Launching Sustainable WAC Programs

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How will WAC survive? How will it grow and change—what new forms will WAC programs take, and how will they adapt to some of the present program elements and structures in the changing scene in higher education? What new WAC theories and research will help lay the groundwork for future WAC programs?

> --McLeod, Miraglia, Soven, & Thaiss, 2001, p. 4

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) is the longest standing curricular reform movement in the history of higher education (Russell, 2002), yet WAC programs fail to survive at an alarming rate of more than 50% (Thaiss and Porter, 2010, p. 558). One way to understand this phenomenon is to consider how WAC programs are developed and institutionalized. We can learn a great deal about how they develop, grow, and fair across time from the narratives of program directors. The field of WAC has a rich history of lore, which has been important for passing on knowledge based in the wisdom of experience. However, as the field matures we would benefit from reframing lore through the application of a theoretical framework for program building. For these reasons, we frame this book with both vignettes from WAC directors and the whole systems approach to WAC program development and transformational change, a theoretical framework that we have developed by drawing on overlapping cross-disciplinary theories of complex organizations and sustainability.

> --Cox, Galin, & Melzer, 2018, p. 1

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The Whole Systems Approach for Launching and Developing Sustainable WAC Programs: Principles

1. Wholeness: understanding a WAC program as a significant intervention within a complex system with

   competing ideologies and many levels, actors, and practices

2. Broad participation: engaging stakeholders from all levels of the institution to help plan, approve,

   implement, and assess program goals, outcomes, and projects

3. Transformational change: identifying points of leverage for introducing change to the university system at

   multiple levels, including changes in ideologies and practices as they relate to writing culture

4. Resilience: adapting to program challenges, maintaining self-organizing practices, and increasing the capacity

   for learning and adaptation to sustain desirable pathways for development

5. Equity: working to minimize disparities in current and future generations of WAC faculty and student writers

6. Leadership: identifying leadership that can serve as the hub for the program, with the authority on campus to

   lead a cohesive effort of planning, launching, developing, and assessing WAC

7. Systematic development: building a WAC program incrementally over time with a clear mission and

   prioritized goals

8. Integration: building program components that synchronize with national and local mandates, integrate into

   existing structures and practices, and facilitate collaborative campus relationships

9. Visibility: ensuring that program development, assessment, and change are transparent, regular, and public as

   well as promoting program events and successes through multiple means of reporting

10. Feedback: identifying indicators and repeated measures to reveal trends, stimulate recursive and adaptive

   change, promote collective learning and feedback for decision-making, and determine whether a WAC

   program is in balance and whether individual WAC projects are sustainable and achieving their goals.

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Whole Systems Methodology for WAC Program Development

This methodology was adapted from the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (FSDS) model, developed to implement a national strategy for sustainable development in Canada (Environment Canada, 2013) and the "Imagine approach" developed by Bell & Morse for creating sustainability indicators (2008).
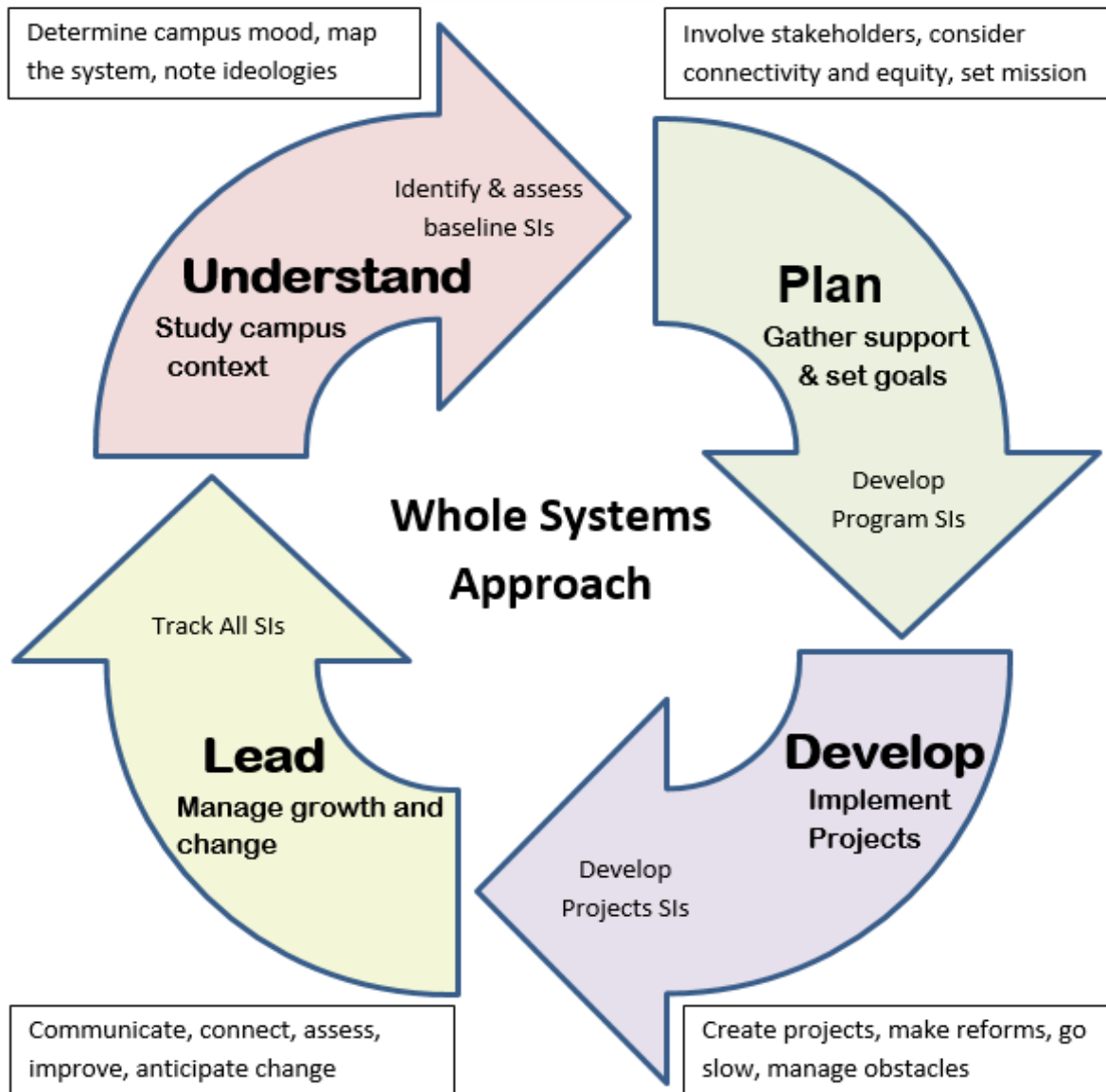
Whole Systems Strategies for WAC Program Development

