

Pedagogue Bonus: WAC-GO (w/Alisa Russell)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or a question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, I talk with Alisa Russell about the Writing Across the Curriculum Graduate Student Organization, also known as WAC-GO.

Alisa Russell is an Assistant Professor of English in the Writing Program at Wake Forest University. Her areas of interest include rhetorical genre studies, public writing, and writing across the curriculum, and her research focuses on increasing community access through writing and writing innovations. Alisa's work has appeared in journals including *Composition Forum*, *The WAC Journal*, and *The Clearing House*, and she currently serves on the Executive Committee of the Association for Writing across the Curriculum.

Alisa, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by providing some brief information on WAC-GO. WAC-GO is a committee of the Association of Writing Across the Curriculum (AWAC) that seeks to increase mentoring and support for graduate students with an interest in writing across the curriculum research, program administration, or teaching. You were one of the founders of WAC-GO and you were the chair in 2016. I was hoping you could share more about how you got into writing across the curriculum work as a graduate student, the mission and vision of WAC-GO, and how you've seen the organization reach its goals in providing support and resources to graduate students interested in writing across the curriculum.

AR: Yeah, I'm so glad you ask about WAC-GO. It's so important to me, and I think it's so important to the field. So I've told this story before in other contexts, but I'll never forget Michelle LaFrance was the WAC director at George Mason when I was there and I was in one of her seminar courses and she asked me to apply to the graduate research assistant position for the WAC program. And I said yes. I was like, "Oh yes, I want...yes. I want to do that. Absolutely." And then I had to go look up what WAC stood for, because I actually wasn't sure what it was. I had heard about it in my courses or in the hallways. And I worked in the writing center, so I obviously heard the writing center director talk about, "Oh, we need to collaborate with the WAC program on such and such," but I didn't actually know what it stood for or what it did.

And I had to go look it up. So once I realized what it was, it was like, "Oh my God, this is exactly what my research interests are." And, "Oh my God, this is where I get to work with faculty because..." but I can't tell you how many grad students I've talked to that had the same experience where they realize they were interested in WAC work or they were already doing WAC work at their institutions, but didn't know that this was actually a body of scholarship and a sub field or a field on its own, until after the fact. Right? They found it afterwards. It was like, "Oh man, I wish I had known that this was a whole thing."

Well, part of that is because writing centers are super visible. It's a literal place, right? For most universities, it's literally a place you can go. First-year composition, very visible. Almost every grad student ends up teaching in a first-year comp program. Whereas WAC, especially when you're a grad student, it's a lot less visible, unless it's a really big program that actually has an office. Even the George Mason program didn't have a WAC program office. It's just where the director's office was. Right? And so it's just not as visible, I think. It's harder to see. But as someone who just did the job market, WAC is still very popular and in demand. So, Shane, this was a terrible job market year. Yes? I don't know if you were keeping track, but it was really bad. But there were five or six WAC specific job ads, in a year where there were very few jobs in general.

So I keep imagining grad students who really do WAC work or are interested in WAC work, but never got the chance to experience it. Or they didn't have a WAC program at their institutions. So they were never a GRA or they can't really brand themselves as WAC people in the market, even though they are passionate about that mission and that work. Right? But they're not familiar with that body of scholarship or with that language or with those practices. So what WAC-GO is about, why, and Brian Hendrickson and Al Harahap were my co-founders here, our initial mission was just to create a formal and visible place where grad students could actually see WAC. Right? And they have a place to go to connect with others, to find mentors, to find resources, to realize that this is a thing, right? Just like WPA-GO, the Writing Program Administration Graduate Organization is so important for people who are really interested in running first-year writing programs.

We saw this as a mirror organization, right? For people to see and get interested in WAC. So a lot of the things that they've been doing... I'm not on the leadership team anymore. I'm transitioning out of being a grad student, but the current team is so amazing. They've got a ton of projects going. They've got a huge job market survey going around, and they're going to do interviews about what it's like to be on the market as a WAC person. I actually started before AWAC, but we're now a committee of AWAC, which is really great because it gives us this larger umbrella and structure. We have all these amazing advisors in the field and we also have some budget lines. And so they're offering travel grants now to WAC related conferences.

One of the things that I piloted was the cross institutional mentoring project, because one of the tricky things about WAC, as we were saying, because it's so different across institutional contexts, a lot of universities don't have a formal WAC program, which makes it really hard to get WAC mentoring and experience as a grad student if you're at one of those institutions that don't have a program. And so this actually pairs graduate students with faculty mentors at other institutions, and gives them resources to have a mentoring relationship over an academic year, which I just love, I think. I'm still really into the cross-institutional mentoring project, for a lot I think even beyond WAC, I think that could be really important for our field.

They always do a webinar after CCCC about... to kind of capitalize on that energy. So there's a lot of great, they have the newsletter, a lot of great structures that they've set up that make it a very sustainable organization to provide this formal and visible space. Not only is sustainability a challenge for individual WAC programs, it's become a challenge for the field in general, especially because... I'll never forget, Anne Gere, who hosted the 2016 IWAC Conference. She

was talking with the WAC-GO founders, Brian, Al and I, because we were talking about hosting a social at the IWAC and things like that. And she said she wanted one of the opening plenary talks to be by a really established scholar in WAC, but to be paired with a brand new scholar in WAC, like a grad student. And she said, "I literally don't know where to go to find this grad student, where are they?" Right?

And so, a lot of the big names in WAC, Chris Thaiss, Terry Zawacki, Chris Anson, Mike Palmquist, they've all been around a long time and done incredible work, but a lot of them are starting to move into retirement. Chris Thaiss, Sue McLeod, has just moved into retirement, Terry. And so we need new energy, right? New people coming in and doing this work and a visible space, I think makes the path into WAC work at institutions and as a field, just less, just more transparent, right? There's an actual path. You don't have to get shoulder tapped. Right? You can actually find how to get in whether you have a mentor asking you to be the GRA or not. So that's super important, I think.