

Building Better Bridges: What Makes High School-College WAC Collaborations Work?

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Introduction

TO BETTER PREPARE STUDENTS for writing across the curriculum in higher education, some high school teachers and college professors have formed partnerships. The idea is that a cross-pollination of ideas from the teachers, who know the students best, and the professors, who know the expectations and forms of college writing best, could greatly benefit students, teachers, and professors.

Success with such partnerships has so far been mixed. Some programs have flourished and continue to be successful, while others have failed to work and sustain. Why do some programs fail and others succeed? What in successful partnerships might be replicated by others?

To explore these questions, we led a half-day preconference workshop at the 2010 Writing Across the Curriculum Conference at Indiana University. This workshop reflected on past and present high school-college partnerships through writing centers and WAC programs, then challenged participants to design plans for collaborations that would last into the future.

After the workshop, participants emailed us final drafts of their plans, which we shared with all who attended the workshop, and we asked for updates almost one year later. We also conducted a small survey to discover other partnerships around the country and how they work. This article examines workshop and survey responses to highlight successful and sustained collaborations that might be replicated by others.

Extending the Partnerships Beyond the Workshop

Both of us have worked with WAC and writing center partnerships over the years, so we have learned from our own experiences as well as those of colleagues at a variety of secondary and post-secondary institutions. In designing our workshop, we wanted to give participants a taste of some of the partnerships that had and had not worked and why. We

also wanted them to work collaboratively to consider how they would start a partnership, design a possible step-by-step start-up plan, and answer a list of partnership-forming questions (Appendix A). During the brainstorming time at the end of the workshop, many worked with partners from their institution to create a list of ideas to share beyond the workshop.

To add to what we learned from workshop participants, we also questioned others to determine their perspectives. We created a survey on Survey Monkey (Appendix B). Of our 30 respondents surveyed through the WAC, WCenter, SSWC-L, and WPA listservs, 50% were relatively new partnerships (0–2 years), while 40% have existed for 3–10 years, and 10% were established more than 10 years. Approximately 77% of the partnerships have existed only 0–5 years, which isn't surprising given the recent national emphasis on greater collaboration between K–12 and post-secondary education.

One current push affecting all levels of education is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), already adopted by 48 states. The CCSS is “an initiative of the National Governor’s Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers [to refocus] attention on reading and writing across the curriculum” (NCTE 18). According to Lynne Weisenbach, Vice Chancellor for the University System of Georgia, post-secondary institutions can play a key role in implementing the standards because of their role in the professional development of teachers, so they know best the expectations of postsecondary education (Weisenbach). Like the University of System of Georgia, many post-secondary institution missions involve outreach (See Timar, Ogawa, and Orillion; Spoth et al.), including outreach to K–12 schools, and a simple Internet search will find a profuse number of links to the push and pressure for high schools to send graduates to college (See National Center; Kirst and Venezia).

Increasingly, with pressures from initiatives such as the CCSS, institutions are trying to create seamless transitions between high school and college. More and more institutions are creating dual enrollment programs, early colleges, outreach programs, and recruiting tools that provide college preparation activities for prepared and under-prepared high school students. For many of these programs, writing is a key component (often because of first-year writing requirements), and writing centers and WAC programs are well situated to support these efforts.

In fact, since we completed our survey, a high school-college partnership group has formed and met at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Atlanta (April 2011). They established a listserv, proposed a workshop for next year’s conference, and continued to plan more collaborative activities to involve K–12 through post-secondary colleges and universities.

Michael Thomas, president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education, sees higher education playing a vital role in implementing CCSS. He claims the “most pressing issues [are] how to define and assess what it means to be *college- and career-ready*” (9) and that defining and assessing those things will best happen through collaboration with K–12 teachers and leaders. Thomas writes that higher education and K–12 education should have detailed conversations about how “both entities can work together charting specific avenues, strategies and next steps in the process” to ensure student success (9).

David Conley also points to communication and collaboration as key to student success in transitioning from high school to college: “A key problem is that the current measures of college preparation are limited in their ability to communicate to students and educators the true range of what students must do to be fully ready to succeed in college” (3). The communication problem is not new to education or to the potential benefits and pitfalls of educational trends or mandates. Conley states, “Ideally colleges will work with feeder high schools to create scoring guides, assignments, and even courses that help students diagnose their level of preparation for college” (11). A well-documented key measure for post-secondary success is writing (See Conley “Understanding”; College Board) and collaborations like the ones presented here can serve as models for those collaborations and conversations, and later in this piece we discuss what some features of successful models look like.

