

# “A long-lasting positive experience” from a Short-term Commitment: The Power of the WAC TA Fellow Role for Disciplinary TAs

ELISABETH L. MILLER AND KATHLEEN DALY WEISSE<sup>1</sup>

While teaching assistants (TAs) often play a crucial role in teaching writing-intensive courses and often go on into faculty careers, a relatively small body of research has interrogated the ways that WAC/WID programs may effectively train and support disciplinary TAs. In this essay, we draw on surveys and interviews with former WAC TA Fellows—disciplinary TAs who helped to lead training for new TAs teaching writing-intensive courses at a large research university. We offer this close analysis of the WAC TA Fellow role as one relatively short-term and small-scale model with, we find, significant and ongoing benefits for supporting disciplinary TAs as emerging professionals and as future WAC allies.

---

Teaching assistants (TAs) play a crucial role in university teaching, particularly in introductory and writing-intensive courses. Whether they serve as instructors of record, lead discussion sections, act as graders, or take on other roles, these instructors require training. For writing-intensive courses, this training is often provided by writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines programs. Accordingly, these trainings are most commonly (and very competently!) led by writing studies and WAC/WID experts. However, given the philosophy of WAC/WID programs—always drawing on and valuing disciplinary expertise—we analyze in this essay a model of WAC TA training that draws explicitly on the expertise of experienced TAs from across disciplines. Specifically, we examine the WAC TA Fellows role that experienced TAs across disciplines take on to train new TAs teaching an intermediate WID course required for all undergraduate students at University of Wisconsin-Madison, a large public research university in the Upper Midwest. This training, which is held each semester, introduces new TAs to WAC principles that they can use in their upcoming writing-intensive courses and can draw on in their future teaching positions. The WAC TA Fellows are experienced disciplinary TAs

---

1. Elisabeth L. Miller and Kathleen Daly Weisse are co-first authors.

who have been selected by their respective course coordinators to help lead the training based on their own expertise in the classroom and excellence in teaching<sup>2</sup>.

As former WAC assistant directors actively engaged in working with TA Fellows—and as WAC and writing program leaders ourselves now—we wanted to learn more about the potential value of this unique way of involving disciplinary TAs in WAC training. Specifically, we wanted to know what former WAC TA Fellows say they took with them from their participation in these roles: for their work as TAs, for their future faculty (or non-academic) careers. What, if anything, stood out about the WAC TA Fellow role to disciplinary TAs? Seeking to add to literature on the need and potential for professional development for graduate student instructors in WAC (Rodrigue, 2013; Cripps et al., 2016) and in academia more broadly (Winter et al., 2018), we sought to explore what TAs across disciplines learn from being put in trainer and leadership roles in a WAC program. Drawing on survey responses and interviews with former WAC TA Fellows, we show the substantial takeaways for disciplinary TAs (and WAC programs) that may come from even a very small-scale role for TAs across disciplines in WAC training. Preparing faculty to be WAC allies, ambassadors (Cripps et al., 2016; Williams & Rodrigue, 2016), or surrogates (Hughes & Miller, 2018), can and—we argue in this essay—*should* begin when they are graduate student TAs. The WAC TA Fellow role offers disciplinary TAs experience taking on WAC leadership in the liminal space of a cross-disciplinary TA training for writing-intensive courses. Such experience is invaluable in the short-term for TAs teaching writing-intensive courses, and in the long-run for TAs who may go on to become faculty ideally positioned to take on powerful WAC pedagogy. We offer this close analysis of the WAC TA Fellow role as one relatively short-term and small-scale model with, we find, significant benefits, for supporting disciplinary TAs as emerging professionals and as future WAC allies.

In what follows, we first provide an overview of the WAC TA Fellow program that we are studying in this essay; we then review literature from WAC and from the scholarship of teaching and learning regarding the needs and options for TA training related to pedagogy—revealing gaps around empirical evidence for the effectiveness of various training models and a growing interest in ways to engage TAs in leadership roles around teaching training. We then lay out our survey and interview-based research designed to contribute to these knowledge gaps. Finally, we analyze those survey and interview responses (which form a rich data set: thirty-three former TAs

---

2. The University of Wisconsin's WAC program officially calls these roles Communications-B (or Comm-B) TA Fellows, as the Fellows support "Communications-B" courses, the intermediate writing-intensive course requirement at the University. To draw on a more universal term for readers beyond the University of Wisconsin, in this article, we refer to these roles as WAC TA Fellows.

hailing from seventeen disciplines across twenty years of this long-standing program) for evidence of what made the WAC TA Fellow role matter to disciplinary TAs.

## The WAC TA Fellow Model

In the WAC TA Fellow model we analyze in this essay, all TAs who are new to teaching intermediate disciplinary writing courses are required to participate in two half-day training sessions that are designed and facilitated by the University of Wisconsin-Madison's writing across the curriculum program. The training is intended to introduce new TAs to key principles of WAC and to equip them with a range of tools and practices they can use in the classroom. Most of the TAs who attend have never taught before. Apart from the required general teaching orientation offered through the graduate program at the university (a training that focuses on general classroom management and HR policies) the WAC TA training (which focuses explicitly on teaching with writing) is the only training that most new TAs receive before entering into the instructor role (with the exception of some individual departments that offer more support).

The WAC TA training is led by the WAC program director, a graduate student assistant director (usually a PhD student in Rhetoric and Writing Studies—a role that the two authors of this essay held previously), and a cohort of experienced WAC TA Fellows (four in the fall semester, to support a training of seventy to seventy-five new TAs, and three in the spring for forty to forty-five new TAs). WAC TA Fellows, who are the centerpiece of our research, are recruited by the WAC program and by writing-intensive course instructors and coordinators, selected based on their success serving as TAs in various disciplinary writing courses. The director and assistant director intentionally recruit fellows, in consultation with course coordinators, from a range of disciplinary backgrounds so as to be representative of the variety of writing-intensive courses offered by the university.

