

CHAPTER 3.

THE WRITING ACROSS THE  
CURRICULUM GRADUATE  
ORGANIZATION: WHERE  
WE'VE BEEN, WHERE WE ARE,  
AND WHERE WE'RE GOING

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*This chapter provides a brief overview of the Writing Across the Curriculum Graduate Organization (WAC-GO)'s history, from an initial listening tour of graduate student needs to a recent roundtable discussion at IWAC 2018. The chapter focuses on three verbs that illustrate WAC-GO's mission: energize, demystify, and connect. The authors explore how these verbs have activated WAC-GO projects across the past and present, and they conclude by imagining the organization's future. Ultimately, this chapter recognizes these three verbs (energizing, demystifying, and connecting) as goals of not only WAC-GO, but WAC as a field.*

A graduate student organization in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) follows from a long line of conversations about the sustainability of our work and of our field. WAC scholar-practitioners have been urged to make purposeful choices toward sustainability ever since McLeod (1989) recognized that WAC

had progressed from a primarily grassroots movement to a “second stage” of increasing institutionalization. Since then, most conversations about the sustainability of WAC have revolved around the dynamic landscape of higher education and institutionalization (Condon & Rutz, 2012; Malencyk, 2012; Townsend, 2008; Walvoord, 1996). However, the Writing Across the Curriculum Graduate Organization (WAC-GO) is the result of turning these conversations about the sustainability of WAC as a movement toward WAC as a field. Many of the founders and key figures of the WAC movement who have ensured its sustainability so far are moving (or have moved) into retirement. As a new organization in the field, WAC-GO makes a statement that the question of who will replace these founders and key figures should be one of central focus.

WAC-GO also makes a statement that replacing and expanding key figures in WAC will take more than informal measures. Within writing studies, WAC is unique in its strong interdisciplinarity, its locally shaped administrative components, and its range of methodological approaches. It is also unique since not every university or even writing studies program has faculty who specialize or offer coursework in WAC. This means that, in most cases, a graduate student’s development as a WAC scholar-practitioner must be sought out. Further complicating graduate-student entrance into WAC, WAC researchers historically have too often ignored graduate students’ and new faculty members’ efforts to write their ways into disciplines and academic careers (Madden & Tarabochia, this volume). In their discussion of graduate student socialization, John Weidman, Darla Twale, and Elizabeth Stein (2001) described a field of study as a “guarded enclave,” but they also noted that entrance into this enclave “comes more easily” through formal structures like assistantships, fellowships, etc. (p. 77). Moreover, the intentionality of these formal structures becomes a significant factor in recruiting and increasing retention of diverse and/or underrepresented student populations (Mullen, 2008). We believe that a formal organization like WAC-GO can provide the structures graduate students need for successful socialization, which we believe is further necessary to sustain and diversify the field.

To accomplish this sustainability and diversification, three verbs activate WAC-GO’s mission: *energize*, *demystify*, and *connect*. How do we energize the momentum of the field by encouraging fresh and diverse graduate student perspectives? How do we demystify entry points into WAC work and spaces for graduate students? And how do we connect graduate students to peer and faculty mentors and collaborators? Where we’ve been, where we are, and where we’re going is driven by how we can best put these verbs into action, and, as our readers will see in this brief history, the International Writing Across the Curriculum (IWAC) Conference is often poised at their intersection. Of course, constructing a narrative of WAC-GO’s inception, development, and possible fu-

ture in this short piece is one we approach enthusiastically, but cautiously. While we turned to the organization's meeting records, documented files, and collective memory to build this narrative, we cannot fully capture the myriad emails, informal conversations, moments of inspiration, and encouraging words that stitch these discrete pieces together. Thus, we offer what we hope you'll consider three snapshots—where we've been, where we are, and where we're going—that capture but moments of WAC-GO's history and possible future.

