our approach to writing is not limited to curricular discourses. In supporting and enhancing the intellectual life of students and faculty engaged in the academic mission of creating and circulating knowledge, Writing Across Communities asserts that literacy education is both a civil right and civic responsibility. Writing Across Communities promotes student-faculty engagement through writing for the benefit of diverse disciplinary, cultural, civic, and professional communities across the university.

We launched the Writing Across Communities initiative at the University of New Mexico in the Spring 2005, beginning with a series of university-wide conversations about writing that culminated in the first UNM Literacy Colloquium titled "Knowing Our Students," featuring keynote speaker Juan Guerra. Concomitant to these university-wide discussions, we established the chartered graduate student organization Writing Across Communities (WAC) Alliance in order to more fully authorize graduate students in the practice of self-governance and to secure their leadership role over this initiative. From the beginning, we have envisioned Writing Across Communities as a conduit for circulating a multiplicity of perspectives on issues relevant to literacy education within our local communities. The central organizing concepts of "Writing Across Communities" hinge on open-ended notions of "writing" as discursive acts of self-authorization through text (digital, alphabetic, visual, print, etc.) and "communities" as porous contexts of belonging, knowing and acting (our cultural, disciplinary, civic, cultural, professional spheres, etc.).

The ethical imperative for adopting a Writing Across Communities approach to WAC was overwhelming as soon as we began considering the historically-excluded student populations we serve. At the University of New Mexico, our vulnerable communities include a broad range of student groups: first generation college students, linguistically-diverse students, international students, Native American, Mexican American, African American student groups, non-traditional (re-entry) student

populations, economically-disadvantaged students, physically and mentally disabled students, returning veterans and their families, political refugees, former prisoners (most of whom are disproportionately male students of color), LGBT students, survivors of hate crimes, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. In other words, nearly the entire student population of the University of New Mexico constitutes the intended beneficiaries of the Writing Across Communities initiative. We engage the persistent dilemma facing participatory democracy: resisting the tyranny of the majority. Writing Across Communities responds to our social need for deliberative space, intentional presence, and radical hospitality.

Every year since its beginning, Writing Across Communities projects and events have served hundreds of undergraduate students, supported numerous graduate students, and engaged many faculty members across disciplinary groups and divisions. In the academic year 2010-2011 we launched six major Writing Across Communities events including: the Celebration of Student Writing, the Write On! (WOW!) Core Writing Workshop, the "Civil Rights Symposium on Mental Health and the Community," an Earth Day Conference, a Working With Writers Workshop as well as the new ABQ Community Writing Center initiative (what we call "a writing center without walls"), a cross-disciplinary graduate student online journal called *In Progress*, and the online WAC newsletter *Writing Communities*. The ABQ Community Writing Center has been launched in April 2011 at the Albuquerque Main Public Library, coordinated and staffed completely by graduate students to serve the literacy needs of local citizens. Additionally, the first issue of the online WAC-inspired graduate student journal, *In Progress*, was released in November 2011. [\[2\]](#) [\[#note2\]](#)

The first UNM WAC newsletter was written by graduate students and released in February 2011 to chronicle the development and describe the multiple dimensions of Writing Across Communities. The discursive act of telling the story indexes both the unique qualities of this initiative as a graduate-student directed project as well as the organic, grassroots nature of its evolution. Erin Penner Gallegos, UNM graduate student and editor of the inaugural issue of our WAC newsletter, eloquently reflects:

We have chosen the name—*Writing Communities*—to reflect our understanding of both how we write and our attitude toward how and why writing matters in the lives of the students, faculty, staff, and public who comprise the greater UNM community that the Writing Across Communities Initiative serves. Not only is writing a collaborative act, one that happens within the constraints of particular disciplinary, professional, personal, and epistemological communities, but the act of writing itself is creative and generative. By writing together, we create integrated communities, strengthened by deliberation, contention, and conversation. (2)

The Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM around which my graduate students and I have been sustaining this conversation (about language diversity, community literacy, and social activism) is no less vulnerable today than it was at its genesis. In truth, it remains even more threatened. We still have no funding, no director, no sanctioned institutional space. But an amazing thing evolved alongside the erosion of the Department of English and absence of stable resources over the past few years. [\[3\]](#) [\[#note3\]](#) A growing cohort of graduate student leaders have stepped up and brought their own political, intellectual, and professional resources to this project and transformed the Writing Across Communities initiative into something exceeding imagination. The most significant outcome of these past five years is that Writing Across Communities continues to complicate the culture of writing at UNM with questions centering on issues of language, literacy, identity, and social justice. Literacy is socially-constituted and as such, exponentially complex. Getting college writers to master the academic essay or research project or lab report is just not enough. The linguistic and textual

outcomes of a Writing Across Communities model promote critical engagement and cultural belonging across disciplinary, cultural, professional and civic communities.

Writing Across Communities and FYW

As part of the Writing Across Communities initiative, we engaged in a five-year process of revisioning the First Year Writing (FYW) Core Curriculum (ENGL 101 and ENGL 102). We gradually moved the content of the core writing curriculum from an exclusively (academic prose) essayist-based literacy model to a community-centered, genre-based approach. My graduate students and I taught the first experimental ENGL 101 sequence using Writing Across Communities principles during Fall 2006. The transformation of the First Year Writing Program has not been seamless or immediate. The process continues to evolve through a highly experimental and deliberative process between faculty and graduate students. The UNM Rhetoric and Writing Program eventually adopted a genre-based approach for ENGL 101 in Fall 2010. The re-visioning process continues as we seek to extend Writing Across Communities principles and first year writing across the disciplines. As chair of the Dean's Strategic Committee on Core Writing, I will lead the implementation of the first W-Course Pilot Project for ENGL 102 (second semester FYW) across the curriculum in Spring 2013. In an effort to mentor and train new graduate teaching assistants and future WPAs in a Writing Across Communities approach to WAC and First Year Composition, I designed and taught the first ENGL 640 WPA Seminar at UNM in Spring 2009. I coalesced a cultural ecology approach to WAC with current scholarship in FYW, WPA, and WPA subfields of Composition Studies. In addition to an extensive reading list, I invited guest lectures from local and national writing program administrators. Guest lecturers for my Spring 2009 ENGL 640 WPA Seminar included Linda Adler-Kassner (University of California at Santa Barbara) on the "activist WPA" and Kim Brian Lovejoy (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis) on language diversity issues in first year composition (see [Appendix 1 \[new-mexico-wpas-appendices.php#appx1\]](#) for further information on ENGL 640).

As Dan Cryer, UNM graduate student, notes in his CCCC 2011 panel paper, "Empty and Sentimental': Complicating the Notion of Community in the Composition Classroom":

Those of us who advocate for a Writing Across Communities approach need studies that analyze how well students learn when these methods are implemented. Such a study may compare teaching methods at different institutions, and should take into account not only quantitative analysis of written products but also qualitative analysis of students' behaviors and perceptions. In the field of composition we take our own advice by constantly revising our practices, for in revision lays the pursuit of a better future.

The process of revamping our First Year Writing Program and the challenges of training FYW teachers in Writing Across Communities principles are more fully examined in a forthcoming chapter, "Out of WAC: Democratizing Higher Education and Questions of Scarcity and Social Justice" (Kells). We continue to evaluate and reflect on ways to better align FYW with Writing Across Communities principles and projects. The process of experimenting with a "Writing Across Communities" genre-based approach to first year writing began in Fall 2006 with the implementation of the first WOW! Write On! Workshop (drop in writing workshop) for the first year writing program and the pilot project of my WAC-enhanced ENGL 101 syllabus (see [Appendix 2 \[new-mexico-wpas-appendices.php#appx2\]](#)).