WAC TA Fellows take on a number of tasks during the training. Most notably, they are required to design and facilitate a breakout session centered around a topic of their choosing that is related to teaching with writing. Common breakout session topics include peer review, informal low-stakes writing, and rubric design. TA Fellows also participate in a Q&A panel fielding wide-ranging questions from new TAs, and they lead informal small group discussions during the morning sections of the training—acting as enthusiastic peer models. Fellows draw upon experience teaching writing in their own disciplines when designing materials for the TA training (e.g., running breakout sessions on science writing, effective oral communication, or broader WAC topics such as responding to student writing—supported by examples from their teaching). Oftentimes, this attracts new TAs from similar disciplines who might then prioritize attending their breakout session.

Preparation for the TA Fellow position is highly scaffolded by the WAC program, including a brainstorming session with the WAC assistant director, and a group workshop meeting during which TA Fellows receive feedback on their breakout session materials in an interdisciplinary, collaborative environment. Each breakout session is required to have at least one handout, developed through rigorous peer review by both the WAC staff and the other fellows. Further, each breakout session is designed around principles of active learning and must feature some kind of hands-on or interactive component. Fellows receive a \$500 stipend for their work.

Upon completion of the WAC TA training, Fellows attend a debrief session with the WAC program, offering suggestions and feedback on the training, and then receive a thank-you letter featuring positive feedback from training evaluations. These letters are sent out not only to the Fellows themselves, but to their advisors, deans, key stakeholders in departments and colleges, and a selection of other recipients—ranging from former influential teachers to family members—to show appreciation for the hard work they've completed. Altogether, the program is spread across around a month from preparing to training to debriefing.

### **Literature Review: Teaching Assistant Training in and beyond WAC**

TAs have been the focus of a significant body of scholarship in composition studies, most notably literature about training TAs to teach first-year composition and other general education and core writing courses (Artze-Vega et al., 2013; Macauley et al., 2021). Despite the prevalence of TAs in WAC work, there is scant research on the topic (LaFrance, 2015). Recent calls for more WAC scholarship on TAs, however, seek to change that narrative, pushing researchers to investigate different aspects of the TA experience as they relate to WAC. In their intro to their 2016 special issue of *Across the Disciplines* on TAs and WAC, Williams and Rodrigue, for example, urge researchers to pay closer attention to TAs who, they argue, have the potential to directly and strongly contribute to goals central to the WAC movement. TAs “are worth investing in and supporting,” Williams and Rodrigue argue, with the potential to “help us achieve WAC goals in various institutional contexts” (p. 2). In particular, they call on WAC leaders to direct their attention to TAs whose work extends beyond the bounds of the traditional TA role, more specifically, those working with students whose discipline is outside of their own. Elsewhere, Rodrigue (2012) points to gaps in WAC literature around TA professional development. Her 2013 study, which examines how disciplinary TAs perceive themselves as writing instructors and how this perception is influenced by professional development opportunities, serves as a springboard for our research on WAC TA Fellows.

Some scholars have highlighted the unique position of TAs in the academy: noting, in particular, their “liminal” role between student and teacher, between novice

and expert (Macauley et al., 2021). That notion has begun to be developed in powerful ways in WAC scholarship. For instance, in her 2016 study, Winzenried, explored how TAs navigate disciplinary genres in the general education classroom by straddling the line between disciplinary “insider” and “boundary crosser.” These general education courses, Winzenried argues, offer complex contexts in which TAs “broker” disciplinary genres for students who occupy space on the periphery of disciplines (first- and second-year students who are new to their disciplines or are undeclared). Paying attention to and investing in these TAs’ professional development is critical to supporting this challenging and important work. Winzenried stresses that investing in disciplinary TAs’ professional development marks a commitment with long-term value, “because TAs often carry the pedagogical strategies and practices they develop in their graduate school teaching experiences into their future faculty positions” (p. 12).

More broadly, the emphasis across academia on supporting graduate students as teachers and as future faculty has intensified over the last couple of decades, particularly as graduate programs have begun to acknowledge that students require training for a range of academic careers, including at comprehensive, regional, or otherwise teaching-intensive institutions (Auten & Twigg, 2015; Winter et al., 2018). One significant effort to address graduate students’ need for training in pedagogy is the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) programming initiated in 1993 by the Council of Graduate Schools and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. PFF programs have sought to address the “recognition that doctoral students aspiring to faculty careers needed preparation for all dimensions of a faculty member’s role—teaching, research, service,” whereas many existing “models for doctoral education focused on research to the exclusion of other responsibilities” (Winter et al., 2018, p. 3). The PFF initiative funded programming at a wide range of universities, including many programs that continue to thrive and grow (see Rozaitis et al., 2018).

Tracing PFF initiatives and beyond, Kalish et al. (2009) took an inventory of the roughly 290 Carnegie research and doctoral granting institutions in the United States at that time. They found “four types of programming that are much more common than others”: teaching orientations, peer mentoring, graduate courses on teaching, and certification programs (Border, 2011; p. xi). A range of scholarship of teaching and learning literature has charted the variety and effectiveness of such programming, particularly arguing for the value of learning communities for future faculty (Richlin & Essington, 2004), and aiming to understand the knowledge and support necessary for graduate students to develop as effective teachers (Austin & McDaniels, 2006).

