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“Writing Across the Curriculum” and the Paradoxes of Institutional Initiatives

Deborah H. Holdstein

University-wide Initiatives and Maintaining Institutional “Cohesion”

In an often-quoted position paper written in 1963, *The Uses of the University*, Clark Kerr (then the president of the University of California, Berkeley) articulated the two greatest public misconceptions about universities and about university faculty: “There are two great clichés about the University. . . . One pictures it as a radical institution when in fact it is most conservative in its institutional conduct. The other pictures it as autonomous, a cloister, when the historical fact is that it has always responded . . . to the desires and demands of external groups. . . . The external reality is that [the university] is governed by history” (94–95). As Michael Bérubé (1998: 188) points out, students during Kerr’s presidency protested the nature of Kerr’s vision. He quotes members of the Free Speech Movement, who charged that Kerr’s “multiversity” amounted to little more than a “public utility serving the purely technical needs of a society” (qtd. in Bérubé 1998: 188), taking *history* narrowly to mean “a particular stage of American society” (Mario Savio, qtd. in Bérubé 1998: 188).

As the new century begins, both Kerr *and* his critics prove correct, almost paradoxically so: the institution is conservative, resistant to change, imagining its “work” as autonomous; it is *at the same time* too responsive to external pressures, to forces that, ironically, impede rather than promote educational processes. Jean-François Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* (1984: 48) delineates this “narrowness,” in which “the desired goal becomes the optimal

contribution of higher education to the best performativity of the social system” (qtd. in Bérubé 1998: 191). Put (perhaps too) simply here, “knowledge is put in the service of enhancing global economic competition,” and “higher learning will have to continue to supply the social system with the skills fulfilling society’s own needs, which center on maintaining its internal cohesion.” As Bérubé (1998: 192) deftly points out, “Kerr (rightly) saw professionalism as the very device that increasingly *integrates* the university into the machinery of government and industry. The question, then, is not whether the university will serve the general public; the question is *which* structural and economic segments of the public will be served—and interpolated—by which academic disciplines.”

It is surprising, therefore, that scholars so concerned with the economic and other forms of prostitution on the part of universities are so rarely if ever concerned with their contradictory effects on the actual programs that serve students—and the effects on students themselves. Indeed, there has been little scholarly link among institutional agendas and contexts, the movements that fall under the rubric of “university-wide initiatives,” and the ultimate effects of these on the students we claim to serve. In this case, I refer to such university-wide concerns as “Writing Across the Curriculum” (WAC) (assessment is another of many), which at times appear to configure and inform the worst institutional attempts to maintain Lyotard’s sense of a negative “internal cohesion.” Moreover, conversations regarding such initiatives on a professional listserv—especially conversations regarding WAC—believe only an occasional suggestion or awareness of the interdependence of institutional and pedagogical forces on the part of faculty. Even when the institution as a contextual force for teaching, writing, and learning is acknowledged (the university as “governed by history”), faculty discourse reveals a type of internal, *isolationist* cohesion, one that presumes a student-teacher relationship untouched by the institution (the university as “cloister”). Few faculty seem truly aware that institutional, economic, and political contexts ultimately have significant impact on the structure of the very student “outcomes” that many faculty seem to believe they have the autonomy and power to influence and to correct.

In this essay, I analyze the discourse of WAC represented by faculty discussions on the listserv of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA-L). My analysis, I hope, will highlight the ways in which faculty (inadvertently) participate in reproducing a *discourse of paradox* surrounding university-wide curricular initiatives like WAC, a discourse that subverts our best pedagogical intentions and, ultimately, dilutes the literacy education our students receive.

The Paradoxes of “Crisis” and “Excellence”

Historian Joan W. Scott argues that we operate within a rhetoric of crisis in higher education, which upon analysis is rooted in *paradox*. Scott (1995: 294) delineates four paradoxes, seemingly “contradictory developments” that “have elicited similar responses from apparently opposing sides”:

1. The more the university community has diversified, the more relentless have been the attempts to enforce community;
2. The more individualism is used by those opposed to the institutionalization of diversity, the more advocates of diversity invoke individualism;
3. The greater the need for open-ended research, reflection, and criticism in the production of new knowledge, the more instrumental the justifications for taking new directions have become;
4. The greater the need for theorizing—for the practice of questioning unquestioned assumptions and beliefs—the faster has been the turn to moralism and the therapeutics of the personal.

