Extra-Institutional Agency and the Public Value of the WPA

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First-year composition is a public enterprise historically. It's no secret to WPAs that their necessary public defense of student writing—and the myths that require such defenses to be launched—are a result of this perceived communal ownership. Composition, unlike other academic disciplines, is perpetually at the mercy of cultural conceptions of literacy, whether through various levels of community "sponsorship" and that sponsorship's accompanying costs (Brandt, "Sponsors of Literacy") or complicit institutional structures, fueled by culturally skewed notions of "correctness" in discourse, all of which keep composition at the bottom of the academic hierarchy (Crowley). The multitudes who claim ownership of first-year composition and its pedagogy on their own make the WPA a necessary figure. Were it not for the inside vs. outside, academic vs. public conflict over writing and literacy, the WPA would have less need to prove him- or herself as an *intellectual* authority while building a scholar-teacher agency that battles to establish and maintain a program that in the aggregate resembles a meaningful curriculum rooted in responsible theory and practice.

In search of how writing "means" to students *and* to the workforce that those students will enter, writing programs increasingly stand to be measured by criteria emanating from outside their walls—by external assessment mandates, state proficiency policies, and other such extra-institutional systems. Consequently, the WPA, as the public face of his or her program, stands to be either a passive instrument of that measurement or an active participant in its delivery, particularly in relation to the external assessment and classification of at-risk courses such as basic writing. Such positions comprise a complicated place to stand, when WPAs are themselves already physical sites of evaluation, both in terms of their labor (i.e., their "work value" to the institution) and their intellectual capital (or their scholarly production as represented outside the institution, as a component of its larger public pro-

file). Such constant scrutiny is professionally taxing, as Laura Micciche has recently noted: "the WPA's authority and power are challenged, belittled, and seriously compromised nearly every step of the way [. . . thus] WPAs daily find themselves immersed in anger, frustration, and disappointment" (434). Because such feelings are valid—and surely widespread—I think it is important to further parse the terms *authority* and *power*—alongside the labels of WPA work as "task" versus tangible "position" (Schwalm 10)—while we look to alternate sites of better professional satisfaction for WPAs, namely sites of negotiation that exist outside the WPA's home institution.

Ed White reminds us, in his famous article "Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA," that academics "[pretend . . .] that everyone is powerless," especially within the context of departmental administrative politics (106). He urges the WPA to "assert that you have power (even if you don't)" (106) to seek out powerful connections with the administrative positions on one's campus, such as college deans, to find allies regarding program funding and curricular endeavors. However, because as White asserts, "WPAs generally live schizophrenically, hating power yet wielding it" (108), such a charge is easy to make, but difficult to enact. WPAs are, according to White, self-limiting in their roles as powerful, authoritative administrative entities. Accepting White's argument in full, however, requires an acceptance of two key assumptions.

The first of these assumptions is that all WPAs really hate power. Our assuming that this is true for all WPAs already puts us at a power disadvantage because such a statement implies that all authoritative endeavors must necessarily result only after a WPA's inner turmoil is overcome. While it's recognized that in many ways White makes this statement *precisely* to question its legitimacy, I would argue that, collectively, WPAs tend to accept this assumption because it suits us professionally as faculty in English departments. If we are powerless, we are not "in charge," and thus we may not be distinguished from "regular" faculty. In fact, we are not responsible for what happens to our programs—there are always those around us who have "power" that's greater in substance and scope when compared to our own. And we do not have final say on many curricular or programmatic issues— and do not *want* it, in some cases—because we are faculty *first* and management second.

The second of these assumptions, and the one that I wish to address in this article, stems from these feelings of inadequacy, of limited authority at the local level. This assumption rests on the notion that the only outlet for power negotiations is the internal administrative structure—that no other external avenues whereby WPAs might find support, or even collaborative power sources, reasonably exist. I do not discount that White's stance regard-

ing resources is generally true: WPAs should first look inward for avenues of opportunity where their programs are concerned. But we rarely, if ever, talk about what happens when even *those* avenues are shut down, or unavailable, or simply insufficient for our program's needs. Where do we then turn, and in what ways might we exercise our own authority when we go looking for assistance outside the walls of our home institution?

I argue that extending the *public* role of the WPA to negotiations and even collaboration with these other power sources—upper-level administration—may be of equal, or even greater, value as compared to the local, institutional work that the WPA already sees as her or his primary professional domain. Positioning my experience in the context of theories of administration, especially those that examine the dichotomy of public versus private models of leadership, what follows is rooted in a story about my own developing agency as an administrator, resulting from my negotiations with our state offices over common system rubrics for basic writers and basic writing placement. When WPAs work cooperatively with upper-level administrators to develop mutually beneficial initiatives, there are many positive implications. In my case, these initiatives lead to the negotiation of common course objectives for students in basic writing through a board-mandated common rubric for basic writing placement and assessment (given course goals and objectives). Such negotiations could also have positive implications for future collaboration for other individual composition programs and thus I believe other programs might work to enact similar negotiations, specifically in the context of articulation agreements and alignments designed to "streamline" student economic and intellectual mobility between high schools, community colleges, and universities.