Our study builds on these important explorations in and beyond WAC scholarship to determine what pedagogical training TAs benefit from. Specifically, we seek to

gather empirical insight into the value of one particular teaching development model for disciplinary TAs—joining others’ calls for involving graduate student instructors in leadership roles in teacher training and development (Saichaie & Theisen, 2020; Schwaller & Cochran-Miller, 2020; Winter et al., 2018). Rodrigue (2013), for instance, posits that explicit training and education for disciplinary TAs is necessary to enable them to develop identities as writing-intensive instructors. Similarly, LaFrance and Russell (2018) point to the value of providing TAs with hands-on experience with WAC, arguing that “first-hand exposure to WAC research” in an “authentic context” gives graduate students the opportunity to deepen their relationship to writing, learning, and teaching (p. 207). Also closely related to our project, other scholarship has detailed the importance of having disciplinary WAC representatives, acolytes, ambassadors, and surrogates (Hughes & Miller, 2018), but has not focused specifically on disciplinary TAs who serve in WAC leadership positions. The model of WAC leadership around TA training that we examine in this essay has similarities to the WAC Fellowship at CUNY, detailed in Cripps et al.’s 2016 article. While the CUNY WAC Fellowship is an ongoing assistantship, not a short-term, one-time, honorarium-funded opportunity like the WAC TA Fellow role we explore, both fellow roles “help fill the gap” left by a lack of disciplinary pedagogical training. Further, they both provide powerful leadership experiences that build on TAs’ liminal roles between student and teacher, as outsiders to disciplines in “preparation for the professoriate” (Cripps et al., 2016). Like the CUNY WAC Fellowship, the WAC TA Fellow role provides an opportunity for experienced TAs to support other teachers by serving as WAC mentors. In our analysis, we seek to further articulate the benefits of the WAC TA Fellow leadership model for TA learning.

## Research Design and Methods

Our IRB-approved survey and interview-based research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What, if any, influence has the WAC TA Fellow experience had on former TA Fellows? What have they taken into the rest of their graduate school experiences or into future careers?
2. How do former WAC TA Fellows describe, or characterize, the fellow role?
3. What can WAC practitioners and scholars learn and build on from this training role for disciplinary TAs?

## *Data Collection and Analysis*

To answer these research questions, we performed both online surveys and brief (twenty-minute) Zoom interviews. We first obtained a list of 150 former WAC TA Fellows (maintained by the WAC program) who served between the start of the program in 1997 and 2019, for whom we were able to locate ninety-two email addresses. We emailed our ten-question anonymous survey (see Appendix A) via a Qualtrics link to these former fellows. We received thirty-three survey responses, for a thirty-six percent response rate. From those surveys, we gathered ten individuals willing to be interviewed, and we were ultimately able to coordinate eight brief, twenty-minute interviews (two were canceled due to unforeseen life events and conflicts). In interviews, we asked participants to expand on key parts of their survey responses. Table 1 provides a list of the seventeen different graduate programs that survey respondents reported that they were (or are) enrolled in. Table 2 offers a list of interview participants. As Table 2 shows, interviewees served as TA Fellows between 2000 and 2014, coming from eight different disciplines: all now working at universities, and seven of eight still teaching in some capacity.

Using principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), we collaboratively coded the survey and interview responses, first using open coding looking for the stated values and benefits of the WAC TA Fellows training. Comparing codes, we agreed on two particular categories for analyzing survey and interview responses: a) influences of the WAC TA Fellow role on future faculty (and non-faculty) careers, and b) characteristics of the WAC TA Fellow experience that made it influential.

Table 1

List of Graduate Programs of Former WAC TA Fellow Survey Respondents

<b>Graduate Program and Number of Participants</b>
Sociology PhD–8
Political Science PhD–3
Theatre Studies PhD–3
Biological Sciences PhD–2
Geography PhD–2
Psychology PhD–2
English -- Literary Studies, PhD–2
Water Resources Management MS–2
English -- Composition & Rhetoric PhD–1

Communication (Rhetoric, Politics & Culture) PhD-1
Journalism and Mass Communication-1
Scandinavian Studies PhD-1
Human Development and Family Studies PhD-1
History PhD-1
Zoology PhD-1
Life Science Communication (MS)-1
Landscape Architecture MS-1
Total Survey Respondents: 33

Table 2  
Interview Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Discipline / Degree</b>	<b>Year Served as Fellow</b>	<b>Current Position</b>
Monica	MS Life Sciences Communication	2000	Associate Professor of Business Communication
Sylvia	PhD Biological Sciences	2005	Research Scientist
Jacob	PhD Water Resources Management	2006	Lab Manager and Adjunct Faculty in Biology
Sam	PhD Theatre Research	2007	Associate Professor of Theatre
Manasi	PhD Journalism & Mass Communication	2009	Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication
Susan	PhD Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies	2011	Lecturer in Theatre Studies and Accountant in the Medical School
Kyle	PhD English – Literary Studies	2012	Assistant Professor in a Continuing Studies program
Abbey	PhD Communication (Rhetoric, Politics, Culture)	2014	Associate Professor in Communication (Rhetoric, Politics and Culture)



## Analyzing WAC TA Fellows' Experiences

In these analysis sections, we draw from survey responses as well as some more in-depth examples from interviews with past TA Fellows to explore two key questions: “What were the influences of the training on WAC TA Fellows?” And, subsequently, “What characteristics of the TA Fellow role made it influential for Fellows?” For the first question, four significant themes arose: TA Fellows frequently mentioned developing a newfound appreciation for teaching writing and talking about teaching writing. Second, many participants discussed appreciation for having the opportunity to build community with other like-minded teachers across disciplines. Third, a number of respondents said their experience prepared them to take on future teacher trainer roles. Finally, a large majority of the TA Fellows said they continue to return to the WAC materials they had designed. Following this analysis of what mattered to TA Fellows, we then turn to a discussion about what exactly made the training so meaningful—particularly its link to funding, recognition, individualized attention, and leadership. It is worth noting that there is an interesting slippage between WAC TA Fellows' discussions of powerful teaching and teaching training and the impact and import of teaching with writing or training others to teach with writing. We find that slippage to, in fact, provide noteworthy evidence for just how central teaching with writing and foundational WAC pedagogy is to powerful teaching writ large.

