

**Council of Writing Program Administrators
Report on a Consultant-Evaluator Visit to Northern Illinois University
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Introduction and Acknowledgements

In mid-November, 2000, as Consultant-Evaluators representing the Council of Writing Program Administration, we visited Northern Illinois University at the request of faculty and administration involved in efforts to further develop and sustain Writing Across the Curriculum at the University. We wish to thank all of those who actively participated in the visit: first, special appreciation goes to Professor Bradley Peters, WAC Coordinator, whose tireless work preparing for and during the visit demonstrated not only the commitment of NIU to the importance of writing, but also indicated the depth of Peters' commitment to students, to faculty, to an informed implementation of WAC, and to his ability to actively garner the support a successful effort demands.

We also wish to thank Provost Lynne Waldeland, Interim Associate Provost Robert Wheeler, Assistant Provost Virginia Cassidy, LAS Dean Fred Kitterle, English Department Chair Heather Hardy, and Director of Composition Bob Self. Each of these colleagues demonstrated that NIU is poised to enhance the importance of writing at NIU, indeed, to make it an essential cross-campus commitment. Dean Kitterle's generous, ongoing support of effective writing in general and WAC in particular undoubtedly will ensure that successful efforts continue campus-wide. Similarly, the WAC Advisory Board and campus Deans will continue to prove essential to thoroughgoing implementation and acceptance of WAC, and we thank them for their input during our visit. Moreover, we wish to thank the talented and dedicated staff of the Writing Center (Ildiko Carrington, Gail Jacky, Lynda Nance, and Daryl Ann Bettcher) who took time to meet with us and to articulate their commitment to the effective teaching of writing and to the students at NIU. We also thank the many others we met and whose participation in the visit enabled us to learn about the issues surrounding the teaching and learning of writing at Northern Illinois University.

This report is divided in sections, each of which will recommend action and provide a discussion of that recommendation.

The Need

Make WAC part of a concerted, campus-wide effort by embedding it within existing University structures. Create a balance between central administration and the need for autonomy on the part of the Colleges, Departments, and faculty.

Over and over during our visit, we observed that a University-wide commitment to writing is seen as important by a variety of constituencies at Northern Illinois University. Clearly, the institution's most powerful resources in serving NIU students—its tenured faculty and its budget—must be placed in service of this commitment. As noted by the "Illinois Commitment," regional employers emphasize that communications and writing skills are essential and that those of NIU graduates "aren't good." Effective writing is not only important to ensure quality no matter the student's major or career path and to foster the success of NIU graduates, but also to enhance the reputation of the institution as a whole and to distinguish it from its sister schools within this fairly comprehensive, multi-tiered state system.

Moreover, WAC—as a centerpiece of recruitment, retention, and as a model of excellence in University education—is also key to effective and all-important assessment of student outcomes. As a consequence, it figures prominently as NIU prepares for its upcoming North Central Association re-accreditation process

and team campus visit. As we discussed numerous times during the campus visit, NCA wants to see what's in place, not merely what is planned.

That said, the good news is this: NIU has on campus one of the most committed groups of faculty, administration, and staff that we have seen at any institution. Professor Peters, with the firm yet flexible guidance of Dean Ketterle, continues to lay the groundwork for a successful WAC program; in addition to his excellence as a scholar and teacher, he is "knowledgeable" and "easy to work with," in the words of one Writing Center staff person. Peters' tenure home and leadership base can certainly remain in LAS; it is customary for such leadership to come from Liberal Arts in general and from English in particular. However, other College Deans and central administration must continue to give firm voice and institutional and financial support to WAC-related efforts to prevent its being known as an "LAS thing," and to overcome any assumption that English faculty or Writing Center staff are solely responsible for teaching or reinforcing effective student writing.

Central administrators and the Deans can reinforce the importance of WAC by making it part of the University's reward system. For instance, the Provost's office can ensure that the Colleges plan and enact specific WAC and assessment-related activities by making the Deans accountable during annual review for actively pursuing College-level WAC efforts. Similarly, review of Department Chairs and tenured faculty—not only tenure-track faculty—will have as part of their Departmental, College, and/or University evaluations an assessment of WAC-related work in programs and curricula, respectively. Senior faculty, and not merely G.A.s, must lead and participate in WAC; senior faculty, not G.A.s, should be ambassadors to other faculty to cultivate and further writing-intensive work within existing curricula. Senior faculty must serve as WAC liaisons to Colleges and Departments, perhaps representing various disciplines on the WAC Board. We will reiterate these points later in this report.

