

The WPA's Progress: A Survey, Story and Commentary on the Career Patterns of Writing Program Administrators

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How many years have you served as a WPA?

5.97 years (average) .5 to 25 years (range)

At what kind of institution do you serve?

3% two-year college 31% four-year college 66% university
69% public 31% private

Do you have tenure?

76% yes 17% no 7% NA

During the past two years I have surveyed members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators about their career patterns, asking questions about academic training, job responsibilities, rank and tenure patterns, and professional goals.¹ My motives for conducting this survey were mixed: as an officer of WPA, I wanted to know more about the membership I served; as a rank-and-file member, I wanted to contribute to the research on program administration that our constitution lists as a goal; as an untenured WPA, I wanted to know if all the horror stories were true; and as a member of an English department, I wanted to know if the much-debated split between English and composition as disciplines had any basis in the organization of colleges and universities.

What I present here are the results of that survey—formulated both as statistical data and as an archetypal history, a kind of "WPA's Progress" which, if not exactly like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* from the Slough of Despond to the Celestial City, at least depicts a pattern of self-education and growth. With the statistics and archetypal history, I include (à la Bunyan) an interpretive gloss that focuses on key episodes and raises crucial questions about the relations of WPAs to English departments. Throughout I use the pronoun "he" because the majority of respondents (63%) were male.

I. The WPA's Career: Some Statistics and a Story

What degree do you hold? in what field(s)?

89% Ph.D. 3% D.A. 3% Ed.D. 5% M.A.
80% English 8% Education 5% Comp. Lit. 7% Other

The typical WPA begins his academic career by taking a B.A. in English and then proceeding on a more or less predictable course: M.A. in English, Ph.D. in English, initial appointment as an instructor or assistant professor of English. A few WPAs take Ph.D.s in other disciplines—in education, rhetoric, linguistics, even history or psychology. But most WPAs trace their academic origins to English departments. The typical WPA, moreover, specializes in a traditional field of English or American literature, writing his dissertation on a subject (to list only the most common) in medieval studies (20%), Victorian (15%), or American literature (20%). Some of the newest WPAs list rhetoric as a specialty (15%), but the typical WPA still concentrates in a field of literature, perhaps combining it with studies in composition.

After (or sometimes while) completing the Ph.D., the WPA takes a faculty position and begins a combination of administration and teaching that demands an expertise in both composition and literature. Fully 78% of the WPAs surveyed hold faculty positions in English and serve within the regular ranks of assistant, associate, or full professor. Another 12% hold faculty appointments in departments other than English (communications, education, developmental studies, or simply "the Writing Program"). Only 10% hold primarily administrative appointments attached to a dean's office or an independent writing program. Predictably, then, the teaching assignment of the typical WPA follows the curricular patterns of the English department:

In addition to administration, what classes do you teach?
86% freshman comp 46% advanced comp
69% literature 52% graduate course

After freshman composition, in other words, the most common teaching assignment that the WPA assumes is a literature course. This pedagogical fact holds true even for former WPAs who no longer head writing programs: 68% of ex-WPAs teach literature, though many have moved into upper echelons of the administration.

While the WPA teaches his courses in composition and literature, he also (as we all know) administers a writing program—a program that, more often than not, includes responsibility for freshman English as well as advanced composition, the writing center, writing across the curriculum, and peer tutoring.

What are your responsibilities as an administrator?
Check all that apply.
83% freshman composition 64% writing center
46% advanced composition 46% peer tutoring
49% writing across the curriculum 54% other

The typical WPA is, in effect, a writing *programs* administrator, the "other" of his job description covering a multitude of serious responsibilities: directing creative, business, or technical writing; running the graduate program; supervising TAs; and so on. Typically, the WPA receives course reductions for these administrative tasks (one per semester), but typically, too, he works harder than his colleagues in English who teach and publish only. Approximately half of the WPAs surveyed said their workloads were comparable to those of faculty who were teaching only. Another half, however, said they worked harder—much harder, 50% harder.

How does your workload compare with that of your colleagues?
50% more 41% same 9% less

"Frankly," said one respondent, my workload "is considerably heavier and a 12-month commitment." Said another: "It's much heavier, more varied, with more committee work and a greater variety of contacts with people. I'm reasonably sure I write more than they [regular faculty] do every week, but . . . the written work is quite varied."

The issue of a WPA's workload involves not simply a time commitment, but the relation of that commitment to academic success. "My workload is considerably heavier," one WPA pointed out, "but that's not the real difference. My peers' teaching hours contribute more directly to publication." Another added: "[My] job [has] always entailed much more service work—twice as much, if not more; yet I am expected to publish or perish exactly as 'regular' faculty [are], and I have the disadvantage that most of what I publish is in rhetoric and composition and therefore not as highly respected as literary criticism."

Having raised the spectre of publication, we now proceed to that phase of the WPA's story that includes episodes of evaluation, promotion, and tenure. In the genre of spiritual autobiography, this might be called the "dark night of the soul"; were I to sustain the comparison with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, I might make it parallel to Christian's imprisonment in the Doubting Castle by the Giant Despair. (Christian and Hopeful are told, you recall, that "since they were never like to come out of that place, their only way would be forthwith to make an end of themselves, either with knife, halter, or poison.")