The Junior WPA and Professional Development: Lost in Translation

The dimensions of the Writing Across Communities initiative extend from FYW to supporting junior writing program administrators (JWPAs) in leadership roles beyond FYW programs. Writing Across

Communities projects provide opportunities for JWPAs to work within their larger academic and civic communities. In what follows, this profile will offer a portrait of UNM's Writing Across Communities approach to literacy education as a model of professional development for junior writing program administrators working within diverse academic, professional, and civic cultures. After five years of mobilizing, this home-grown educational movement has become what graduate student Brian Hendrickson describes as the most "pervasive non-institution institution" at UNM. It is unlike any other WAC program in the nation because of the opportunities as well as the constraints shaping the context, the vision, and the leadership of a growing cohort of graduate students at UNM.

We (our field) don't generally teach (attend to) the everyday writing that first year writers need or want or that new WPAs and freshly-minted PhDs demand. We do not often enough take into account the cultures of writing that shape the discourses, the literacy practices, and the texts we inhabit. We have a lot of containers for concepts and practices (a lot of theories) but not a way to connect between the dots, the concepts. We have no model for seeing the organic nature of our cultures of writing (the constant shifting and adapting necessary to become an effective, efficacious writer). How do we migrate across, transgress the boundaries of our cherished models, paradigms, disciplines, and knowledge systems? We too often think and talk in isolation. Linda Adler-Kassner responds to this problem in *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. In addition, in *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement*, Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser examine how intentional engagement with civic issues and stakeholder communities can be integral to university writing programs at many levels including service learning, WAC, and First Year Writing.

Thinking together about the needs of the new WPA demands that we attend to issues of cultural, intellectual, linguistic, and disciplinary diversity. How can we teach and prepare future writing program administrators (JWPAs) to design and develop college-level literacy programs that support and sustain the diverse cultural ecologies of the academic (disciplinary), professional (work-place), civic (public), and ethnolinguistic communities they serve? This is why I adopted Juan Guerra's notion of "transcultural repositioning" (or "transcultural citizenship") as the conceptual cornerstone of Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM (Guerra "Writing for Transcultural Citizenship"). However, Guerra limited his construct to the individual. In response, I have suggested a larger sociological and pedagogical extension of that notion through "Writing Across Communities"—a set of principles for promoting "transcultural repositioning" or rhetorical alacrity within and across diverse discourse communities.

In sharing the story of the evolution of the Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM as a democratized space for new writing program administrators learning to negotiate the junctures and intersections of the field while advocating for literacy education for historically-underserved student populations, my principle concern is helping emerging leaders in the field to address the implications of leading writing programs within conditions of growing economic scarcity and socio-cultural diversity. I agree with Linda Adler-Kassner that we need to be telling our stories in order to change the story about writing.

The Writing Across Communities initiative offers an alternative narrative about junior writing program administrators navigating these junctures, the "perils and promises" of writing program administration, and mitigating the "culture shock" of the profession (Enos; Anderson). It does so by cultivating leadership strategies that promote productive action; enact the generative possibilities of deliberative democracy as a way of knowing and governing; assert authority under contentious political conditions within departments and university contexts; respond to reactive rhetorics of institutional structures resistant to change; and transform the narratives of JWPAs from disabling fictions into efficacious narratives of change agents.

In the role of administrators and change agents, JWPAs in a Writing Across Communities context must balance two opposing roles and imperatives: the role of the administrator as an organizational stabilizer and resource manager and the role of activist as an organizational agitator confronting inequitable, unjust, and ineffective social institutions. In this dual position, new WPAs need strategies to recognize and respond to reactive rhetorics designed to sabotage and jeopardize progressive program changes and the redistribution of institutional resources. In many respects, the JWPAs within the UNM Writing Across Communities initiative function as directors of a small non-profit organization. They must build public support for the community projects they seek to develop. At the heart of every endeavor is the necessity of deliberative practice as they conduct fundraising, organizing, and networking. They learn that democracy is not only a way of governing but a way of knowing. Each of the loosely-connected graduate student projects within the Writing Across Communities initiative promote the key dimensions of the profession: scholarship and research; advocacy and service; teaching and mentorship.

