

Defining Roles for Graduate Students in Writing Program Administration: Balancing Pragmatic Needs with a Postmodern Ethics of Action

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In recent years, discussion about the roles and responsibilities being assumed by graduate students within writing programs has increased. Distilling the issues into the most easily defined camps leads to the question: Are we professionalizing or deskilling the field by employing graduate students as WPAs?

One “camp” argues that the field should prepare graduate students for writing program administration through new course offerings, workshops, and assistantships. The need for more organized efforts (widespread and longstanding use of under-the-radar practices notwithstanding) is supported by the widely recognized reality that in today’s job market, people earning PhDs in composition studies can commonly expect to be asked to take on some form of administrative duties once hired. Accordingly, the argument goes, the field has a responsibility to incorporate administrative experience into graduate study. The essay “Present Perfect and Future Imperfect” by Scott Miller, Brenda Brueggemann, Dennis Blue, and Deneen Shepherd is perhaps the strongest representative of this perspective.

A second “camp” questions using graduate students in administrative appointments, suggesting the practice be seen as part of a larger problem with the push to professionalize graduate study. Carrie Leverenz and Amy Goodburn’s thoughtful essay on the subject warns that increased focus on professional development in composition programs could come at a cost to the pedagogical preparation of TAs. Taking on the issue more directly, Sheryl Fontaine has argued that using graduate students as program administrators promotes values which “are in obvious conflict with those most central to those of contemporary pedagogy and theory” (84). Among other

reasons, she and others suggest that asking novices to handle administrative duties reinforces damaging notions about WPAs as glorified staffers with no special disciplinary knowledge.

Defining this issue into two camps provides a quick, if incomplete, view of the stakes involved for the WPA community and for graduate students: Graduate students are interested in getting the best possible preparation in order to be competitive on the job market; and the WPA community is interested, in part, in how what we do promotes (or doesn't) the professional status of our work. That said, the usefulness of putting this issue into an either/or framework ends there. By focusing on broad strokes, such binaries oversimplify the arguments of others, including those I cite above. They mask larger complexities and don't help us see the issue fully and thus deal with it most productively. I prefer instead to see the issue this way: Graduate students are not disappearing from the domain of WPA work, so it makes little sense to ask whether or not they should be here. The hiring of graduate students to assist WPAs with administrative work is a long-accepted practice, connected on one level to the regular university-wide practice of funding graduate students through assistantships. On another level, due to the increasing complexity of our own work, hiring graduate students to help with our workload has become a necessity. And, perhaps most significantly, growth in WPA-related research continues to draw graduate students into WPA work.

What is needed, then, is not so much a debate asking should we or shouldn't we incorporate graduate students into WPA work, because they are here to stay, but a discussion about how and in what ways graduate students' roles and responsibilities in administrative appointments reflect our administrative philosophies as well as our theoretical commitments. What is revealed by this kind of examination not only has potential pedagogical implications for the preparation of future WPAs but also intersects with discussions of power, authority, and administrative philosophies from WPA scholars like Edward M. White, Jeanne Gunner, Eileen Schell, and others. In my interactions with WPAs and a number of assistants, I learned that most of the work currently being done by graduate student assistants can be categorized in one of three job-types—the liaison or go-between, the administrative assistant, and the co-policymaker. This essay argues, however, that we need less limiting approaches to working with graduate student WPAs—ones that will move us away from continued reliance on hierarchical, fixed notions of administration-as-control and toward a view that is more dynamic and responsive. What follows is organized into two sections: the first describes what characterizes current definitions of the roles

and responsibilities graduate student WPAs typically hold, and the second offers an approach to working with graduate student WPAs that interweaves a postmodern ethics of action with administrative practices.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF GRADUATE STUDENT WPAs