With 50% of reported collaborations we surveyed being fewer than two years old, one has to wonder how many initiatives have come and gone. Fortunately, as evidenced in our survey results, there are at least a small number of programs that have been running for over a decade, and those programs can serve as models for newer programs to emulate. From those long-running programs, some of the broader lessons learned include the need for bridges to be built between student expectations for high school and for colleges. As one respondent noted, “There exists a disconnect between the requirements for high school graduation and what colleges and universities expect from their freshman students, [e]specially in the areas of reading comprehension, writing skills and basic mathematics.” Additionally, these programs enhance community and collaboration between teachers and college faculty, and, as simply stated in one response, help everyone “to value the work of teachers.” None of these results from the longest standing programs in our survey are surprising. The answers reveal the respectful, collaborative nature of the partnerships and point to some of the factors that have made these programs successful.

Two key trends emerge from the programs that have existed six or more years. First, in all but one case, the collaboration was started jointly between the secondary and postsecondary institutions. Both institutions wanted to work together, so no one was foisted upon another.

This joint commitment cannot be overstated. Frequently, secondary school teachers complain that university people want to “come down” and tell them how to teach writing. Gerd Bräuer, Writing Center Director at University of Education, Freiburg, Germany, emphasized the need for a clear partnership, rather than a one-sided effort. However, as reflected in his survey response, his experience shows another aspect of this:

I gained many insights over the [3–5] years but this is my most important lesson: no high school partnership anymore without the willingness of high school teachers to further train themselves in the topic of the project. The current situation is that this particular high school profits greatly from the outside help through our student teachers but still doesn't have a single expert on writing pedagogy among its faculty. In other words, if we from the university writing center would end this project, this high school would probably lose its writing tutors within the next semester.

Therefore, both partners need to uphold their end of the bargain to make it work effectively. In the successful, long-standing programs, many stakeholders helped develop the programs, so they understood the need while helping shape the program to benefit all involved. Lucille M. Schultz, Chester H. Laine, and Mary C. Savage support Brauer's claim in their survey of the history of school-college collaborations in which they analyzed what worked and what didn't. Among their findings, they learned that many programs failed “not because the colleges were deliberately trying to dominate the schools, but rather because the participating parties were not critically conscious of the dynamics that affected their interactions” (150). The authors recommended that all parties set the agenda and understand their role in the interaction (151). Also, all or part of the funding in many of the successful programs came from schools or school districts and colleges, representing a kind of commitment that can live beyond the life of a grant or the goodwill of one individual willing the program into fruition.

The second key trend was that all of the programs were integrated into the institutional fabric of all institutions involved. Stakeholders, then, have a voice in the programs, and everyone involved sees tangible benefits that show up on administrator and granting agency radars. Responses indicate that two programs offer high school students credit for first-year writing courses in college and two more programs provide direct feedback to students and teachers about student progress as preparation for college courses. In addition, two more involve teacher preparation, one pre-service and the second through the National Writing Project (NWP). All six of the programs discussed here indicate information sharing as a real benefit for all involved.

In the case of the pre-service teachers, the respondent notes, “Pre-service students are able to observe master teachers in action. Students analyze teaching strategies and gain a better grasp of what teaching is like as a profession.” This is the kind of analytical experience teachers want for their students, and the analysis that students do gives them real classroom experience that they can bring back to the college classroom to inform their classmates and teachers. A secondary benefit is that 90% of the pre-service teachers who participate in this program are hired by schools they visit. That is a measurable goal that benefits the students, teachers, schools, and university involved. And the communication fostered by the program serves to strengthen it. The schools see future teachers and, based on the hiring rate, like what they see.

More broadly, though, from the survey and our workshop, what we have found is that all of the successful partnerships have formed around local contexts and needs—using a kind of systems thinking to integrate their programs within the fabric of the institutions and the community. Those integrations range from outreach in rural areas to development of support services in urban schools. They involve teacher preparation and professional development programs. They tie into existing programs such as the NWP. Although the kinds and levels of support from schools and post-secondary institutions vary greatly, participants have found ways to work within the local confines to make links that benefit all parties involved. Some partnerships have no funding, some have NSF or Carl D. Perkins grants or support from the NWP, and one partnership isn’t sure where their funding comes from.

