

Power, Fear, and the Life of the Junior WPA: Directions for New Conversations

Dew, Debra Frank and Alice Horning, eds. *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators: Institutional Practices and Politics*. West Lafayette: Parlor P, 2007. ISBN: 9781602350168.

Enos, Theresa and Shane Borrowman, eds. *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*. West Lafayette: Parlor P, 2008. ISBN: 9781602350502.

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I. THE PROBLEM

Disheartened. Concerned. Stubborn. Grateful.

This is the range of emotions that I'm left with after reading Parlor Press's two new volumes about the experiences of junior WPAs: *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*, edited by Theresa Enos and Shane Borrowman, and *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators: Institutional Practices and Politics*, edited by Debra Frank Dew and Alice Horning. Both collections were compiled out of a very real need to attend to the challenges that junior WPAs (hereafter jWPAs) face, from political tensions to work load imbalance. While Enos and Borrowman's text is a voice-driven collection of case studies and responses and Dew and Horning's volume brings together a variety of pragmatic and theoretical articles, the general message of both books is clear: The dangers that jWPAs face are real, and we have not yet done enough to address the situation.

As a reader, then, I feel disheartened because, although things *are* changing, the predominant sentiment about the position of jWPAs remains negative. I'm concerned because I have just read several hundred pages warning me *not* to take the job that I'm contracted to begin this fall. I feel stubborn because I continue to believe that I have made the right decision

for me in accepting this position. And, finally, I'm grateful because, from what I can tell about my position thus far, it has been shaped in response to our profession's calls for more viable jobs. Specifically, the position that I am about to begin includes a significant course reduction, assistant staff, stable curriculum, and nationally recognized senior faculty members who are eager to see me succeed. I have, from what I can tell, as good a chance as anyone of "making it" as a jWPA.

Even so, reading this material and attending related sessions at the recent WPA conference in Minneapolis this past July, I do continue to find myself feeling disheartened. And this is the aspect of my reactions that troubles me the most: to be discouraged not just by the potential pitfalls that this job (or, truly, any job) could hold, but also by the fact that the tone of our literature and discussions remains so adamantly fearful. Am I destined for disaster? Have I signed on for an impossible task? Moreover, what can someone in my situation take from this literature? What am I left with? And what can I do, proactively, both to stay the course in the field that I have chosen as well as to survive the challenges of the administrative work that I and so many of my peers are increasingly finding ourselves involved in?

Many of us who have completed PhDs in rhetoric and composition in recent years, like Brenda M. Helmbrecht with Connie Kendall, recognize the near inevitability of WPA work during the early stages of our careers (*Untenured Faculty* 173). These voices, however, stand in sharp contrast to voices like Duane Roen (*Promise and Perils* 213), Ed White (*Promise and Perils* 129), and Horning (*Untenured Faculty* 40) who consider jWPA positions dangerous and perhaps even unethical. While these and other advanced members of our field offer what insights they can, many of them continue to issue a warning: New faculty members simply should not accept administrative work prior to tenure. Even so, as Horning among others admits, jWPA positions are becoming naturalized (5) as graduate programs increasingly train students for WPA work and more and more jobs on the MLA list include some facet of administrative responsibility.

Throughout these conversations, voices of both concern and advice hover around the same two related issues: power and tenure. Junior WPAs do not have power, and so they cannot achieve power (i.e., tenure). This is clearly a problem. Richard C. Gebhardt, however, argues that the crux of the matter is to reframe departmental guidelines for tenure and promotion, rather than to scare jWPAs away from the work (21). Indeed, at this past July's WPA Workshop, led by Chris Anson and Carol Rutz, ample time was spent discussing the "fourth dimension" of WPA tenure files. As the "fourth leg" of a wobbly table, Anson and Rutz encouraged my cohort of

workshop participants to consider administration a challenging but crucial part of any jWPA's tenure and promotion file.

Clearly, these concerns are real; the warnings are necessary; and the implications are frightening. Even so, I believe, as certain of the authors in these collections do, that we must find ways of managing the fears that such warnings—while necessary and important—can create. Otherwise, we may become immobilized by fear itself, rather than working to improve our situations. As I see it, this fear is motivated by two related issues. First, there is the fear that WPA work will not *get* me job security. That is, it will not be sufficiently valued in a tenure file. Second, there is the fear that this work will actually *lose me my job* because it will absorb my time and/or it will ensnarl me in politics that will put me out of favor with whatever higher forces determine my candidacy. This sounds indeed like a no-win situation: As jWPAs, we are commissioned to do work that is not valued and that jeopardizes our future. In this context, we are never blessed with power. And that is, indeed, the fear: we are powerless now, and powerless we will remain. Unless, of course, we can find ways both of making ourselves valuable and of managing the obstacles that administrative work always entails.

