

WAC at Century's End: Haunted by the Ghost of Fred Newton Scott

Susan H. McLeod

There is a *fin de siècle* feel about some of the present conversation in academe, much of it having to do with massive changes in the American economy that are just now beginning to affect institutions of higher education. As the notion of lifetime employment in one corporation has become a memory in the business sector, its academic equivalent, tenure, has also come under hard scrutiny; in various states trustees and legislators are beginning to talk about abolishing tenure, to the extent that a keynote speaker at the 1997 National WAC conference predicted that it would disappear in the next five years (Sternick). Those writing about the corporate world predict a future where full-time employment is not a likely option for most Americans (Aronowitz and DeFazio). In academe, faculty lines are being lost as universities are told by legislators to emulate corporate downsizing models and "outsource" teaching to adjunct faculty, stretching budget dollars by creating a stable of permanent part-time workers (see Faigley). California State University, Hayward provides an extreme example of implementing this policy: the percentage of adjunct faculty there went from one quarter to nearly one-half of the total between 1992 and 1995 (Leatherman). Public universities are being told to do more with less—getting smaller pieces of the state budget pie as legislators talk of accountability, efficiency, and an increased faculty workload while they shift state spending priorities from higher education to prisons, Medicaid and K-12 education (Gold and Ritchie). There is talk of virtual universities and classrooms, and a revolution in teaching and learning brought about by technology (Gilbert), but the brave new world promised by technology in education brings with it even steeper tuition costs, making a college education more and more difficult for even the middle class to obtain. There is even talk of the disappearance of higher education as we know it. Peter Drucker, the management guru who predicted the influence that the G. I. Bill would have on American society, had this to say in a recent interview:

Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won't survive. It's as large a change as when we first got the printed book. Do you realize that the cost of higher education has risen as fast as the cost of health care? . . . Such totally uncontrollable expenditures, without any visible improvement in either the content or the quality of education, means that the system is rapidly becoming untenable. Higher education is in deep crisis. (Lenzner and Johnson 127)

Yet even as we speak of massive changes in higher education, writing across the curriculum as an educational movement seems to be soldiering on. Recent articles are fairly sanguine in their appraisal of the future of WAC (Walvoord;

Jones and Comprone); at the National Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs Special Interest Group meeting every year at the Conference on College Composition and Communication there continue to be many new faces, people who have come to discuss starting a WAC program at their institutions. The third National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference (1997) had the best attendance in its history. Are those of us involved in WAC so deeply involved in our own programs that we can't see these disconcerting trends in higher education? Are we, like the legendary band on the Titanic, just carrying on business as usual while the ship goes down?

I hope not. But there are two clouds I see on the horizon with regard to the future of WAC programs, both of which are danger signs in terms of program survival. The first has to do with the way many WAC programs are structured. Because they are by definition cross-curricular, such programs do not fit into a recognizable academic compartment (known to administrators as a "unit" and usually identified with a discipline—e.g., English, sociology, chemistry); they are therefore often located administratively and physically outside the usual departmental structures. As David Russell has so carefully documented, the disciplinary/departmental organization of higher education is a powerful institutional force, one that resists innovative structures and ideas. Any program that lies outside the hierarchical structure of the academy or that goes against the usual way of doing business is always in danger of being absorbed into a more recognizable structure. Russell points to the history of earlier general education reform movements in secondary and higher education (the Social Efficacy Movement, the Cooperation Movement, Deweyan Progressive Education). He demonstrates convincingly that the disciplinary structure of institutions, with its emphasis on departments and on specialization, eventually mitigated against all these reforms.

When cross-curricular programs seek to modify the attitudes and compartmental structure of academia, when programs seek to broaden access to professional discourse communities, they become forms of resistance, threats to the institution (or to the century-old conceptions of it). Thus, as with all movements to extend literacy, WAC has political, economic, and social consequences. (306)

There are some WAC programs which are located in a unique structure created just for that program, as a result of an outside grant or an institutional initiative funded on a one-time basis—back in the days when funding was more plentiful. In the present budgetary atmosphere, where in the absence of increases many institutions are under pressure to reallocate budget dollars internally, such programs in danger of going under. They are so different from the usual institutional "unit" that they stand out as anomalies, vulnerable to the administrative ax when it comes time (as it now has almost everywhere) to raise faculty salaries or fund new initiatives by forcing the institution to cannibalize itself.

The second cloud on the horizon has to do with WAC leadership. A colleague and I recently completed a study of 138 WAC programs which have

been in existence for a decade or more (Miraglia and McLeod). Our findings were consistent with what Walvoord and others have been saying about WAC—that it has grown and transformed itself in myriad ways, becoming part of new initiatives (critical thinking, assessment, electronic communication, service learning) as these arise. But one of our findings was startling. Of the 138 programs we studied which had been up and running for a decade or more, fully half of them still had the original WAC leader involved in the program in some way. These programs continue to thrive on their respective campuses because there continues to be one person on campus who makes WAC happen.