Understanding the Institutional Landscape

1. **Determine the campus mood.** "Campus mood" refers to the overall readiness of an institution for increased commitment to student writing across the curriculum. Determining the campus mood is a mix of collecting data, talking to stakeholders, reflecting on current writing practices across university contexts, and identifying points of conflict and agreement about possible WAC program models.
2. **Understand the system in order to focus on points of interactivity and leverage.** Institutions of higher education have connectivity through a variety of network nodes and hubs (such as academic senates) and also segregation (the siloed structure of departments and colleges). To locate points of leverage and connectivity where even a small influence or change could have wide-ranging effects throughout the system, it is beneficial to map out the facets of institutional complexities.
3. **Understand the ideologies that inform the campus culture of writing.** These ideologies are the assumptions about writing on the campus, which are reflected in--and reinforced by--processes, practices, and programs. A WAC director that simply builds new programs without addressing underlying faculty ideologies on writing runs the risk of those ideologies undermining the WAC program's goals.

Planning a Program

4. **Involve multiple stakeholders in the system.** Building sustainable WAC programs that have a high level of connectivity and influence across the institution requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders across the system. Curricular change is university-wide, so buy-in and influence are essential.
5. **Work towards positioning the WAC program for greater interconnectivity and leverage in the institution.** WAC programs that do not fully integrate into existing institutional structures are rarely sustainable. From their inception, WAC programs should aim to be a hub within the network and not just a node, or to at least connect to hubs.
6. **Consider the impact of WAC on faculty and student equity.** Achieving equity and minimizing disparities in current and future generations is a key component of sustainability. How WAC affects the students the program serves, and the faculty that it implicates, should be considered in the early stages of program development.
7. **Set a mission, goals, and SIs.** WAC programs often grow organically from an initial workshop or retreat, or develop in fits and starts as a director experiments with different projects or reacts to different needs. However, a WAC program that sets a mission statement, goals, and outcomes during the development phase will be more coherent and goal-driven, and thus more likely to have a more significant system-wide effect. These outcomes include the identification of sustainability indicators used to assess program viability and longevity.

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Developing Projects and Making Reforms

8. **Maximize program sustainability through project-based development.** Planning for a sustainable WAC program requires an intentional project-based approach to translate program outcomes into action. In WAC programs, example projects include writing intensive initiatives, writing fellows programs, and faculty development retreats. Taken together, a set of projects is used systematically to fulfill the WAC program mission.

9. **Make reforms at both the micro and the systems levels.** In WAC programs, work at the micro-level (i.e. consulting with individual faculty) and working at the systems level (i.e. working with a department to create a departmental writing assessment plan) are both important for the development and sustainability of a program, and need to be balanced so for the program to maximize program impact.

10. **Plan for gradual rather than rapid reforms to the system.** WAC programs seek to shift the culture of writing at the institution, and this kind of change happens slowly and incrementally. Thinking that sustainable change will happen quickly will only lead to frustration on the part of the WAC director and perhaps those to whom the WAC director reports.

11. **Deal with obstacles to program or project development systematically.** To handle the challenges that inevitably come up when developing a WAC program, a systems approach is needed, in which the director doesn't perceive the challenges as personal or insurmountable, but as emerging from ideologies or mechanisms within the system that can be overcome through a systematic approach.

Leading for Sustainability

12. **Communicate regularly and at all levels of the system to keep the program visible.** In order to be seen as part of the fabric of the institution, WAC programs need to stay visible through good PR, partnering with highly visible partners, and reminding other units of the relevance of the WAC program.

13. **Be aware of systems beyond your institution and connect to those that are beneficial to the WAC program.** Systems beyond your institution include disciplinary accrediting bodies, WAC organizations, position statements, and organizations outside of writing (i.e. CUR). These systems affect a campus culture of writing and may provide needed leverage for a WAC program.

14. **Assess and revise the WAC program.** Systems tend toward segregation and stagnation, and WAC programs are susceptible to becoming static if feedback loops in the form of assessment activities aren't built into the program. In addition to the typical forms of WAC program assessment, the whole systems approach suggests the tracking of indicators of success and distress, an approach that can help a WAC director better build on success and anticipate problems before they materialize.

15. **Create a plan for sustainable leadership.** A WAC program is only as sustainable as its leadership. Given the ever-expanding nature of a WAC program, the director needs to balance commitments to avoid burnout and maximize efforts, as well as consider distributing WAC leadership roles, and creating a plan for the succession of leadership.

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