Leading in Public: WPAs and Theories of Administration

If we conceive of the WPA's primary role as residing outside his or her home institution, we can begin to theorize the reified "power" and "authority" that such a position might afford. In problem-solution advisory pieces such as Barry Maid's "How WPAs can Learn to Use Power to Their Own Advantage," such a reification is articulated at the programmatic level. In the context of a departmental issue over exit exams, Maid declares that "power exists always as an abstraction waiting to be concretized. It is not [. . .] by definition, finite and tangible. Therefore, it cannot be easily systematized, hierarchized, and distributed. Most important, power is not something which can be given or assigned. It must be taken and used" (209–210). This assertion by Maid is an important one, as it positions the amount and direction of power in the hands of the WPA him or herself, rather than as a variable, dependent upon departmental or institutional limitations.

Such power allows for opportunities that go to the core of the WPA's vexing dual-definition as faculty and administrator. Barbara Schneider and Richard Marback have rightly argued that assessing WPA work as "an activity that is [. . .] neither merely administrative nor simply scholarly [. . .] eludes appropriate description and evades appropriate evaluative criteria" (8). Schneider and Marback assert that WPA work may be more appropriately categorized as "guided institutional action" (9), given its daily interactions with upper-level administration and subsequent policy decisions that are outgrowths not just of knowledge of the field but also of "a kind of acumen or flair [. . .] that is more than bureaucratic functionalism or scholarly productivity" (10). Similarly, Louise Wetherbee Phelps laments that academic leadership is undervalued and politically marginalized, considered "the refuge of those less talented" or of those essentially finished with teaching and scholarship (3). She argues that the WPA position can serve as a model for academic leadership training, promoting "equal partners in reform, rather than futile resisters or passive objects of it" (4). This equality model may serve WPAs better as public rather than private, local figures if we consider the public status of composition in our culture.

I highlight these arguments regarding the proactive and *powerful* WPA because they can be easily be extended in discussing the WPA as a primarily *public* figure who can collaborate with higher administration when such collaboration benefits one's program—the local "good"—here the academic well-being of students, especially those participating in basic writing courses. While Schneider and Marback have argued that WPAs should embrace and even extend their innate political power to others in their home programs, I want to take that call for power one step further and assert that the WPA can characterize his or her work—and, important, his or her public value—outside the boundaries of the program or institution. Following Joseph Harris' lead, I agree that the WPA, in the face of the misuse of and over-reliance on contingent labor, the rising costs of higher education, and the prospect of "outsourcing" literacy instruction, must indeed "press for more direct control over our curricula and staffing—within departments of English or, if need be, outside them" (Harris 58).

I contend that the WPA's public value when exercised in the extra-institutional setting in this move for "direct control" can be more than simply a move made *against* higher administration and its accompanying measurement initiatives, or it may be concomitantly separatist in its view of writing instruction as situated in a faculty versus administration dichotomy. We already know this dichotomy to be largely false, because WPA work is inherently fraught with management narratives that belie our assertion that we are always and only "faculty" in our points of view and programmatic

decision-making. As Marc Bosquet argues in "Composition as Management Science," establishing his idea of the "heroic WPA," the WPA's life as teacher and administrator is characterized by influences and issues irrelevant to many instructional-only faculty, even those in composition studies, including the "ethos of struggle" that characterizes WPA work (15).

I fundamentally disagree, however, with Bosquet's assertion that, like upper administration (deans, vice-presidents) who are also faculty, all WPAs (which Bosquet labels "professional and managerial compositionists") should—or *could*—"shed the desire for control and embrace the reality of collective agency" by becoming "colleague[s] among colleagues" (31), as if collegiality and administrative work were always mutually exclusive. This inability to see WPAs as aligned in any way with higher administration is particularly problematic at smaller state institutions, such as my own, which lack graduate students and the common hierarchical structure of the WPA/TA/undergraduate student system of Research I in the new Carnegie system composition programs, in which authority is more easily claimed as part of the inherent mentor–mentee relationship.

But the role of the WPA as manager is always fraught with anxieties, pitfalls, and workforce implications. As Donna Strickland has pointed out, "It is not [. . .] that composition professionals never think of themselves as administrators. It is the case, however, that composition professionals who have sought to tell the story of composition for the most part have avoided framing the story as a tale of the rise of management" (47). Strickland goes on to argue that "unlike most other faculty [. . . ,] composition professionals [. . .] have an overt bureaucratic function that they cannot overlook in the way that traditional faculty can overlook their own bureaucratic functioning" (53). Strickland's important assertions, put in the context of her charge to explore the "managerial unconscious" in WPA studies, expose the reluctance of many WPAs to occupy and understand the managerial function of their positions.