Before going further, I need to place this discussion in context with the work of Sally Barr Ebest, whose 1999 study provides a comprehensive description of how graduate programs in composition and rhetoric prepare students in the areas of teaching, research, and administration. Her study provides an overview in particular of current curricular requirements as provided by a wide range of graduate programs in composition and rhetoric. In her summary of this study, published in the Spring 1999 issue of *WPA*, Barr Ebest notes that, although “structured training and coursework in the duties and responsibilities of writing program administration were nonexistent” (74) in responses to her survey, her follow-up research confirmed a more recent development of such courses as well as the concomitant increased recognition among faculty to provide graduate students with experience and/or training with administrative issues. Her study’s close examination of graduate curricula from a range of programs presents a picture of the impact of coursework on preparing future WPAs, perhaps most significantly with regard to research methodologies. I hope that my essay contributes to her project by focusing more closely on descriptions of the roles and responsibilities graduate students are currently assuming in program administration.

Although the topic has attracted attention in recent publications and at conferences, as a community we need a more concrete sense of the range of responsibilities of graduate students acting as program assistants. Beyond my own experiences with and observations of the work of graduate student WPAs in three writing programs (Michigan Tech, Texas Tech, and Penn State), much of what follows is based on information I began gathering in 1995 when I conducted a national survey about GTA education curricula (see “Training the Workforce”). Since then, I have continued conversations with numerous WPAs and more than a dozen graduate students who had been hired to work in administrative capacities within writing programs around the country. The descriptions that follow are based, then, on these on-going dialogues (more informal than formal). Their insights and my experience form the basis for my discussion.¹

In my initial queries of WPAs and graduate student WPAs, I sought some basic information:

- What job title is given to graduate students working in administration?

- What was the review process involved in hiring?
- For how many years does a graduate student hold this job?
- How many hours per week do they work?
- What are graduate student WPAs' main responsibilities?

These questions, and the conversations they started, have yielded the following outline of typical definitions of graduate student WPA positions:

- Job titles vary from Assistant Director of the Writing Program, to Assistant to the Director of the Writing Program, to Program Assistant, Teaching Advisor, TA Peer Evaluator, and so on.
- Most graduate student WPAs hold the position for one year, and often part of a summer, and receive one course release per semester (or ten hours per week) for their duties.
- Graduate student WPAs estimate that the actual number of hours per week that they conduct program business floats above the ten-hour-per-week contract. They also report that these hour-totals fluctuate heavily during the semester. There are heavy periods and slower periods each semester.
- In general the hiring process is not formal. The typical story is, after the first year of teaching in the program, the WPA approached them personally about the job. Increasingly, more programs are implementing more formal hiring processes. Still, for the most part, graduate student WPAs felt they were recognized as evincing good will among their peers and for being above-average composition teachers. Other skills such as being very organized or being a computer whiz were also mentioned.
- When holding this appointment, they are typically either in the second (finishing) year of a master's degree or the second year of a doctoral degree—occasionally the first, depending on whether they entered the program as a masters student.
- Many are concentrating study in areas other than composition studies.

Sets of bulleted descriptions, however, don't reveal much about the kinds of work these graduate student WPAs assume, the impact they have on the day-to-day operations of a writing program, or the wider reaching influence they may have on program development. The descriptions and discussions that follow are based on my contacts with graduate student WPAs from a range of programs during the years 1996 and 2000. During that time, I collected the kinds of informal job descriptions that aren't available in most

official job announcements. What marks these unofficial job descriptions is their embeddedness in an individual's specific experiences of working during a given year for one WPA. To be certain, they don't tell the whole story, but they are richer in detail than more generic official descriptions. And, importantly, graduate students who shared them with me, knowing no direct quotations or names would be used, offered no harsher criticism of those they worked for than what they directed at themselves, mostly for wishing that they'd had more time for a particular initiative or knew more before they started. Distilled from these individuals' descriptions, I've defined typical graduate student administrators' roles as falling into one of three categories: graduate students act as liaisons or go-betweens, as administrative assistants, and as co-policymakers. Although they are not mutually exclusive—individual graduate students have responsibilities that overlap all three of these categories—I use these categories to articulate the typical kinds of work WPAs ask of graduate students and the kinds of responsibilities these graduate students typically undertake.