Scott’s paradoxes are intended to address global issues within the “crisis in higher education.” However, those of us involved in composition and in the administration of composition and English programs can readily see the parallels between these paradoxes and composition studies—especially points 1, 3, and 4—and the additional, field-specific paradox regarding composition and WAC that I suggest here: the stronger the pronouncement on the part of institutions that students need to write more effectively and the more resounding the cry for effective writing in the disciplines (and the greater the budgetary and philosophical commitments these pronouncements entail), the less substantive and supported and “real” the writing-related and WAC efforts actually become. To this I add another composition-related, Scott-inspired paradox: the more dedicated the composition faculty members or administrators to the professed goals of good instruction in writing at a variety of levels, the more likely they are to believe that they and their students operate in a pristine, closed community somehow untouched by these bacterial paradoxes and contradictions. The *idea* of community (“we are compositionists and administrators of composition programs and English programs; we are good; we try hard; we teach well; we’re dedicated; we operate within our own little sphere”), in Scott’s (1995: 295) words regarding institutions generally, is “substituted for an analysis of social relationships,” making it easy for us to separate what we do (teach) from what others do (administer, draft strategic plans and budgeting priorities, set curricular agendas, deal with boards of trustees, seek funds from state legislatures, and so on). In this light, we must warn

against the use of WAC and other writing efforts as part of a “reductive instrumentalism” that “tailors knowledge to a narrowly specified outcome,” the counterpart to our own belief that community alone will undergird our efforts for our students and that our “social relationships” with the institution will have no bearing on our teaching (299).

The institutional-political-professional contexts interlacing within Scott’s paradoxes of crisis in higher education inform a related paradox in university-wide initiatives: the paradox of “excellence.” That is, in the name of increasing access and learning, institutions promote programs that actually limit access and diffuse writing instruction in potentially elitist ways. In his most recent book, *Know and Tell*, David Bleich (1998) discusses with clarity a form of this elitism. He describes the “paranoid element” in the academic search for purity in language demonstrated in George Campbell’s eighteenth-century adaptation of “the Royal Society’s gendered metaphors of the brutal, erotic engagement between science and the natural world” (31). Miriam Brody suggests that Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, despite rhetoric and composition’s twenty years’ worth of recent work and professed forms of process-based teaching to the contrary, continues to inform the “modes of discourse still widely used in secondary and postsecondary writing pedagogy” (qtd. in Bleich 1998: 31). Further indicting our collective adherence to Campbell’s legacy, Bleich reminds us that Campbell suppressed dialectical diversity in order to establish one usage style—that of the English gentleman, or the “freeborn Briton.” Miriam Brody affirms that for Campbell, impurities of language were “not differences but errors,” whose names “raised the mistake to an offense against society and against revered canons of comportment” (qtd. in Bleich 1998: 57).

As faculty and administrators in composition and rhetoric or literary studies, why should we care? Thirty years of literary and composition/rhetoric theory suggest we believe otherwise, for one, most notably reflected in composition’s professed concern with student-centered theory and practice and precipitous, recent forays by literary scholars (such as Jane Tompkins and Elaine Showalter) into the (surprising, to them, at least) joys of teaching. (Their forays were surprising to many of us, however, only because they seemed to have no sense that an entire body of work had already been published in composition representing the epiphanies they apparently had discovered for themselves. This disregard of composition’s legacy, too, is a variety of Campbell’s elitism, since Tompkins and Showalter implicitly suggest that discoveries about teaching are significant in English studies only if they come from literary circles.) As does Bleich (1998: 31–32), we can extend