Because of these further interrogations of the WPA-as-manager quandary, I reject Bosquet's belief that "composition's best chance to contribute to a better world and to achieve disciplinary status [. . . is] predicated on working toward a university without a WPA" (32). I recognize the historical truth that the hierarchical structure of composition studies is predicated upon the exploitation of contingent labor, graduate students, and, in some universities, a universal requirement that is far from "universal" in its benefits or outcomes, and thus the WPA becomes the figurehead (willingly or not) in this hierarchy. Indeed, writers such as David Schwalm have pointed out that "faculty are almost *countertrained* for administrative roles [. . . yet must] think institutionally and [. . .] look beyond the institution to the larger uni-

verse of higher education" (22). I agree with Schwalm that as WPAs we need to look *outside* our local hierarchical structure (if, indeed, the programs we run even fit this model) and consider the benefits that the WPA position may bring to collaborative administration functions that lie beyond the program, the department, or even the university.

The roles of the WPA and the department chair, one could argue, are ideologically and functionally identical—and similarly powerful—when viewed in the context of labor-management or faculty-administration paradigms. Yet the prevailing discourse about English department chairs is similarly construed as a faculty-management binary, and thus it is similarly problematic. As Cathy Davidson explains in her appropriately titled article "Them Versus Us (and Which One of 'Them' is Me?)," the job of the chair is "based on a hierarchical organizational model. The chair is the go-between for the central administration and the faculty" (97). She characterizes the chair as "psychologically" neither faculty nor administrator, yet also emphasizes that English departments, led by chair-administrators, "must be willing to show the ways that they are capable of thinking through their role and function within the academy and within society" (100). But Davidson's most salient point about the use of administrative power comes when she connects that power to the forces which control academia, yet live outside its institutional walls. Davidson argues that the rhetoric of "us" versus "them" implies that

> [a]dministrators are monolithic sources of power, an ominous, foreboding they. Yet to ascribe so much power to them is to forget the precarious role that all of us in higher education play, vis-à-vis the public, state legislators, the federal government, or (for those in private universities) prospective donors and boards of trustees. However beleaguered we are or feel, the binaric language of power [. . .] serves to make us even more beleaguered. The tired division of them versus us no amendments in original is a binary that ultimately reiterates our position as powerless and thus worthy of disrespect. (98)[1]

Davidson's argument is directly applicable to the administrative function of the WPA: the more powerless we seek to become, the more we feel the push-pull of our positions, situated sometimes uncomfortably between private-local and public-universal initiatives, or between faculty and administrative loyalties, to put it in Ed White's terms. Such a rejection of power certainly may encourage the notion that the WPA is *always* the "Velcro-pro-

fessor [. . . wherein] all the negative effects of the requirement stick to her though she gets little credit or reward for holding it all together" (Crowley 227). To accept her assertion that WPAs have "enormous responsibility and no power" (227), we must also accept that our power is limited to the local institution itself, rather than potentially available and useful in the extra-institutional setting, which is not always the case.

Seeking a Public Presence: Basic Writing and Extra-Institutional Perceptions

Basic writers are a priority group for WPAs, as they are certainly more the rule than the exception at today's university, especially at comprehensive, regional institutions such as my own. As such, these writers have as much right to valuable academic resources as do all other student groups. As reported by the Stanford University Bridge Project, in the fall of 1995, of the approximately 70% of students who attend college within two years of graduating from high school, *29%* were enrolled in at least one "remedial" reading, writing, or math course upon entering post-secondary education (www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/#problem). A more recent study, "Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College," reports that in 2001, *40%* of students attending four-year institutions were enrolled in courses labeled remedial (2). The Stanford study points out that issues such as "inequalities throughout education systems in college preparation, course offerings, and connections with local postsecondary institutions; sporadic and vague student knowledge regarding college curricular and placement policies [. . .] and an inequitable distribution of college information to parents" are among the social and institutional factors leading to students' enrollment in such courses (www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/execsummary.html).