## WHERE WE'VE BEEN

Our story begins at the 2014 Conference of Writing Program Administrators where Michelle LaFrance couldn't help but notice the strong and integrated graduate student presence. She traced this presence back to the Writing Program Administrator Graduate Organization (WPA-GO), a graduate student-led organization that linked graduate students with mentors, helped them find financial support, and encouraged them to actively participate at the conference. She wondered if the field of WAC Studies would benefit from a similar graduate student organization. After an enthusiastic response from several established scholar-practitioners in WAC, Michelle brought the idea to then-graduate students and WPA-GO officers, Brian Hendrickson and Al Harahap (and later Alisa Russell). Before these founders could launch a full-scale WAC graduate organization, though, they simply needed to listen. Over the next several semesters, the founders created space to listen to established scholar-practitioners in WAC, leaders of other WAC entities, and, most important, graduate students interested in WAC.

The first stop on this listening tour occurred a year before IWAC 2016. Michelle, Brian, Al, and Alisa met with upcoming conference host, Anne Gere, to collaboratively consider what it would mean to highlight graduate student voices at the conference (in other words, *energize*). However, the founders' conversation with Anne stumbled upon a more pressing issue. For the closing plenary talk, Anne wanted a long-time scholar-practitioner paired with a graduate student. A long-time scholar-practitioner was easy to locate, but Anne hit a roadblock in locating this mythical graduate student. Neither she, nor the members of her conference planning team, knew where to look for a graduate student doing WAC work. The founders recognized this dilemma as an intriguing tipping point in the field: WAC had become an epistemic category and a professional identity in its own right, but graduate education and mentorship in writing studies (and related disciplines) had not developed commensurately to foster emerging WAC identities. They immediately recognized the need for something more formal, more concrete, and more visible to demystify entry points and connect graduate students to those already established in the field.

For the next stop on the founders' listening tour, they met with a newly assembled advisory board of WAC scholars and administrators from across institutions that was working to guide the founders toward a mission statement and organizational details. The conversation quickly unearthed a complicated facet of WAC: As the founders and the advisory board tried to decide where a WAC graduate organization could fit among the already-existing WAC entities, they realized there was no overarching umbrella for WAC organizations. For example, most of the major WAC entities—the WAC Clearinghouse, the WAC Special Interest Group (now the WAC Standing Group), the International Writing Across the Curriculum (INWAC) Board, the IWAC conference, etc.—had developed in response to specific needs, and thus played important but different roles in the field. And while they often collaborated, these entities tended to operate independently of one another. The advisory board considered how these varying structures could lead to confusion about entry points and involvement, especially for graduate students, which folded into initial conversations that ultimately resulted in the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum (Basgier et al., this volume). The need for a formalized graduate organization that could energize graduate student involvement, demystify entry points, and connect graduate students to these organizations seemed evident.

After these conversations with trusted advisors in the field, the founders were ready to hear from graduate students themselves. On September 25, 2015, the founders hosted an introductory video meeting to share their vision for WAC-GO and learn more about graduate student needs. Many graduate students shared their experience of “stumbling” into WAC work; for example, one graduate student who had developed a ten-week workshop for graduate teachers in the disciplines realized that this was a major WAC project only after the fact. Graduate students also noted that they wanted to “see” more of what WAC work looks like across institutions, both because many did not have formal WAC programs at their institutions or because they had only experienced their own institution's model. Encouragingly, one graduate student asked how much WAC scholarship addresses language issues, and the other attendees jumped in enthusiastically with references and summaries. The founders noted that this was exactly the kind of connecting that WAC-GO could facilitate.

With the listening tour coming to a close, the founders' first steps in launching a sustainable organization focused on building visible structures. They built this visibility through hosting a social at IWAC 2016 in Ann Arbor; assembling an Executive Committee with clearly demarcated roles and responsibilities; creating an organizational logo; drafting and voting on official bylaws; building a central web presence on a WAC Clearinghouse page; launching social media profiles on Facebook and Twitter; and growing a member list. As WAC-GO's

visibility and member list grew, the Executive Committee still wanted to ensure that our fledgling initiatives were meeting the needs of our members. We thus distributed a Resource Survey in February 2017 to our member list and to various organizational writing listservs, receiving 20 responses. Some findings were expected—for example, graduate students found WAC-related conferences cost prohibitive, and they thus highly valued travel grants. However, some findings took us by surprise: Of the 11 respondents whose programs did not offer coursework in WAC, 10 of them were already involved in WAC research or administration. Likewise, only three respondents indicated they do not have access to mentors in WAC/WID, but 11 indicated that they do not know how to find or cultivate mentoring relationships in WAC/WID. These findings became fundamental in developing the founders' original short- and long-term goals as an organization.

