Susan McLeod on Sustaining Collaboration and Community in Writing Across the Curriculum: A Labor of Love

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Led by colleagues like Susan H. McLeod, who use their expertise and experience to foster our shared values, members of the CWPA recognize that when administering effective writing programs, "it takes a village." Indeed, McLeod's scholarly legacy demonstrates the collaborative work of the CWPA that we value and celebrate in this *WPA*: *Writing Program Administration* anniversary issue. Among many contributions to our discipline and our journal, McLeod has played a significant role defining writing across the curriculum (WAC) as well as in promoting guidelines and recommendations for establishing and building sustainable (McLeod & Soven, 1991) and healthy (McLeod, 1997) WAC programs. In the spirit of McLeod's commitment to community, what follows is more of a collaboration rather than a typical interview. Last year, I sat down in my office and placed a video call to Susan McLeod at her home on the west coast where she shared with me from a comfy chair in her living room. I asked her, for this special issue, to discuss the context surrounding some of her *WPA* articles in order to provide her take on who we are as a writing program community, where we came from, and where we still need to go.

About Susan H. McLeod

As one of the earliest advocates for the WAC community, and as a member of the Board of Consultants of the National Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs, McLeod has long emphasized the need to co-labor across departments to advance the vision of writing across institutions. As a research professor and University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) Writing Program Distinguished Scholar, she worked to integrate scholarship and praxis, demonstrated by ten books and numerous articles

on WAC, writing program administration, and other work on the affective in the writing classroom. Her work is a continuation of the early "call for writing across the curriculum" born out of "social and ethical purposes" that challenge all "teachers to take more responsibility for student writing" (2007, p. 51). She has significantly influenced postsecondary education by advocating for teaching writing within every department, not only as a siloed endeavor. She has advanced the WAC message through interdisciplinary collaboration and community building.

While she has contributed to the field through her individual scholarly activity, McLeod has spent considerable time co-laboring as an editor to bring forward promising voices and crucial messages. She currently serves as a co-editor of *Perspectives on Writing*, a WAC Clearinghouse book series that approaches writing studies broadly, presenting the study of writing from diverse perspectives to foster both theory and practical approaches. Along with her series co-editor Rich Rice, McLeod has published works from innovative voices in the field, including Chris Thaiss, Doreen Starke-Meyerring, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Linda Flower, and Asao B. Inoue. While we sat talking about her legacy, she smiled and expressed her excitement thinking about the "opportunities" she has had in supporting the vision of scholars like Inoue, voices that can continue to influence the community and take us to new places. For McLeod, within these fresh voices and fresh visions, WAC and the work of the WPA will not only live on but thrive and mean something to the changing student landscape, to those who look to academia to express and fight for a better American Dream. Beyond her scholarly contributions, McLeod's commitment to community building and her vision for WAC labor as inherently and deeply collaborative embodies our disciplinary DNA well.

Defining and Sustaining Successful WAC Programs

McLeod's early articles in *WPA* clarified the work and goals of WAC while contributing to the investment needed to successfully build and sustain healthy programs. According to McLeod, our community must effectively define and describe the work we do, both for ourselves and for those outside the field. In our conversation, McLeod described WAC as a movement born out of composition studies with the message that "students must learn to write in their respective disciplines and throughout their education, rather than in one or two courses early in their education." She urged that

the heart of WAC, the WAC movement—that is the people, the 'We the People' of WAC—believe that the only way to accomplish this goal is through interdisciplinary partnerships that involve a deep and abiding commitment to collaborative efforts to produce the best approaches to writing pedagogy.

Her work historicized the early years of WAC within the university context, providing guidance to WPAs/WAC directors. McLeod sought in her early *WPA* articles to provide practical "guidelines and a vision for sustainable WAC programs, born from community-building efforts," because the work is difficult to imagine and understand unless you are mentored into it.

During our talk, we discussed articles she had written very close to the beginning of the WAC movement: "Defining writing across the curriculum" (1987), "What do you need to start-and sustain a writing-across-the-curriculum program?" (1991), and "WAC at century's end" (1997). McLeod reminisced that this was a time when the WAC community was "just beginning to come together, so building strong ties and establishing common ways of talking about and defining the work were a high priority." So, the WAC Board of Consultants formed and led faculty development workshops at various universities to meet the community's needs. McLeod confided that this early group of pioneers realized that

> most administrators and faculty did not know what WAC really was. Many administrators did not understand the time and effort it would take to establish, grow and sustain. Faculty thought WAC meant more term papers or something like grammar across the curriculum. And, of course the instructors' response to this was, "No way!" While administrators said, "Too bad. We're doing this."