### *Tracing Influences of the WAC TA Fellow Role on Disciplinary TAs*

*Refining teaching knowledge.* Despite the brevity of the TA Fellow experience (the entire process typically takes no longer than a month from the time that the fellow accepts the position to the conclusion of the training), it had a significant impact for those involved. “I consider it one of the more rewarding and memorable teaching experiences during my graduate career,” said a 2013 fellow completing a MS in water resources management. TA Fellow Monica even went so far as to claim, “I feel comfortable saying that it influenced my, like, entire career.” These findings are akin to what Cripps et al. (2016) noted from their own fellows study: that the fellowship opportunity gave TA Fellows an opportunity to critically reflect on WAC pedagogy, and that pedagogical experience, in turn, “helped them feel like better teachers in their disciplines” by the time the fellowship was concluded (p. 6).

In our analysis, we found that many survey respondents/interviewees attributed the enthusiasm they feel for teaching directly to their experience as WAC TA Fellows. In this way, their responses point to the program's reach and impact. Importantly, for some of these participants, well over a decade had passed since they had served as WAC TA Fellows, yet the experience remained fresh in their minds. For some participants, this memory stood out as their sole experience with formal pedagogical

training. As one former TA Fellow from sociology who graduated in 2013 said, “There really weren’t other opportunities like this when I was in grad school.” For others, it was one of the only times they could connect with others about teaching. In her interview, Abbey, a communications PhD who served as a fellow in 2014, expressed regret that she hadn’t had the opportunity to work with TAs in other disciplines earlier in her graduate career, explaining, “Because teaching isn’t valued at an R1 in other disciplines, you kind of have to talk on the [down low] in, like, these kind of hidden underground networks to be like ‘Hey, what do you know?’ and I just remember feeling like I was really cobbling these [networks] together...so the idea that there were other people [fellows] who could also design workshops and who are also thinking about teaching and interested in doing it well, and happy to talk about it, like, all of that was super valuable and kind of mind-blowing.” Likewise, former TA Fellow Jacob noted in his interview that there was a significant gap filled by the WAC TA Fellow experience, saying “nobody was really looking after us in terms of you know where our careers were going if we were getting teaching experience” until the WAC TA training.

In addition to these rare and powerful opportunities to focus on teaching, many of our study participants noted that being asked to help *train* TAs in other disciplines helped them develop more confidence in their teaching, resulting in a mindset shift about the purpose of TAs in general. A former fellow from sociology who is now an associate professor recalled that the experience “definitely focused positive attention on the role of a teaching assistant,” which “often isn’t seen as a position of value in the academy.” Along those same lines, in his interview, Kyle, a literary studies PhD and now an assistant professor, explained, “I think that one thing I learned is just how important (and sometimes rare) it is to have conversations around writing pedagogy with college instructors—from TAs to professors.” The WAC TA Fellow model treats TAs as future faculty whose pedagogical development is equally as important as that of more senior faculty across campus.

Others expressed specific appreciation for the unique opportunity to work with TAs outside of their individual disciplines. A fellow from 2003 who received their PhD in sociology and now works as the director of service learning at a major research university explained in their survey response, “[T]he TA Fellow was such an amazing opportunity to dig deep into the specifics of how we teach, and at the same time, do that with people from all different disciplines. To explore what writing means in different contexts, and how to make that explicit and teach it, rather than leave it implicit. It gives you a perspective that there are so many ways to do things, and we academics are so wedded to our own silos sometimes, that we don’t even remember that folks in different departments see writing very differently than we do.” Sam, a TA Fellow completing a PhD in theatre, and now an associate professor, shared this

appreciation for the ways being exposed to other disciplines and their writing and communication conventions helped to hone teaching knowledge and practice. He now teaches first-year seminars with students across disciplines and explained the value of being able to make connections across a range of majors. The WAC TA Fellow experience helped reveal nuances across disciplines, putting what may have been taken for granted practices into context and making visible the ways in which these practices have been shaped to fit different pedagogical and disciplinary needs across the curriculum. For TAs who occupy liminal roles in the classroom, serving as both insider and boundary crosser to their discipline (Winzenried), finding these connections among one another helped them to untangle some of the complexities of writing-intensive instruction and to even more deeply develop and refine their teaching expertise.

*Building a teaching community.* In addition to expanding teaching knowledge, the ability to work with TAs across disciplines invoked in some participants a deep appreciation for building community around teaching. Susan, a 2016 fellow who was at the time pursuing her PhD in theatre said, “I suppose the thing that has stuck with me most was how pleasurable it was to be in a community of folks who were passionate about teaching writing—especially across disciplines.” As a first-generation college student, Susan had struggled against feelings of “imposter syndrome” and “a little bit like I’m just trying to catch up to my peers.” The WAC TA Fellow experience was a “refreshing and exciting” opportunity to connect with others and share goals/insights about teaching with writing. Another survey response from a 2010 fellow from sociology explained, “I learned how important communities of practice are to becoming an effective teacher of writing. Joining with colleagues from across the university helped me recognize our common challenges and rewards.” Serving as a WAC TA Fellow offered participants a language for articulating the shared values they felt around teaching. As one survey participant remarked, the TA Fellow position “continued to strengthen my understanding of teaching as a process. I learned a ton from the other fellows.” These findings resonate with and provide additional texture to Rodrigue’s (2013) conclusion that WAC training deepens disciplinary TA’s teaching identities.