## WHERE WE ARE

As the current Executive Committee, we've found translating the founders' goals of energizing, demystifying, and connecting into concrete initiatives both challenging and invigorating. One major revelation of the listening tour was that most graduate students are not able to take coursework in WAC, or they find themselves doing WAC-focused theses and dissertations without realizing there's a whole field with an exciting body of literature and developed methodologies waiting for them. Thus, we have collected resources for graduate students interested in WAC work on our Clearinghouse page (<https://wac.colostate.edu/go/>) to connect them to the resources they need for success. For example, our Research Support section offers resources such as "Research Questions and Methods in WAC Scholarship," as well as a Post-C's webinar recording, "Quantitative Design in WAC Studies." In these resources, we draw from landmark WAC studies to suggest what WAC/WID-related research questions and methodological approaches might look like. Relatedly, we know from experience that graduate students are not always explicitly introduced to occluded genres or processes of the academy. Therefore, our Professionalization Corner offers resources such as a "New to WAC Studies" info-doc; "Advice on Writing Your IWAC Proposal," contributed by our advisory board; annotated conference proposals that point out salient rhetorical moves; and a Post-C's webinar recording, "Publishing as a Graduate Student."

Another major initiative to energize and connect graduate students interested in WAC is our bimonthly newsletter. The WAC-GO Newsletter is foremost a point of shared experience: We want to provide our members (and the larger writing studies community) with a recurring touchstone of common readings

and key announcements. The newsletter is a way for graduate students to see what others are up to, stay briefed on recent WAC initiatives, and maybe even feel less alone. Second, the newsletter provides a low-stakes forum for graduate students to test out their ideas. We encourage graduate students (and junior faculty) to submit ideas for two of the newsletter standing sections: “Engagement with WAC,” in which the author engages with or reflects on a recent issue, trend, or idea in WAC/WID studies, and “What I’m Working On,” in which the author can provide an overview of their current WAC projects, including the purpose and methods, and can also ask a question or two to the community to help move the project forward. The third standing section, “From the Desk Of,” serves as word from a more experienced scholar-practitioner in WAC/WID to grad students interested in WAC/WID. Our hope is that graduate students realize other graduate students are interested in similar work, sparking collaborative enterprises and institutional crosstalk (you can find our newsletter archives at [wac.colostate.edu/go/wac-go-newsletter-archives/](http://wac.colostate.edu/go/wac-go-newsletter-archives/)).

One of our most recent initiatives, The Cross-Institutional Mentoring Program, connects a graduate student interested in WAC work with an established scholar-practitioner at a different institution. This program is especially meant to provide one-on-one mentorship to graduate students who do not have access to WAC mentors, WAC coursework, or WAC opportunities in their graduate programs to further demystify WAC work. Participants in this program define and develop their mentoring relationships by setting their own goals, expectations, and activities over two semesters (Fall and Spring). Some of these activities might include video chatting regularly, sharing drafts of recent work, emailing regularly, collaborating on projects, or socializing at conferences. Some of our initial findings from the program’s pilot year show that both mentors and mentees greatly value close mentoring relationships, but both parties don’t always know what they can get out of these relationships. Our findings also show that WAC work is very much fueled by these mentoring relationships, both for graduate students wading through the complex world of writing studies and for junior faculty navigating new institutional contexts, and that these mentoring relationships are especially key for cultivating diversity and supporting under-represented students. Encouragingly, both mentors and mentees in our pilot program were deeply committed to structures and initiatives that increase the diversity of our field. (You can find a white paper on the pilot program at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1THws3lQJ3oVaYt8w5BBMmvg8Bodhhyry/view>.)