Brody's argument—and connect it to the institutional, political, and economic concerns invoked by Bérubé and others—to reveal the contradictory stances of those among us who ostensibly would otherwise make a claim toward openness, inclusiveness, and appreciation for difference: “The more privileged, consciously trying to exercise their responsibility to enhance the lives of the less privileged, see no other choice than to make students like themselves; it is as if only their privilege defines them. They do not see that privilege is only a part of the difference and that therefore a situation of exchange between faculty and students is more desirable than faculty's attempts to ‘make them like us.’” These contradictory motives of “excellence” are evident in institutional pushes to use WAC as an alternative to first-year composition. Part of the motive involves an institution's discomfort with freshman composition's promise of wide-ranging access to forms of literacy. WAC, with its frequent appearance in upper- rather than lower-division coursework, allows the institution to pretend that students are being served—but not in any way, of course, that might be identified as potentially “remedial.”

Echoing Bérubé, we must ask ourselves this: Whom do we serve in the name of curricular and university-wide initiatives? Does this “service” ultimately represent interests other than those of whom we claim to serve? Kerr, Bérubé, Lyotard, Bleich, and Brody merely scratch the proverbial scholarly surface, revealing by implication that institutional initiatives are often part of an elitist project. (Indeed, to name this project “contradictory” or “paradoxical” might be a kinder, gentler view of what others call “hypocritical.”) Even if students “want to be like us,” there are forces still at work that believe that they aren't worthy of being so.

In any number of published essays, colleagues concerned with assessment, for instance, reveal the ways in which academic institutions subvert issues of “excellence” and “literacy” through assessment programs designed to suit institutional politics, not students, and to support a relentless emphasis on enrollment and retention figures. For instance, in Edward White, William Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri's volume, *Assessment of Writing* (1996), a number of essays reveal the complexities of testing—gender and race among them—that have yet to penetrate the forces of institutional politics, this despite administrative lip service to diversity and inclusiveness (see in particular Kamusikiri 1996 and Holdstein 1996). These complexities effectively subvert the notion of true “objectivity” and the ways in which institutions represent what testing can and cannot do. An essay in the volume *Writing With* (Holdstein 1994), moreover, delineates the ways in which outwardly collaborative forms of university-wide, faculty evaluation of student writing

(under the guise of “collaboration = good”) become instead forces of collusion with administrative practices that subvert the goals of learning and teaching.

“Writing Across the Curriculum,” however, is my focus here, as it apparently has become the newest weapon for what a colleague of mine cheerfully, if informally, termed “institutional sleight-of-hand.” That is, demonstrating the contradictions inherent in many WAC initiatives, institutions give the appearance of encouraging that (forms of literacy) which it then implicitly withholds. For illustration, we can turn to popular culture, which provides many a similar example: at the end of *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen tells the story of a man who goes to a psychiatrist, not about himself, but about his brother: “I don’t know what to do about my brother, doctor. He’s crazy. He thinks he’s a chicken.” The psychiatrist replies, “Then why don’t you just have him put away?” “I would, doctor,” the man replies, “but we need the eggs.” When faculty persist within institutionally driven initiatives, we often do so because “we need the eggs,” however elusive or ultimately illusory the true benefits for ourselves and our students (the eggs, in this case) might be. The joke might also encapsulate the administrative shell game of a WAC effort—one that purports to assist in the teaching and learning of writing—that is mostly public relations and illusory. Again, the paradoxes of excellence—promoting programs that supposedly increase access and learning but that ultimately serve only to reinforce sorting and status quo elitism—are not only a means of institutional deflection but also, ironically, become reproduced by faculty, as the case of WAC demonstrates.

WAC: A Definition and Brief History

WAC was initially a bottom-up phenomenon, with faculty initiating and sustaining quality efforts. Certainly, literature from the 1970s onward abounds in clearly articulating its philosophies, practices, and goals. Put perhaps too simply, “Writing Across the Curriculum” programs are university-wide efforts that attempt to validate and enact the importance of writing in every discipline from engineering to sociology to English to printmaking. At its most effective, through collaboratively derived values, training workshops among faculty throughout the institution, and faculty modifying existing courses that embed a good deal of writing, WAC can foster the importance of effective, analytic communication among disciplines, decentralizing the responsibility for effective writing from the English department alone to virtually every discipline on campus.