The WAC TA Fellow experience even inspired others to seek out similar communities of practice later in their faculty careers. For some cohorts of fellows, these relationships extended beyond the boundaries of the WAC TA training experience. Whether through casual friendship or through joint membership in a writing group, these connections demonstrate, as one participant argued, that “the program fostered long-lasting relationships among alumni” in different disciplines. Susan’s cohort of TA Fellows, for instance, went on to develop “a long-standing relationship” by forming a joint writing group following the conclusion of their WAC TA Fellow duties.

“I felt a little bit like I was finding my people,” she explained. “At a huge research institution that, like, intimidated me...I felt like I had a hard time finding my people, and this was one location where it was like, oh this feels kind of custom made to find, you know, like-minded folks.” Bringing together these small cohorts of TAs enabled these productive communities to form. The fact that they formed around WAC is no-doubt a boon to the field as these TAs continued on to become future faculty at a number of high-profile institutions across the country.

This WAC teaching community provided a place to push back on less rhetorically grounded views of teaching. WAC practitioners have historically fought against models of writing education that privilege grammar and mechanics as the sole markers of writerly success (Russell, 2002). Likewise, the TAs in our study found that the WAC TA Fellow role helped them, like Susan mentioned, to find powerful spaces of belonging, to counter imposter syndrome, and even to push back against what they now see as an unproductive and harmful pedagogical approach. Thinking back to her time as a TA Fellow, Abbey explained, “Because of the experience...I could set aside some of the more toxic teaching practices I saw modeled in other places.” Sam, a 2007 fellow studying theatre research, echoed these sentiments, claiming that his time as a TA fellow “made me a passionate defender of students, and made me dislike instructors who constantly complained about their terrible students.”

*Transitioning from teacher to teacher-trainer, student to faculty.* Several survey respondents, including a sociology PhD, mentioned that their involvement with TA Fellows “was some of the only leadership/training experiences I had as a graduate student.” The WAC TA Fellow role engaged graduate students not only in being trained, but in the powerful leadership role of trainer. In this way, the WAC TA Fellow role provides the kind of TA leadership experience that many Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) initiatives strive for (See Saichaie & Theisen, 2020; Schwaller & Cochran-Miller, 2020; Winter et al., 2018). A theatre and drama PhD, now a teaching professor and an academic advisor, explained that they “first discovered [their] love for teaching teachers and mentoring TAs.” Discovering that passion gave them a sense of “confidence” knowing they had the “skills to be able to help” others “become better pedagogues.” They described their “work as a fellow” having long-lasting effects: “find[ing] its way into” their classroom instruction, presenting at “national conferences about teaching theatre and mentoring TAs,” serving in professional organizations on the topic of teaching, receiving teaching awards and recognition, and “running two pilot programs for student success and retention.”

Similarly, a sociology PhD TA Fellow in 2003 reported that they “now work in faculty development for community engagement,” and they consider their experience as a TA Fellow to be “one of the reasons for my success as a faculty member, and the opportunities I’ve had to benefit from—and now work in—faculty development.”

What's more, the exposure to WAC/WID philosophies and their "variation across the university" as a TA Fellow "has proved very useful," they say, in their current faculty development role: particularly preparing them "for the range of attitudes faculty members have towards faculty development and pedagogical training, which is not always positive! All of these insights I use regularly in my current position." Similarly, acknowledging how training and leadership roles are often a part of faculty careers, a composition studies TA Fellow, now an associate professor, reflected that "It's just good to learn how to train other new teachers," noting that they now "regularly" train new composition instructors.

Former TA Fellows also appreciated the trainer role for the way it extended their "influence." "Being a trainer allowed me to influence many more TAs, to improve the writing experience for students," said a sociology PhD who served as a fellow in 2014 and now is a management and program analyst for the administration for Native Americans. A MS in water resources management who was a TA Fellow in 2013, and now a postdoc, described their enthusiasm and increased investment as a trainer: "I learned that I enjoyed the trainer role, and I found myself wishing for [more] opportunities to engage with writing as a teacher/trainer." "As a trainer," they explained, "I was more enthusiastic about the material than I was as a participant; I was invested in the outcome of the training in a different way than I was as a participant." We take these reflections on the power of experiencing the trainer role to be evidence of the kind of "fly-on-the-wall view of pedagogy in action, without being a direct participant as either a student or instructor" that Cripps et al. (2016, p. 2) identify as an especially impactful benefit of engaging disciplinary TAs in WAC work.

This different, or increased, level of investment as a trainer appeared in the responses of several other participants. A survey respondent who served as a TA Fellow from the MA program in landscape architecture described the value of being "asked to evaluate my teaching approaches or strategies and identify a concrete example that I could share." This kind of "active assessment" of their teaching was a new and challenging task that deepened and strengthened their knowledge of their own teaching practices. Similarly, our interviewees Susan and Manasi provided insights into the value of serving as a trainer. "I think as a trainer I actually learned more than when I was new," reflected Susan, a TA Fellow from theatre studies. That deepened learning, Susan went on, came from the fact that she "felt like an insider (part of the community), and because I was focused less on contributing something worthwhile and instead really listened to all of the great ideas/experiences my fellow TAs had. Also simply preparing for the training really upped my learning game." Manasi concurred, observing that, though she already had significant teaching experience prior to enrolling in her doctoral program in journalism, she was motivated by supporting the "many other TAs" who "were totally new to teaching." Mentoring new TAs and

“[o]rganizing events with meticulous planning” were both valuable takeaways from Manasi’s participation in the trainer role of TA Fellow.