In 1987, in response to the community's need for clarity, McLeod wrote, "Defining writing across the curriculum" to help others better understand "the mission and goal of WAC—what WAC really is—and provide a sense of what constituted the kind of investment required to build a successful WAC community." Before visiting a campus to lead workshops and empower new leaders, she told me she would send two of her *WPA* articles to program directors and administrators to read: "Defining writing across the curriculum" and her 1991 *WPA* article, "What do you need to start-and sustain a writing-across-the-curriculum program?" She shared this work in advance of her visits because

> doing so reduced the amount of time needed to explain the work once a team arrived. It headed off administrative responses like, "I'll bring in a consultant and then we'll be done." So both of those pieces were meant to be explanatory and helpful to faculty and administra-

tors, showing that 'more term papers' was not the answer, and that WAC was not a quick fix, but rather required a deep commitment to collaboration and community-building at every level of administration and throughout the ranks of faculty and staff across the institution.

These early articles in *WPA* play a central role in establishing some guidelines for writing across the curriculum programs.

Programmatic Structure and Healthy Leadership

In revisiting her early work, McLeod indicated that keeping programs afloat still requires the same kinds of work she discussed in her 1997 *WPA* article, "WAC at century's end," and many of the concerns she talked about in that piece have already happened. While "WAC at century's end" discusses structures for WAC programs, according to McLeod, we have a greater variety of WAC program structures now, unique to different institutional contexts. For example, McLeod noted that one of the more common approaches is to house WAC programs in writing centers with the director of the writing center reporting immediately to a provost or a dean. She felt that she would promote the provost-purview model a little more if she were writing her "century's end" article today, since this model seems to provide the most protection and resilience for WAC programs. Understanding the rhetorical context in which a WAC program conducts its operations is important to its ongoing success. She added,

> as David Russell pointed out, disciplinary structures are the strongest structures in universities. Things tend to bend toward disciplinarity. So, if you have this wonderful interdisciplinary program, unless your program is housed in a permanent structure outside a department, it will tend to fold into a department, as happened at Michigan.

McLeod believes that programs run primarily by one department do not serve institutions or students across the entirety of the institution well; she opined that "the value of WAC is that it is highly collaborative. This vital element of WAC demands that we build relationships across disciplinary boundaries," something that is difficult to achieve if other departmental members must meet in a place that does not promote common ground. Without establishing mutual partnership, McLeod told me, we are not really doing WAC.

Interdisciplinary work can lead to sharing the cost of the work through co-laboring and through funding projects. One of the biggest challenges today, according to McLeod, is reckoning with the budget. One solution is through partnering across disciplines on grant applications that lead to

more productive and influential outcomes. To protect our program budgets, McLeod advises that we should co-author grants across disciplinary boundaries.

SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH ADVOCACY: COMMUNITY AT ITS BEST

McLeod has spent a lifetime promoting community engagement surrounding the most pressing issues facing WPAs and WAC directors through strengthening the bonds of collegiality. For McLeod, "collaboration is a very personal thing." She has regularly collaborated with colleagues in the WAC community and incorporated the knowledge of experts from outside of the discipline to inform our knowledge-making and teaching practices. Working together professionally is essential to the work we do; however, she noted that "some collaborations just work better than others." Indeed, during the interview, she reflected on one collaboration that was so unproductive that she had to discontinue it, advising me that

> it is important to recognize when it is time to break from working with someone else and handle the break graciously. But before it comes to that, collaboration is the kind of relationship that requires that we establish who is going to do what at the outset of the relationship. When this happens, expectations are clearer, which leads to better success.

McLeod's collaboratively written pieces in *WPA* represent some of her most groundbreaking work in advocacy and inclusivity, establishing increasing expertise within the WPA community.

In fact, her work demonstrates what can be gained when we bring in expertise from outside of WAC and the WPA to gain new approaches to resolve longstanding issues. According to McLeod, one of her most successful and meaningful collaborations was with Kathy Garretson, who co-authored the 1989 *WPA* article, "The disabled student and the writing program: A guide for administrators." McLeod provided some background, stating

> Kathy was hired by Washington State University (WSU) to help implement the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on campus. When we began working together, ADA was just beginning to be implemented in universities. We were teaching writing instructors how to help provide accommodations for students with hidden learning disabilities, many of which would not have been admitted to universities before the ADA. Many of our instructors struggled to understand how to support this new student population.

Garretson and McLeod explored ways to disseminate information about what students needed. She recollected that

> as I learned more and more working with Kathy, I realized that other WAC directors and WPAs needed to know about these issues, so I knew we needed to write something for the community. Since Kathy was not a faculty member, she did not need to publish to fulfill her job; however, when I said to her, "Let's write this up," she said, "Yes!" and wholeheartedly, because she believed in the work.

McLeod and Garretson took the information they prepared for the faculty at their own institution and composed a piece that could speak to the wider readership of this journal, those who were also tackling how best to prepare their teachers to comply with these new, important regulations in support of students. From there, McLeod was able to repurpose their research into presentations and workshops, sharing this vital information with colleagues at other universities, demonstrating the way that interdisciplinary partnerships, like McLeod's and Garretson's, can create inclusivity. The message, McLeod shared, about students with disabilities in the 1980s and 1990s "was new to most everyone and, unfortunately in many ways, still is to the majority of WPAs, faculty, and staff today." She exhorted that we still have a lot to learn and a lot more to do in the area of accessibility and disability advocacy for both students and faculty.