But the very strength of such programs (a dedicated leader) is also a weakness; these programs are heavily dependent on just one person for their health and continuation. As WAC has matured as an educational movement, so has its leadership; many programs are now headed by someone at the top rank of the institutional ladder. (We might call this phenomenon as “the graying of WAC.”) In lean budget times, institutions quite naturally replace full professors who retire with beginning assistant professors, for a significant salary savings. But junior faculty are exactly the wrong persons to be involved in program administration, since they usually cannot give the program their full attention and also do what is necessary to qualify for tenure, and since in an institution that is based on hierarchical power relationships, they are on the lowest rung of the ladder. And of course, some institutions, in the present atmosphere of downsizing, will choose not to replace the WAC administrator at all when he or she leaves. Our research shows, perhaps not surprisingly, that when the WAC director is not replaced, the program dies a quick death. One of the respondents to our survey, a long-time WAC director, summed up the problem of the one-person show WAC program despondently but succinctly: “God knows what will happen to WAC on my campus when I retire.”

The history of writing instruction at the University of Michigan in this century provides a cautionary tale for both kinds of problematic WAC programs—the one-person show and the unique structure. First, let us consider the now-familiar story of Fred Newton Scott. Scott, one of the founders of NCTE and its first president, almost single-handedly created the Department of Rhetoric at the University of Michigan in 1903. He was a productive scholar, evidently a brilliant teacher, and a gifted, even charismatic, leader; time and again he was elected president of various professional organizations, including the MLA. The Department of Rhetoric flourished as a separate unit for more than 30 years under Scott’s tireless leadership, attracting large numbers of gifted graduate students who went on to do ground-breaking research of their own (see Stewart, “Fred Newton Scott”; “Rediscovering”).

But it was not to last. Clarence Thorpe, the historian of the Department of Rhetoric at the University of Michigan, stated that “[t]he department of Rhetoric came into existence as a separate unit—mainly, it is said, because Professor Scott wished it so” (560). It continued as long as it did because of his powerful leadership. But as one of his own students said in discussing the history of the

department, the Department of Rhetoric *was* Fred Newton Scott (Shaw). His program was essentially a "one-man show" (Brereton 24) and as such could continue only as long as his energy sustained it. Two years after his retirement the department which had flourished for more than three decades under his leadership was absorbed back into the English Department from whence it came (Stewart "Two Model Teachers" 128). Although he had created a departmental structure for his program, it did not have enough other faculty of equal power and prestige to prevent a larger, more powerful unit from reclaiming it. Once Scott was gone, the Department of Rhetoric sank back into English without a trace.

Now let us consider the more recent history of the English Composition Board at the University of Michigan. The ECB, as it has become known, was one of the first WAC programs formed at a large research institution, providing a model for other research institutions. It was created in 1979, in the words of its first Director, Daniel Fader, "by a vote of the faculty of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts to assume responsibility for the teaching of writing in the College. Creation of the Board was proposed to the faculty by a Graduation Requirements Commission which found that both students and faculty were deeply dissatisfied with the quality of students' written English. The ECB was charged with proposing a plan which would remedy that dissatisfaction" (Condon et al. 1). With Fader as its driving force at the beginning, and with continuing leadership under Directors Jay Robinson and Deborah Keller-Cohen, the ECB's mission developed to include assessment, the teaching of introductory writing courses, a tutorial service, assistance to faculty teaching courses that fulfilled the upper-division writing requirement, research, and outreach (2-3). An outside review conducted in 1984 stated that the ECB was a "nationally recognized program that has exerted a major influence on composition instruction in American colleges and universities" (Condon et al., Appendices to "Self Study").

As academic structures go, however, the ECB was anomalous within the institution. It was a College unit, but unlike other units it had no tenure track faculty except the director, no graduate program, and responsibility for writing courses that could be seen by an administrator as infringing on the autonomy of other units (such as, for example, the English Department). It was, to use Russell's words, a "form of resistance" to the institution and its structures. As the ECB evolved over the years from a faculty oversight committee to an independent unit (still reporting to the Dean of the College), the functions that the tenured faculty from across the disciplines used to serve as members of the committee were turned over to full-time (untenured) staff members. As this transfer happened, the ECB lost its authoritative voice. Without powerful tenured faculty involved and without tenure lines within the unit, the ECB was put in a vulnerable position. The exact sequence of events which led to its recent demise as an independent unit are best left for those involved to tell, and for my purposes here are not important; the fact is that as of August, 1997 the ECB has been consolidated with the English Department, to be headed by a department member whose research specialty is medieval literature.