In terms of professional development opportunities, our graduate students function as JWPAs managing various events and projects. Our graduate students arrive from all points of the nation with vision, passion, and openness to the needs and interests of our UNM student population. The cultural and geographical locations of our graduate students reach from Hawaii to New York, from Washington to Minnesota, from Texas to Maryland. The Writing Across Communities (WAC) Alliance provides the rhetorical space for their various self-directed projects: editing the WAC Newsletter; contributing to the WAC online journal; chairing a WAC symposium; coordinating the ABQ Community Writing Center; tutoring in the Writing and Language Center, etc. My advocacy role might be best described as a network operator connecting the Writing Across Communities "clearinghouse" locally and nationally. I help our JWPAs imagine and implement their projects. I provide support and protection wherever necessary. I mentor JWPAs through the processes of vision-making, budget planning, grant writing, networking, committee-building, drafting press releases, delivering reports, and conducting outcomes assessment. I also provide them entrée to the national conversation on writing through coursework, scholarship, professional conferences, and organizations. I guide graduate students through the precarious terrain of bringing an idea into practice and helping them to negotiate all levels of university administrative structures from the president's office to the student union building. The list of sponsors for Writing Across Communities events and projects spans the spectrum of the UNM institution and beyond. This pragmatic and applied nature of Writing Across Communities as a model for training JWPAs could not be realized alone in a traditional composition practicum or theory-based seminar for many reasons, not the least of which is the level of commitment and visibility demanded of graduate students as program coordinators in order to exercise authority as the principle leaders of Writing Across Communities.

Challenges to Reconfiguring Intellectual/Institutional Spaces

In practice, Writing Across Communities is a work-in-progress. It is a set of organizing principles or operating premises. This provisional nature of Writing Across Communities is not only appropriate; it is intentional. Literacy is a fluid process. The notion that mastering any single literacy practice (such as the academic essay) is sufficient to becoming an educated and engaged citizen in the twenty-first century is a flawed notion. But I need to be honest here. Not everyone is buying it. The capacious notion of Writing Across Communities is too messy for some stakeholders at UNM. Writing Across Communities does not fit neatly into any one institutional category or space. It cuts across the academy, engaging what I call the "four P's of the writing process:" poetics (cultural aesthetics), pragmatics (rhetorical contexts), polemics (political possibilities), and pedagogies (educational practices).

This protean nature of Writing Across Communities is especially bothersome for administrators who count on fixed categories, hierarchical relationships, and quantitative outcomes. Writing Across Communities is messy because it is organic, it is grassroots, and it is democratic. It reinvents itself year after year. By the very nature of aligning our WAC program with our graduate program, Writing Across Communities remains perpetually de-stabilized and de-stabilizing. The intellectual engine and the rhetorical operating space of Writing Across Communities begin and end with our students (not faculty, not administrators, not curriculum, per se). Our graduate and undergraduate students are the mobilizing force keeping the conversation going.

My role as program chair of the Writing Across Communities initiative has been largely as a liaison and advocate, connecting the local situation to the national conversation. In practice, I have been less an administrator and more of an agitator and intellectual architect. This nebulous role has not only required organizing social action behind-the-scenes, but finding new ways to mobilize diverse constituencies toward a collective re-evaluation of how we teach writing across the university. [\[4\]](#) [\[#note4\]](#) There is no "blueprint." Nowhere in my doctoral program did I get operating instructions for mobilizing, theorizing, or institutionalizing a university-wide writing initiative.