Courses called “writing-intensive” (WI), by extension, are usually

upper-division and discipline-specific, allowing students to learn the conventions and demands of writing in their majors and, it is assumed, in the professions to which the majors presumably lead. In a strong WAC program, full-time, often tenured faculty in chemistry, say, will teach the WI courses in that field, usually existing chemistry courses—labs and otherwise—that now include significant and varied writing assignments. This scholar/teacher-based definition of WAC at its best is, to quote WAC innovators Susan McLeod and Margaret Soven (1991: 26), one that “involves a comprehensive program of faculty development and curricular change, instituting writing in virtually all university courses in order to improve students’ writing and critical thinking skills.”

By 1990, however, leaders in the movement recognized and attempted to address the problems inherent in a double-edged trend: WAC’s becoming a top-down phenomenon. As McLeod and Soven warn: “We find this trend gratifying in one sense, since it shows how WAC has become something that institutions want as matter-of-course, rather like freshman composition, but we also find this mandating of WAC disturbing. Many deans and chairs, like the people they send to our Network meetings, are proceeding with good will, seeing WAC programs as something beneficial to their campuses; but they often do not have the time to read up on such programs and therefore do not understand the work involved in implementing them” (25). Indeed, the authors continue, “One frustrated WPA [writing program administrator] confided to us that her dean had told her to deal with reluctant faculty by ramming WAC down their throats.”

Similarly, in “The Damage of Innovations Set Adrift,” Edward White (1990) warns the composition, literary, and their administrative communities (often grouped within the same department) of the dangers lurking throughout misguided initiatives in the name of writing—initiatives that lack financial, faculty, and true administrative support, for instance. Yet the prevalence of recent conversations on the WPA listserv regarding administratively corrupted WAC practices indicates that it is indeed those myriad subversions of WAC philosophies under the economic, social, and political conditions within and outside of the institution—and not lack of faculty initiative—that characterize all too many WAC efforts. What, then, becomes of our students, students for whom WAC was originally conceived as a broadly based, interdisciplinary forum for writing, reading, and thinking? For now, I fear this is a proverbially rhetorical question.

One might argue that there exists an unwritten, rather stark institutional definition of WAC, which I phrase (admittedly) with full-frontal cyni-

cism: As we enter the twenty-first century, WAC is an institutionally contrived and agenda-driven way to ensure that writing is still someone else's problem. Without resources and careful, overarching forms of monitoring that hold university-wide authority, the writing-intensive courses that frequently form the major portion of WAC programs at many institutions embody merely the pretense of excellence. They allow students and faculty alike to believe that writing goes on only in a particular course, not in many courses — that writing “isn't my problem” if there is one writing-intensive course listed in the catalog and it isn't the one I have to teach. In short, WAC is a public relations guise, a short-term Band-Aid to temporarily seal open political wounds regarding the poverty of students' writing abilities and to veneer such public relations annoyances as appropriate forms of assessment. Moreover, it has evolved as yet another way to disempower and disenfranchise not only student learners, but also the faculty teaching them.

Faculty and WAC Embody the Paradoxes

Composition faculty and administrators enact the paradoxes of crisis and excellence, however inadvertently, in the texts of 1997 and 1998 conversations regarding WAC on the listserv of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA-L). In these posts, colleagues' professional conversations in which they seek other colleagues' advice about how to do what, most appropriately, and when, are transcended more often than not by a powerful subtext: the powerlessness of writing program administrators and misguided (or equally powerless) department chairs, the wide discrepancy between what WAC programs claim to do for students and what they actually can do, and faculty's apparent lack of awareness that their power or lack of it regarding their goals for students' writing bears any relationship to the institutions that employ them. It appears that writing program administrators and chairs attending such conferences as the Association of Departments of English (ADE) preach mostly to their own choirs; the rest of the congregational leadership (the upper-administrative “clergy”) reveal political concerns that supersede and ultimately outweigh the others'. (I'm reminded of Gary Olson and Joseph M. Moxley's 1989 essay on the limits of a WPA's authority, which merits this postscript only in that our limits [oxy]moronically extend to university-wide initiatives in WAC.)