II. THE TEXTS

Let me be clear from the outset: *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration* and *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators* are texts that I recommend. As they were intended, I recommend them to any graduate student who so much as flirts with the idea of taking on program direction at the university level, just as I recommend them to any young faculty member who finds him or herself suddenly commissioned with unanticipated administrative work. Most importantly, I recommend reading these books earlier than I did—only a few weeks prior to beginning my first faculty position as a WPA.

These are not, however, easy reads. In their introduction, Jillian Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos, for instance, sought the “promises and perils” of WPA work and found much more peril than promise (*Promise and Perils* 7). First gathering data through a wide-scale survey and then following up with testimonials, their book gives voice to a variety of experiences, most from jWPAs. These perilous experiences, so many of them wrought with frustration, clearly need to be given voice. On some occasions, individuals found themselves in truly untenable conditions: told to do one thing and later discredited for it. Even moves to be strategic, to push toward tenure through one means over another, sometimes left their authors befud-

dled when the gamble didn't work out. These are heartbreaking stories and important reminders. Moreover, by way of contextualizing the narratives, the editors collected brief response essays from leaders in the WPA field who consider their colleagues' trials and offer reflections and advice. Collectively, the editors argue, these testimonials and reflections suggest that a central peril of WPA work is the inherent conflict of scholar-administrator identities. In response, they call for more tenure-line positions and more explicit promotion criteria. With such improvements, they suggest, there may be fewer WPAs who admit, as one of their respondents did, that "I have much more responsibility than authority" (17). As a whole, this book is sobering, visceral, and real. *The Promise and Peril of Writing Program Administration* reads like the archive of an historical moment: a generation of jWPAs who were trained enough to know what to do, but still find themselves flummoxed. This juxtaposition, then, is a new kind of status: As jWPAs, we are increasingly trained in the nature of writing administrative work in general, but we still need more advice about how we can navigate the specific situations in which we find ourselves.

In contrast, *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators* presents numerically fewer essays, and the pieces themselves are less conversational and more theoretically driven. Still accessible and meaningful, these articles as a whole take a more pragmatic approach to the phenomenon of the jWPA. While certain voices—editor Horning's among them—still argue unequivocally that juniors in the field should not take on this work, the majority approach the issue as a phenomenon that has become unavoidable. As Horning herself admits, PhD students are increasingly becoming trained to do this work, while departments are struggling—either because they don't have the funds or because senior faculty do not wish to continue leading programs—to find anyone but junior faculty to do the work (*Untenured Faculty* 4). The implications are, on the one hand, that institutions are perhaps not acting as responsibly as they could. The profession tells them not to hire junior administrators. However, we are in a buyers market, and there are more than enough new PhDs graduates looking for jobs who are willing to take these positions. On the other hand, these same graduates are, in many cases, not as uninformed as they may once have been. Many more graduate students are being trained in writing program administration. So, while it incorporates many resistant voices, this collection primarily accepts the reality of jWPA work and attempts to discuss several important conditions around it, including issues of what a jWPA is; what motivates individuals to pursue WPA work; how jWPA work may be different from advanced WPA work; what good might come out of jWPA positions; and how jWPAs should be trained and protected. In sum, the

principal recommendations are that jWPAs must be well trained; they must be politically protected; and they must have a reasonable work load (7).

So where does this leave us? From both narrative and theoretical standpoints, most of the literature published continues on a very cautious note. Those same leaders in the field who worked to develop documents like the Portland Resolution (available on the WPA website) are increasingly accepting the need for graduate students to be trained as WPAs, and so graduate courses and other opportunities continue to spread—which, as many contend, is a good and necessary trend. Further, as recent graduate students themselves attest, the job market is so saturated with administrative jobs that they are becoming difficult to avoid—not to mention the fact that many of us, having been well-trained, look forward to them (175). Finally, beyond those of us who select WPA work, many assistant professors are asked to take on such work in their second or third years on the job. Therefore, even if they do not seek WPA positions, many young rhetoric and composition faculty end up involved in this kind of work early on. It seems wise, in this case, for us to pay heed both to the narrative voices of *Promise and Perils* and the more pragmatic approach of *Untenured Faculty*. Taken together, these texts both remind us of the challenging circumstances that jWPAs face, as well as the unavoidable trend of untenured faculty working as writing program administrators.