I would like to tell you that at the end of these past six years of persistent mobilization that the UNM administration has seen fit to recognize, support, and promote WAC as a university-wide program with sanctioned reporting lines. This is not the case, however. We have no budget, nor director, no staff, no office, and no formal infrastructure support whatsoever. My work as faculty advisor has been, in essence, pro bono. My appointments as chair of the UNM Core Curriculum Task Force (2009-2010) and chair of the Dean's Strategic Committee on Core Writing (2011-2013) represent the only formal administrative acknowledgments of Writing Across Communities as a viable initiative at UNM. As WAC Program Chair, I do not receive any form of administrative compensation or incentives for this work. All programs and events have been supported by grant writing. Writing Across Communities is both a presence and an absence. We do have a WAC logo though, and letterhead. And we have a website. [\[5\]](#) [\[#note5\]](#) And, we do have rhetorical authority—locally and nationally. Some might call it "social capital." I call it collective good will.

The Polis and the Polyglot University

During my recent campus visit to the University of Texas at El Paso, Kate Mangelsdorf offered me this encouragement: "It is amazing what we can achieve if are willing to work for free." She gently reminded me that we don't get paid for subverting hierarchies or the dominant discourse. An advocate for multilingual approaches to literacy education, Mangelsdorf is no stranger to doing whatever is necessary to build a sustained conversation about the importance of recognizing our students' ethnolinguistic identities (Mangelsdorf). The graduate students at UTEP are helping Mangelsdorf build a university-wide writing center without a budget line or dedicated staff. If it is important enough to university writing programs, we (faculty mentors and graduate students) often find ourselves working for ourselves and our communities without extrinsic reward or remuneration. This is only one of the challenges of the work we are doing here with Writing Across Communities at the University of New Mexico.

There are also the inevitable problems with maintaining continuity and momentum within a graduate-student directed WAC program. We face the question about transferring and passing down authority every year as graduate students complete their degrees and move on. To address that challenge, we recently instituted a peer mentoring component to the WAC Alliance organizational structure to appoint both a WAC Events Coordinator and Assistant WAC Events Coordinator at the onset of each new academic year. This organizational change helps to sustain the conversation and the fabric of leadership. I caution each new WAC Events Coordinator upon appointment of these three things. In

order to be successful in this organizational climate, new leaders must 1) have a high tolerance for ambiguity; 2) rely on their colleagues; and 3) be the steward of the Writing Across Communities story. I warn them that the extrinsic rewards "suck," but the intrinsic rewards are priceless for this work. And I make it very clear that the only thing they will take away with them at the end of their term is the experience. They will not get paid. They will not get promoted. They will not see their names in lights. If they are looking for fame, fortune, or fanfare, they better look elsewhere.

If we were to reimagine the process of building Writing Across Communities at UNM, I would establish a University Writing Advisory Committee at the onset of the mobilization process. Although we have been lobbying the Office of the Provost for these past several years for a cross-institutional writing council aligning faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, student service administrators, and other stakeholders in the Writing Across Communities initiative, we have not succeeded in establishing a formal top-down advocacy entity on behalf of WAC at UNM. My appointment as chair of the (College of Arts and Sciences) Dean's Strategic Committee on Core Writing in Fall 2011 represents the formation of the first formal advisory entity for WAC at UNM. Administrative instability that has plagued the university over the past six years represents a significant impediment to gaining the level of administrative traction we hoped to achieve. The thrashing machine of local politics churns on. Academic year 2011-2012 will usher in the fourth complete administrative regime change since I joined the faculty in 2004, from the college and the provost to the presidential levels. Nonetheless, the Writing Across Communities initiative maintains a presence. We have taken a leading role in promoting the establishment of the Writing and Language Center as well as the UNM Core Curriculum Task Force, successfully forging alliances with all colleges and major programs on campus including the Office of the President, Office of the Provost, Graduate Student Professional Organization, and the Faculty Senate.