GRADUATE STUDENT WPA AS LIAISON

As the name suggests, the primary function of graduate student WPAs falling into this category is to act as a go-between for the writing program administrator and the program's staff of instructors and teaching assistants. As liaisons, these graduate students typically have two main responsibilities. First, they help TAs understand and follow the program's policies and procedural requirements. Second, they are relied upon to report complaints, problems, and suggestions arising from the teaching staff. Consequently, graduate students acting chiefly as liaisons are chosen for their smart-but-friendly reputations among their peers and for their capacity for showing good will to all. Good will is a crucial requirement for the job, in all cases, because graduate students operating as program administrators negotiate their allegiances to their peers and to those in the WPA office daily.

Again, as its name implies, this position places a premium on maintaining lines of communication among the WPA and the teaching staff. The strength of such a position is that it makes space for a person in the WPA office who is at ground-level within the program. By reporting current issues and concerns among the TAs and by offering insight into how TAs will respond to a given policy or procedure, the graduate student as liaison can play a helpful role in helping shape administrative agendas and planning. However, one potential concern with defining graduate student WPAs' duties chiefly as go-betweens is that it can limit them from experiencing WPA work that is more substantive.

GRADUATE STUDENT WPA AS ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Graduate students whose job responsibilities fall into this category, not surprisingly, explain their role in the writing program very clearly, as it is a very familiar position in offices everywhere. Functioning primarily as administrative assistants, these graduate student WPAs define their roles in terms of the paperwork side of administration. Much more so than the previous category, their energies are used to keep track of the flow of communication going in and out of a program office. For instance, as administrative assistants these graduate students regularly use memos and emails to send out reminders, announcements, and meeting schedules to the TAs and instructors. Other common tasks include being in the office to answer the phone and direct requests for information to the proper authority; ordering textbooks; developing schedules for the fall orientation and other events like brown-bag lunches and teaching colloquia; updating the program's files, resource library, and Web site; and taking notes during staff meetings. Not occasionally these graduate student WPAs also help draft program policies, which are mostly related to procedural matters, such as incident reporting, record-keeping for classroom attendance, policies for finding a substitute teacher, etc.

As the job-type suggests, graduate student WPAs acting as administrative assistants find themselves operating as managers—measuring presences and absences, tracking the activities of the teaching pool, and drafting or filing reports. As such, the duties and responsibilities defined by this category of graduate student work fall between those of the other two categories. Like the liaison position, administrative assistants find themselves using a significant portion of their time communicating with their fellow teaching assistants. The difference, however, is that administrative assistants operate more like mid-level managers from a business model: Their chief task is preparing and sending reports to the pool of writing instructors and conversely preparing and presenting reports to their supervisor, the WPA, on organizational matters. Typical of such work, and a fundamentally crucial organizational need for any writing program, are a range of record-keeping duties, such as tracking attendance for and interest in workshops. Additionally, like the policymaker position described next, administrative assistants play a larger hand in developing program materials and policies. The tendency, however, is that as administrative assistants these graduate students' responsibilities boil down to keeping the office afloat by helping to manage the endless paperwork, which is increasingly generated and stored online.

GRADUATE STUDENT WPA AS POLICYMAKER

Not all graduate student WPAs hold duties as primarily liaisons or staff assistants. An increasing number of WPAs encourage a more collaborative relationship with their assistant directors. These graduate students play more central roles in program development, and in turn, occupy a more equal position in relationship to the WPA. Graduate students who have a voice in policymaking are more involved in decision-making generally speaking within a writing program. They play a thoughtful, even major, role in matters such as textbook selection, syllabus drafting, and curriculum revision. They are more likely to have experience helping to draft program policies regarding more complex writing program activities such as peer evaluation of TAs, developing a system for approving TAs to teach honors sections of writing courses, or for determining topics and speakers for regular writing program colloquia.