Other respondents described their fellow roles as, one human development and family studies PhD student said, supporting them in “learn[ing] how to transition from student to leader and to be a student educator.” The power of this kind of leadership experience was especially apparent for one of our interviewees, Kyle, now an assistant professor and director of a community education program who described his TA Fellow experience helping him to “reflect and kind of think about why and what kinds of things I was hoping to accomplish and what worked and what didn’t”—a kind of “self-awareness” he took from the experience. Kyle’s reflection on developing leadership skills he took to his faculty career clearly resonates with calls to involve graduate students in the “leadership and administrative” elements of programs designed to prepare future faculty (Winter et al., 2020, p. 5).

What’s more, Kyle reflected on the TA Fellow role being “pivotal” in his “shifting from” student to professor. Citing the fact that graduate students often experience imposter syndrome, Kyle explained how serving as a TA Fellow helped him “go from somebody who wants to do something to somebody who knows that they can do something.” Reflecting on his own teaching practices and “sharing them with other teachers,” and ultimately “see[ing] they were helpful” gave Kyle a deep sense of confidence that “maybe I have something to actually offer, versus just somebody who’s trying to figure out what to do.” In a final interview comment, Kyle expanded on the value of this self-awareness, self-assurance, and sense of purpose: “It was just the first time that I was offered a position where I did feel as though I could take what I had learned and spread it in a way that would have a ripple effect: that it was beyond just the students in my classroom” and might “actually affect the classrooms that I’ll never know, that I’ll never be a part of, but that those TAs would go out and create, and I love that idea.” This “ripple effect,” Kyle said, “was a pivotal thing for me as a grad student” being able to envision a faculty career. Such a “ripple effect” begins by centering deep WAC experience in a TA’s pedagogical and administrative philosophy, which spread outward and forward into their faculty careers. This, we believe, is just the kind of truly powerful payoff that can come from a WAC program’s investment in TAs (a finding that lends more credence to Williams and Rodrigue’s urging for WAC programs to prioritize disciplinary TAs [2016]).

*Creating and using materials and resources.* Many participants said that they continue to refer back to and actively use the materials and resources they both received and designed for the WAC TA training. A 2003 fellow and now a professor of political science at a small liberal arts college continues to use these materials almost twenty years later: “I have a folder in my office called ‘teaching writing’ and all that material is still in there, at my fingertips, to use. It’s been incredibly helpful across the years.”

In fact, continuing to use resources from the training, including the handouts created for the fellows' individual breakout sessions, years later in their careers was the most prevalent trend we found in survey and interview responses.

Still, many others remarked on the value of this program for their CV. A 2013 fellow from sociology and now an associate professor of sociology, remarked, "It was really good leadership practice in the realm of teaching. There really weren't other opportunities like this when I was in grad school. I think it looked good on my CV also, which was useful for the job market." Similarly, Jacob, a former biology WAC TA Fellow, found his materials helpful when going on the job market the semester following his time as a TA Fellow. A 2012 political science TA Fellow said that the TA training was critical to their success on the job market, sharing that they "had tangible experiences I could point to during job interviews where I had taught writing!" For many fellows, it was the direct and authentic experience training teachers and talking about teaching writing that mattered most.

## **Unpacking the Characteristics that Made the WAC TA Fellow Role Valuable for Fellows**

In the previous section, we discussed what influences the WAC TA Fellow role has on graduate students as they serve as TAs and as they go into faculty and non-academic careers. In this section, we explore the characteristics of the fellow role that allow for, or enable, these effects. Particularly given that the WAC TA Fellow role is a relatively small one, and quite a long time ago for many of our respondents, what makes this experience compelling to fellows, and what makes it valuable? What makes it stick, or what makes it, as Sylvia, a PhD from biological sciences who served as a fellow in 2005, calls "a long-lasting positive experience"? We discuss here how funding, recognition, and program leadership make this role so successful.

The \$500 stipend for the WAC TA Fellow role incentivized this position for several TAs. One history PhD graduating in 2021 described being "interested to learn from other TA Fellows to improve" their own teaching and to "pass along some of the things I had learned," but they emphasized that the "\$500 also helped me justify setting aside the time this role required." Likewise, one sociology TA Fellow noted that "the money was a great incentive." Sylvia considered the funding and the benefits she accrued from the fellow experience as more than fair for the work required. "I guess I just look back at that experience, even though it was just a couple of days, and I think I got maybe \$500 for it, it was just, you know, it wasn't much, but the value for it, the cost benefit kind of value is actually pretty high," Sylvia reasoned.

Appreciation for the recognition and honor of the WAC TA Fellow role also appeared in former fellows' responses. That recognition happens at multiple levels. Jacob, a TA for an honors biology course, explained that he agreed to serve as a TA

Fellow primarily due to his deep respect for the course coordinators from that program, who asked him to serve as a fellow. A sense of honor and recognition also stemmed from TA Fellows' sense that their experience and expertise were being valued. "I was honored to take on the leadership role because I grew so much as a teacher as a WAC TA and found the experience to be such a rewarding one," described a Scandinavian studies PhD, now an associate professor and department chair. Sylvia similarly described a sense that, by "being selected as a WAC TA Fellow," that her "input was valued and that I had something worthwhile to share with other student TAs. It was an honor to participate."

While memories of the funding or recognition WAC TA Fellows provided were "hazy" for some, many still vividly recalled the WAC program's leadership. One, now associate professor in political science, clearly remembered the WAC director's "energy, enthusiasm, and support of TAs!" A former fellow and MA in landscape architecture echoed these sentiments, expressing their "respect" for the director and their "excitement and dedication to writing as an art and educational tool that should be accessible to everyone." Sam, likewise, spoke of the WAC facilitators—including the director and the graduate student assistant director—as "great leaders," "mentors," and "sounding boards."

