

**Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs**, by Michelle Cox, Jeffrey R. Galin, and Dan Melzer. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2018. 272 pp.

*Reviewed by Mandy Olejnik, Miami University of Ohio*

As the discipline of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies continues to expand and build more types of writing programs, it is critical for scholars and researchers to look toward approaches for *sustaining* the writing programs that are created. Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), as Walvood explains, began as a movement inspired by societal factors: a surge of more students in college after the GI bill and the related “Johnny Can’t Write” narrative—borne after the process shift in composition studies—that relied heavily on workshops for faculty across disciplines discussing “writing to learn” pedagogy. The workshop model has proven to be a limited initiative that can easily wane, and much scholarship on WAC is based in anecdote and the sharing of experiences to help others build types of programs. *Sustainable WAC* goes a step further toward emphasizing not only the building of WAC programs from experience but also sustaining them in the complicated system of academia and setting up a solid theoretical framework for doing so.

In *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs*, editors Michelle Cox, Jeffrey R. Galin, and Dan Melzer turn to whole systems theories to develop their theoretical framework for WAC programs, which provide “tools for describing rich and dynamics systems” (like WAC programs) and “tools for creating and assessing change introduced to a system” (25). Cox et al. add to ongoing conversations about WAC as a movement and field. They provide significant contributions by moving beyond strategies used by WAC programs and practitioners to include theorizing a dedicated framework meant to focus on writing program administration, not pedagogy, in order to “better understand WAC program development within the complex and dynamic contexts of higher education” (16). This framework is buoyed by integrated vignettes from experienced WAC directors and concrete strategies throughout the book that connect both the vignettes and theoretical frameworks together into conversation and demonstration, as well as practical questions embedded in chapter sections that WAC professionals would be wise to ask of their programs. As Walvoord notes in her foreword, this book marks an important stride forward for WAC as a much-needed “theoretical framework to guide both our visions and our practical actions” (xi). With such a theory-driven focus, *Sustainable WAC* also

aids the ongoing strife for writing program administration work to be taken seriously in academia as meaningful, quality research.

The first third of the book (chapters two, three, and four) focuses on building and describing the theoretical framework of a whole systems approach to WAC, which the authors say they hope will be of value to other WAC scholars in addition to practitioners. They synthesize research on five key theories that build their sustainable WAC framework. Complexity theory (26-31) offers “ways to study interactions among diverse groups of actors” (25); systems theory (31-34) focuses on the macro level and leverage points; social network theory (34-37) operates at the micro level among networked actants; resilience theory (37-41) helps WAC professionals understand system management and stress; and sustainable development theory (41-44) centers on the transformational change in complex systems. Together, these theories build a framework that “[builds] from context and [represents] the complexity of larger-scale reform” (24). WAC programs themselves are not complex systems, the authors make clear, but can be seen as sites to induce change in universities, which are complex systems. Importantly, they note that “no one leader controls all aspects of the system” (49), which reinforces the importance of WAC leaders and practitioners understanding who leads other systems in their university and how their university operates as a whole system.

In chapter two the authors also share ten principles (drawing from Bellagio principles) that they posit as being central to WAC development: wholeness, broad participation, transformational change, resilience, equity, leadership, systematic development, integration, visibility, and feedback (46-47). These principles inform their four-stage methodology (borrowed and adapted from Canada’s Sustainable Development Strategy iteration of “plan-do-check-improve” and Bell and Morse’s “Imagine” approach) central to their sustainable WAC approach, as outlined in chapter three: understand, plan, develop, lead. These stages focus “on a process for creating change that helps shift the mindset of program assessment” toward one that gauges sustainability that is “holistic, inclusive, concrete, transparent, and practical to implement” (55). Additionally, this methodology represents “theory connected to action” and “principles informing reflective practice” (75). Cox et al. also introduce fifteen strategies in this section (64-75) that they detail and contextualize in later chapters with vignettes, reiterating throughout that the strategies are meant to be flexible and recursive despite their linear representation in print form. These strategies, starting with determining the campus mood and ending with revising WAC programs and creating a plan for sustainable WAC leadership, help WAC administrators understand how to implement a whole systems approach to their work.

In the second section of the book (chapters four-seven), each chapter discusses a stage in the authors' four-stage methodology (understanding, planning, developing, and leading), focusing on strategies and tactics from the fifteen earlier-introduced strategies. The authors also describe the importance of "hubs" as opposed to "nodes" in a network, arguing that WAC programs that operate primarily as nodes (i.e., a program run by one director who runs workshops/does something "extra" and removed from a dedicated program) are not sustainable since they do not connect with the larger network (119). It is in this section where the authors weave together opening vignettes from WAC practitioners and the strategies for WAC programs, demonstrating principle-based strategies (from chapter two) in conversation with the theoretical framework they've set up. For example, in chapter five, Timothy Oleksiak writes about his experience being hired as a WID coordinator at Bloomsburg University where he was able to assemble a WID Advisory Board during the first year of his position. Throughout the book, Cox et al. refer back to Oleksiak's vignette as they outline their fifteen strategies. In chapter five they argue that the existence of his advisory committee with members across the university demonstrates the fourth strategy of "involving multiple stakeholders in the system"; they also refer to his vignette again in chapter six while discussing the fifteenth strategy of "creating a plan for sustainable leadership," noting that Oleksiak's national job search for WID coordinator reflected programs searching for and valuing WAC expertise. The authors weave these strategies, vignettes, and principles together throughout these chapters in a fluid, "networked" manner.

Finally, Cox et al. conclude the volume with chapter eight by looking forward to implications of the whole systems approach for WAC at every scale. They describe two WAC programs that have already begun to implement a whole systems approach, identify limitations of their work (primarily that they have only pieced together part of the five theories which have more aspects to explore), and extend their discussions to the field of WAC itself. They point to the importance of centralizing WAC programs with a central organization, and the creation of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum (AWAC) and its mission (among other things) to "seek formalized connections among different WAC and other writing-related organizations to reach mutual goals" (232).

Since this is a book that seems primarily written for current WAC administrators and experienced WAC scholars, I see important future implications for graduate students interested in WAC work. For example, I wonder: what is the role of graduate student directors and administrators in WAC work, as more WAC programs grow and more doctoral programs might enable graduate students to serve in WAC administrative assistantships and specialize in WAC? How can programs sustain the work that graduate students spearhead,

as they are only in their administrative roles for a few years at most? What might a whole systems approach offer to the training of future writing program administrators, in WAC and out? These are not questions explicitly taken up in this book, but they are important ones that build from the work done here and that can further the implications for WAC as a field of study.

Overall, *Sustainable WAC* is an important, field-defining book for WAC scholars and practitioners alike. The authors move toward a dedicated theoretical framework of approaching WAC supported by relevant theories while also drawing insight from seasoned WAC directors. While the authors acknowledge they have borrowed only certain parts from major theories that might still have more to parse through, this book is a promising step forward and a must-read for experienced and burgeoning WAC scholars and administrators alike. As the authors noted at the beginning of the book, a study by Thaiss and Porter in 2010 found that fifty percent of all WAC programs fail. Hopefully increased attention to WAC as theory and as something that can benefit from rich, theoretical frameworks like the ones described in this book can help decrease that percentage over time across universities.

*Oxford, Ohio*

### **Work Cited**

Walvood, Barbara. "The Future of WAC." *College English*, vol. 58, no. 1, 1996, 58-79.