These graduate students have authored, or co-authored with the WPA, many key program documents and pedagogical statements, and they are more likely to initiate some projects. These graduate student WPAs have helped design and draft standardized course materials and policy statements shared by all instructors in the program. They may co-teach the pedagogy practica required of new teaching assistants. They may have helped solicit, edit, and produce a program's collection of model student essays as well as a handbook—now typically online—that some programs provide for first-year students. As well, they have increased responsibility enacting policies through, for instance, conducting classroom observations of TAs, writing evaluations, and recommending teaching assignments for up-coming terms. Additionally, these graduate students have described developing team-teaching initiatives and special topics courses—that might, for instance, incorporate visual rhetoric in the composition course. Not surprisingly, these graduate students are more likely than graduate student administrators falling into one of the other categories to claim rhetoric and composition studies as their area of doctoral study.

IMPLICATIONS OF THESE MODELS

By outlining these three characteristic roles or subject positions, I mean to highlight some of the contributions graduate student WPAs make to writing programs. Acting as liaisons, administrative assistants, and co-policymakers, graduate student WPAs can provide crucial support to the writing programs within which they work and to the faculty WPAs who direct them. The material needs of the program office, the faculty WPA, and the gradu-

ate students who take these positions are met—at least in part—by each of these models. After all, maintaining strong communication channels, keeping records, and drafting and enacting policies are three of the most vital responsibilities of any well-managed writing program, and both faculty WPAs and graduate students benefit from these working relationships. It is almost too obvious to acknowledge the well known reality that WPAs are not islands unto themselves, and that by hiring graduate students they are deputizing them to take on some of the never-ending demands of the job. And, it has also become an acknowledged article of faith that WPAs have a duty to help prepare the next generation of program administrators. Accordingly, graduate students gain not only financial support and/or by course-load reductions but also by earning experience operating on the boundary marking faculty subject positions from student subject positions—making an impact on an administrative level in their programs as well as preparing for future working relationships in which they are defined not by their student status but by their status as administrators and teacher/scholars.

Yet, it is not enough to be able to label three general roles and responsibilities that graduate student WPAs hold without further reflecting on what these roles reveal to us about basic assumptions guiding the working operations of writing programs. Faculty WPAs in such large institutions are actively engaged in any number of complex administrative activities (curricula development, placement procedures, graduate teaching and advising, portfolio assessment, outcomes assessment, WAC and WID projects, and so on), each in its own way intersecting local program work with intellectual and scholarly inquiry. Indeed, long have we argued that such activities are not *merely* service but “entail substantive intellectual labor” (MLA Commission 178). Position statements like “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration,” authored by the WPA Executive Committee, have helped us argue to those outside of rhetoric and composition studies that such work is a site for the production of knowledge in our field. As fundamental, then, not only to the daily operations of individual writing programs but also to developing or refining our ways of knowing and our core intellectual values, the roles we assign graduate student WPAs need further examination. Just as the choices we make about placement or other administrative practices hold a commensurate stake in knowledge (re)production and on continuing concerns about power or the lack of it among WPAs, so too do the roles we assign to graduate students.

While these three categories represent a range of options, my worry is that graduate student WPAs’ most frequently assigned responsibilities suggest they function primarily as surveillance mechanisms. In its most mild form, graduate student WPAs are assigned to keep an eye on things for busy

faculty WPAs by posting new regulations, reminding the teaching staff of policies and events, and keeping office hours in order to be available to answer TAs' questions or to explain procedures. In this way, as several WPAs put it to me, graduate student WPAs act as temperature-takers, checking the health of the program and reporting the general mood of the teaching staff to their faculty supervisors. This seems harmless enough and, as I have noted, even necessary. However, in too many cases, we are overemphasizing a policing or magisterial approach to administration. In these instances, as when a parent leaves their oldest child in charge, graduate student WPAs are used as instruments of control in two ways: (1) as informants—telling the WPA what is “really going on” in the program, and (2) as enforcers—ensuring program mandates as being carried out by all of the teaching staff.

