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What should first-year writing look like around the United States based on current writing studies research? Edward M. White’s similar question on the Writing Program Administrators listserv (WPA-L) in 1996 led to a collaborative effort by some 240 faculty to answer this question. In 2000, the Council of Writing Program Administrators adopted the resulting document, the WPA Outcomes Statement (OS), which set forth common outcomes for first-year writing courses across the U.S. Since then, administrators, WPAs, university faculty, writing instructors, and even students have scrutinized this text. In 2005, The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement presented the background and many of the conversations happening about the OS. Susanmarie Harrington states in the introduction to this volume, “The dialogue must continue” (xix), indicating the need for WPAs and writing instructors in particular to continue discussions about national outcomes for first-year writing instruction. The WPA Outcomes Statement: A Decade Later does just that, illustrating uses and critiques of the OS more than fifteen years after Edward White’s initial question and continuing the conversation about this important document.

The introduction to The WPA Outcomes Statement claims that it does not seek to repeat the work done in The Outcomes Book of outlining the history and background of the OS. Instead, this volume serves as a “record of how the WPA OS has been adopted, adapted, and modified, and the ways in which the WPA OS is moving outward to affect other parts of the university and university—or college-level—writing instruction” (xii). To this end, The WPA Outcomes Statement offers twenty essays organized into three sections, each offering new perspectives on how the OS has been used and in what ways it needs to evolve in order to reflect current research about best practices for first-year college writing. Although there are still many points of difference in first-year writing programs, the OS serves as an important document to codify how composition scholarship can be incorporated into institutional and programmatic decisions about writing instruction. The WPA Outcomes Statement presents readers with different ways the OS has been used to support the development and growth of writing programs as well as possible revisions to strengthen the document.
Part one, “Adapting the WPA OS to Develop Curriculum,” includes seven perspectives on the OS and curricular development. Debra Frank Dew’s “CWPA Outcomes Statement as Heuristic for Inventing Writing-about-Writing Curricula” identifies the OS as a heuristic to support writing-about-writing approaches and help students build transferable writing knowledge. “The Politics of Pedagogy: The Outcomes Statement and Basic Writing” by Wendy Olsen insightfully outlines how the OS reinforces the value of basic writing and articulates connections between basic writing and first-year writing. Kimberly Harrison explains how the OS helped one writing program transition from literature-based first-year writing courses to rhetoric-based courses in “Building a Writing Program with the WPA Outcomes: Authority, Ethos, and Professional Identity.” Teresa Grettano, Rebecca Ingalls, and Tracy Ann Morse’s valuable contribution, “The Perilous Vision of the Outcomes Statement,” complicates Harrison’s optimism by emphasizing the limitations of the OS on writing program development, including the possible alienation of faculty who don’t identify with rhetoric and composition. “The Outcomes Statement as Support for Teacher Creativity: Applying the WPA OS to Develop Assignments” by Sherry Rankins-Robertson explains how the OS can be used to align writing assignments with outcomes. Broadening the lens, Doug Sweet argues in “Released from the Ghost of Platonic Idealism: How the Outcomes Statement Affirms Rhetorical Curricula” that the OS represents an epistemology of writing that highlights deliberative rhetoric. Finally, Paul Anderson, Chris M. Anson, Martha Townsend, and Kathleen Blake Yancey ask readers to consider what a similar statement for writing across the curriculum programs would look like and why it is needed in “Beyond Composition: Developing a National Outcomes Statement for Writing Across the Curriculum.” Taken together, the essays in this section demonstrate some of the advantages and limitations when using the OS to impact curricular developments. Olsen’s essay in particular illustrates how the OS can be used to argue for a particular curriculum based on best practices and to create more vertical alignment between writing courses, which positively aligns the writing instruction students receive at different levels.

