

Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA

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Fortunately, the first time I encountered truly naked power as a WPA I was ready for it. Not consciously, I must add. But I had already been an English department chair for nine years, and then a statewide administrator in halls where nobody pretended (as they do on campus) that everyone is powerless. So I had absorbed from the atmosphere certain lessons: recognize the fact that all administration deals in power; power games demand aggressive players; assert that you have power (even if you don't) and you can often wield it.

I was now back on campus, coordinating a large-scale Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) program, with a wide range of responsibilities. And the Dean of Humanities had just let me know that I would be losing all assigned time, all clerical support, all faculty development money, even the pittance of a Xerox budget that had been part of the deal when I took the job. Without these funds, the program would fragment and then disappear.

"You can't do that!" I protested. "The budget for the program was designated by the university and can't be used for other things."

The dean was practiced. He knew that WPAs are normally powerless and that the WAC program (since it is outside of the departmental power structure) had no real way to fight back. He also knew that he was the administrator who was supposed to fight for my program, and he was knifing me in the back.

"I knew you'd be upset," he went on soothingly. "But this was all decided at the Chairs' Meeting. With every department growing and the budget holding still, the chairs decided that they needed that budget more than you did."

Another fact of power (in universities as well as in foreign relations) is that its most arbitrary use is always presented as if it were the most reasonable and logical consequence of facts out of anyone's control. In addition, the power stroke is supposed to have overwhelming support as a *fait accompli*. Despite myself, I had to admire the skill with which the dean was closing down all routes of opposition.

Like most WAC programs, ours was kept at some distance from the English department, so that we could demonstrate that writing was the concern of the whole faculty. But my good friend the English Department Chair was still supposed to keep an eye out to protect WAC. That was, however, another lesson I had picked up: when friendship or even professional loyalty and self-interest conflict, self-interest always wins. I wondered briefly what she would say, soothingly, to me when I next saw her. Meanwhile, I was very angry with the dean.

"Does that mean you lied to me when you said that Humanities would look after the WAC program?" I said.

"Don't fly off the handle, now," he replied, turning away. "I said I'd do all I could to support the program. And I have."

The problem was clear. The University had funneled its support for the WAC program in the most logical direction, through the School of Humanities. The School had both autonomy and democracy in allocating its funds. But all power resided with the deans and the department chairs, and every chair's principal allegiance was to his or her department, so programs that were outside of departments simply had no say in how resources got spent. The problem was not really personal, though I felt aggrieved and angry at the dean and the chair; it was institutional. There was no way to fight back within the school, but institutional problems are the main business of central administration. I started calling central administrators.

I hit pay dirt on my second call. We had a new dean of undergraduate studies, a clever and ambitious fellow who was ready to talk. I went right over.

"Here you are," I said, after a few opening pleasantries, "a dean of undergraduate studies, without an undergraduate study to your name. How would you like to take our WAC program under your wing?"

I saw a glint in his eye. The only budget he had at the time was for his own office, and he was looking for ways to expand his role in the university. I told him the sad tale of what the dean of Humanities and the chairs in the school had done to WAC.

"It was inevitable," I went on. "How can the WAC program compete with the Art department for funds? Or even with the German department?"

We need to get out of the departmental competition altogether. Your office is the natural one."

He agreed, and set up an appointment for us with the Academic Vice President on the spot. Two days later, the WAC program was transferred, with its budget intact, out of Humanities to the Office of Undergraduate Studies. During the course of that year, incidentally, that Office gathered unto itself the Learning Center (from Student Affairs), the Advising Center (a new program), the moribund Honors program, and a handful of other programs that needed a strong administrative advocate and a safe haven for their funds. Support for WAC has since continued to grow. That dean thanks me for helping his empire expand, and he is the steady advocate of WAC in administrative circles that the program must have. My Humanities dean wasn't soothing nor very friendly for some time. (He has since departed; shrewd and unscrupulous deans rise rapidly.) But he never attacked the writing program again; I was happier with his respect than I was with his useless soothing patronization.

This experience has important general implications. When I listen to new WPAs at the WPA summer workshops, I realize that power and the various uses of power are centrally important to most WPAs—but most of them are not only unaware of that fact, but resistant to it. We are writers, almost by definition against the establishment, hostile to the powers that be, opposed to that dread monster, "the Administration." Yet, as WPAs, we somehow find ourselves part of what we abhor: hiring and firing, evaluating and scheduling, fobbing off student complaints, and doing a hundred other administrative jobs, including the manipulation of power to protect our programs. Sometimes it seems better not to think about it, about power, about our own place in the power structure. Better just to stay with a conviction of our own powerlessness, amply affirmed by the deans and department chairs who (it appears) have *real* power.

