Doubling Our Chances: Co-Directing a Writing Program

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"Which one of you wants to chair the writing department?" These were some of the first words that each of us heard from a somewhat apologetic dean only days after we were hired as assistant professors at Metropolitan State University. The university had just undergone a large expansion of the full-time faculty because of an enrollment bulge; as a result, many brand new faculty were called upon to run departments and act in other administrative roles. When we heard that we were two of the lucky candidates for such a role, our reaction was mixed. On the one hand, we were thrilled that our new university home was about to create a bonafide department of writing, separate from the English Department and as autonomous as any unit in the college. On the other hand, we were skeptical about the prospect of walking into an administrative job as untenured faculty. We had both done administrative work as graduate students, and we knew that writing program administrators, whether department chairs or program directors, face enormous political and professional challenges. In short, neither of us wanted the job. We quickly conferred with each other and with tenured faculty whom we trusted and decided that the only solution was to co-chair the department. At the time, we thought of this as a temporary arrangement that would evolve into a more traditional administrative structure as we accustomed ourselves to the institution. Almost five years later, however, our co-chairing structure not only endures, but thrives. In fact, by sharing the duties of writing program administrator, we have been able to avoid or overcome many of the political quagmires and professional pitfalls that plague WPAs.

We have identified several key areas where this arrangement has resulted in personal, departmental, or institutional benefits. We have found, for example, that co-chairing a writing program has allowed us to shift responsibilities between us, to accommodate the demands of our individual workload or personal lives. On a departmental level, co-chairing depersonalizes the role of chair or director, reducing political risk for the co-chairs and fostering a departmental identity separate from the person of the chair or director. Finally, co-chairing challenges some traditional notions of bureaucracy, and in our own case, offers some interesting insight into cross-gender, shared leadership.

We should, at the outset, distinguish between co-directing and co-chairing. As we noted above, we were tasked with developing a stand-alone writing department. It's become a large academic unit, with curricula in composition (basic through advanced), creative writing, technical and business communication, and journalistic writing. We manage two majors and a minor and the

university's writing center. Although chairs do not become part of the university administration at our institution (they remain full-time faculty), we do get some limited standing in this role, including regular access to the college dean. This may not be the case for directors of a writing program nested within another department. Being chairs as opposed to program directors has probably increased our autonomy and enhanced our ability to carry through our own plans. On the other hand, the role of chair is considerably more defined than program director, and our arrangement has more publicly challenged traditional expectations. While we acknowledge there are differences between co-chairing and co-directing, we think that many of the points in the discussion that follows apply more or less equally to both, and we use the terms interchangeably throughout this article. Indeed, other factors, such as institutional context or the personalities of individual chairs or directors, may play a larger role in the relative success or failure of a co-chairing or co-directing arrangement. These, and other potential drawbacks, exist for this kind of shared leadership: we discuss these in the article's final section.

In terms of our own institutional context, Metropolitan State University, though part of a large state system, is not a typical institution. Most notably, Metro State students are almost exclusively working adults; their average age is 34. But Metro State is also unusual in that it has a rich tradition of alternative approaches to education which have recently been overlaid with more conventional university practices. Until the last six years, for example, there were no traditional academic departments, majors, or grading systems. The small faculty met as a whole to make curricular and policy decisions. Now we have clearly delineated departments, a growing number of majors, and a standard grading system. Administrative structures have been defined and solidified, curriculum has been regularized, and clearer lines of accountability have been instituted. The university still maintains, however, a distinctly entrepreneurial feel; it's an institution where change is fundamental and frequent. As such, we have experienced little resistance to the concept of co-chairing a department.

A Fluid Approach to Co-Directing

When we introduce ourselves as co-chairs to people who don't know us, we typically make some distinctions in our roles. We let others know that Craig is responsible for the technical communication major and for upper division curriculum, and that Anne coordinates the writing major and lower division curriculum, including the writing center. This apparent division of labor, however, belies the reality of our everyday work as co-directors. In fact, the vast majority of what we do is shared. We both schedule and staff courses; hire, train, and evaluate faculty; monitor enrollment term by term; meet regularly with the dean to discuss department issues; field and address complaints by students and part-time faculty; oversee the budget; allay the anxieties of faculty in other disciplines about the writing of their students; plan for future needs; and interact with units such as the computer center, the multicultural student office, and the library. Throughout the university we are both acknowledged as directors of the program. Queries about programs, courses, and schedules are directed to both of us.