The WPA listserv touches on a wide range of subjects and often serves as the clearinghouse for a productive, general set of topics on writing programs, English programs, administrative concerns, assessment, and many other scholarly and pedagogical issues. However, 1997 and 1998 were partic-

ularly notable for sets of conversations on “Writing Across the Curriculum.” The metanarrative—despite faculty and administrator exchanges about WAC and “how to do what,” “what’s the best philosophical approach to,” and so on—evolved into a surprisingly indirect sense that contradictory, counter-philosophical institutional agendas would prevail. The first discussion that ultimately evokes this set of contradictions begins the story innocently enough with a query from David Graham (WPA-L, 18 August 1997) at Ripon College: “Here . . . our WAC program operates, in part, by way of writing-intensive courses in the various majors—at the sophomore or junior level—in addition to the usual first-year comp class in English. We are contemplating a shift to a more diffuse model in which writing activities are developed throughout the course of a major program rather than being concentrated in single courses. I would very much appreciate any suggestions. . . . What are the pitfalls? What might a successful program of this nature look like?” A simple enough question, and Chris Thaiss at George Mason University responds in a post dated 20 August: “It’s possible to develop a WI program in a way that allows for a ‘diffusion’ model in certain instances. For example, here at Mason, where we’ve had a WI requirement, some departments, e.g., Public Affairs and Computer Science, meet it (actually exceed it) by designating a range or sequence of courses that have responsibility for introducing different types of writing and reinforcing skills.”

The initial post and the response would seem straightforward enough. But the diverse experiences of the members of WPA-L inevitably reflect and inject the concerns of the hierarchy in which these programs are housed, but with little acknowledgment of that by the colleagues in the list conversation itself. And interestingly, the authority of the posts themselves also inevitably reflects the hierarchies of the profession at large, despite composition’s professed stance as the discipline of democracy. One might argue that this cyber-venue allows full access to noted scholars who might otherwise seem remote to the rest of us. On the other hand, it might suggest that the presence of notables potentially silences others, creating yet another level of paradox or contradiction to the notion of a list’s allowing an institution-free, openly grassroots, unhierarchical form of access for professional conversation.

For on that same day, one of the mainstays of WPA-L (and for this we who participate are also quite fortunate), Edward White, noted for his work in WAC and assessment, among other areas, wrote the following. White here evokes the specter of a Scott-like paradox that demonstrates the distance between appearance and reality. He suggests that as more programs add one or two writing-intensive courses, fewer numbers of faculty actually teach writ-

ing and fewer students, in turn, gain access to effective writing pedagogy (or any writing pedagogy, for that matter): “We have dealt with this issue in the past, but its importance makes it worth repeating. I reiterate my sense that with some notable exceptions . . . writing-intensive courses are a snare and a deception. They appear to solve the problem of insufficient student writing but often make it worse, since writing is no longer every faculty member’s responsibility, even in theory.” Interestingly, within the narrative of this particular thread, White’s warning takes a backseat in an attempt not only to offer assistance to Graham’s specific query, but also to confront the inappropriate ideological assumption that all institutional support contexts are or will be equal. Those who do not confront the assumption, however, instead seem to assume the best of all possible worlds for everyone, an “institution” or “context-free” environment for decision-making. Bill Condon (WPA-L, 20 August 1997) at Washington State University appropriately reminds the list that writing programs must to a good extent follow indigenously from the context of a particular school: “I want to chime in to agree with Ed. . . . But I also want to suggest that we’re engaged in a kind of either/or fallacy here (not Ed, the list). One kind of program will suit smaller institutions better than it does larger ones. At smaller schools, the diffusion model builds off the institution’s strengths (smaller class size, more faculty-faculty contact, etc.). At larger institutions, the diffusion model is harder to manage, but it still can work. But why not have both?” Condon goes on to assert that using the diffusion model, with some writing in all classes, makes a great deal of sense for core courses or general ed courses. He does, however, either beg the question or respond selectively while addressing both Graham’s original post and White’s response, both acknowledging institutional context and then downplaying or ignoring it.