While the figure for basic writing placement at my institution is, at about 10%, far below either the Greater Expectations report or the Stanford figure, my work as WPA certainly involves both internal and external decision-making about the future of such students. My self-imposed charge as a WPA has thus been to make that student population's academic agency public and visible, and at the highest level available. In policies from placement to exit exams, to "standard" composition course sequences, to faculty assignments in basic writing sections (with questions regarding dilemmas such as assigning seasoned full-time faculty or the new adjuncts or graduate students? assigning the most radical teachers or the most traditional ones?), no WPA's work, including my own, is without its intersections with the educational life of the basic writer. From my own experience, these students are literally the

foundation of the public, comprehensive university; it is for this reason that our department has made it a priority, during my tenure as program director, to staff our basic writing sections with full-time faculty whenever possible.[2]

Certainly basic writing is a historical site of contention between writing faculty who see its value in a comprehensive curriculum that seeks to create opportunities for students, and upper administrators who fear the trend toward "lowered standards" for admissions that lead to "unqualified" (or other such labeled) groups of students who populate basic writing and drain valuable resources. Bruce Horner has pointed out that "like college composition generally, basic writing has long been perceived as marginal at best: expendable, temporary, properly the responsibility of the high schools" (200) and that in some public documents about basic writing, such as the 1969 New York City Board of Higher Education open admissions policy statement, the language of action, states Horner, "either explicitly or implicitly opposes ethnic integration to academic excellence, the academically prepared and those needing remediation [. . .] the socio-political interests of the 'city and society' and academic interests" (204).

Horner's study highlights the reality of course curricula at the university level, which often require students to take "remedial" courses but fail to recognize how integral those marginalized students are to the very fabric of the institution. Additionally, Horner's observations show opposing views, by the New York City Board, of a "public" versus private (academic) good in educating students. These views are reflected in broad trends beyond City University of New York (CUNY), toward the typical budgetary place of basic writing in the university, accurately characterized by Joseph Harris. He contends that English has "abandoned" teaching this portion of the core curriculum and, as a result, has *allowed* it to be undervalued and marginalized (59). I contend that WPAs have the unique ability to build the bridge between those worlds of perceived good—both economic and social—if they make a greater effort to "go public," as it were, to challenge these perceptions about basic writing in their capacity as program *leaders*.

Despite the public presence of composition in general, and basic writers in particular, since long before my WPA work began in 2000, the larger community within my institution had very little knowledge of our program past the limited course descriptions in our university catalog and the various feedback from alumni, often subjective and always the kind of information upon which no one could truly act in any responsible manner. Our program is niched within a public, comprehensive university in which first-year writing is taught by full- and part-time faculty; the program is primarily sustained by part-timers whose institutional employment histories extend as much as twenty years. Working in this milieu, I found myself negotiating a

variety of teacher agencies within a relatively private, self-contained program that had long ago accepted its traditional "service" function and had, consequently, made few changes—or movements toward change—in curriculum or design. Past WPAs, for reasons that were temporally and spatially logical and that were validated by a departmental lack of interest in their work, kept to themselves, limiting their scope of influence to part-time faculty, committee work, and textbook selection. No WPA had experienced a university-wide presence or had made any public gestures to indicate how and why our program was designed as it was.[3]

Susan Miller, in her discussion of the figure of the WPA and his or her role in guiding departmental policy or shaping departmental opinion regarding the teaching of writing, recognizes the complex issues behind identification with and attitudes toward first-year composition as a subcomponent of an English department (Miller 162). In this context it is difficult for me to judge how "public" my predecessor(s) should have been, since structurally they were bound (as am I) to identity issues that were guided largely by those who lacked such "symbolic association" with writing and which linked the WPA *figure* to certain roles and functions irrespective of his or her personal identity.

Resulting from this perhaps unconscious disassociation by previous WPAs, the larger public, including the system office, was blind to our program's pedagogical and intellectual mission. This finally came to serious consequences in July 2003. The discussion that prompted our system office to zero in on basic writing as a financial and educational liability began among the board of trustees and the various community members on that board who had had experience as students in first-year writing. In a discussion of what "proficiency" should mean to our universities, responses were split: for every board member who claimed that first-year composition (and in some cases basic writing) allowed him or her to be an articulate professional later in life, another board member saw such courses as important but "too expensive" and "remedial," or, typically, "make-up high school work." Indeed, when asked about this most widely misunderstood and marginalized course in the curriculum, basic writing, WPAs must answer to such familiar concerns, including points of instruction (*Aren't you teaching them to diagram sentences anymore?*), student progress (*Why can't my seminar student Billy write a sentence? He took your composition class!!*), and competing budgetary issues (*Can't you just use unqualified Mr. X to cover these classes? I mean, anyone can teach writing, right?*) .

No board member, I believe, was aware of our college-level course expectations in basic writing, which had been developed in direct response to popular misconceptions that basic writing was (or should be) the "dummy"

or "grammar drill" course. Thus, a solution, borne of some ignorance about these curricular issues and genuine student need, was proposed: because basic writers apparently weren't going to go away—what if the system required that all students who needed the course were *mandated* to take it in their first year, or else be banned from the system, relegated to community colleges (or no college at all)? This hypothetical strategy might provide an influx of cash into our budget, because, it seemed, many of our students were "remedial" and thus unlikely to finish their degree programs unless they completed these courses early in their college years. That's when I got the call.