We tend to receive duplicates of mailings, and we are both invited to functions involving department chairs (although usually only one of us attends). In fact, we have developed what we term a fluid model of co-directing. The fact that either of us can perform all required tasks gives us great flexibility. We frequently shift duties to meet our individual needs and, as we discuss below, use this approach to overcome some of the most problematic challenges faced by WPAs.

Workload and Professional Identity

Like many workers in America in the late 1990s, WPAs are asked to stretch themselves beyond a reasonable limit. One obvious consequence is that administrative work consumes the time and sometimes the soul of the WPA. Saddled with a wide range of supervisory, budgetary, and programmatic responsibilities, WPAs often have little time to pursue their own scholarly endeavors. The professional world of the WPA often shrinks to a series of problems (sick instructors, students threatening lawsuits, budget shortfalls, newspaper reports on legislators' dissatisfaction with the literacy skills of college students) that beg for short- and long-term actions. Not only does the professional horizon recede behind this pile-up of needs and demands, but there is also a high risk of early burnout. And the problem of professional compromise becomes more acute when the WPA is untenured. For the untenured WPA, limited professional horizons can have dire consequences. As the CCCC Committee on Professional Guidance to Departments and Faculty states, "The administrative and teaching burden of the position may be so heavy as to prevent the candidate from fulfilling requirements for scholarly work" (494-95).

The work of running a writing program also takes its toll on the WPA's personal life. In her survey-based study of gender and writing program administrators, Sally Barr-Ebest quotes from informants who give heart-wrenching testimony about personal lives squeezed so tight, they sometimes disappear. One woman says: "Of course my duties have affected my personal life. I might be able to have a healthier life if I weren't always in the service of the institution." A male respondent said: "Well, I have no personal life. I rarely see my wife and child because I have to work all the time just to keep up. As soon as my assistant has tenure, I plan to step down. Unfortunately, that's probably five years ahead. I hope I can survive that long" (60). This last comment is interesting because it suggests that this WPA will simply hand down to his successor the enormous strain that he has experienced. In contrast, our co-directing arrangement addresses some of the problems cited by these administrators before they become a blight handed down from generation to generation. Because we share so many duties, we can easily alternate when one of us has other commitments. Each of us has had substantial personal challenges during our almost five years together as co-chairs. In every case, our fluid arrangement allows one of us to cover for the other. Similarly, we have given each other "breaks" to work on research projects. The virtues of co-directing have also been apparent during summers when, in our administrative roles, we are rarely off duty. We have sometimes traded months during the summer, so that one of us can have a significant block of time for rest and research. Our arrangement also allows us to do more teaching, since

we share the release time for chairing a department. Jeanne Gunner points out that in a highly centralized writing program, the director is often pulled away from teaching in order to administer the program; as a result, both the curriculum and the staff of instructors suffer. By co-directing the program, we are able to continue to do substantial quantities of teaching in a variety of areas within our curriculum.

Although the logistical advantages of co-directing are the most obvious benefits in terms of professional renewal and achievement, there are some psychological advantages as well. One such advantage is that even if we don't call on the other person to cover when we have another commitment, we know that we can. In other words, there is a mental health safety valve built into the co-directing structure. Another significant benefit is that we are able to process together the trials and tribulations of our job. We meet almost every day to communicate about various issues affecting the department. Our co-directing meetings move rapidly back and forth between our need to accomplish tasks and our need for support in a climate that is not always friendly for writing program directors. We recognize, however, that both kinds of interactions are vital for our success as writing program directors. We feel we are better able to address problems when we can have a dialogue about solutions, and we feel we are better able to maintain our sanity and our focus when we can exchange concerns and frustrations.

The Politics of Writing Programs

The problem of exploitation and overwork is exacerbated by another major challenge typically faced by WPAs: the political vulnerability of writing programs and their administrators. Writing programs are too often considered the "service" division of a college and so are regarded as the intellectual inferiors of English and other departments which teach "real disciplines" and "content areas." They are often staffed by part-timers who have little authority or political clout. And writing programs are chronically underfunded, competing with more privileged departments and programs for scarce resources. The writing program administrator, then, must often interact with the university and larger community from a position of weakness. WPAs without tenure are even more vulnerable. As Olson and Moxley put it, "Clearly, the untenured director's position is precarious: it is exceedingly difficult to make unpopular albeit programmatically and pedagogically sound decisions when professional survival is at stake" (57).