Will the ECB survive and keep its integrity within a departmental structure? Probably not. The ECB has lost both its autonomy and its leadership—all ECB contracts are being converted into English Department contracts, and all of its recent administrators (the Director and Associate Directors) have left the institution for other positions. My sense, informed by Russell's work, is that the Board will suffer the fate of Michigan's Department of Rhetoric. Unless it can be revived in the university's new Writing Center, or unless Michigan chooses to follow the example of the University of Arizona and hire a half-dozen tenure-track faculty in Rhetoric and Composition to provide a core of scholarly leadership for it, the ECB as we once knew it—a model WAC program for research institutions—will shrivel and die.

What can we learn from these two stories about writing instruction at one institution? Different people will no doubt have very different takes on the events and their meaning, and I invite them to respond to this piece to give their views. I for one do not interpret Michigan's story as one of good vs. evil, of yet another chapter in the saga of composition's struggle for legitimacy in higher education—or as Janangelo puts it, in the "ceaseless and righteous battle with institutions that we name and dismiss as deliberately malevolent . . . and eminently soulless . . . others" (14). While I think what has happened is unfortunate, given the excellent record of the ECB, my administrative sense is that its anomalous structure and position in the institution was a fatal flaw. What happened was tragic but inevitable; the story of the ECB is a homily illustrative of the two storm warnings mentioned earlier and which may serve to guide us as we try to preserve WAC programs on our own campuses.

One way to protect WAC programs which have a unique or anomalous structure during times of academic retrenchment is to locate them in more familiar and accepted institutional units. For example, many WAC programs are now locating themselves in writing centers or teaching and learning centers. These two structures, although outside the disciplinary/departmental organization of the institution, are by definition support rather than instructional units and therefore are put in situations where they must compete on an unequal basis with departments for resources. Further, writing labs and teaching/learning centers often have reporting lines higher up the academic hierarchy than the college level, and therefore positioned differently than departments within the academic community. They have the protection (and the accompanying status) of a Vice Provost or a Vice President rather than a Dean, of central rather than of middle management. I do not mean to suggest that all WAC programs should locate themselves in such academic support units, since the structure of WAC programs varies markedly from site to site according to institutional missions and histories. But in a time of scarce resources, wise WAC directors should take heed and think about where best to house their programs and what administrator might shelter them during the budgetary storms.

Those of us involved with WAC should also ask ourselves what would happen to the WAC programs on our campuses if we left town tomorrow. If the

answer is that the programs would die, it is time to start thinking about involving others in the programs that are now one-person shows. This should not be difficult; the best WAC directors I know have a leadership style that is naturally collaborative and collegial. One step is to involve an assistant director, someone to mentor who will take over at some inevitable point. WAC directors should also ensure that there is a network of powerful faculty on campus involved with the program and a structure in place (a senate or presidential committee) from which these faculty can help set policy and if necessary guard the program. Wise WAC directors will also look for outside funding for their programs (corporate donors are often more interested in support for writing programs than are university administrators), and will integrate their programs with other important campus initiatives—assessment, technology, general education reform, so as to braid WAC into ongoing issues rather than having it as a free-standing (and more vulnerable) entity.

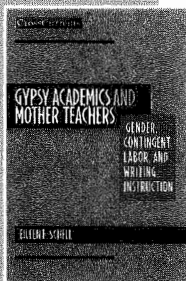
As we approach the end of the 20th century, let us for the sake of argument assume that Peter Drucker is right—that higher education as we know it is in deep crisis. Post-secondary education has faced other crises in the past—changing demographics after both World Wars, open admissions, curricular reforms of all stripes, and has adapted and survived. The strength of the WAC movement during its 25-year academic life as an American educational movement has also been, as Barbara Walvoord points out so well, its adaptability and transformative power, its ability to focus on writing broadly conceived as an essential component of thinking, learning, and teaching. Some part of me remains sanguine about the lasting effects of WAC programs on faculty and curricula. My hope is that, like general education programs on our campuses, WAC is here to stay. But I remain haunted by the ghost of Fred Newton Scott. Wayne Butler, the last Director of an autonomous ECB (and now with the Daedalus Group), posted a message about the fate of the Board on the Writing Program Administration Listserv with this title: "For Whom the Bell Tolls." Let those of us involved in WAC take heed—it tolls for us as well. Their effects may be lasting, but our WAC programs as institutional structures may be more fragile than we imagine.

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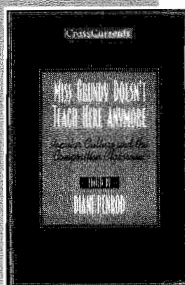


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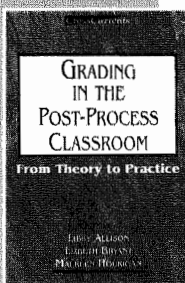


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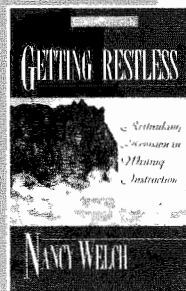
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