In August 2003, my dean asked that I meet with the vice-chancellor as a representative WPA of our system (four regional campuses) to discuss the board of trustees' mandate. I knew that I was now to be responsible for directing the development of a system-wide rubric that would allow the campuses to implement the plan on our own terms. Amazingly, the vice-chancellor was trained in the curricular principles of WAC/WID and thus found the money argument a bit unseemly in the light of her belief that composition is a crucial, valuable requirement in general, with basic writing in particular as a critical point of access for our at-risk student population. The vice-chancellor wanted to know what our department's stance on basic writing was, how we defined such a course (was it our first course? Our first two courses? All three courses?), and how we felt we could handle a mandate that required this course to be completed within all students' first year of study. In short, she was unwilling to say how the system's composition programs would implement this somewhat vague mandate specifically until the programs themselves—or somebody speaking for them—helped to define the terms. In this case, I happened to be that somebody.

I should say here that had the vice-chancellor *not* been so enlightened, one of two things would have become potential outcomes. Either we would have been given a personal tour of the new policy and given a concomitant list of implementation methods *or* no such meeting would have taken place; I wasn't at the trustees' meeting, after all, so I doubt that anyone would have known to invite me. The WPA as a literally invisible cog in management comes most to bear in these situations, as few people outside academia— and perhaps outside English—even understand the existence for any faculty-administrative role other than department chair, which is the position that faculty take for granted as truly public in department hierarchies. We assume that WPAs necessarily *cannot* have a public presence, or extra-institutional value, and so we frequently accept these out-of-earshot negotiations as impossible sites of entry and consequent contribution. So the alternate article, the one I'm *not* writing here, would necessarily discuss what strate-

gies a WPA should employ when a decision comes down from the system office without notice or consultation. I recognize that this is the case most of the time. But I'm posing the notion that perhaps we sometimes *allow* that to be the default, instead of focusing on a less-considered question regarding a WPA's public agency: What if your system office has an enlightened vice-chancellor? Are you ready to help her craft a rubric?

Most likely WPAs are not ready for such a working arrangement, because we are rarely advised about ways such a meeting might be implemented and would take place, or what exactly are the parameters of its execution, should it occur. Much advisory scholarship exists regarding intra-university perceptions of first-year composition programs and how program administrators (WPAs) can best handle such overarching influence and daily interference. This advice is represented in well-known and practically-oriented collections such as Linda Myers-Breslin's *Administrative Problem Solving for Writing Programs*, Stuart Brown, Theresa Enos, and Catherine Chaput's *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource*, and Irene Ward and Bill Carpenter's *Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators;* indeed, work from each of these anthologies is cited in this article. These collections, aimed at both WPAs in practice and, significantly, WPAs-to-be in training, highlight why and how program administrators must situate themselves as professionals in the field as well as becoming program "problem solvers" in the world of university administrators and faculty. As such, they are invaluable collections that many of us have put to great use. However, perhaps because composition studies as a field has historically valued collaboration, these anthologies emphasize how cooperative strategizing *at the program level* best serves the WPA. Typically WPA literature situates—or, more colloquially, pits—WPAs against higher administration in an exclusively adversarial relationship by sad default; it does not adequately address how a WPA might work significantly at the extra-institutional level, or how such negotiations and collaboration may be differently valuable than those done within one's program.

Some scholarship has made gestures toward where the WPA "fits into" the larger administrative structure, but with varying emphases. Doug Hesse's "Understanding Larger Discourses in Higher Education" makes the important argument that WPAs need to understand the larger professional issues that administrators and other faculty face *outside* composition studies; he suggests that WPAs make themselves aware of conferences, research questions, and the professional literature that is of importance to deans, provosts, and other leaders outside of English studies (310). He contends that "WPAs ought to perceive more opportunities than pitfalls when trying to think like academicians other than English or composition faculty" (311) to

become less insular in their educational world view. As critical as this advice is—and WPAs would do well to take it—it does not fully address how such a position might reconfigure the WPA as a public administrator who might see the *bulk* of her work as speaking to these larger institutional attitudes and directives.

Similarly focused on how WPAs might integrate themselves into the mechanisms of upper-level administration in higher education, Joyce Kinkead and Jeanne Simpson's influential article "The Administrative Audience: A Rhetorical Problem" seeks to outline how WPAs might do "admin speak" and how they might train their assistant directors to do the same. Kinkead and Simpson "encourage WPAs to find the common ground they share with other administrators—to reckon with them" (68) and advise WPAs to understand the rationale for decisions made by upper-level officials such as vice-presidents and deans. But articles such as theirs still appear to keep WPA-administrative relationships at the level of linguistic trickery, if you will, where we learn how *they* (the upper administration) "speak" to get what *we* (WPAs) want.