From this apparent position of weakness, the WPA must negotiate a host of political challenges. These challenges include maintaining consistency across sections, training and retaining a large pool of instructors, managing complex budgets, and simply dealing with the interpersonal issues that arise when numbers of students and faculty are large. Writing programs are also highly visible. Faculty and administration across the university pay close attention to literacy skills, as do employers, legislators, parents, and other members of the community. As a result, the writing program is often held accountable when students lack college level literacy skills. (This accountability is not in itself problem: meet-

ing the needs of underprepared students is a particular strength for many writing programs. The problem, rather, has to do with realistic expectations for writing instruction outcomes.) A further type of political situation has its roots in writing pedagogy and can involve challenges to multicultural content in readings or a perceived lack of emphasis on writing correctness. All of these kinds of issues (managing personnel and budgets in a complex program, meeting the needs of underprepared students, maintaining quality, consistency, and independence) have the potential to become politicized, to involve conflicting value systems. The risks are twofold: a disadvantaged position for the writing program in competing for resources and a potentially disadvantaged position for the already beleaguered WPA. We have found that co-directing can ameliorate some of these problems. An advantage of co-directing in a politically charged climate is that the program is never identified with a single personality.

The tendency within an institution to equate a department or program with the personality of its leader harkens back to the trait theory of educational leadership, where traits for effective leadership tend to cluster together to form an ideal image of the virile leader: "Leadership in organizations has been historically associated with particular characteristics which are more frequently depicted as 'masculine' than 'feminine': aggressiveness, forcefulness, competitiveness and independence" (Blackmore 100). Personality is also at the center of the transformational model of leadership, which features a charismatic leader who inspires and "generates emotional arousal" among followers (Middlehurst 35). We are all familiar with departments or other units that are strongly identified with the personality of the chair. This equation of a personality with an academic unit is virtually erased when the department or program is co-directed. In our situation, neither of us has the opportunity (nor the desire) to be identified as "the writing program."

When the directors of the program are two people with different personalities, histories, and genders, external attention is focused on the department rather than on personalities. Politics, as a result, tend not to get bogged down in personality, with all of the inherent risks to the individual. But politics can still affect the department as a whole and, again, co-directing offers some advantages. As we mentioned above, a major source for potential political conflict that affects the writing program centers on the acquisition of literacy skills and writing pedagogy. Expectations are the key element here. What are the goals of writing instruction? What are desired outcomes? How can literacy skills be reinforced throughout the curriculum? When audiences external to the writing program know the answers to these questions, the potential for conflict and political fallout is minimized. Yet educating these external audiences is a daunting task, as the cast of characters changes frequently and retention of learning seems brief. Co-directing can aid in this significant educational effort. Two empowered voices can address the university community concerning literacy issues; two knowledgeable advocates can attend meetings, offer workshops, or engage in casual conversation with colleagues in other departments. We have found, for example, that we have each been able to create largely separate, multidisciplinary networks

of faculty interested in writing. While co-directing does not necessarily double the educational outcomes concerning the goals and expectations of writing instruction, two voices do increase our contact with external audiences and, consequently, reduce the misconceptions that can lead to conflict.

Co-Directing as Post-Bureaucratic Practice

After five years of co-directing a writing program, we have found that our unusual arrangement challenges and destabilizes many traditional (and problematic) tenets of bureaucracy. These tenets include a rigid division of labor, the imposition of hierarchical structures, and resistance to change (Heckscher and Donnellon). Two critiques of traditional bureaucracy are particularly relevant to our co-directing scenario: the feminist critique of dominant models of bureaucratic leadership and the critique within management theory of mechanistic organizations. The feminist critique of dominant models of leadership is ably articulated by educational theorist Jill Blackmore. She argues that the dominant model of leadership is masculinist and is based in liberal political theories: "A particular view of leadership premised upon liberal theories of abstract individualism and bureaucratic rationality, and supported by positivistic theories of knowledge which privilege universal laws of administration and human behavior, has become dominant in educational administration" (94). Blackmore contends that the "masculine ethic of leadership is based on individuality, rationality, and hierarchy" (106). She argues for a feminist model of leadership which emphasizes the interdependence of individuals, the relational context for decision-making, and a notion of power as empowerment rather than domination. Other feminist theorists challenge the centralization of power that is endemic to traditional masculinist models of leadership. They argue for an approach to leadership in which authority is decentered, and decision-making is shared (e.g., Miller; Dickson). Blackmore also challenges the "bureaucratic rationality" that is at the center of masculinist leadership. In bureaucracies, decisions are made based on what will produce the most positive outcomes. In the spirit of promoting efficiency and productivity, the division of labor is clearly defined, and individuals are assigned limited, specialized tasks.