Because of the central role that graduate students are playing in this initiative, I recently proposed expanding this conversation into the National Consortium of Writing Across Communities with the key purpose of mentoring future leaders in the field. The call that Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt made in their *College English* article "Beyond the Curriculum" to promote approaches to literacy education that press the limits of the academy has shaped many different responses over the past decade. What we are doing at the University of New Mexico is just one of those responses. After nearly six years of organizing, the conversation has grown to include other universities. UNM is now the founding chapter of the newly established National Consortium of Writing Across Communities, representing twenty-five affiliated universities across the nation (for further information, see <http://www.unm.edu/~wac/NCWAC.html> [<http://www.unm.edu/~wac/NCWAC.html>]).

The National Consortium of Writing Across Communities (NCWAC) includes a constellation of stakeholders centered on educational principles and cultural practices that promote the generative relationships of language and literacy to the maintenance and wellbeing of human communities. The NCWAC seeks to guide curriculum development, stimulate resource-sharing, cultivate networking, and promote research in language practices and literacy education throughout the nation to support local colleges and universities working to serve the vulnerable communities within their spheres of influence. The members of NCWAC recently convened during the 2011 Conference of College Composition and Communication in Atlanta to draft its mission statement and action items. In the spirit of the past six years of Writing Across Communities at UNM, the NCWAC will advocate for culturally-relevant approaches to literacy education for historically-underserved student populations; promote resource-sharing between faculty and graduate students; mentor graduate students and junior faculty; serve as clearinghouse for collaborative scholarly projects (conference panels, dissertation committees, research initiatives, visiting scholars, guest lectures); and promote curriculum development. The UNM chapter of NCWAC will host the 2011 Summer Summit in Santa Fe for college composition teachers and graduate students as a pre-conference for the Annual Conference of

National Council of Writing Program Administration which will be held in Albuquerque, New Mexico July 15-22, 2012.

Conclusion

The current historical moment of healing national division and international polarization call for models of democratic practice that promote dissent, engage difference, cultivate debate, and negotiate the noise of dissonance. As Hannah Arendt reminds us, the promise of human freedom is realized through community—by plural human beings, “when and only when we act politically.” In a word, this is what democratized education is all about: cultivating conditions for self-governance and rhetorical authorization. This is the key idea behind the Writing Across Communities initiative at the University of New Mexico: invigorating the public sphere, cultivating civic literacy on behalf of our most vulnerable communities, and creating discursive spaces for historically excluded student populations.

In his 2010 Commencement Address to the University of Michigan, President Barack Obama invoked the central themes of diversity, civic engagement, and social change. He charges the graduating class with the following:

For if we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we become more polarized, more set in our ways. That will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country. . . . And so, too, is the practice of engaging in different experiences with different kinds of people. I look out at this class and I realize for four years at Michigan you have been exposed to diverse thinkers and scholars, professors and students. Don't narrow that broad intellectual exposure just because you're leaving here. . . . Instead, seek to expand it. If you grew up in a big city, spend some time with somebody who grew up in a rural town. If you find yourself only hanging around with people of your own race or ethnicity or religion, include people in your circle who have different backgrounds and life experiences. You'll learn what it's like to walk in somebody else's shoes, and in the process, you will help to make this democracy work.

How do we as educators respond to Obama's charge? How do we make democracy work in our classrooms and institutions? As reflected in this commencement address, we need to be pushing the boundaries of the familiar. We need to be pressing the limits of the possible. Novice writers as well as new WPAs will increasingly find themselves in a demanding new world in which they must draw on a wealth of communicative strategies and fluencies. The new WPA will operate at the intersection of research, policy-making, and pedagogy. Racial democracy remains an unrealizable ideal without the full inclusion of ethnolinguistically diverse communities within our schools and social institutions that promote and protect the constitution of deliberative public spheres.