Examples of the use of graduate student WPAs as surveillance mechanisms can be found within all three of the job categories previously outlined. Graduate students working mainly as liaisons described, among other things, being asked to report on the following types of activities of their peers: who is back in the office too early from teaching; who is and isn't holding office hours; who is dressing inappropriately on teaching days; and who is putting down the program to other faculty or staff in the English department. Graduate students whose responsibilities I categorize as administrative assistants related to me their being asked to report, among other things: who is not submitting syllabi or other teaching materials to the program office on time and who is not attending required meetings or the required number of workshops or colloquia. Additionally, graduate students working as administrative assistants described being asked to develop better tracking systems for revealing patterns among the teaching staff and identifying weaknesses among them, such as who is regularly earning low ratings from student evaluations or which TAs have higher than average numbers of plagiarism cases each semester. Even the experiences of graduate students who identified themselves as policymakers revealed instances in which they were operating from a policing imperative. What was perhaps most troubling were some descriptions of their peer evaluation of teaching practices. Although many programs have developed rich peer evaluation programs designed to encourage peer-to-peer professional development, more than one graduate student reported to me ways in which peer evaluation of teaching was less about helping others develop better teaching habits and more about identifying outliers and bringing them back in line with standard practices. In one instance, a graduate student described being asked to re-do her written evaluations so that the WPA could more easily locate specific information about whether or not individual TAs' courses followed curriculum requirements. Other graduate students described being involved in revising contracts and

other policy statements in order to add such language as would allow a WPA to create a paper trail on individual TAs and to institute a process for ridding their programs of recalcitrant instructors.

Certainly maintaining standards and consistency within a large teaching staff is an ongoing challenge to successful program administration. My point here is that, in too many instances, we have been and continue to define graduate student WPAs' chief responsibilities as guardians of consistency and stability. Although individual graduate students have worked or are currently working in more substantial ways within many different writing programs, I am suggesting that the balance of the average graduate student WPAs time is spent functioning as just such a guardian. And, both individual writing programs as well as the field as a whole pays a price for this. The pattern emerging from the use of graduate students as surveilors of their peers suggests a reliance on traditional hierarchical or WPA-centric models of administration. Decisions to do so may be driven by gaps in proper staffing, in needing someone to answer phones, keep communication flowing smoothly between a faculty administrator and the teaching staff, and give us a warning when fires may be building, but the consequences can be troubling. The resulting model that is reproduced is a magistrate's approach to writing program administration: one that teaches our mentees to emphasize keeping the peace and enforcing moving violations over more substantial priorities or wider-reaching agendas. Moreover, it leads to another version of the what-works approach to preparing future colleagues that I and others have questioned in recent years, and, it plays a role in the ethical dilemmas facing WPAs that Mary Ann Cain and George Kalamaras describe in their article "(Re)Presenting the Work of Writing Program Administrators."

Such top-heavy models of administration reinforce the WPA as the site of power/knowledge within a writing program. As Jeanne Gunner notes in "Decentering the WPA," these approaches perpetuate traditional administrative power structures in which communication flows one-way—from the faculty WPA down while graduate student WPAs are treated as a kind of mouth-piece or messenger—and a standardized syllabus and textbook establishes the pedagogical identity of the program. Gunner argues that such an "anti-democratic division of authority" disconnects writing teachers from the curriculum they teach—deskilling them (13). Viewed from a disciplinary perspective, such approaches contradict messages from the Executive Committee and others about the intellectually rich nature of writing administration. By relegating graduate student WPAs—who in many cases treat their experience as professional training for future administrative work—to

performing surveillance and acting as magistrates, we encourage impoverished assumptions about writing program administration as a bureaucratic burden rather than as a site of intellectual inquiry and engagement.