Blackmore's explication of bureaucratic rationality echoes Gareth Morgan's model of the mechanistic organization. In his *Images of Organization,* Morgan contrasts two types of organizational structures. Derived from military models, the mechanistic organization is intensely hierarchical, bureaucratic, and based on specialization: every person has specific, unshared responsibilities that contribute to the overall organization mission. Management provides leadership in task assignment and integration. Accountability is clear, though mechanistic organizations are not good at adapting to changing circumstances (28). Though out of favor with theorists, the mechanistic organization is the model more or less followed by many large organizations. By contrast, Morgan's "organic" model de-emphasizes both hierarchy and specialization and interprets organizations as biological organisms. It is based on the idea that organizations operate most effectively when "the interdependence of technical and human needs . . . is kept firmly in mind" (38). The organic organization is loosely structured: it uses

flexible teams to carry out tasks. Team members have specialties, but also contribute most when they have a broad grasp of organizational goals and functions. Management sets those goals, but the locus of decision-making is in the teams. Organic organizations are very good at accommodating change, less good at ensuring accountability and consistency.

Although in many ways a university reflects the mechanistic model of organizational behavior, the organic model best reflects our fluid approach to co-chairing. Key for us is meeting needs—not only those of our students and colleagues, but our own. An inflexible "one person, one job" approach would leave us perpetually responsible, unable to off-load work. Certainly we could reduce the amount of responsibility by dividing the work between two people, but there is limited flexibility in this plan. As described in terms of the organic model, the administration (in the person of the dean) sets organizational goals and the "team" consists of the two of us. It is not terribly flexible in the sense that the team seldom changes players, but it is highly flexible in its ability to meet needs. Interdependent and responsive to change, our co-chairing arrangement is also radically non-hierarchical. As co-directors we are equals in every sense. There is no visible or hidden hierarchy that determines who really is in charge. We have equal authority to sign off on any form, equal authority to hire faculty, equal authority to develop curriculum and policy. The idea that we are completely equal in role and authority has been difficult for some to comprehend. When Craig served on a search committee for a new dean, he repeatedly introduced himself to candidates as the "co-chair" of a department. Many candidates seemed baffled by this title. Some seemed to think that as an untenured "co-chair" he was somehow apprenticed to a senior faculty member who was the "real" chair. The experience of co-directing a program has allowed us to see how deeply ingrained are cultural assumptions about the singularity of the "leader" and about the hierarchical context in which "he" operates.

Not surprisingly, when we first initiated our co-directing arrangement, it sometimes disrupted daily bureaucratic practice at our institution. Various members of the community, for example, had difficulty fitting us into their usual procedures. Sometimes budget and scheduling forms would be sent to one of us only; at other times, the other person would receive the material. Eventually we worked out an arrangement in which we both received all the forms, and then would negotiate who would do what. We imagine that our unusual arrangement at first irritated our co-workers, who were trying to keep information moving as efficiently as possible. Over time, however, the systems adjusted to our collaborative role; when authority is decentered, bureaucratic practices become destabilized, making way for alternative practices.

We should acknowledge, however, that more mechanistic, bureaucratic structures offer some advantages. While no one wants inflexibility, increased specialization, from a strictly administrative view, might result in clearer lines of responsibility, more focused use of time, and perhaps more predictability (if this is in fact desirable). As co-chairs of a department, we find there is an occasional loss of efficiency in the organization. For example, we routinely receive two

phone calls for the same problem. A student might call asking about a course, or a faculty member might call inquiring about a room assignment. The caller rarely indicates that she is also calling the other co-chair. As a result, we sometimes duplicate our efforts in responding to the call, and on occasion give conflicting answers to the question. While this duplication appears to be a chink in the armor of efficiency, any loss of productivity is amply compensated for by the fact that we both can answer the question. Efficiency would be compromised to an even greater extent if we were perpetually referring questions to the other person.

Collaborating across Genders

Thus far we have discussed some of the personal and professional benefits of co-directing a writing program. One other feature of our collaboration is worth noting, however. As a cross-gender collaboration, we have had the opportunity to explore a number of issues surrounding gender and administration. Our co-chairing arrangement has provided a kind of unofficial laboratory in which we can study how constructions of gender affect leadership of a program. We have discovered that in some ways, our co-chairing arrangement confirms dominant constructions of gender. For example, when we were hired, we were assigned to specific areas—Anne's job focused on basic writing, the Writing Center, and assessment; Craig's job focused on professional writing and technology. This division of labor is certainly a gendered phenomenon and it has to some extent affected our roles as co-chairs. More commonly, however, cross-gender collaboration has provided us with several opportunities to rethink traditional patterns of gender behavior and perception. We've identified three such opportunities: 1) cross-gender leadership as a site of resistance to gender norms; 2) cross-gender leadership as an opportunity for shifting identity; and 3) cross-gender leadership as an administrative strategy.