Finally, we seek to energize the presence of graduate students at writing studies conferences, but especially at IWAC. Thanks to the generous support from the Auburn University hosts and our donors (Macmillan, the WAC Clearinghouse, and Fountainhead Press), WAC-GO was able to host a conference-wide

cocktail hour at IWAC 2018 that explicitly encouraged cross-generational networking. We were also able to connect with many graduate students throughout the conference at our hospitality table. These are exciting starts that we plan to continue at future conferences.

## WHERE WE'RE GOING

WAC-GO's nearest future (the 2018–2019 academic year, at the time of writing) is at least in focus. We already have a number of initiatives lined up, some of which include compiling job-market resources, designing a budget and application process for travel and research grants, and launching a social media campaign to feature graduate student scholarship. However, our vision gets fuzzier the further into the future we look. What will it mean to energize, demystify, and connect in 5, 15, even 30 years? To consider this question, we hosted a roundtable discussion at IWAC 2018 about these future possibilities for WAC-GO as an organization.

Roundtable attendees first brainstormed ways that WAC-GO could not only provide support for graduate students, but also harness (or energize) the passion of these graduate students to significantly contribute to the field in lasting ways. For example, one roundtable attendee suggested the newsletter could take on some of our field's bigger questions and explore generational changes: What does WAC mean in the world right now? What's missing from our conversations about WAC? Additionally, we discussed recruiting graduate students to compile an oral-history-of-WAC project or a web series in which established scholar-practitioners share their experiences and advice. Graduate students would benefit from the experience of conducting these projects, but then the whole field would also benefit by archiving these narratives.

Our roundtable discussion soon turned toward issues of sustaining the organization itself. As one roundtable attendee noted, by the time a problem becomes clearly defined, the Executive Committee members may no longer be graduate students. We emphasized, then, the need for clearly defined structures (like the bi-monthly newsletter and the Post-C's webinar) and roles (like the rotating Executive Committee positions) that can be handed off from generation to generation. Additionally, after enough time, we expect our resource development and project initiatives could either reach a critical mass or no longer answer the changing needs of graduate students. Future Executive Committee members will need to remain self-reflexive to strike a balance between maintenance and creation, as well as flexibility and structure.

Through our roundtable discussion, we also realized that, for sustainability as an organization, it is just as important to recognize what we *cannot* do as it is

to recognize what we *can* do. It seems obvious, but it's worth saying: We cannot provide graduate students with everything they will need to know before they go into a WAC position. We can't know the institutional context graduate students will move into or what kind of research projects will ultimately result from their questions. What we *can* do, though, is provide introductions—to the field, to the range of methods available to WAC scholars, to some stories of what it can be like to run a WAC program. What we can also do is *demystify* the paths for mentorship and networking: Hopefully a new faculty member can call up their old cross-institutional mentor when they run into an issue, or collaborate with that other WAC-GO member on a new research project.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Energize. Demystify. Connect. When working through an earlier version of this draft, we as co-authors realized in a moment of clarity that these three WAC-GO goals echo the very mission of WAC as a movement. From the beginning, Writing Across the Curriculum has been about energizing faculty and students to engage with writing as a mode of learning; demystifying genres and writing processes across rhetorical spaces; and connecting individuals to their various communities through writing. Is it any wonder that we, the Executive Committee of WAC-GO, realized the significance of applying these values to the field's own graduate students?

Being a graduate student is overwhelming, daunting, and sometimes isolating. But as Executive Committee members for WAC-GO, we have a home base to share advice, triumphs, failures, and laughter. Yes, we have had the chance to form relationships with some of the “big-wigs” in WAC: Regularly emailing those whose scholarship we know by heart is an opportunity we are sure few graduate students receive! Even more importantly, though, are the relationships we've formed with each other and with other peers who will eventually become our colleagues. In short, we have experienced a process of socialization into a WAC community that would not have been easy to achieve otherwise. For the future, we hope that WAC-GO continues to provide this important space for newcomers to construct themselves as WAC folk, but we also hope the relationships built in WAC-GO contribute to a more inclusive and connected field as a whole.

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