This enthusiastic, supportive leadership manifested, for many former TA Fellows, in what Abbey explained as the "individual attention" provided by WAC facilitators—a very productive "back and forth conversation" about faculty development that she has taken on to her faculty career. "I recall receiving helpful, individualized formative feedback" from WAC facilitators as they prepared their training materials, said a 2010 TA Fellow from psychology, now a professor. "I remember feeling surprised by the level of attention given to my plan, and a consequent sense of confidence that my presentation would be helpful for those who attended my session," they added.

Citing the preparatory meetings with other fellows and WAC facilitators, the MA in landscape architecture expressed their appreciation for WAC facilitators making them "feel welcomed, appreciated" and "set[ting] an environment where I felt quite connected to the other WAC TA Fellows." They attributed this ethos directly to the enthusiasm and personal approach of the WAC director: "I think if [the director's] approach had been more impersonal, the personal connection, support, and encouragement I felt for my other WAC TA Fellows (and that I believe was reciprocated) would not have occurred and would have led to less exciting and dedicated presentations." Finally, a 2013 TA Fellow and current postdoc in water resources management described the power of "one-on-one engagement" provided to prepare the fellows to lead training sessions. They commented on a "specific meeting" to discuss training session plans with the WAC TA assistant director, receiving "thoughtful"



feedback, and “feeling like [the assistant director] valued my ideas for the lesson.” This “collaborative” meeting made them feel “excited about the Fellow role.”

## Concluding Thoughts and Takeaways

The argument could be made that a program like WAC TA Fellows is a “boutique” kind of model. That is, while the WAC TA training at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is attended by roughly 110–120 graduate TAs each year, the WAC TA Fellows role is held by just seven TAs per year—no more than five percent or so of the TAs involved in our training. In a university with roughly 10,000 graduate students at any given time, this number may feel staggeringly small. So, then, what makes this model worthwhile? For one, involving and training TAs to be leaders in WAC training helps grow our numbers of WAC acolytes, ambassadors, and surrogates; once the TA Fellow experience is over, these graduate students return to their home discipline equipped with new WAC knowledge to impart to their colleagues. These effects are, indeed, long-lasting—a finding that shows up in the vivid descriptions of former WAC TA Fellows, some of whom participated in the program roughly twenty years ago.

In addition to being long-lasting, the position is far-reaching, extending out to a significantly larger network of people beyond just those who held the position. This TA Fellow model, as our research has shown, has helped spur the development of multiple sustainable teaching communities over the years—at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and beyond. By emphasizing shared values and a shared enthusiasm for teaching among TA Fellows during the workshopping process, the program was able to foster these strong, ongoing professional relationships. Similar to our participants, we, as WAC assistant directors, found that having these types of relationships in graduate school was extremely valuable for supporting our efforts in the classroom, on the job market, and in our future careers. Notably, though, these were opportunities that would have been very difficult to find on our own, outside of the WAC TA Fellow experience and our engagement with it. The pre-training workshopping stage of WAC TA Fellow training specifically helped model a teaching community environment where participants could share openly about the challenges they face in their writing and teaching—an ethos that TA Fellows brought into the WAC TA training as well. Finally, recruiting and training TA Fellows offers WAC practitioners a way to contribute to preparing future faculty, particularly when there may be few other options available. The exceptional TAs who are recommended for the WAC TA Fellow position have already shown an interest in teaching and are likely to go on to become faculty with teaching responsibilities following their graduate career. For some of these TA Fellows, however, the WAC TA Fellow role was the only training they received on teaching. By involving disciplinary TAs in leadership roles, WAC

practitioners can thus provide much needed, impactful support for those who might have otherwise gone without any explicit pedagogical training.

One of the TA Fellows we interviewed, Monica, was particularly enthusiastic about the potential for this program to be taken up elsewhere, noting, “I would love for it to be modeled at other universities.” We share this belief in the efficacy and value of this particular model for developing and supporting disciplinary TAs in, and through, WAC work. As explored in our second analysis section, the TA Fellow role was influential for a number of reasons: specifically, it provided funding, recognition, individualized attention, and supportive leadership. While other programs that take up this model do not have to mirror ours, we believe that some mix of these four key characteristics should remain constant for ensuring TA support. It’s the combination of these four characteristics that make our program successful. Without funding, WAC TA Fellows lack incentive. Without recognition, the perceived value of the program for one’s career diminishes. Without individualized attention, the WAC principles that we rely on TA Fellows to know may fall to the wayside. And without supportive leadership, the program becomes less sustainable, and the burden of labor placed on the WAC TA Fellows starts to outweigh the benefits of participating.

We could imagine the WAC TA Fellow model being used to train graduate TAs for leading or co-leading one-time or ongoing WAC faculty workshops or WAC consultations. As our research has shown, for a range of TAs with such diverse disciplinary backgrounds, even short-term leadership roles may have significant long-term impacts. Through a WAC TA Fellow model, WAC programs can tap into the powerful talents of experienced disciplinary TAs (following Williams and Rodrigue’s 2016 call). With powerful benefits in terms of building teaching communities, filling gaps in teacher training for future faculty, and fostering positive disciplinary perspectives on writing, this WAC TA Fellow role can positively contribute to disciplinary TAs’ development as teachers, teacher trainers, and professionals, while promoting foundational WAC pedagogy.

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the study participants for sharing their time and experience, the two anonymous reviewers for their formative feedback, *WAC Journal* editors for their guidance and support, and Brad Hughes for his unflinchingly generous mentorship and powerful leadership.

## References

- Artze-Vega, I., Bowdon, M., Emmons, K., Eodice, M., Hess, S., Lamonica, C., & Nelms, G. (2013). Privileging Pedagogy: Composition, Rhetoric, and Faculty Development. *College Composition and Communication*, 65(1), 162–184.