Simpson and Kinkead make a valid point about the importance of acknowledging these linguistic differences between writing faculty and higher education officials; in our work as teachers and program administrators, we rarely recognize the insulation such a career affords us, and how this "head in the sand" approach to the *work* of running a program, including our labor in guiding first-year students through the difficult maze of college literacy, complicates our efforts to secure more public recognition for and understanding of writing pedagogy and program operations. So while I do not aim to critique Simpson and Kinkead's argument, I wish to point out how little has been written in this type of advisory context that *extends* their general argument, linking collaborative WPA work to the common "problems" presented by those in the upper echelons of administration, such as system offices for public universities.[4]

I understand that given rising pressures to become a professional force in one's own right, the perception that all central administrators are WPAs' adversaries is a common one, especially in relation to faculty governance and intra-institutional authority. No one wants the powers-that-be to sweep in and alter or commandeer our curricula, and, frankly, no one really wants to admit that she is *working with* those powers in any "official" capacity. As Libby Falk-Jones has argued, academics typically "[view] power as primarily destructive or oppressive. Such a perception of power typically underlies common metaphors for power derived from war, violence, explosions, and even games (winners and losers)" (77). Especially on unionized campuses such as mine, where the division between "administration" and "faculty"

is drawn along collective bargaining lines and where administrative faculty such as I am continually straddle this division, this notion of power-as-oppression is omnipresent.[5]

To view this from a reverse perspective, however, consider Falk-Jones' other contention that "[. . . WPAs'] lack of reward power" can be crippling to programs, and thus WPAs may help their programs by working with upper-level administration to "make rewards—stipends, course release time—available to participating faculty" (78). These agreements are important to composition professionals and cannot be struck in isolation (at least at my institution). But I would add to this list of "rewards" those bargained for *students*, as relevant to course credit, program design, and system-wide perceptions of the value of these students' writing, particularly at the basic writing level. These student-centered agreements are critical bridges between high schools and colleges, between public perception and public support of higher education, and for better or worse, they frequently start at the top and work their way down to the institutional level. Rather than resist our power to influence these discussions and shape public perception, I submit that we do seize it and *use* it to help system offices *help us* to define and thus provide institutional agency for basic writers in the FYC curriculum.

BEING PUBLIC: WPAs, SYSTEM OFFICES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING PROGRAMS

WPAs must accept and even embrace their own potential for power and must do so in the service of a truly public authority, which works for a public, student-centered good. I began this effort to use power publicly in Summer and Fall 2003, during several meetings with our vice-chancellor to discuss the fundamentals of the plan that would affect basic writers on our campus and on the other three sister campuses in our system. In response to her questions, I was first grateful for the rare opportunity to define the culturally loaded term "basic" (which replaces other subjective terms such as "remedial" or "precollege," terms I had worked to phase out of our admission office's informational literature and high school recruiting visits); I assured her that basic writing was one of our three courses only and that not all composition courses were "remedial" simply because they focus on first-year literacy. This was a way to cut off any existing limited perceptions of the sequence coming from within the institution itself.

Second, in terms of gathering WPAs to *standardize* that definition for student and faculty benefit (especially helpful to frequent transfer students, a population that equals 30% of our annual enrollments), I agreed that we had a collective stake in having that dialogue, and that even if it took a number of meetings (and it did), we'd decide on language rather than have

it decided for us. Finally, to make such standards public—especially to community colleges and high schools—so they might better understand what basic writing is, and, plainly, what they could do to meet these goals themselves, I agreed to craft a rubric, with the input of my fellow system WPAs, that would be truly public. This would necessitate follow-up on an annual basis, in some cases, to assure that the *entire* system (K–12 to postgrad) understood what we meant by "basic writing" and why it was so important for our students.

Again, the benefits of this collaboration were targeted for the "public good" of students, even as they were simultaneously in the service of the central administration. Yes, a common rubric allowed the system office to more clearly "categorize" basic writers in our curriculum (and in the curricula of the other campuses). Certainly this could have been read as a top-down approach to labeling our students as deficient in skills, i.e., lacking in college-level literacies. However, the invitation to work *with* the vice-chancellor on this project told me that local expertise, in this case, had some public value. Had our program not worked to make itself publicly visible (and had my dean not been assured of our local expertise such that she set up this collaborative relationship when the vice-chancellor sought assistance), such a rubric could have easily been crafted without our involvement.