In fact, many responses to my questions about evaluation included accounts of injustice and despair.

How and by whom is your work as a WPA evaluated?
Is this procedure standard for (or similar to) that used for other faculty and administrators at your institution?

"The criteria used to decide my tenure," one wrote, "were those standard for all faculty: teaching, service, and publication—except that composition publications were tainted, and I had to argue forcibly for their validity." Similarly, another WPA complained that, although the criteria for tenure were identical, he "had to overcome prejudice against composition [as a] specialty":

Teaching quality never mattered (unless it would have been bad). Administrative talent, energy, innovation, quality . . . ultimately didn't matter, and the only way these would have mattered would have been if any had been bad (and "bad" could well have been only as assessed by key powerful faculty, by whimsical criteria). What mattered was publication, publication, and more publication.

Despite such accounts of injustice, the plot of the archetypal WPA is not one of professional failure but of success, not one of resistance from English faculty but of support and fair play.

If you hold a faculty position, do you now have tenure?
82% yes 18% no

If "no," is tenure a possibility in the future?
80% yes 20% no

According to the survey, most WPAs now hold tenure or expect to receive it soon.² Even if we exclude former WPAs from the statistics, virtually all of whom have tenure, the percentage of tenured WPAs is high: 73%. Moreover, for every episode of injustice reported by one WPA, another describes support from his colleagues and administration. "Being writing director at a 4-year college," one respondent noted, "probably helped me get tenure, [although] it wouldn't have helped so much at the university where I directed E.O.P. Rhetoric." Yet from WPAs at major universities, the comments also suggest that directing a writing program can be an asset:

Scholarship, service, and teaching were the areas evaluated; they are the same for all faculty, but I believe that service was given greater weight in my case than it generally is for other faculty members.

My service helped, and the department considers publication in composition as valuable as publication in literature.

[The promotion criteria are] publication and administrative ability and curricular design—the same as for other faculty. No: the publication requirement was lower for me. It is for the [department] chair, too.

Such positive comments, taken with the negative, suggest that a WPA may confront some difficulty in defining and agreeing upon tenure criteria with the English department. But, in as many cases as not, agreement is reached, and the WPA receives a fair evaluation of his achievements.

It is admittedly difficult to construct a composite plot from these crucial episodes in personal histories: although the results may be similar (82% with a positive tenure vote), the ways and means are not. Yet if newly-appointed WPAs can learn anything from their predecessors' careers, it is (1) that they should define criteria for tenure and promotion *before* they come up for review and (2) that they should try to publish in both composition and literature if they hold appointments in English departments where they regularly teach literature courses. One wise WPA explained, for instance, that although she was judged by the same tenure criteria as her colleagues and although her work as a WPA counted as service, she had asked for a written job description when she was hired; it stated that, "given her 'service' duties, she would not be expected to produce a book for tenure." "All my articles but one," she noted, "were in composition studies, and although some senior colleagues balked, the departmental majority voted me tenure. I might add that I was and still am one of the most published members of the department."

One way to avoid departmental balking is to publish in both composition and literature—as, indeed, many successful WPAs have done, recognizing that "service to the entire college community is an advantage," but so is "publishing literary criticism." Publishing literary criticism may be defined by some as submitting to the enemy's terms, but we should remember, in the words of Pogo, "we have met the enemy, and they are us": 85% of the WPAs surveyed hold Ph.D. s in English or Comparative Literature; 78% hold appointments in departments of English; 69% teach literature as part of their regular course assignments. If WPAs publish in literary fields as well as in rhetoric and composition, it may be that they do so to fulfill an oft-neglected ideal of the profession: to integrate teaching with scholarship and research. The problem in the profession is not the WPA who publishes in both composition and literary studies; the problem is the English faculty member who teaches both, but ignores the scholarly writing in the former field.

If we can conclude anything, then, about the typical WPA's experience with tenure, it is that he survives, escapes the clutches of the Giant Despair, and to his credit.³ Tenure does not represent, however, the conclusion to the WPA's story. We have not reached the Celestial City. There are other episodes to record after service as a WPA.

II. The (Ex)WPA's Story: Some Late Episodes

Over a third of the names on the 1981 membership list are now former WPA's— "has beens," if you will.

Are you now or were you formerly a WPA?
64% presently 36% formerly

How many years did you serve as a WPA?
6.6 years (average) 3-25 years (range)

What title do you now hold?
9% Assistant Professor 26% Professor
52% Associate Professor 13% Dean or Provost

The responses of former WPAs to questions about years of service, changes in status, and professional goals suggest that not all WPAs stay in their jobs forever. Most move on to other responsibilities: to assume positions as deans and provosts, to chair English departments, to direct graduate programs in writing, or (at least) to enjoy the rank of tenured full professor. With one exception, all of the former WPAs surveyed have tenure; many are full professors; over half divide their teaching between graduate courses in rhetoric and undergraduate seminars in literature and composition.