John Bean (WPA-L, 20 August 1997), of Seattle University, hints at the institutional contexts that, when “set adrift,” motivate White’s post, while attempting to address Graham’s question. He acknowledges the difficulty of accountability regarding WAC, despite institutional arguments that place accountability as the reason for initiating WAC programs to begin with: “We have no oversight committee doing quality control or enforcing anything. The weakness of the ‘diffuse model’ at the present time is that departments need more help in teaching the discourse of their fields. We are doing a great job in writing-to-learn in the Core, but a less than adequate job of teaching discourse in the major fields.”

To his credit Bean implies, at least, that WAC programs based solely on the writing-intensive model will have to battle the politics of individual

campuses that possibly preclude or corrupt the ways in which writing is taught and learned. There is little discussion, however, of these connecting issues—ones that have potentially tremendous impact on the claims of WAC programs to benefit the learning and writing of students.

Beth Daniell of Clemson seems to suggest the reasons for the less-than-adequate job of fostering effective writing, despite a dedicated faculty committed to student learning. Articulating the institutional paradox at the administrative level, Daniell interjects a “provost problem.” Apparently this administrator finds WAC to be the perfect public relations opportunity to rid Clemson of first-year writing and save some money. On 15 September, Daniell writes:

At least part of the idea [for getting rid of composition] comes from the Engineering College which in fact drives this place. It is now taking most engineers five years to finish a bachelor's. The accrediting organization keeps wanting more work; the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges wants more communication, especially speech. So they are trying to “free up” hours for especially the engineers but also the architects. The engineers don't see learning to write as like playing tennis or learning French. *They want it to be a one-shot inoculation.* (my emphasis)

Despite this overt acknowledgment that institutional structures in and outside of the university have direct impact on our abilities to deliver appropriate programs, many of the posts still seem to suggest that we are institutionally unrestrained in our quest for the perfect, site-specific WAC effort, removed from the inevitable. Daniell's echo of White's more cynical, if entirely accurate, sound bites (his frequent mention of the “inoculation theory of composition”) brings none other than White himself, Greek chorus-like, from the cyberwings (much as Woody Allen was able to bring Marshall McLuhan from behind an advertising board in a movie theater to contradict a professorial blowhard pretentiously distorting McLuhan's theories). In an 18 September 1997 post, White reminds WPA-L once again of the ways that WAC and WI courses are easily corrupted when administrative support wanes, when a newer, more cost-efficient agenda arises, and when memories are short: “How soon they forget! For some years after the Challenger disaster, schools of engineering were strong supporters of comp and WAC; they knew that the failure of staff engineers to communicate incipient system failure to the bosses was a serious professional [and ethical?] lapse. Still, [he suggests to Daniell] you might try invoking the memory of the Challenger in the interests of the engineers themselves.” To his credit, White initiates what should be the universal

concern by which we might try to confront, if not fully transcend, institutional paradoxes and politics: “the interests of the engineers [presumably the students and the engineers they will become] themselves.” Other participants, including Linda Bergmann (WPA-L, 18 September 1997) of the University of Missouri, Rolla, suggest that accreditation guidelines can become productive leverage for composition faculty, but that in some cases it is the proverbial double-edged sword: Her program’s engineering accreditation organization is “moving away from mandating a certain number of courses, and more into requirements that can be met ‘across the curriculum,’” making it easier for campus administrators to consider replacing first-year composition with WAC. Nonetheless, the posts by faculty and composition administrators rarely connect the gap between discussions about “best practices”—what Graham apparently seeks in his post—and institutional/administrative movements against those best practices. It is as if these are two parallel wavelengths that never touch.