If that had happened, the ways "preparatory" curricula were to be defined would have been beyond our control. Certainly that definition could have spread to our entire course sequence, rather than being focused only on our basic writing course. The result would have been an increased public perception that all writing at the 100-number level is of lower intellectual rigor than other courses in English or other disciplines, resulting in an increased burden on our students to complete both of these courses in their first year of study. While such course completion is the ideal, financial and other significant human realities often make such completion impossible. So it was important to me to highlight the basic writing course as not only unique in its definition, but also in its design (including a defense of its classroom capacity—twelve students per section—and its individualized pedagogy, rooted in student-professor conferences and final portfolios). This dialogue gave me the opportunity to articulate publicly and, in doing so, ultimately validate why we *taught* basic writing as we did, so as to solidify that approach in public documentation at the system level. Again, I could not have made that happen—and had not been able to do it previously—at the local level alone.[6]

> My story has many intertwined conclusions, but some of them were these:

1. In the context of our discussions, I shared with the vice-chancellor our plan to make basic writing a credit-bearing course. While this proposal was not specific to my charge, it gave me the opportunity to seek higher-level support for such an initiative and to put this support into the final proposal. Linking system policy with local needs, discussing our for-credit proposal with the vice-chancellor also allowed me to make the case that if basic writers would be required to take their course within twenty-four credits of enrollment, then it really *ought* to be credit-bearing. In financial terms, money spent deserved some actual credits earned. Perhaps because of the vice-chancellor's support and the general visibility given to our basic writing course as a result of her collaboration with our program, our course is credit-bearing as of Fall 2005, for the first time in its local institutional history.

2. I used this public opportunity to make contacts with the other WPAs at the three other campuses, as previously mentioned; I had known only one of these directors well, but now we had a common discussion point as a group. I regretted my not having done this much sooner, before any system office plan went into action. Why not consolidate *WPA* power extra-institutionally? While each of our work had a local context, across sister campuses we shared common objectives. Our meetings allowed us to craft a common rubric for the vice-chancellor and to plan strategies, should further initiatives (whether positive or negative) occur. Our rubric went to the system office as the template for further discussions about basic writing, including those at the community colleges. While I certainly don't mean to imply that four-year colleges should lead the system's relationship with the community colleges, I also will admit that if offered to take that curricular lead as a WPA, I would gladly do it.

3. I used the rubric charge to put into writing what we, as system WPAs, felt that our area high schools should be doing if curricular and pedagogical circumstances allowed. This consensus-based attitude was built on my other "public" work, existing outreach to the high schools in my community, which was related to placement and course completion rates for recent enrollees. I welcomed the opportunity to put at the system level some ideas for high school-college writing initiatives, which are so often ignored in today's cash-poor educational systems.

4. Finally—and admittedly—I used this opportunity to build a contact in the system office; that person is now willing to support fur-

ther initiatives at my institution that will work to bring the branch campuses together. I can call the vice-chancellor and talk frankly about programmatic concerns; I can seek her advice about the profile of our writing programs as they are discussed at the board of trustees meetings. This relationship does not supersede the administrative relationship I have with my department chair, or even my dean, but this extra-institutional contact who knows the work that I do and values it gives our program a presence—and future opportunities—that didn't exist before.

Nevertheless, what can other WPAs do on their own campuses to enhance their own extra-institutional power and show it in positive, meaningful ways? Is my experience a realistic model upon which to base other WPAs' efforts to "go public" with their own programmatic authority?

Here's a list of possible starting advisory points that I hope other WPAs might find useful:

1. *Make your program truly "public."* Find out what other local campuses and, if applicable, your central office or board of trustees knows about your program. How do other institutions, as well as those officials controlling your campus funds from outside the institution itself, talk about your course sequence, or your basic or preparatory courses? How do they talk to their constituents and to their children and neighbors about your courses? Is your program accurately represented to the public? If not, find ways to give your program some positive public relations visibility. Consider sending some e-mail, or some copies of program documents (goals and objectives, sample syllabi, a list of program achievements and statistics, such as placement trends and curricular improvements) to those in power, possibly your board or central administrators. Send these materials to feeder institutions and sister campuses as well, and don't forget local high schools. You may be surprised at how many of these participants in public discourse about higher education want to speak with—and learn from—you, because you are a public representative of your program.

2. *Ask for money from sources you may not think are listening (or watching).* To extend Ed White's good advice about going beyond the "local" avenues of department chair or dean, when faced with funding roadblocks ("Use it or Lose it"), try some unexplored avenues of support. Using the same public program information that you have already distributed to the higher-ups, ask if these officials would

be willing to fund some large-scale initiatives, like assessment (we have an assessment grant program that comes from our system office—not surprisingly, perhaps, spearheaded by our enlightened vice-chancellor) or establishment of articulation conferences between high school, community college, and four-year college representatives. Again, you may be surprised at how forthcoming the funds are when composition is put in the context of statewide educational concerns, especially as state boards of higher education continue to talk about "alignment." A savvy WPA will translate "alignment" into "cooperation" or even "(two-way) communication," and get out in front of these negotiations, taking the power lead.