However, along with these personal and professional commitments must come the funding to make these WAC efforts truly embedded within the University value system: released time, say, for faculty workshops; accountability measures to determine that writing is actually being done in classes within all disciplines; additional time or financially-based incentives to encourage senior faculty to invest the time in making their existing courses writing-intensive; WAC-specific travel funds to encourage attendance and participation at useful conferences; and numerous possibilities that Dr. Peters, along with his WAC Board, might together discuss, review, and recommend.

WAC is not the occasion for the un-funded or under-funded mandate. In addition to the weight of internal budgetary commitments to WAC for the program's credibility, it is imperative that those committed to WAC work collaboratively to seek and obtain internal and external funding. Many of the faculty and administrators with whom we spoke are already well aware of potential sources of support: internally, for instance, the Committee for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education; externally, the Pepsi Foundation, and others.

Use the importance and legitimacy of writing in the disciplines to support a variety of campus agendas. For instance, the self-study process towards North Central Association re-accreditation can often provide the basis for a new Strategic Planning process that would encourage additional support for WAC and related assessment initiatives—FIG's, thematic semesters, and so on.

As noted elsewhere in this report, it is essential that the interests of WAC be represented in these processes as an additional way to "institutionalize" writing across the disciplines and to demonstrate its NIU-wide importance. Furthermore, WAC—a commitment University-wide to good writing seen as tantamount to quality and excellence in an institution—can be crucial for enhancing (or redefining) public perspectives regarding NIU.

A series of courses built upon the strong foundation of first-year composition, a strong Writing Center, a multi-disciplinary group of G.A.'s who contribute to first-year composition and to the Writing Center (which, as you will read elsewhere in this report, is woefully understaffed): in sum, there are myriad ways

to “embed” the importance of WAC within existing University structures. Essential University initiatives are only one set within a series of these.

The Composition Program

NIU's first-year composition program provides a sound foundation for Writing Across the Curriculum. The principal advocates of WAC at NIU understand that an entry-level composition program cannot provide an "inoculation" against poor writing; rather, it provides students with an introduction to thinking and writing at the college level. In short, first-year composition should be regarded as a critical substructure for WAC. Our observations have led us to believe that the people who administer and teach in the composition program at NIU fulfill this role. Laboring under funding and staffing constraints similar to but somewhat tighter than those at similar institutions, the first-year composition program deserves increased support, and, most important, those responsible for its administration must continue to play key roles in developing NIU's new Writing Center and its incipient WAC program. While faculty across campus need significant input and must be provided with ways to claim ownership of WAC, the people who will lead the program over the long term are likely to come from the English Department and the College of Arts and Sciences.

In particular, the composition program needs support to develop sound assessment practices, at entry and exit from its courses. Currently, most students are placed by virtue of their ACT scores—a practice which even ACT admits is a misuse of its tests. More to the point, NIU needs to establish a sound placement process, based on some form of direct test of writing, in order to collect baseline data about entering students' writing abilities—and, incidentally, to make placements that are better suited to student learners' needs.

The program has developed explicit objectives for its first-year composition courses, and it has established firm criteria for exit from those courses. All that remains is to establish a system of assessment that can more fully enact those criteria by applying them to samples of students' work, both at entry and exit. This system can result from expanding the current optional placement exam, which uses composition program teachers to good effect as raters, and from instituting a portfolio-based exit assessment from the program, which would allow the program to enforce the standards it has developed.

If, at some point, NIU should adopt a mid-career writing assessment, then the data from these first-year writing assessments would become invaluable. These data are critical to the kinds of information demanded by accrediting agencies, both broader ones such as North Central and disciplinary-focused ones such as NCATE or ABET. In short, making better placements is only one goal of such an assessment program—and, at that, probably not the most important goal. These assessments should provide rich information about student learning outcomes, about need for faculty development and curriculum reform—and, eventually, about the effectiveness of NIU's instructional programs. These benefits justify the expense and energy required to mount such a program.

The NIU Writing Center

NIU's current Writing Center is doing yeoman service under the most difficult of conditions. Overcrowded, oversubscribed, and severely undersized and understaffed, the Writing Center nevertheless provides excellent service to students and strong support for writing on campus. We congratulate the English Department for pioneering and continuing to provide this form of support to writing at NIU. We agree that the Center needs to expand—if not as a result of NIU's proposal to IBHE, then certainly with funding from within the University.