But my campus experience made inescapable the fact that my job as WPA included being canny with power; the WAC program would have been doomed if I had not fought back against that "real power" and defeated it. I had discovered a kind of power that does not appear in flow charts, power that most WPAs have, and I was able to use it to save the program. What I did was to refuse to accept the condition of powerlessness. As a program director, I was figuratively able to pick up the WAC program, rescue it from dean abuse, and place it in a new home. In fact, I had more power than the dean of Humanities, though none of it was official. I had,

appropriately enough for a writing teacher, empowered myself (a move Olson and Moxley propose for all WPAs).

Of course, it helped to be a tenured professor who knew the ropes. But I am convinced that any WPA could have done what I did. We must empower ourselves in order to do our jobs.

WPAs in general live schizophrenically, hating power yet wielding it, devoid of official power (for the most part) yet responsible for large and complex programs. Many are appointed for rotating terms by English department chairs who, as Olson and Moxley have shown, appreciate us principally for our accessibility and ability to communicate, that is, for our ability to keep things nicely under control without exerting any real authority. But the situation of most WPAs is one more or less under siege, and we had better take stock of the power arrayed against us, the power we have to fight for our programs, or we will not be doing our jobs. If we really don't want to deal in power, we had better step aside, or we will be doing more harm than good.

To understand our situations, we need to assess where the enemies of our program lurk, what their motives and weapons are, and how we can marshal forces to combat them. We also need to see where our allies are and find out ways to strengthen them and to keep them friendly. If these metaphors sound overly military and Machiavellian, you are either new to administration, or you act instinctively in ways that you prefer not to recognize.

The Enemies of Writing Programs

We can divide the enemies of writing programs into two groups: the natural antagonists of any program that uses scarce resources (that is to say, any department or school that does not see writing as essential to its own concerns), and the elitist opponents of writing in particular, those who as a matter of principle see the writing program as an inappropriate or low-priority use of resources. I much prefer to encounter the natural predators than the people of principle.

The natural antagonists of all programs other than their own are relatively easy to deal with; you need only be alert to the usual attacks on funds for writing: upon small class size, decent salaries for writing teachers, and the Xerox budget, and you can face them down. (My dean of Humanities was an extreme case of this kind.) This means, of course, that

you need to have someone representing the interests of the writing program when the resource allocations are made, preferably someone whose self-interest has some stake in the writing program. (This is why I had to move our WAC program when it became clear that those who were supposed to represent our interests were more interested in dismembering than promoting the program.) A very few writing programs have their own budget lines and are recognized as financial entities, but most of us must depend upon English chairs and school deans to look after the program. A careful WPA will use the three basic weapons of bureaucracy to deal with these bureaucratic foes: good arguments, good data, and good allies, mixed with caution and cunning.

The good arguments come easily to WPAs: the historical value of writing and rhetoric, the dismal state of freshman writing skill, the need for writing reinforcement across the disciplines, the sheer difficulty of writing well, the relation of writing to reading and critical thinking, the role of writing in all active learning, the need for small classes so that writing can be assigned and responded to, and so on. The powerful arguments for writing programs will persuade (and persuade again—the battle is never won) most of the natural antagonists, who will turn their greedy eyes to less important programs. Those who will not be persuaded must be circumvented.

The need for good data is less obvious, but careful WPAs will have on hand the entrance or placement test scores of freshmen, the drop-out rates for freshmen taking regular or remedial writing, the number of visits a month to the Writing Center, the number of students affected by the WAC program, the amount of time spent responding to student papers by the average writing teacher, the amount of writing done on the job by graduates, and other handy numbers. And I have already spoken to the crucial importance of good allies, particularly in the administrative chain of command. Routine bureaucratic weapons will usually prevail in routine bureaucratic skirmishes.