Writing Across Communities is an imaginative public space, a rhetorical platform, a constellation of stakeholders. This protean nature of the UNM Writing Across Communities model has its advantages. Writing Across Communities cannot be cut or silenced or eliminated as long as the community of stakeholders continue to instantiate it through events, texts, and projects in new and enduring ways. The idea of Writing Across Communities is little more than a story that our graduate student leaders reinvent and reinvigorate again and again through the Civil Rights Symposia series, Earth Day, Working With Writers Workshops, the ABQ Community Writing Center, and many of other public moments.

Our experience at UNM suggests that a Writing Across Communities model can serve as a catalyst to changing cultures of writing within and beyond the university if we more fully represent and respond to the range of literacy practices associated with the civic, cultural, professional, and academic experiences of our students. Our experiences building a Writing Across Communities initiative at UNM reaffirms my conviction that WAC can serve as a powerful mechanism for stimulating and sustaining not only a dialogue about literacy education but a dialectic for civic engagement. Although we cannot control the ominous factors and macro-trends challenging our universities and colleges that we have witnessed over the past four years with shifting plate tectonics of global economic meltdown, local and national administrative turn-over, and political polarization, we can cultivate, protect, and support the cultural ecologies within our spheres of belonging.

Appendices

Because of their length, appendices are available on a [separate web page \[new-mexico-wpas-appendices.php\]](#) (see links below) and [as a PDF document. \[new-mexico-wpas-appendices.pdf\]](#)

1. [Appendix 1: Syllabus for ENGL 640, Writing Program Administration \[new-mexico-wpas-appendices.php#appx1\]](#)
2. [Appendix 2: Syllabus for ENGL 101: Expository Writing Experimental WAC \[new-mexico-wpas-appendices.php#appx2\]](#)

Notes

A version of this profile was presented at the CCCC 2011 panel "Diversity, Social Justice, and the New WPA: Responsible Relations in Knowledge-Making, Community Activism, and Writing Program Administration" in Atlanta on April 8, 2011. A special thanks to Dan Cryer for his thoughtful reading and responses to this article.

1. Nancy Welch's book, *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*, offers the most succinct and relevant definition of neoliberalism for literacy educators: "Neoliberalism is, in part, a reassertion of classical economic liberalism's central tenet that major political and social decisions are best decided by the market. What makes neoliberalism more than a return to pre-Keynesian, pre-New Deal arrangements, however, is that it powerfully combines 'free market' ideology with the social Darwinist conservatism exemplified by the governments of Britain's Margaret Thatcher and the United States' Ronald Reagan" (7). ([Return to text. \[#note1-ref\]](#))
2. For additional information about the ABQ Community Writing Center see: <http://www.unm.edu/~wac/> [<http://www.unm.edu/~wac/>]. For additional information about the WAC graduate student online journal In Progress, see: <http://www.inprogressjournal.net/inprogressjournal.net/Welcome.html> [<http://www.inprogressjournal.net/inprogressjournal.net/Welcome.html>]. ([Return to text. \[#note2-ref\]](#))
3. The economic challenges facing Departments of English nationally since the 2008 Great Recession have been exacerbated for the University of New Mexico by the loss of more than eight tenure-line Rhetoric and Writing faculty through deaths, retirements, and relocations. By Fall 2011, only two full time tenure-line Rhetoric and Writing faculty remained on the Department of English faculty at UNM. ([Return to text. \[#note3-ref\]](#))

4. I remain indebted to the support and leadership of our graduate student WAC Alliance leaders who have worked so diligently and generously over the past six years organizing Writing Across Communities events and programs: Beverly Army Gillen, Leah Sneider, Bernadine Hernandez, Dan Cryer, Greg Evans Haley, Erin Penner Gallegos, Genevieve Garcia de Mueller, and Brian Hendrickson. It is not an exaggeration to say, we could not do this work without them. ([Return to text. \[#note4-ref\]](#))
5. For a complete history of the UNM Writing Across Communities initiative, see <http://www.unm.edu/~wac/> [<http://www.unm.edu/~wac/>]. ([Return to text. \[#note5-ref\]](#))

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