We know of no successful WAC program that is not either headquartered in or allied with a successful Writing Center. As WAC expands at NIU, the Writing Center will provide important tutorial support to students as they learn to think and write in the fields of their majors and a necessary "safety net" for faculty in all disciplines as they deal with students' writing. The Writing Center can also play a role in faculty development, since Writing Center tutors can provide an important conduit for information about the

effectiveness of various assignments in classes across campus. Writing Center staff will see strong and weak assignments; they will learn what aspects of writing cause students the most trouble; and they will know what helps students succeed and what leads them to fail. All this information will be important in developing effective courses and assignments in NIU's WAC program. Further, administrators at NIU must understand their good fortune: not only are members of the staff wholly dedicated to their intensive work, but they also value the University and its students. Unlike other institutions at which administrators and faculty must work to repair poor morale on the part of staff, this is not the case at Northern. By all means, demonstrate to your staff your appreciation for their excellent work (especially notable given the difficult circumstances under which they work).

As NIU's expanded Writing Center gains momentum and visibility, it should provide an umbrella for the other, disparate tutorial efforts currently operating independently of the Writing Center and each other. In some cases, as with the ESL center, merger seems the best option; in others, such as the Chance Program, students may best be served by an alliance between Chance and the Writing Center. These changes will take time, and they should be made with the best interests of the students in mind. Several specific recommendations apply to all these services:

- Writing Center efforts require more staffing. The Center—as well as the other programs—need a core of full-time staff who can provide leadership and continuity, and they need more peer tutors. The Writing Center alone could easily triple its current level of staffing (4 part-time instructors, 3 G.A.s, 12 Peer Tutors), particularly as the Center moves into expanded quarters. We believe that an expansion on that scale is appropriate, spread over several years so that the Center can cope with such growth and with the increased scope that will accompany its own growth and that of the WAC program. The Center staff members have seen over 1200 students this past term; one staff member calls it “intense, but satisfying.”
- The Center is also in need of some clerical support—primarily in the form of a receptionist who can direct students to appropriate tutors and who can keep important records about users, thus freeing tutorial staff to do their work. Right now, staff members must interrupt their work with students to attend to those telephoning or walking in to make an appointment.
- The Writing Center requires more space. Its current quarters in the English Department are tiny by almost any standard. The size of the facility, together with the understaffing mentioned above, will prevent the Center from providing the support it must provide if WAC is to become successful at NIU.
- Writing Center staff need access to more training, particularly with regard to issues of multiculturalism. This is especially vital as the Center accepts partial or full responsibility for tutoring non-native speakers of English, as well as students from various cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The Writing Center should play a significant role in the faculty development activities that accompany a successful WAC program. The Writing Center can develop materials to support writing in the disciplines, and it can provide significant feedback and support to faculty teaching WAC courses in their own departments (see above). For the benefit of students and faculty, WAC courses should be explicitly linked to Writing Center tutorial services. The Writing Center should continue to provide individual tutorials, of course, and it should develop small-group tutorials that can act as extensions of WAC courses.
- The Writing Center needs a strong Director. At present, Brad Peters fills the dual roles of WAC Coordinator and Writing Center Director. We believe he is doing an extremely effective job in his roles—and we find unanimous agreement on this point from all with whom we spoke during our visit. However, as the Center expands and as the WAC program grows, these positions will require more attention than anyone—even someone with Brad Peters's energy and ability—can

give them both. Eventually, we foresee a time when the WAC Coordinator will be fully occupied with that role and the Writing Center will need a separate administrator, someone who can attend fully to its needs. When that appointment becomes advisable—and we think the time for it is not very distant—that person should report to the WAC Coordinator, in order to keep the Writing Center in a close partnership with WAC.