The Cords of Professionalism and Collegiality: Growing Together as a Community

Knowing that we only had a few minutes left, McLeod shared her thoughts about how to build community and collaboration through what she called, "the cords of professionalism and collegiality." Even though "we" would travel individually to give workshops at various universities, that work, for McLeod, "always focused on building community at a local level that led to building community at the national level." Faculty would embrace the ideas of WAC, not just about teaching writing and using writing to learn, but about curricular change, and changing the "way they think about teaching and learning." One of McLeod's goals was to try to leave behind "a core of committed faculty who kept in touch with each other," she said, emphasizing that a workshop should establish a foundation so that faculty could continue their work "as a village." "Without collaboration," she added, "we would not have a sustainable community."

Building relationships is vital to accomplishing our goals as individuals and as a discipline. One such relationship was her partnership with a colleague she had known for a long time, Margot Iris Soven. They served on

the Board of Consultants together and frequently shared a room at CCCC. Indeed, McLeod acknowledged that it is vital to "attend conferences and connect with other like-minded scholars and teachers. The national CWPA conference is a great place to build community and foster cooperative scholarship." For instance, at the WAC special interest group at CCCC, McLeod told me that members would "meet and then, as a group, get dinner and decide what their next book project would be. One year when the WAC Board of Consultants was considering what book they were going to write together the next year, they decided they most needed to write a personal history of WAC." McLeod and Soven (2006) took on the work, naming it *Composing a Community: A History of Writing Across the Curriculum*, because the "WAC movement did and continues to do just that." The collection helps us to understand WAC's past, drawing from the details of eleven personal histories that describe many more members and a community of effort. Without bringing together many foundational members in WAC, McLeod shared, it would be much more difficult to record histories accurately, effectively, and fully. McLeod recalled that this kind of work was always based in "collective input," and she added that WAC directors are by-and-large collaborative people by nature.

McLeod highlighted the importance of attending national meetings more than once. She lamented the plight of WPAs who cannot or do not go to national meetings, adding "that always surprised me, because the conferences are where the community is." Without community support, some WPAs don't "have anybody else to talk to about their experience except maybe on the WPA list-serve." The day I first met McLeod in person was at a national conference. She and Rich Rice invited me to join them for dinner. What was clear to me, from observing her collegial relationship with Rice and her strategic questions posed to me—a stranger—about my scholarship and teaching, followed by her thoughtful wisdom about my career, was how much she values community and empathy by leading through relationship. In my case, she took the time to stop for the one.

Stop for the One: McLeod's Advice Revisited

As I sat in my office listening intently and consciously aware that our time was coming to a close, I felt amazed that this WAC leader, while iconic in our field, made me (and I'm sure anyone else who spends time with her) feel at home and welcome, and invited into the work. I'd like to invite you into that place, so that you might feel more like you've spent time with her as well. If you can, find a comfy chair of your own and imagine sitting

with McLeod as her words speak to her legacy, which is now our legacy and our work:

> Dear WPAs and future WPAs,
>
> Please make sure you pursue your own scholarly development because your work is your research field. What you do is valuable and necessary. Within higher education, you are uniquely positioned as an advocate, so seek ways to help marginalized students, fellow workers, and your program to cross-disciplinary borders.
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> In every aspect of the work you do as a WPA, communicate early and communicate often. Have your elevator pitch that explains what WAC is and what you do ready. For stakeholders, potential members of the community, and rainmakers, be sure to define terms and processes, so that your support system has a right understanding of the vision, the labor intensity, and timeframe for building and sustaining a truly successful program. Build your WAC community by inviting co-laborers in at every level of the university system (the provost, deans, faculty and volunteer workers) and from without as needed.
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> It is vital to work within the institutional mission. Likewise, establish your WAC home based on the best fit within your institution, so that you are protected and have ample resources that don't lock other departments out of participation. Build a community of partners beginning with tenured faculty across the institution to promote WAC stability, and seek collaborative funding partnerships. Be sure to avoid the great person model and instead build a community of strength that doesn't show partiality to disciplinary ties. While it is wonderful to have a "great person" at the helm, designate an assistant, so that you are replicating yourself (but allow them to operate in their own strengths). When you do this, you allow the Inoues of the community to speak, to thrive and to take us to new places.
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> And whatever you do, attend your national conference.

<div align="center">—SHM</div>

Finally, for those who know Sue personally and have seen or read her work, you would not be surprised to hear that while McLeod is retired, she happily agreed to this interview with me, just one small but wonderful example of how she continues to remain active in the scholarly community, still mentoring, still editing and offering guidance to new scholars—scholars like me. The articles she published in *WPA* and elsewhere embody a deep, abiding value for collaboration and community as essential to ensuring

WAC programs and writing programs are healthy, innovative, and inclusive. Her articles might well-serve as a starting place for reconceptualizing, defining, assessing, and reimagining the work of WAC as collaborative and community-oriented, thereby building scholarship and practice on a good foundation.

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Acknowledgments

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