This career pattern raises an important question:

Do you think writing programs are better served by WPAs who remain in their jobs permanently or by WPAs who rotate in and out from other faculty or staff positions?

Predictably, over half of the former WPAs preferred rotation, with the rest equivocating or suggesting semi-permanence with time away from the job for research or full-time teaching. Current WPAs disagreed on this question, with equal numbers voting for permanence, semi-permanence, and rotation. One common defense of rotation is "burn-out." "Burn-out is 5 years," wrote one ex-WPA; "6-10 years max," wrote another. Burnout is not, however, the most common reason for rotation. The typical WPA rotates *out* of the director's position and *into* another position of academic service because he believes that younger colleagues deserve a chance to take command of the writing program, or that writing programs flourish with fresh infusions of ideas, or that the best pattern for a WPA is "to develop assistants and learn to delegate authority, to show the work rather than to try to do it all." No WPA, past or present, defended rotation for its own sake: "Rotation is better assuming the availability of more than one knowledgeable faculty member; rotation from knowledge to ignorance is no help."

III. The WPA's "Progress": Some Conclusions

What the career patterns of WPA members suggest, in sum, is that program directors can succeed in traditional academic terms *by doing their jobs* and that they can stay happily and productively in those jobs or, if they choose, move out of them into other academic ranks. What this summary misses, however, are some other conclusions that might be drawn from this archetypal WPA's history.

First (false) conclusion: By culling names from the 1981 membership list, this survey represents professional WPAs who still hold academic positions. It in no way represents those former writing directors who have quit (or lost) their positions, nor does it account for thousands of writing teachers who, too frequently, struggle for full-time employment.⁴ The progress my story traces cannot thus be read as the pattern of the writing profession as a whole.

Second (valid) conclusion: Although it is commonplace to narrate the history of writing programs as a movement away from departments of English, the facts given by WPAs do not support this view. We all know writing programs that are independent of English, removed from any departmental affiliation or control. Nevertheless, most WPAs and their programs retain close ties with English: both are *in* English. This relation seems to hold true whether the WPA is a long-established director or a newly-appointed Ph.D.

In matters of academic training, for instance, there is little difference between old and new WPAs: in the past, most WPAs received degrees in English (81%); today, most WPAs still take degrees in English (79%). In departmental appointments, there is no difference: 84.2% of former WPAs hold positions in English; 83.8% of current WPAs hold similar positions. Only in matters of teaching does there seem to be a significant change: 53% of former WPAs now teach graduate courses in rhetoric or composition studies, a statistic beyond what most of us would have hoped for a few years ago. When E. D. Hirsch published his now-famous "Remarks on Composition to the Yale English Department" in 1979, very few of his readers expected graduate faculty to take seriously his suggestion that "a good Ph.D. program in English ought to reflect the composite character of our profession and turn out professors of rhetoric *and* belles lettres."⁵ Yet many of Hirsch's readers have now committed themselves and their graduate programs to that "composite character," and we can gauge the seriousness of that commitment from the graduate teaching assignments of older WPAs and from the training of the newest WPAs who mention that, while they hold Ph.D. s in English, they have specialized in both a literary field and composition studies.

Third (indeterminate) conclusion: We currently find ourselves in a debate over composition as a part of English studies versus composition as a separate discipline.⁶ The arguments for the latter rely on recent professional trends: the creation of writing programs distinct from English departments, the creation and growing respectability of journals in composition, the growth of professional conventions like CCCC. If we consider other professional trends, however, we will discover a counterargument. In the past few years, English departments have not only added WPAs to their ranks; they have also validated the WPAs teaching and research in composition as tenurable contributions to the profession, and they have added courses in rhetoric and composition to the graduate curriculum. English departments may no longer be widening the gap between literature and composition. As it turns out, they may be incorporating composition into the larger discipline of English studies, a discipline that includes not just literary history, but rhetorical theory and composition research as well. Where we end up as WPAs—within English studies or someplace else—is a matter for time to tell.

Notes

¹These percentages represent the responses of 59 WPAs who completed a 1985 survey of career patterns and job responsibilities. The survey was mailed to 100 WPAs randomly selected from the 1981 membership list and distributed also at the MLA and CCCC sessions sponsored by WPA. I wish to thank those WPAs who completed the survey or discussed its implications with me. "NA" means "no answer"; for the third question, this response came from WPAs who either held administrative positions for which tenure was not possible or who taught at institutions where tenure was not granted to any faculty.

²In a survey submitted to the Modern Language Association, *Report on the 1983-84 Survey of U.S. English Programs*, Bettina Huber similarly notes that "three-quarters of the faculty heading Freshman Writing Programs have tenure."

³Associate professors outnumber all other ranks and titles among WPA members: 44%, compared to 20% for assistant professors, 20% for full professors, and 10% for deans, provosts, and vice-presidents combined.

⁴See Donald A. McQuade, "The Case of the Migrant Workers," *WPA*, 5 (Fall, 1981), 29-34.

⁵"Remarks on Composition to the Yale English Department," *ADE Bulletin*, No. 62 (1979), 65.

⁶See esp. Maxine Hairston's "Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections," *CCC*, 36 (1985), 272-82.