First, cross-gender leadership has proven to be a site of resistance to gender norms. For example, when we first began as department co-chairs, each of us was approached differently by other members of the community. While Craig was contacted for issues related to program development and policy, Anne was approached about issues that involved caretaking (e.g., student complaints) and "behind-the-scenes" work that bordered on clerical activity (e.g., scheduling classes). This problem became most obvious during one meeting with a high level administrator in her office. The administrator made virtually all of her eye contact with Craig. When we left the meeting, we discussed what had happened. We resolved to change seating arrangements next time to avoid a recurrence of this problem. Similarly, Craig made a point never to make unilateral decisions about policy, and Anne made a point to identify herself publicly with issues of policy and program development. These efforts reflect our desire to consciously and deliberately resist the way that gender is typically reproduced in everyday life. Cross-gender co-chairing is a particularly rich site for such resistance because it potentially enlists both women and men in the process of challenging dominant assumptions. Co-chairing provides an ideal opportunity, one might say, for a coalition effort.

Secondly, we found that cross-gender leadership provided an opportunity to play with gender identity. While we often think that we have specific and fixed gender identities, gender may in fact be mobile and flexible, as much current feminist theory suggests. Gender identity may change as the context (local, global, historical) changes. In other words, as male and female co-chairs, we might find ourselves occupying identities and roles typically assigned to the other gender. For example, Craig recently served on the Dean Search Committee for our college. He turned out to be the committee member most concerned about how the new dean would meet the needs of underprepared students. He was, in a sense, taking on Anne's role (a gendered role) as defender and protector of vulnerable students. In contrast, Anne recently came to a department meeting armed with what she called an "Enrollment Enhancement Plan," or EEP. (Metro State has many acronyms, but this was a new one.) The plan was focused on the bottom line—getting more students in our classes, even if that meant cutting back on opportunities for part-time faculty. One might have expected a top-down plan like this one to emerge from a male leader, more concerned with profits, so to speak, than with people.

Finally, we've learned that cross-gender leadership offers strategic opportunities. The idea here is that leaders may occupy diverse gender positions for the purpose of furthering a goal. In some situations, for example, it may be particularly effective for Craig to represent underprepared students or for Anne to plan strategically for increased enrollment. Similarly, it may be advantageous for Anne to call on Craig to intervene with a recalcitrant male instructor who is entrenched in traditional gender norms. For Anne to attempt to deal with this person could be worthy in terms of asserting her authority and defying gendered expectations; unfortunately, though, it simply may not work. As Hildy Miller says of co-existing masculinist and feminist models of leadership, "In the bi-epistemological institution, personas have to change with context" (53).

Conclusion

We need to reiterate something we mentioned in the introduction: co-directing a writing program might not work in all settings. Further, personalities definitely play a role. The co-directors have to be committed to co-directing. They must be clear and public about the arrangement to realize its benefits; they must be interested in egalitarian cooperation, not in what turns out to be an obvious or subtle tug of war; they must be committed to open and frequent exchanges of information and ideas. And to benefit from the fluid model we employ, they must each be willing to take more than their share at some time, to provide space for their partner in collaboration. This is not always convenient.

Further, co-directing can have drawbacks. One potential drawback is accountability. It is conceivable that co-directors might use their position of shared responsibility to continually defer questions, criticism, or even decision-making. Whether this results from lack of communication, avoidance, or other causes, it can undermine the effectiveness of the writing program and render co-directing less useful than a single-director model. Perhaps an even more significant

drawback has to do with overwork. One of the major goals of co-directing is to allocate workload to best meet the needs of the faculty involved. In practice, this truly seems to work. However, we have also found that as co-directors, we do more work than might be expected from a single director, a common situation in any kind of job-sharing arrangement. While we equally divide the perquisites of program direction (teaching release, for example), we each put in more than a fifty percent effort into our administrative roles. This has obvious advantages for the department (and the university administration does not mind it, either), but it is something that should be closely monitored or at least well understood. In our co-directing relationship, we recognize that this is a different type of overwork (voluntary, for the most part), but we feel it is still a less exploitative situation than that faced by many solo WPAs.

Despite these drawbacks and the commitment necessary to make fluid co-directing successful, we feel that we have individually benefited from this arrangement, as have our department and its students. Co-directing may be a valuable strategy for negotiating the many personal and professional pitfalls that confront writing program administrators.

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