BALANCING PRAGMATIC NEEDS WITH A POSTMODERN ETHICS OF ACTION

How might we conceive of roles for graduate students that offer both them and ourselves more balanced and productive responses to the challenges of administration? More specifically, how might this dilemma help us rethink the ways in which our actions are bound up in assumptions about how power operates within writing programs? Assumptions about power or authority are at the core of working relationships like that between WPAs and graduate student assistants, and, as with all issues of authority, there are no black and white solutions. I am not suggesting, therefore, that we denounce the roles graduate students play as liaisons, administrative assistants, and co-policymakers. Nor that should we value any one of these roles over the others. They exist in useful tension with one another, each highlighting weaknesses of the others, but no one of them provides the solution. Rather, I suggest that we gain more ground by seeing the matter as inextricably linked to how power/knowledge is manifested and circulates within writing programs. I don't think I go too far in saying that WPAs discuss power—strategizing how to gain it, bemoaning our lack of it, questioning the best uses of our authority, and theorizing new models of it—at nearly every turn (cf. Dickson; Micciche; White; H. Miller; Gunner; Brown, Enos, and Chaput; Weiser and Rose). This essay breaks no new ground in establishing a new theory of authority for WPAs. What I suggest is that we can more productively define graduate student WPAs' roles and responsibilities (and rethink our own) through a postmodern ethics of action that casts authority as dynamic yet responsive. Such a perspective would promote more robust possibilities for graduate student WPAs as they balance their overlapping responsibilities to us, to the discipline, and to their writing program.

In a postmodern world driven by economies of speed and expansion, many feel challenged by the pace at which conventional anchors of authority have faded. Postmodern theory is a source of concern for those who associate it with unending fragmentation and nihilism—the loss of any truth and certainty, the loss of any version of an ethical self. Cast in this light, postmodern approaches to authority encourage a relativistic stance in which a WPA might accept “Go with the flow” as a mantra for administrative (non)action. From such a perspective, the WPA becomes defined as a formless shape shifter, operating opportunistically, increasing his or her authority by following the flow of power within a campus setting. Yet, the postmodern

belief in the provisional and positional nature of disciplinary authority can offer great promise. Its enticements lay in its opening of possibilities for making new arrangements and for finding new avenues to answer ongoing practical and epistemological challenges.

What the positive face of postmodern ethics supplies is an approach to power that accounts for multiple possibilities for personal agency that are grounded by our connection (read responsibility) to others. It defines power as existing within complex sets of social relations and as a result of individual interactions that construct a field of possibilities for action. Social theorists like Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, and Emmanuel Levinas among others have argued that power circulates as people interact, and it is articulated on a continual basis through the actions of individuals. These theorists point out that the exercise of power is dependent on people who have a say, not on people being mindlessly led on way or another, floating with the current and grabbing a piece of the action when it comes along. As Foucault writes:

A power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements [. . .] that “the other” (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up. (220)

Within this field, individuals, working together, exert agency—a “permanent provocation” of wills (222)—to identify questions, listen and respond, and negotiate their actions within a frame of possibilities. When we base our interactions on this ethic of responsibility, we accept Levinas’s argument that it’s our capacity to be responsible for others that establishes our subjectivity: “the proximity of the Other is presented as the fact that the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he [sic] approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him” (96). This perspective offers WPAs an alternative to WPA-centric approaches to administration because, while assuming a dynamic understanding of how power circulates, it maintains that individuals’ actions are governed neither by preset rules nor by the capricious whims of an institution. Instead, our actions are motivated by our connection to and sense of responsibility for others.