Based on our work and findings, there is good news. Many of the newer programs are modeling themselves after the long-lived ones. From these programs, we believe, we can develop a set of best practices. Below is an attempt to categorize the results of our survey, young and long-standing programs, and our workshop participants’ work. The categories are by no means definitive and they blur, but for discussion, they can be helpful. In all of the results, three basic models or components of collaboration appear repeatedly.

- 1. Programs reporting collaboration note some form of information exchange, and some involve the NWP.** Workshop attendee Michelle Cox of Bridgewater State University describes her WAC Network:

I invite teachers from a different local school each year to join the WAC Network, a program I run that brings together teachers, part- and full-time faculty, administrators, and staff to learn more about teaching with writing, share this knowledge with colleagues through monthly themed WAC Discussion Groups, and attend steering meetings for WAC. The Network currently includes five high school teachers from two school districts, and teachers from a local middle school

are joining next year. Once a school joins the Network, they can attend all WAC events (and many other faculty development events) for free.

Similar collaborations occur from experiences of teachers who are involved in the NWP through local and regional sites. Based on our survey, one respondent indicated that New Mexico State University, in conjunction with the NWP, offers “professional development in writing and a collaborative community through a 4-week institute, professional development days, and fall and spring teacher inquiry seminars.” In support of this kind of work, “Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum: A Policy Research Brief from the National Council of Teachers of English” emphasizes the benefits of collaboration in professional development to effectively transform teaching (17).

Also, a survey respondent describes how the University of Arizona and Sunnyside and Tucson Unified School Districts have a model, long-standing program called Wildcat Writers (<http://wildcatwriters.weebly.com/>). The program’s first goal is for teachers to “better understand and address the gap between high school and college writing.” From this goal grows the second: “students will develop stronger motivation for and understanding of college writing.” In this program, secondary teachers collaborate with college teachers to better understand first year writing courses. But an excellent additional feature is that college students collaborate with high school students, providing them with feedback on their papers and projects. The high school students can also ask questions about college and visits to campus.

- 2. Programs involve students in their collaborations, either in some variation of a writing center or a writing fellows program.** Twelve of the thirty survey respondents specified developing or supporting high school writing centers as a primary purpose of the collaboration. Clearly there is a trend for writing centers to reach out and collaborate with others—in this case across the divide of K–12 to college. Writing centers and writing fellows at both secondary and post-secondary institutions have been collaborating for decades (Farrell; Farrell-Childers, Gere, and Young; Barnett and Blummer; Childers), so it is not surprising that this work is influenced by collaborations among members of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA).

Kirsten Jamsen and Katie Levin at University of Minnesota participated in our workshop and developed some ideas. Jamsen had attended the first IWCA Summer Institute, and she and Levin created an E(arly)–12 Writing Centers Collaborative of 30 people who have led or are interested in starting/supporting E–12 Writing Centers. They describe that it “needs to be a supportive, informal, listening and learning together group” (Jamsen), and they already have plans for future meetings at the

NCTE annual conference with Chicago area high school writing center directors. They are also planning to invite the tutors of Minnetonka High School to Jamsen's tutor developmental class.

3. **Post-secondary institutions provide support for middle and secondary schools consisting of post-secondary consultants in the secondary school classrooms, post-secondary institutions providing resources (i.e. financial, training, or staffing) to middle and high schools, and some form of dual enrollee or early college programs.** For example, Jackson Brown at Stephen F. Austin University describes their program:

This past summer, Stephen F. Austin's WPA and the dual-credit English teacher at Nacogdoches High School collaborated on a proposal to implement a preliminary writing fellows program that would supplement classroom instruction for freshman and dual-credit composition courses. Their idea was to hire and train fellows to lead weekly writing labs for six sections of freshman composition—two dual credit classes at the high school, two at a local community college, and two at SFA. They would then assess these courses' effectiveness in helping students become better writers. I offered insight and advice into what training fellows for this project might involve, and they applied for a grant from NCTE. They didn't receive the grant, but they have tentatively found an alternate source of funding; SFA's WPA plans to move forward with the initiative this summer. (Brown)