But the second group of enemies, those who oppose college writing instruction on principle, is much more difficult to handle. They have a view of writing as mechanics (or something equally elementary), or as a gift of the muse (or something equally mystical). In either case, for them, arguments, data, and allies are irrelevant; these are elitists or others living in a fantasy world, and they believe deeply that writing programs are not a proper part of higher education. Often (but by no means always) housed in English departments, they have an equal contempt for pedagogy and for

composition, and their motives are sometimes obscured, even from themselves. Their perceived calling is for higher things, and they have no intention of debasing themselves by learning anything about composition, which they avoid teaching to the equal relief of the students and themselves. For this group (and I have encountered them on high school as well as on college campuses), any money spent on writing is a diversion from the serious nature of teaching—which has no very clear relation to learning.

Against such foes, only one answer will work: sheer power. It is futile to argue with them, for you cannot pierce to the hidden sources of their beliefs. The most difficult part of being a WPA is combating those who have only scorn for our enterprise, for that means assessing and using the forces at our disposal.

Since many WPAs these days remain untenured, sometimes not even on tenure track, the paths to personal power often seem blocked and risky. (This is an important argument for appointing only tenured WPAs, a trend that appears to be developing as rhetoric and composition gain prestige as scholarly fields.) The best solution to this problem is to avoid placing oneself in a weak situation; every prospective WPA must recognize that occasions are sure to occur that require the use of power. As the promised faculty shortage emerges in the 1990s, untenured faculty should avoid becoming WPAs until their positions become more secure. But this emerging policy will not help present WPAs already in weak positions. (This smacks of Will Rogers' advice on how to become rich in the stock market: buy stock when it is cheap and sell it after it has gone way up in price; if it doesn't go up, don't buy it.) Nonetheless, the first rule of administration is to avoid placing yourself in a position that is untenable, that is, in a position with large, unmanageable responsibilities but very little authority (read Power).

When the position of WPA is defined as one without power, it becomes a trap. Olson and Moxley, in their survey of English department chairs, turned up a classic definition from an unusually honest chair:

Our director is not a faculty member. He is an underpaid lecturer without tenure! At one time, the freshman English Director was always a regular member of the faculty, usually an assistant professor. In recent years, we have appointed a Ph.D., who is *not* a member of the standing faculty. This has worked well, since it does not destroy the career of an assistant professor. The only

slight negative is that the Freshman Director may not have quite the authority in the department that a member of the regular faculty would have. (55)

As the demand for specialists in rhetoric and composition increases, such demeaning positions will become harder and harder to fill by qualified faculty. Those who are willing to have their careers destroyed by taking such a job will have to find ways to fight out of an almost impenetrable wall of restrictions.

Wielding Power

But let us assume that the WPA has done reasonable negotiation before undertaking the position. What are the power issues he or she faces in relation to the writing staff, the English department, and the administration?

As every WPA knows to his or her discomfort, the staff tend to view the WPA as the boss, no matter how little power the position may in fact hold. Of course, some WPAs *are* the boss, with the power and the burdens that the term suggests; but most have only the responsibility of recommending hiring and changes of status. But the major power that comes with being perceived as the boss is the opportunity to improve the teaching of writing. A mere collection of syllabuses (not even the tenured full professor can fuss about that), followed by a meeting about them, can focus attention upon the best teaching going on. The same can be said of a collection of writing assignments, followed by a meeting during which teachers can explain the context and purpose of the best ones, including the role of revision and grading. Some WPAs also have direct power over texts and syllabuses, but most have only indirect power over these, achieved by focusing upon goals for the program and preferred ways of meeting them. Certainly, the most important aspect of the WPA's job (after survival) is the improvement of instruction. And most WPAs have substantial real and perceived power to accomplish that end.

One important exception to that last statement must be added, however: few WPAs can do very much with the tenured faculty who, on many campuses, still teach writing courses. Some of these tenured faculty do teach writing very badly, but I am convinced that most of them do better than rumor allows. They may use some old-fashioned techniques, but

some research shows that older faculty are more receptive to new ideas than are the less secure beginners (White and Polin, I, 321-323). WPAs are often frustrated by the tenured teachers, who resist the instruction of workshops and seminars and, most of all, the new-fangled ideas of the new hot-shot WPA. But more often than not, these teachers are giving good assignments and spending time with their students. Experienced WPAs tend to do relatively little with the tenured faculty; they will enlist them as mentors for the newer faculty (who may have something to teach their mentors), and waste no more time trying to tame the untameable.