Such an approach to administration would manifest itself in a number of ways. For example, this view demands that WPAs recognize that power/knowledge is not a fixed possession they can control and hand down to the teaching staff via printed sets of policies or via a magistrate, the graduate stu-

dent WPA. Faculty WPAs cannot be viewed as lone authorities, even though pressures from institutional forces often position them as such. Those guided by a postmodern ethics of action resist urges to act unilaterally; instead they listen to graduate student WPAs and negotiate shared actions in light of the interests and needs of those involved. In describing how this postmodern ethics might reshape teachers' roles in computer classrooms, Marilyn Cooper describes what this stance involves: "Sharing power is not a matter of giving up something you have but rather of deciding what you want to do in any given situation and being conscious of taking responsibility for how what you do affects others" (149). This stance replaces the popular notion, then, that administration is a matter of control with a more productive view that it is a matter of collective action. In the process, it rewrites the script between WPAs and graduate student assistants, reshaping the manner in which they work together and define each others' roles.

Accordingly, by permitting a more responsive, even inventive, relationship to flourish between faculty and graduate student WPAs, our programs become open to benefiting from the wisdom graduate student WPAs can offer. By inhabiting the liminal, interstitial space somewhere between faculty status and student status, graduate student WPAs are capable of providing considerable insight into reaches of the program where WPAs do not/can not tread. This places graduate student WPAs (more than) knee-deep inside writing programs—a position that privileges them with the most up-to-date information on the daily questions and concerns among a department's entire teaching cadre. Instead of using their special positioning to perpetuate a WPA-centric model of administration—one that defines graduate student WPAs as instruments of surveillance—faculty and student administrators can work together more productively by reframing their roles and responsibilities in ways that encourage collective action and dynamic response. In the space remaining, let me provide three brief illustrations of how such an ethic of action can reshape the roles and responsibilities of graduate student WPAs.

One example of how some writing programs have committed to this stance is the growing practice of employing a graduate student as a kind of ombudsperson. In such a position, a graduate student works not as a magistrate so much as a negotiator by investigating undergraduates' and TAs' concerns from as many angles as possible and, in turn, assisting all parties in coming to agreement on an issue through discussion and compromise. Such a complex position is probably most successfully held by graduate students precisely because they inhabit the interstitial space between TA and faculty WPA. This kind of role expands the duties and experiences of graduate students far beyond the more limiting liaison or administrative assistant

job-types, though it combines aspects of both. In fact, the benefit of this kind of role for graduate student WPAs is multi-directional: By using their own insider knowledge and perspectives as they work and socialize with their peers, the graduate student WPA is in a position to listen, advise, and mentor. Simultaneously, they are also in a position to work with composition faculty to shape the program's pedagogy, thus operating as advocates for teaching staff in administrative arenas. Such a role illustrates how some WPAs have or are redefining both their own roles and the roles of graduate student assistants in ways that are sensitive to the shifting dynamics of knowledge and authority within writing programs.

Beyond (or perhaps as a result of) their taking on roles like an ombuds-person, graduate students WPAs need to be re-positioned more centrally regarding a range of decision-making activities within writing programs. In recent years, many programs have made this move, by creating and using a number of committees—made up of graduate students and part-time instructors as well as full-time faculty—to decentralize decision-making authority. Such committees may undertake responsibilities ranging from making textbook decisions to reviewing and/or drafting policies to organizing peer mentoring. When these committees include graduate students as fully integrated members and not nominally and when they do more than make recommendations to the faculty WPA, writing programs not only shift the roles of graduate student WPAs. They also demonstrate that they value collective action over a hierarchy of control.