The eight essays in part two, “Applying the WPA OS to Enact Programmatic, Institutional, and Disciplinary Change,” ask readers to consider how the OS can be used for broader change. Craig Jacobsen, Susan Miller-Cochran, and Shelley Rodrigo in “The WPA Outcomes Statement and Disciplinary Authority” explain how the ethos of the OS supported curricular revisions in a ten-campus community college district. Stephen Wilhoit thoughtfully examines how the OS helped to create “deep change” in the way faculty across the curriculum think about writing in “Achieving a Lasting Impact on Faculty Teaching: Using the WPA Outcomes Statement to Develop an Extended
WID Seminar.” In “Building Clout in Non-Program Programs by Using the Outcomes Statement,” Karen Bishop Morris and Lizbeth A. Bryant explain how the OS reinforced the authority of their “non-program program,” or a program that lacks the institutional ethos to impact decisions about the program. Similarly, Darsie Bowden’s “Reframing the Conversation: Can the Outcomes Statement Help?” asks WPAs to use the OS to quickly intervene in opportunities to reframe conversations about writing and writing pedagogy. In “The WPA Outcomes Statement: The View from Australia,” Susan Thomas relates how the OS helped articulate first-year writing in Australia and strengthened this enterprise. Morgan Gresham’s “Ripple Effect: Adopting and Adapting the WPA Outcomes” provides—like Grettano, Ingalls, and Morse—a moment of reflection about potential problems with the OS, describing how it both helped establish an eportfolio assessment and created conflicts with contingent faculty fearful of change. Deirdre Pettipiece and Justin Everett further describe in “Ethos and Topoi: Using the Outcomes Statement Rhetorically To Achieve the Centrality and Autonomy of Writing Programs” how the OS can create both possibilities and dissent in writing programs, which ultimately split their writing program from the English department. Finally, J. S. Dunn et al. recount in “Adoption, Adaptation, Revision: Waves of Collaborative Change at a Large University Writing Program” how the OS has been used and adapted in various ways through different stages of one writing program’s development. These essays show how the OS transforms to support different efforts that strengthen writing programs. The OS does not unilaterally create consensus within writing programs about the direction first-year writing should take; instead, it provides a touchstone for changes that locally can look very different.

Finally, the five essays in part three, “Cultivating the Intellectual Enrichment of the WPA OS through Critique,” urge readers to see the OS as a living, evolving document. Paul Kei Matsuda and Ryan Skinnell’s “Considering the Impact of the WPA Outcomes Statement on Second Language Writers” critiques the monolingual assumptions undergirding the OS, arguing that all students would benefit from a global context. In “Competing Discourses within the WPA Outcomes Statement” Judy Holiday claims that “little rhetoric,” or language use in specific situations, needs to be integrated under “big rhetoric,” or language use in specific social and historical contexts, in both the OS and writing programs. In “Is Rhetorical Knowledge the Über-Outcome?” Barry M. Maid and Barbara J. D’Angelo explain their adaption of the OS for a technical communication program and the prominence of rhetorical knowledge outcomes in students’ reflections, asking if, in fact, this is a role rhetorical knowledge should play. Michael Callaway argues in “The WPA Learning Outcomes: What Role Should Technology Play?” that the technology plank of the OS, added in 2008, inadequately addresses the
complex rhetorical situations of writing on screen. Finally, Emily Isaacs and Melinda Knight’s “Assessing the Impact of the Outcomes Statement” presents sobering findings; out of 101 institutions they studied, only 15 have programs or courses that align with the OS and, generally, “the WPA OS has not been broadly adopted or even adapted by our nation’s colleges and universities” (300). The OS has space to evolve as it attempts to satisfy the diverse interests of many scholars and to provide guidance for first-year writing programs, but the WPA community must ultimately resolve these different directions into a document that remains functional.

Isaacs and Knight’s conclusions about the lack of attention to the OS call into question its prominence, particularly as the OS has received attention from many composition scholars. As we participate in conversations about the OS, there are fundamental questions to answer. First, do Isaacs and Knight’s conclusions hold up with larger samples of institutions and in institutions we are familiar with? Second, if so, do we need to focus more on promoting the OS to these institutions and programs? The conversations represented in The WPA Outcomes Statement valuably demonstrate various ways the OS can be used and adapted. However, a crucial conversation to begin is how writing programs work toward or fight against the idea of universal outcomes. By and large, authors in this collection do not resist the OS as a set of national outcomes that should guide their writing programs. The relatively small number of writing programs that have adopted or adapted the OS indicates that many are either unfamiliar with the OS or resist the standardization that it represents. The creators of this document actively sought to create a set of outcomes that writing programs could adapt to their local conditions, but the OS still offers particular perspectives about first-year writing that are not universally accepted or taught. This book illustrates some of the work that has already been done with the OS and asks us to consider what work is left to do in order for the OS to reach its potential as a representation of national outcomes for first-year writing.

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Work Cited