Power in relation to the English department is another matter, one tangled hopelessly in the dispute over the professional status of rhetoric and composition as a field. If the department is aware of this field, or willing to consider the possibility of it as a field, the WPA gains power as any other faculty member gains power, usually through publication and other professional activity. Both CCCC and the ADE have published statements arguing that professional activity for composition faculty and administrators may include joint authorship of articles, textbooks, administration, workshops, and the like; it is important early on to seek a statement in writing that the English department (if that is where the WPA's future lies) will recognize such work. If not, the WPA must either find a department that will or prepare to publish in the field of literature. In four-year colleges and universities, faculty power is still very much a matter of publication that "counts." Personal power in the department usually comes from off campus, from books, articles, and positions in national organizations. Two-year colleges are more ready to accept excellent teaching and superheroic administration as sufficient.

Some WPAs do not have to deal with English departments, which is both a good and a bad arrangement. It is a great relief to apply for tenure without having to prove literary scholarship, if you are focused entirely upon rhetoric and composition. But it is also lonely and dangerous to be out there on your own, with no department to protect you, dealing directly with the deans and vice-presidents. In either case, the trickiest power relation that any WPA must maintain is with the administration, which returns me to my opening anecdote. If you have developed some personal power, through tenure and professional recognition, and institutional power, through administration of a good writing program, you can manipulate the administration to the degree your political savvy allows. But, while most WPAs have not yet gained that degree of security, the power game must still be played.

A survey by the National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (NCRIPTAL) discovered that administrators "view faculty members as much more powerful than faculty members view themselves. This discrepancy suggests that either administrators overestimate the power of faculty or that faculty are unaware of the influence they actually possess" (4). This administrative perception of power is doubly true for those faculty administering academic programs; most administrators simply cannot conceive how powerless most WPAs feel themselves to be. However powerless the WPA may feel, the administration often feels otherwise, and it is essential for the writing program that the WPA foster this illusion as much as possible. And it is not wholly an illusion, since power is ultimately a matter of perception.

The WPA has much power inherent in the position. A well-run composition program is a power base, since it frees administrators from what they fear most: constant harassment from discontented students and faculty. Furthermore, the writing ability that WPAs usually possess is, as we tell our students, an instrument of power. Some WPAs are fearsome memo writers, aware of the value of crucial copies to key people (the "cc" at the bottom), and are spared depredations from terror of their pens and keyboards. Others are quick draws at a survey; they know that few faculty are happy with the writing skills of their students, and they can always come up with fresh data to demonstrate the value of their work (and, incidentally, drum up support at the same time).

Another source of power for the WPA comes from the profession itself. Many WPAs have fostered networks, locally, or even nationally, upon which they can draw for help: letters of support or evaluation, evidence of practice elsewhere, statements of professional standards, and the like. The summer seminar for WPAs sponsored by WPA is a rich source of contacts for professional power. Another act of power is to call for an evaluation of the writing program by the consultant/evaluator panel of WPA itself; a team of well-known outside evaluators taking the writing program seriously represents the kind of power that administrators are accustomed to listening to carefully.

The final source of all administrative power is risky: the power to resign. However indispensable you may feel yourself to be, never make that threat unless you are really prepared to do it, for the odds are that your resignation will be accepted, regrettably, but with some internal rejoicing.

A resignation is like war, a failure of diplomacy, and a threat to resign is like a threat to declare war. And like war, a resignation in pique leaves a real mess for someone else to clean up. Nonetheless, sometimes this last resort is the only way to get the attention of the people who hold funds. The next WPA is the one to profit from a resignation, a tactic only the tenured are likely to contemplate.

This paper is, I notice, governed by military metaphors, not the kind of thing we are used to reading in these polite pages about writing and teaching. But I remember a brief conversation about power at the 1989 WPA Summer Workshop which keeps convincing me that these issues need to be brought to the surface. One member of the group said, "If we have learned anything at all from the Women's Movement, we ought to have learned that we can gain power by simply asserting that we have it."

"In some cases, yes," replied a veteran. "But we have also learned that if you assert power you don't have, you can be slapped down pretty quickly. Power games really *matter* at work, just as they do at home."

Power is in some ways like money or sex; it is only of pressing importance if you have none. But those with official power wield it so naturally and, often, so skillfully, that those on the receiving end never know what hit them. Administrators, including WPAs, cannot afford the luxury of powerlessness. The only way to do the job of a WPA is to be aware of the power relationships we necessarily conduct, and to use the considerable power we have for the good of our program.

Works Cited

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