

Spring 2013

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Recommended Citation

Hendrickson, Brian. "The Hard Work of Imagining: The Inaugural Summit of the National Consortium of Writing Across Communities." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, pp. 115–18, doi:10.25148/clj.7.2.009356.

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The Hard Work of Imagining: The Inaugural Summit of the National Consortium of Writing Across Communities

Albuquerque, NM. July 12-15, 2012

Reviewed by Brian Hendrickson
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On July 12-15, 2012, in advance of the Council of Writing Program Administrators 2012 Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the University of New Mexico hosted the inaugural Summit of the National Consortium of Writing Across Communities (NCWAC) in nearby Santa Fe. In attendance were twenty-four established and emerging scholars and graduate students working in (and across) fields such as community literacy, writing program administration, writing across the curriculum, and second-language writing. Of NCWAC's twenty-seven sponsoring institutions, represented at the summit in addition to the host university were Arizona State University, University of Arkansas, Bridgewater State University, University of California Santa Barbara, Colorado State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, University of Oklahoma, St. John's University, Salt Lake Community College, Temple University, Texas A&M University-Commerce, and University of Utah. The purpose of the summit, like that of the consortium itself, was to bring these scholars and their respective disciplines into conversation, with a recognition that the next generation of public intellectuals must, according to Ellen Cushman, "combine their research, teaching, and service efforts in order to address social issues important to community members in under-served neighborhoods" (329).

Established at the historic Mary Mac's Tea Room in Atlanta, Georgia, during the 2011 Conference on College Composition and Communication, NCWAC arose out of a constellation of conversations led by scholars such as Linda Adler-Kassner, John Duffy, Linda Flower, Keith Gilyard, Eli Goldblatt, Juan Guerra, Michelle Hall Kells, Elenore Long, Steve Parks, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur, to name a few; each scholar's work, distributed along the spectrum of literacy advocacy and instruction, to coordinates—and the connections between them—overlooked or undervalued by traditional approaches to academic writing instruction. In the spirit of sustaining those conversations, NCWAC derived its name from Juan Guerra and Michelle Hall Kells' argument for a cultural ecology approach to cultivating what Guerra terms *transcultural citizenship*: "adaptive strategies that help individuals move across cultural boundaries by negotiating new and different contexts and communicative conventions" (296-99). This approach manifested in 2005 in the University of New Mexico's Writing Across Communities Initiative, which holds that "communicative competence depends upon complex strategies of shuttling between ideas and audiences, a challenging, culturally-dependent process" (Kells 96). Writing Across Communities therefore complements the notion of a writing beyond the curriculum model of writing program administration forwarded by Steve Parks and

Eli Goldblatt, in which students, instructors and administrators “think through and across and outside disciplines” (Parks and Goldblatt 589).

Writing Across Communities adds to this ongoing conversation an important contextual and ethical qualifier by framing literacy initiatives within a cultural ecology model, thereby “resist[ing] a culture-blind mode of document production and seek[ing] to guide students to critically respond to the cultural and symbolic systems within diverse contexts” (Kells 98). This mission requires not only that writing instruction across the curriculum must more explicitly “enhanc[e] opportunities to build identification with the cultures of the academy” but also “cultivate appreciation across the university for the cultures and epistemologies our students bring with them” (Kells 96). Writing Across Communities, then, makes an important contribution to the ongoing conversation calling for a radical re-envisioning of the academic mission in light of recent developments in fields invested in literacy advocacy and instruction. However, advocates for this re-envisioning, in performing public intellectual work in service to the most vulnerable communities within their spheres of influence, are likely to render themselves vulnerable to those forces in the academy invested in maintaining conventional modes of disciplinary knowledge-making and professionalization—modes that still hold sway over programmatic missions and tenure review boards inclined to apply to public intellectual work the pejorative *service*. Furthermore, this new imperative requires a breadth of interdisciplinary knowledge and administrative responsibility far beyond the pale of any one individual’s capabilities, so scholars committed to this work would need to be able to plug into some kind of network designed for sharing knowledge and resources across institutions.