Here are two examples of how such a rethinking of administrative structures can bring unlooked-for yet substantial productive change to a writing program. First, in response to widespread dissatisfaction among the teaching staff at one institution regarding the system of peer evaluation, the graduate student WPA formed an ad-hoc committee consisting of other TAs and part-time instructors. In one semester that committee interviewed the teaching staff to learn where problems existed and what the teaching community wanted out of its peer evaluation experience. In response to what they learned, they devised a wholly new method of peer evaluation of teaching, turning what had been a fairly cut-and-dried procedure (a class visitation followed by filing a written evaluation) into a process that still included a formal review but that was preceded by a semester of more sustained interaction or mentoring between the teacher and the peer reviewer. The new procedure was presented by the committee to the teachers and the faculty WPA and approved by the staff as a whole before it was implemented. A second example: At a different institution, a small group of graduate students who had had writing program assistantships developed a major curricular initiative regarding one of the general education course requirements for

undergraduates. These graduate students transformed a professional communication course by proposing, creating, and running it as a community-service learning experience. This committee of self-selected graduate students worked with local non-profit and government agencies, and they redesigned the course in order to expose undergraduates to the rhetorical complexities of producing writing for a workplace audience with a range of needs. To make this project happen, they applied for and received both university and external funding, maintained contacts with area agencies, redesigned all the course materials and assignments, and supervised fellow teaching assistants. Perhaps most significantly, years after their inception, both of the programmatic initiatives mentioned here are on-going today.

Although these brief descriptions leave many details unmentioned, these two very different initiatives reveal a common conclusion: When faculty WPAs no longer act as the only source of authority, when graduate students are shifted out of the magistrate mindset characterizing too much of their work, and when we instead work more reflectively with the range of stakeholders within a program, we promote the possibility for longer-reaching and more productive change in our programs. Change can be small or far-reaching, and graduate student assistants, being positioned as they are, typically find themselves involved in a range of activities necessary for the success of most changes, whether these changes are planned by WPAs or, as in the case of the previous examples, whether they transpire in response to unlooked-for concerns or interests among the TAs or others. In either case, graduate students' involvement isn't only necessary but also frequently refines and transforms the changes being sought or executed. Certainly this is true in the previous examples. While the WPAs involved could have reacted to the same stimuli that provoked the graduate students to act, it is highly doubtful that they could have developed such rich changes or initiatives that so well met the interests and needs of the other stakeholders involved, and ultimately of the program as a whole.

CONCLUSION

As I said earlier, where issues of authority and power intersect there are no black and white solutions. Who knows this better than WPAs? We often navigate a realm of compromise where we are asked to accept less-than-ideal circumstances and already blurred authority. In the face of such conditions we have a choice: Continue maintaining hierarchical administrative structures in an effort to hold onto authority—an option that I believe leads to stagnation in both individual programs and broader research efforts—or reconceive administrative structures in order to understand authority as par-

tial, situated, and continually negotiated. Such a view of authority, rather than spreading a bleak postmodern prospect of paralysis, is predicated on an ethics of action whereby people's identity and authority are based in their sense of connection to and responsibility for others. A key step in replacing hierarchical practices with this approach lies in rethinking the roles and responsibilities graduate students undertake in writing program administration, and this essay offers a starting point for such a task. Although, the liaison, administrative assistant, and co-policymaker job-types will persist, a postmodern ethics of action allows us to conceptualize these roles for graduate students in ways that are sensitive to shifting dynamics of power. This will allow us to reap the resulting benefits of collective action.

NOTE

¹ My research for this essay took place over a number of years, beginning in 1995 and continuing until the fall of 2000. As I said, the earliest foundation for this project is a national survey I conducted in 1995 of 36 graduate programs, which sought information regarding TA education programs and curricula (see "Training the Workforce"). In the course of conducting that survey and the series of interviews with WPAs that followed, I developed detailed descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of graduate students acting as WPAs. This was the starting point of this project. I also made contacts with about a dozen graduate students from a range of programs. Between the years 1996 and 2000, I stayed in touch with these graduate students, seeing them at conferences and using email for open-ended conversations near the end of each semester. This informal approach enabled a rich dialogue to develop while protecting the anonymity of the students and the programs for which they worked.

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