3. Along these lines, *start to think of your program as one that serves a larger community beyond your home institution.* As much as WPAs sometimes cringe at the thought that we are in the "service" business, we really are directing a program that is one of the largest moneymakers on campus and, more to the point, one of the most important educational initiatives within the university (my opinion). I believe that WPAs have for too long been invested primarily—or exclusively— in what goes on in their own departments and among their own writing faculty. If you believe, in true humanities fashion, that your program and faculty serve a *public* good and not just an institutional need, you can better see how the resources that exist outside the institution itself may be more interested in—and appreciative of—your WPA power than are the local folks. This is one way to address Micciche's valid "disappointment" with WPA work: take your show on the road and see the spectators out there as your primary audience, and don't forget to see them as the benefactors of your own hard-fought intellectual authority.

What happened at my institution may not be possible everywhere. I agree that many institutions' WPAs collectively have a long way to go before we find true agency inside our own universities, let alone outside, our programs. So many WPAs out there work under so many differing conditions— and within all kinds of departments at complicated universities of diverse types. But I do want to stress that unless and until we accept our *ability* to be extra-institutional negotiators, or a positive, public version of Bosquet's "hero WPA," we can't hope to affect with any significance the way writing is taught in the university or perceived by the general public. For those of us who administer in programs that include basic writing, in particular, I think it's time we took the role of "manager" to mean something more: we are managing not only faculty and curriculum but student agencies as well, agencies at risk and susceptible to outside definition and control. To fol-

low Phelps's lead, as WPAs we surely can "lead with integrity, based on the ethical premise that infuses academic enterprises in their attempt to realize the ideals of professionalism" (25). If reaching out to higher administration improves that agency and that continual desire for true professionalism, we should not fear making that connection—nor should we disregard the chances for true public power that such a connection may bring.

Notes

1   I realize that Phelps uses this identical passage in her discussion of "the rhetoric of humanities" regarding academic leadership, and I do not aim to duplicate her efforts or her reading of Davidson's influential work. However, because I seek to compare Davidson's rhetorical construction of the department chair specifically to characterizations of the WPA as an allied leadership figure, I employ it in this context. Phelps' full introductory remarks in her article, which lead into this extended Davidson quote are that "potential for collective influence from leaders 'all the way down' is both endangered and enhanced by today's situations of crisis, transition, restructuring, and rethinking, which break up frozen power arrangements and reveal hidden information" (24).

2   For Fall 2005, I'm proud to say that eight of the nine sections of our newly credit-bearing basic writing course were taught by full-time tenured faculty. We are thus enacting Harris' call that "tenure-stream faculty in composition and English" teach not only first-year but also basic writing (63), toward revaluing this course within the department and the university.

3   As other WPAs have noted—particularly women working in departments that are predominantly male, or junior faculty working in departments consisting of mostly senior professors who teach literature but not writing—it is easy for the WPA's voice to be silenced, even if that silence is implicitly rather than explicitly reinforced at the department level. In addition to the myriad narratives written by these disenfranchised WPAs (some of whom are victims of negative tenure decisions as a result of that status, created by a misunderstanding of WPA work as research and scholarship), Susan Miller has argued regarding women and the *teaching* of composition, "individuals are 'placed,' or given the status of subjects, by ideological constructions that tie them to fantasized functions and activities, not their actual situations. These ideological constructions mask very real needs to organize societies in particular ways" (*Textual Carnivals* 123). In other words, the psychic slots into which composition faculty are placed are as much a result of what faculty *think* these individuals do, culturally speaking, as what they *do*, in fact, do. Human group structures do this categorizing automatically; lesser-represented groups within structures are the least powerful to resist such slotting.

4   I am deeply grateful for Jeanne Simpson's thoughtful and encouraging comments to me regarding a draft version of this manuscript, presented at the Thomas R. Watson Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, in October 2004. I want

to specifically note the groundbreaking work of Simpson and Kinkead's article and acknowledge it as a primary influence here.

5   See Rita Malencyzk's recent article, "Doin' The Managerial Exclusion: What WPAs Might Need to Know about Collective Bargaining" (*WPA: Writing Program Administration* 27.3, Spring 2004) for a more complete discussion of this issue.

6   At this point, recognizing the great deal of scholarship on collaborative program administration in *WPA* and in edited collections, I add here that while I am the sole composition program director on my campus (another colleague directs our placement sequence, and yet another colleague has directed our faculty development initiatives), I do not think that even an army of me clones, so to speak—i.e., a deeply collaborative infrastructure consisting of multiple individuals working as WPAs—would have any greater opportunity to exercise power without "going public" and being public in their daily operations. In other words, a collaborative program administration *could do* this same public work, and if that structure benefits the program itself, all the more power to it. But I do not think that having a collaborative program administration *alone* means that a program is automatically *more* able to exercise extra-institutional power unless an effort is made to seek out that agency, beyond the confines of the program and institution.

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