III. THE ISSUES

In the context of these trends and challenges, the composite warnings of these two texts fall into five general categories: problems of resources, politics, market forces, job advancement, and job satisfaction. To begin with, the most often cited resource deficiency is that of time. On all too many occasions, untenured faculty are obliged to administer substantial programs on little more than a course release. Even worse, in some instances, time that has been given once is later taken away (McNabb, *Promise and Perils* 66). In a related vein, Patti J. Kurtz notes that what she needs is more time *and* more credibility: “I might even be able to manage if I had one of the two (credibility would be preferable)” (57). Credibility and authority, then, are likewise important resources because they allow jWPAs to make decisions and take action in a more efficient manner. However, without sufficient training and experience, jWPAs are not able to garner enough authority to conduct their work effectively. As a result, senior members of the field, like Horning, advocate increased training (*Untenured Faculty* 6) and clearer work objectives. However, despite the fact that experts like Anson advise jWPAs to negotiate good terms before they begin their positions (*Promise*

and *Perils* 86), many jWPAs begin their work without so much as a formal job description.

A second area full of potential mine fields for jWPAs is that of institutional politics. Without the requisite authority—or even a clear set of objectives—in their work, jWPAs are more prone to becoming involved in a variety of levels of conflict. In large part, this potential for political tensions results from the nature of WPA work itself, as well as jWPAs' novice stature. Although they are usually members of English departments, writing divisions, or other institutional units, jWPAs typically cross institutional lines, finding themselves involved in—and sometimes at odds with—the interests of both their home departments and their institutions at large. Further, as Ruth Mirtz and Roxanne Cullen argue, the adoption of a new WPA position “nearly always happens in a climate of change, and change is difficult for all parties” (*Untenured Faculty* 101). The nexus of this kind of work requires a high degree of institutional savvy. For instance, Megan Fullwiler noted that she feels that she must become, in a way, “bilingual” as she learns to represent her program and herself to a variety of audiences (*Promise and Perils* 100). Throughout these interactions, however, jWPAs may find themselves in conflict with their colleagues, may inadvertently offend a chair or dean (Enchelmayer, *Promise and Perils* 52), or may be unable to manage a staff of veteran instructors (McNabb, *Promise and Perils* 69). And the concern, of course, is that such tensions will negatively impact a jWPA's future tenure candidacy or other form of promotion.

Even if they can anticipate these potential pitfalls, most jWPAs recognize the market forces that play out in their lives: They do not always have the ultimate choice of whether or not to engage in WPA work. Such work is an important and increasingly ubiquitous facet of the larger field of rhetoric and composition; and, whereas it used to be a task, now it is a position (McLeod, *Promise and Perils* 165). Further, as universities face strained budgetary climates, they often do not or cannot recruit senior-level faculty into these positions. As a result, increasing numbers of job listings involve an administrative component; and even those junior rhetoric and composition faculty who do not initially accept a WPA position are later required to begin such work prior to their tenure review. The reality, then, is that many members of our field will engage in WPA work at the junior level, regardless of whether or not they self select it. Fortunately, rhetoric and composition programs are expanding their WPA training at the graduate level in response to this market reality. However, as Brenda M. Helmbrecht and Connie Kendall remind us, if students are trained for this work, it is only logical that they will be hired into jWPA positions (*Untenured Faculty* 185).

It is, therefore, contradictory to both prepare graduate students for WPA work and simultaneously discourage junior faculty from engaging in it.

Further, while it seems prudent for graduate students to take note of market changes and to prepare themselves for the kind of work that they will likely find themselves involved in, no amount of advance planning can fully immunize a young faculty member from the challenges of advancing toward tenure as a jWPA. Because WPA work requires so much time, junior faculty find themselves without enough time to complete the research and publication required for tenure. Perhaps even more importantly, because of the political climate in which they find themselves, young WPAs run the risk of weakening relationships among the faculty and higher level administrators who will review their tenure and promotion files. As a result, jWPAs often find their energies split: Do they prioritize their programs, or their research agendas? Similarly, do they work to expand their programs, or do they play it safe so as not to risk damaging political alliances? For those in tenure-track positions, it may be possible to balance these forces successfully in order to achieve tenure and promotion; however, a variety of other untenured WPAs are non-tenure track: professionals bound by geography or other circumstances to jobs that do not allow for advancement. Therefore, while it is important for our field to continue redefining scholarship to include the array of texts that WPAs produce (i.e., handbooks, grant applications, proposals, etc.) (Issacs, *Promise and Perils* 181), it is likewise crucial to convert WPA lines to tenure-track positions (Townsend, *Untenured Faculty* 75).