Writing Across the Curriculum

The self-study written in preparation for our visit indicates—and our conversations with faculty and administrators confirm—that current WAC activity at NIU is borne primarily by G.A.s. The notable exception to this fact grows out of the newly hired WAC Coordinator's efforts to revive WAC on campus. However, the primary WAC model at NIU is for a department or college to hire English Department G.A.s to provide either instruction or tutorial services. Because of this practice, NIU faculty have not yet assumed responsibility for writing in their disciplines—that is, for WAC. This must change. WAC must become a mission for senior faculty. G.A.s can serve in first-year composition, in the University Writing Center, and as support in WAC courses (tutors, graders, and so on). But faculty must lead the effort and play the principal roles in making WAC an inseparable component of University culture. We know of no successful WAC program that does not depend on faculty for leadership. We therefore make several additional recommendations focused on putting the WAC program on sound footing:

Make the WAC Advisory Board more legitimate—that is, more of a force for WAC on campus—by placing it within the appropriate committee structure in the University hierarchy. Roles for Board members include not only more than a modicum of authority concerning writing-related policy, but also educating faculty about appropriate perspectives regarding first-year composition, the role(s) of the University Writing Center, and WAC itself. Indeed, given what we've been able to learn about University structures, it appears that the Board could become a subcommittee of the UCC, with appropriate authority over writing programs' policy, eventual approval of writing-intensive (WI) courses, reformation of the undergraduate writing curriculum (English 250, promotion of G.A.s across curriculum, soliciting support for WAC, inspiring and displaying best practice among faculty, and other efforts).

As we have indicated elsewhere in this report, it is imperative that a senior faculty member in each college serve as WAC faculty associate and as that college's representative to the WAC Advisory Board. The WAC Director and Faculty Associates will collaboratively work to establish WAC in colleges, including, for instance, the following initiatives. They will

- Recruit and train G.A.s from the Colleges and from a variety of disciplines;
- Locate courses where writing is already occurring and enhance them;
- Identify best practices in colleges and promote them;
- Work on internal and external funding initiatives.

Working with the WAC Advisory Board, the Deans and central administrators need to promote a strong beginning for NIU's WAC program. We see the following steps as possible, given the circumstances in which we find the incipient WAC program:

1. Help create campus-wide buy-in by developing a sound system of rewards for faculty participation in WAC. To reiterate, these rewards might include:
 - Proactive statements from Deans and Provosts that participation in WAC will be valued in decisions about tenure and promotion;
 - Reduced class sizes for faculty who adapt their courses to participate in WAC;

- Reduced teaching loads, especially for faculty teaching large classes that incorporate writing;
- Support for faculty to develop WAC courses or to adapt existing courses to fit the requirements of the WAC program;
- G.A. or other tutorial assistance for faculty teaching WAC courses;
- Institution of teaching awards for exceptional performance among WAC faculty and G.A.s;
- Inclusion of WAC concerns in evaluating the performance of Chairs and Deans.

2. Empower the WAC Coordinator to serve as a consultant to all faculty about ways of integrating writing into existing courses that are taught by full-time, senior faculty generally recognized as among best of faculty. As a result of such consultation, these courses can become models of best practice, models that can then be propagated in other departments until WAC courses are plentiful.

3. Encourage the WAC Director to continue to make presentations to the Dean's Council, the College Council, the University Council, the Faculty Senate, and other institutionally significant, policy-making forums. Make the WAC Director a regular part of these groups, to extent possible.

4. Create WAC GAs in all departments so that G.A.s across the curriculum can provide support for WAC faculty. The English Department cannot and should not provide G.A. support to the whole campus. Instead, G.A.s should be created in other departments, and those G.A.s should come to the WAC Coordinator for training (and he, in turn, will be assisted in this effort by the Director of the Writing Center). In this way, NIU will not only provide effective support for writing in the disciplines, but it will also enhance the preparation of its graduate students for careers in college teaching, no matter the discipline. Keep in mind that WAC-related initiatives are underway at many of the institutions at which NIU graduate students will eventually hope to find positions.

5. Keep developing electronic environments for WAC and for other pedagogical reasons, including assessment. NIU is fortunate to have in addition to Professor Peters the presence of Professor Michael Day, who is well-versed in the appropriate use of technology to support writing-based efforts. Technological efforts can also become a clearinghouse for issues regarding multiple literacies and their assessment, effective teaching, support for the Writing Center, faculty development, and so on.

As one particularly committed administrator noted during our visit, "This is a unique opportunity to galvanize institutional thinking about the role of critical skills such as writing in the mission and in the integrity of University functions. This is a unique opportunity. In the best interests of the University, the Provost will give voice to a Dean so that he or she can help us fulfill this important set of goals." We have visited few institutions at which the commitment to creating a culture for effective writing by students is so prominently on the minds of faculty, staff, and administration. We hope that our visit has helped to make this highly collaborative venture closer to this "galvanized institutional thinking." Please contact us if there are additional issues to address; we look forward to a progress report in six months.