Moreover, faculty on WPA-L at times also seem to misunderstand the ways in which institutional agendas frustrate many capable, dedicated faculty, seeing their own campus situations as the norm. However, David Schwalm (WPA-L, 19 September 1997), vice provost at Arizona State East, effectively weaves together the tapestry of WAC, freshman composition, and institutions: “Funny thing. Freshman comp is often loathed and feared but it is also a fixture of high quality education in the public mind. Thus the headline, ‘Provost Eliminates Freshman Composition’ could trigger a really complex response. Of course, if your Provost is clever, he or she will claim to be replacing an ineffective course with ‘writing across the curriculum.’” David Rosenwasser’s reply to Schwalm on the same day, however, inadvertently demonstrates that both aspects of the post that follows are in fact anything but mutually exclusive, revealing once again the contradictions, the paradoxes under which we operate: “With all due respect to the parties concerned, can we refrain from the implication that writing across the curriculum is a weapon wielded by cynical administrators to devalue composition? There are a lot of dedicated and effective teachers of writing out there across the curriculum who see writing instruction as a university- or college-wide responsibility.” The implication is true—but so is his second statement. I would suggest that to realize the potential for weapon-wielding on the part of administrators *does not diminish* the hard work of those faculty within a variety of disciplines who attempt to teach writing in their own classrooms. The contradictions arise when we imagine these two arenas as exclusive, without actively seeking to reveal the ways in which administrative decisions in the name of effective writ-

ing might actually diffuse the effects of individual faculty, no matter how dedicated. As Schwalm (WPA-L, 20 September 1997) writes, “When I was at another institution . . . an administrator declared the end of a particular writing requirement and declared the matter would be addressed through WAC. The problem? The administrator seemed to assume that WAC existed *because he said it did*” (my emphasis). Schwalm concludes with advice that we as literature-composition department chairs, WPAs, and others must heed: “There was no plan for implementing WAC. When WAC is used this way, we must be vigilant to request the plan for implementing WAC.” Linda Bergmann responds on the same day, “There is a very real danger of WAC being positioned as a substitute for composition rather than as an extension of its work.”

How Do We Subvert the Paradoxes?

Consider, then, the ways in which these contradictions—both within the perspectives of faculty and throughout departments and institutions—affect not only morale but the effectiveness of those teaching writing and those learning it. Although we would like to believe that we leave these contradictory and often unspoken policies at the door when we enter our classrooms, we cannot. Classroom walls, computer labs, even the sanctity of the one-on-one student conference cannot protect our students from the counterproductive, contradictory, and often unspoken policies that, ultimately, affect our practice and potentially undermine student learning. Intriguing, therefore, is the way in which many of our colleagues still refuse to see the link between university-wide initiatives, their own research and teaching, and the university itself. More intriguing are those times when we acknowledge these links but refuse to believe that they have an impact on our work as teachers.

When connecting with faculty governance structures proves ineffective, when a committee of your colleagues from across the institution proves ineffective, what can be done? WAC at its worst not only potentially subverts the assessment project allegedly so important to institutions (especially during reaccreditation processes) but becomes an excuse for not teaching and learning writing. As White (WPA-L, 31 March 1997) notes, “[WAC] can be a seductive way for English departments and entire universities to avoid their responsibilities: the winner of the it’s-his-job-not-mine race to escape the job. Curious. The reverse of what it should be. Thus, we can drop first year comp, so the departments can teach writing to their majors; the major doesn’t have to worry, because there is one writing intensive or WAC course around, maybe required, to teach writing; but the teacher of the (now) one course that is to do everything has almost no training or interest in the teaching of writing.”

Thus, the contradictory existence of WAC—a good idea that everyone agrees should exist—falls further asunder. The administrative, budgetary, and pedagogical domino effect generated by a thinly conceived, thinly supported WAC effort continues: the one remaining teacher in the program then decides not to bother assigning papers to students in his or her upper-division courses anymore because, after all, “they write so badly it’s a waste of time.” So, like in high school, students have little experience writing because it’s “always someone else’s job.” And for all these, White argues, “WAC is used as the excuse. How’s that for a worst case scenario? I wish it were only a bad dream.” Faculty and administrators become implicated in the WAC paradox, whose contradictions ultimately affect the learning our institutions claim will benefit our students.