These shared concerns provided the exigence for the inaugural NCWAC Summit, an intimate gathering of stakeholders charged with imagining how a national consortium might support emerging public intellectuals in pursuing their scholarly agendas. The three-day program was structured so that Thursday, July 12, and Friday, July 13, each began with attendees delivering position statements informing, qualifying, and problematizing the formation and implementation of a National Consortium of Writing Across Communities. Among those statements were calls for clarifying disciplinary foci and programmatic and organizational missions, increasing mentorship opportunities for graduate students of color, responding to the needs of second-language writers across the disciplines, and cultivating multimodal literacies on campus and in the community. Although these statements tended to reinforce the need for supporting graduate students and emerging scholars doing public intellectual work, the range of concerns represented even in the above summary list hints at some of the issues to emerge during the working group sessions following the delivery of position statements on Thursday and Friday.

The five working groups were charged with brainstorming an organizational mission/vision statement, professional/intellectual statement, organizational structure, terms of membership, and web presence. After the working group sessions on Thursday and Friday, the summit reconvened to share their findings, with each working group often reporting more questions than answers. One question that resonated throughout the working groups related to what the consortium should call itself given that any label it adopted would carry its own discipline-specific history

and connotations likely to exclude those who would not identify with a particular disciplinary tradition. A related question asked how the consortium might constitute itself so as to remain a loose, inclusive collective while retaining some unifying sense of mission. Both questions evidenced the enduring influence of the academy's silo effect even on scholars who perceived their work as transgressing disciplinary boundaries as traditionally conceived.

What became increasingly obvious over the course of Thursday and Friday was a difference in perception—between established scholars on the one hand, and on the other, graduate students and emerging scholars—regarding the two above questions, with the former perceiving them as impediments calling into question the efficacy of a National Consortium of Writing Across Communities, and the latter interpreting the questions either as a generative heuristic or irrelevant barrier in establishing a consortium aimed at addressing the common concerns reflected in attendees' position statements. In order to address this aporia of perspective, then, Saturday's meeting began with a freewrite asking each attendee to respond anonymously in writing to the following prompt: "What is it that we share in common, but doesn't necessarily make us the same, that we can get from this consortium but can't get anywhere else?" After approximately ten minutes of writing, the freewrites were collected, shuffled, and redistributed to be read aloud to the group. Thereafter the floor was open to response under one condition: that speakers frame their remarks in terms of what they heard rather than their own opinions on the matter.

Despite the differences in perspective that had become increasingly apparent over the course of the summit, emerging from the conversation that followed was a recognition of the importance of valuing community, both as an object of scholarship as well as a network of scholars themselves. Both established and emerging scholars repeatedly remarked on the invigorating nature of the summit in terms of the intimacy of the small-group setting as well as the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. For the graduate students, the conversation was instructive as to the complexities of collaborating across disciplines even in a group that shares a common set of values and goals, but it also provided important opportunities for them to meet and receive advice from scholars they admired.

Ultimately it was decided that the conversation would have to be continued at the 2013 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Las Vegas, Nevada, with Michelle Cox volunteering to host a lunch, and Todd Ruecker a hike.

But the conversation didn't end there. Throughout Saturday afternoon and into Sunday, small groups continued to meet and reflect on the summit, both its problems and potentialities. And at dinner that evening just north of Santa Fe, in the small town of Chimayó, in a restaurant not far from the miraculous Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas, a raucous group of graduate students and emerging scholars joked about changing the name from the contested NCWAC to WI-B-WAC (Writing In, Beyond, With and Across Communities). Whatever it is called, the joke seemed to suggest, the need remains for the establishment of a supportive community of literacy-scholars-as-public-intellectuals—one that can be accessed by and efficacious for our most vulnerable colleagues, such as prospective and current graduate students, contingent faculty, and those going up for tenure.

Works Cited

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