- Austin, A. and McDaniels, M. (2006). "Preparing the professoriate of the future: Graduate student socialization for faculty roles." Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, edited by John Smart, pp. 397–456. Springer.
- Auten, J. and Twigg, M. (2015). "Teaching and learning SoTL: Preparing future faculty in a pedagogy course." *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 3(1). pp. 3–13.
- Border, L. B., ed. (2011). Mapping the Range of Graduate Student Professional Development. *Studies in Graduate and Professional Development*. New Forums Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). Constructing grounded theory (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Cripps, M. J., Hall, J., & Robinson, H. M. (2016). "A way to talk about the institution as opposed to just my field": WAC fellowships and graduate student professional development. *Across the Disciplines*, 13(3).
- Hughes, B. and Miller, E.L. (2018). WAC seminar participants as surrogate WAC consultants: Disciplinary faculty developing and deploying WAC expertise. *The WAC Journal*, 29, 7–41. [https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/journal/vol29/hughes\\_miller.pdf](https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/journal/vol29/hughes_miller.pdf)
- Kalish, A.S., Robinson, S., Border, L., Chandler, E., Connolly, M., Eaton, L.J, Gilmore, J. (2011). "Steps toward a framework for an intended curriculum for graduate and professional students: How we talk about what we do." In *Mapping the Range of Graduate Student Professional Development, Studies in Graduate and Professional Development*, edited by L. B. Border, New Forums Press, pp. 163–173.
- LaFrance, M. (2015). Making visible labor issues in writing across the curriculum: A call for research. *College Composition and Communication*, 67(1), A13–A16.
- LaFrance, M. and Russell, A. (2018). "Preparing Writing Studies graduate students within authentic WAC-Contexts: A research methods course and WAC program review cross-over project as a critical site of situated learning." *The WAC Journal*, 29, pp. 207–229.
- Macauley, W., Anglesey, A. Edwards, B., Lambrecht, K., and Lovas, P., Eds. (2021). *Standing at the Threshold: Working through Liminality in the Composition and Rhetoric TAs*hip. University Press of Colorado.
- Richlin L. and Essington, A. (2004). "Faculty learning communities for preparing future faculty." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 97, pp. 149–157.
- Rodrigue, T. K. (2012). The (in)visible world of teaching assistants in the disciplines: Preparing TAs to teach writing. *Across the Disciplines*, 9(1). <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/articles/rodrigue2012.pdf>
- Rodrigue, T. K. (2013). Listening across the curriculum: What disciplinary TAs can teach us about TA professional development in the teaching of writing. *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*, 2(2). <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wtel/vol2/iss2/15/>
- Rozaitis, B., Baepler, P., Gonzalez, A., Ching, P, Wingert, D., & Alexander, I.D. (2020). "Preparing future faculty: Pedagogical practice in graduate School." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 163. pp. 35–43.

- Russell, D. (2002). *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History*. 2nd ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.
- Saichaie, K. and Theisen C. H. (2020). "Editors' notes." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 163. pp. 7–12.
- Schwaller, E.J. and Miller-Cochran, S. (2020). "Writing pedagogy education: Preparing and professionalizing graduate students as writing instructors." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 163. pp. 65–72.
- Williams, A. & Rodrigue, T. (2016, September 30). TAs and the teaching of writing across the curriculum: Introduction. *Across the Disciplines*, 13(3).
- Winter, K., Kent, J., & Bradshaw, R. (2018). Preparing future faculty: A framework for design and evaluation at the university level. Council of Graduate Schools.
- Winzenried, M. A. (2016, September 30). Brokering disciplinary writing: TAs and the teaching of writing across the disciplines. *Across the Disciplines*, 13(3).

## Appendix A

### Survey

Thank you very much for completing this survey about your experiences as a WAC TA Fellow (helping to lead the WAC TA training at \_\_\_\_\_ alongside \_\_\_\_\_ and the Writing Across the Curriculum program).

This IRB-approved study seeks to learn more about the potential effects and value of this opportunity for Teaching Assistants (TAs) across disciplines.

The survey below should only take about 15 minutes or so to answer. Your answers will be entirely anonymous. The last question on the survey asks if you would be willing to participate in an entirely optional follow-up interview (just 20 minutes), expanding on your survey responses. If you choose "yes," you'll be contacted via the email you provide.

Feel free to reach out to the researcher, \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you again for your time and participation!

1. What year did you graduate (or do you expect to graduate) from \_\_\_\_\_?
2. What program are/were you enrolled in?
3. What is your current occupation (or most recent or significant post-graduate employment)?

4. Have you done any teaching with writing since acting as a WAC TA Fellow? If so, what kinds of teaching?
5. If you recall, could you explain why you decided to take on the WAC TA Fellow leadership role?
6. Describe one or two vivid memories of your time as a WAC TA Fellow at \_\_\_\_\_ (preparing for the event with \_\_\_\_\_ & the WAC program, leading a breakout session in the training for new TAs, participating in the Q&A panel with other WAC TA fellows, facilitating informal discussion groups with new TAs).
7. What, if anything, do you think you learned from being in the trainer role as a WAC TA Fellow, versus the participant/new TA role?
8. How did the role of WAC TA Fellow fit into, or compare to, other training / teaching / leadership experiences you had as a graduate student?
9. How, if at all, do you think your experience as a WAC TA Fellow has contributed to, or informed, any of your subsequent work (teaching, administrative or leadership work, etc.)?
10. Are there any other comments you wish to make about the WAC TA Fellow role or your experience with it?
11. OPTIONAL: Would you be willing to participate in a roughly 20-minute interview via Zoom about your experiences as a WAC TA Fellow?