Conclusion

Across all responses the strongest theme is collaboration, faculty and students across institutions working together to improve student writing and learning. For instance, through a summer seminar for high school teachers, Passaic County Community College opens the dialogue with a series of questions prior to the seminar (Appendix C). Tapping into the institutional fabric of both schools and colleges allows them to integrate these programs into the larger institutions that will help them survive administrative and institutional changes. Through many of these collaborations, we see students and teachers providing feedback for one another. Keys emphasizes how student learning in science, for instance, can be enhanced by strategies that include multiple forms of feedback such as peer responses to writing and one-on-one conferences. Combined with traditional teacher feedback, these strategies help students develop their metacognitive capacities (120). Partnerships such as we have been describing have an impact on writing and learning beyond English classes. In fact, one of the survey respondents who has had a partnership for more than ten years describes two collaborations: one between the school and university and another between individuals at each institute. He explains how the partnership benefits the secondary school:

Teachers improve their classroom techniques and experience meaningful, sustained professional development; students improve in writing skills (documented through quantitative research); students perform better on standardized tests (anecdotal); teachers become trained to be school leaders in developing and implementing literacy goals.

These collaborations are not often easy, but as another respondent with several years' experience with a partnership says, "Collaboration is a fantastic learning tool for students and faculty. Logistics takes a huge amount of time. Change is slow and needs good PR [but] that's a start." So, maybe it takes longer than anticipated to start and sustain such partnerships, but the results seem to more than justify the patience involved in developing a long-term collaboration between K–12 and post-secondary schools on writing across the curriculum.

Survey participants all said how important it was to both institutions and their students, and one stated he has learned "the value of exchange of ideas and working together to benefit students." Through communication among all involved, partnerships enable our students to benefit from these sustained attempts to learn from one another for the benefit of our students and faculty at the institutions involved. We hope to continue to be part of this ongoing dialogue as more schools realize the value of these partnerships between K–12 schools and post-secondary institutions.

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APPENDIX A

Questions for Starting a High School-College Partnership

1. What kinds of institutional mission/support is there for such projects?
2. Where is this support coming from? Who will represent each institution?
3. How will they collaborate? How do you designate and delegate?
4. How do you find someone in the schools to participate?
5. How can you have a WAC Workshop with a cross section of volunteers to help find a connection?
6. What is the administrative involvement? What is the grass-roots involvement?

7. How can we develop K–12 professional development points to encourage collaboration?
8. How can we develop person-to-person collaboration by offering graduate students to volunteer in schools?
9. How can we incorporate skills students will need in college?
10. Who initiates the program?
11. How do you grow the program organically?
12. What are models for peer tutoring across levels? How do we get students' voices involved? What are ways to tap into student-peer associations?
13. Is there a way for college students to get release time from teachers?
14. How do we invite high school faculty to our faculty development workshops?
15. Are these collaborations done with disciplines other than English and Education?

APPENDIX B

Survey Questions

1. What is your role in the partnership?
2. Describe your partnership.
3. How long has the partnership existed?
4. Who started the partnership?
5. What is the purpose of the partnership?
6. How does the partnership benefit the secondary school?
7. How does the partnership benefit the university?
8. How is the partnership funded?
9. What have you learned from this partnership?
10. If you are willing to answer follow-up questions, please enter your name, institution and email address here. Thank you.

APPENDIX C

Seminar for High School Teachers

We ask each participant to bring to the seminar on day one these materials to share and use with the group.

1. Your writing activity greatest hit. A lesson that always seems to work. It can be anything from a pre-writing activity to a follow-up to a larger assignment. It should be something that can be done in 1 or 2 class periods (not a long term assignment such as a research activity). Bring any materials you use for the lesson (handouts, resources...), if possible.
2. A writing lesson-in-progress. Bring a lesson that you have used less successfully but believe has potential, or a lesson that you are hoping to develop but need some help creating.

Amongst the topics we will discuss during the seminars, please consider your answers to these prior to attending:

1. What are the top 5 things PCCC should know about what your school and students are doing in regards to writing?
2. Does your school have: a writing center; writing across the curriculum program; portfolios; or writing magazine?
3. What technology works and doesn't work in your classroom?
4. What would you like to know about the expectations that PCCC has for entering students?
5. What might a college (PCCC and others) offer to your school that would improve your ability to use writing?