Finally, even for those jWPAs who survive the early years of their positions, there continue to be a variety of frustrations, leading many jWPAs to experience low job satisfaction. In part, some of the authors of these texts suggest that such frustrations emerge from unrealistic expectations about what the WPA lifestyle will entail. At times, Dew suggests, WPA work is glorified, particularly as it is marketed toward graduate students (*Untenured Faculty* 110). Other individuals, Ruth Mirtz and Roxanne Cullen argue, come to WPA out of a “call to serve,” despite the fact that a desire to support a program and its staff is not sufficient to survive a WPA position (107). So, while some jWPAs’ job dissatisfaction is caused by untenable work conditions, others find themselves disappointed because they had unrealistic expectations to begin with (Hesse, *Promise and Perils* 169). How, then, can jWPAs respond to the reality of market forces and institutional limitations and strike a balance among their needs to survive, thrive in, and enjoy their jobs?

IV. STRATEGIES FOR CONSIDERATION

In response to the stories and conclusions offered in these two books, I believe that what each of us as jWPAs needs to do is to consider our situations and the possible strategies available to us and to determine which aspects of our jobs we can change and which we cannot. To build on Ed White's advice about power (i.e., use it or lose it) (*Untenured Faculty* 45), I believe that what WPAs should seek is power-via-authority, rather than power-via-control. Dew points out that writing programs control us more than we control them (120). Therefore, because we cannot control institutional particularities, this message suggests, our best strategy is to figure out how to work well—both for our own benefit and for that of our students and staff—within the boundaries of our institutions. What we should strive for, then, is increased power-via-authority: demonstrating to our institutions what it is that we do and how valuable it is, and thereby increasing our credibility and our ability to push our ideas and programming further.

In order to establish power-via-authority, these two books remind us that it is helpful to recognize how much we actually *can* change, even if the broad resource base, political climate, and/or bureaucratic culture of our institutions are beyond our reach. To begin with, here are a few things that jWPAs may not necessarily control: job titles and descriptions, course release time, staff hiring, curriculum adoption, administrative support, and budget. Even so, these elements—so closely related to all of our jobs—may be negotiable in ongoing ways. If, for instance, your chair cannot offer additional release time, perhaps she or he can revise your job title in ways that grant you more visibility on campus and, therefore, access to other resources. Or, if a shift of title isn't possible, a revised job description, complete with specific evaluation requirements for your position, might be. As Anson and Ruiz advised at the WPA Workshop this past July, WPA work is both institutionally specific and uniformly difficult to evaluate. Junior WPAs, therefore, must regard their contracts and job descriptions as ongoing works in progress, to be revised year after year.

In sum, the combined insights of *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration* and *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators*, as well as several discussions at this July's WPA conference, contribute to a central, proactive theme for jWPAs: Focus on what you *can* change in order to improve your job conditions, and resist feeling defeated by what you cannot. Alongside these efforts, we are reminded to keep in mind all of the other facets of our work that we likewise *do* control. From the rhetorical choices that we make as we strategize program changes to the attitudes that we maintain about our roles and identities in our institutions, we actually

do control many aspects related to professional success. And, as we strive to increase our self of power-via-authority, it can be helpful to keep these things in mind, several members of our field remind us, as further sources of self-empowerment. What follows are five strategies for authority building and survival drawn from the composite readings and advice outlined above:

- 1) Know your context: One important way that jWPAs can help themselves is to research their own contexts, including program histories and institutional politics and their respective roles within them. Further, as Emily Isaacs had to remind herself during her early years as a jWPA, “It’s not about you, Emily” (*Promise and Perils* 178). That is, the complex dynamics involved in a writing program eclipse any single individual, and jWPAs can relieve their own stress by reminding themselves of their place within a vast network. Take the pressure off yourself, Isaacs’ comment suggests, by recognizing that when things go wrong (or right), it’s not necessarily just about you.
- 2) Be realistic with program design: Akin to the importance of knowing your context is the importance of working effectively within it. Several of the voices within these volumes remind jWPAs to align their own objectives with those of their departments and institutions. According to Art Young, “WPA work for junior faculty can be rewarding and rewarded when tied to departmental and institutional goals” (*Promise and Perils* 260). Moreover, others suggest that jWPAs should focus on making smaller, more manageable changes first and wait until tenure to make larger, more systemic changes. As Sandee K. McGlaun explains, jWPAs should worry less about immediate change and should instead “create a space in which lasting change can be made” (*Untenured Faculty* 229).
- 3) Do not be alone: One of the most important things for jWPAs is to build a broad base of support. New jWPAs should draw on mentorship both at their home institutions as well as from professional circles at the regional and national levels. As the University of Wisconsin’s Brad Hughes once explained to me, it is important for writing programs to have as wide a base of support as possible (personal communication), and the same is true for the leadership of these programs. Further, because the teaching staff within these programs likewise need to feel supported, jWPAs can better facilitate the work conducted in the programs they oversee by including TAs, adjuncts, instructors, and faculty in the decisions that affect them.

- 4) Understand your value: As Lauren Sewell Ingraham points out, “There is tremendous job security in doing a job no one else wants” (*Promise and Perils* 293). While jWPAs may feel isolated and threatened, it is important to remember that universities need the work that we do. Most departments will not want to rehire a WPA position after only a handful of years; so there is, despite our concern about the tenure process, a kind of built-in incentive for institutions to grant tenure to jWPAs. Even for those jWPAs whose jobs are not tenure-track, job security and advancement is possible, a former mentor of mine reminded me during my recent job search, when “you make yourself indispensable.”
- 5) Use your rhetorical tools: Finally, as Paul Ranieri and Jackie Grutsch McKinney emphasize, it is important for jWPAs to utilize the tools that our broad, theoretical training make available to us. For instance, if *phronesis* is the application of practical wisdom, then jWPAs should think pragmatically about ways of applying what they already know (*Untenured Faculty* 250). “As good rhetoricians,” Sandee K. McGlaun reminds us, “we know that there are always more than two options” (228). It is therefore important for us to think creatively about possible solutions and sensitively about the ways in which we present our ideas—always considering our audience, and knowing, too, that we often have multiple audiences (243). The challenge of this work may require us to voice sympathy with the staff we manage on the one hand and to carefully educate our supervisors about the rigor and worth of our work on the other. If we are careful, however, the rhetorical training that we receive early on can help see us through many of the hurdles that we encounter as we move forward in our careers.

V. CONCLUSION

No one involved in the WPA world will discount the potential challenges for untenured faculty who take on this work. However, while debate continues about the relative acceptability of such conditions, the reality is that many early career professionals in our field continue to find themselves in jWPA positions for a variety of reasons. Clearly, then, we have continued need for books like *The Promise and Peril of Writing Program Administration* and *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators*, as well as for formal mentoring programs like those piloted at the WPA Conference this past July. In an effort to answer the call for increased jWPA professional development, a series of the panels at this year’s conference were specifically

labeled “mentoring sessions.” Ranging in topics from tenure and promotion to textbook publishing to WPA board membership, these panels invited jWPAs to join more advanced members of our field for close conversation about the topics most pertinent to their work and survival. A participant in several of these sessions, I appreciated both the content of what I learned, as well as my senior colleagues’ concern and generosity; and I encourage us to continue facilitating opportunities like these. Further, commensurate with the findings of the two texts reviewed in this article, I believe that there are several concrete issues around which we should maintain our focus: tenure-track lines, explicit evaluation criteria, sufficient job training, political protection, and reasonable work loads. Finally, for those of us already involved in the work of jWPAs, I encourage us each to seek out ways of employing the resources that we do have—national networks, institutional alliances, personal insight and resilience—to adapt ourselves and our work conditions into successful intersections of productivity, security, and job satisfaction. As so many of the voices in *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration* demonstrate, there are many resources available to jWPAs—most importantly those senior members of our field who have helped improve working conditions in the past and who continue to show concern for those of us now entering the field. Further, the carefully crafted articles in *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators* are testimony to the ways in which our field can continue to theorize our work, both in terms of sharing ideas amongst ourselves and in order to bring our concerns before other audiences. By taking advantage of the resources that exist, and by gleaning self-empowerment from them, we can, then, heed both the warnings and the hopefulness that these two books entail.

WORK CITED

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