It is evidently easy to agree on flagrant contradictions, the abuses of WAC programs that are represented as being up and running and successful. Notes White, “A flagship state University requiring three WAC courses with NO writing center, NO faculty development program or WAC coordination (all lost in the last budget cut), with WI courses up to 70 students or so taught by the worst teachers in various departments (since the required course is sure to make).” Even with crucial support mechanisms that include ongoing budgetary and staff support, we must be all too aware of the ways in which programs and the students participating in them are inextricably woven within other administrative mandates, politics, and complex initiatives. Bill Condon (WPA-L, 31 March 1997) writes that WAC programs depend on three preconditions: a powerful, visionary director, institutional support of various kinds, and integration with other programs or aspects of the curriculum. I emphasize and reiterate the words *power*, *support*, and *integration*, as they are conditions in and of themselves extremely difficult to secure, develop, and maintain.

All of these issues and examples demonstrate a deep set of contradictions, not only among curricula, teaching, learning, and institutions, but also between what we say we believe as compositionists and as administrators and what we actually do. We in composition frequently operate within a “victimist” stance, suggesting that as a result of our oppression by English departments, literature faculty, and the like, we somehow reach a higher moral order, the compositionist-as-ascetic. In fact, we contribute to the contradictions that impede effective administrative and curricular policy in the ways described by Scott in her discussion of higher education in crisis. Emphasizes Scott (1995: 302), without critically examining these institutional paradoxes, “we remain stuck [in them]”—“paradoxes whose appearance suggests that the cri-

sis of higher education is also a crisis of democratic politics.” Without the certainty, then, of Condon’s three profoundly powerful preconditions—and even with them—we must skeptically question many WAC programs, especially those initiated top-down. We must, therefore, analyze and deflate the paradoxes.

As teachers, our conference presentations and publications indicate that we know better than our daily listserv conversations might actually seem to reveal, of course, and yet our discourse seems to suggest our affinity for this type of paradox. The oppositions are self-defeating for us as teachers and administrators but also, more significantly, for our students in the classroom and for what our inaction teaches them about critical, analytic reflection as part of a call to action. As Scott (1995: 303) writes, “We have all heard the lines: ‘this is not the moment for elitist intellectualizing or philosophizing, this is the moment to mobilize popular action,’ or ‘our political survival depends on not questioning the terms of an identity we’ve just discovered.’ . . . [I]f action requires suspending thought, and politics requires turning away from theory, if political survival is imperiled by critical reflection, where will radical critiques come from, and how are we to value them?”

Following Scott, I want to argue that one way to intervene in the paradoxes of crisis and excellence in higher education reform is rhetorical; that is, critique begins with analysis of our motives and languages for literacy education (and the programs that profess to serve it). She claims that if we miss this rhetoric, we risk substituting “advocacy for analysis at a moment when analysis is needed, not in order to avoid political engagement, but to undertake it more effectively” (303). I further reiterate, then, the real dangers of “Writing Across the Curriculum” revealed in the rhetorical analysis of the WPA listserv, and I ask that we be vigilant beyond our dedication to our classrooms and programs. WAC, even as a pretense of providing access to literacies, might all but disappear when institutional priorities change or the reaccreditation team departs; when powerful people change their minds or leave; when budgets are cut once again; when someone outside the institution complains to a powerful member of the Board of Trustees; or if and when someone decides that we, but more importantly, that our students no longer “need the eggs.” Indeed, the end result bears out Campbell’s legacy, the “paranoid element” that would bar true access to literacies and discourses, a paradoxical, institutional reality that might prove far more insidious and entrenched and restrictive than we—off to the side, diligently commenting on essays before we meet students for conferences—would like to believe.

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