

A Symposium on Mentoring the Work of WPAs

In response to “The CWPA Mentoring Project and Survey Report” published in the fall/winter 2010 issue, the assistant editors of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* solicited proposals from WPAs working in a variety of contexts beyond Research I institutions. We wanted to know what the council could do better to train future WPAs, mentor new WPAs, and support the work of experienced WPAs in diverse institutional settings. We were overwhelmed by the response to our call.

While we asked for contributions from experienced WPAs and early-career administrators alike, we received far more proposals from new WPAs whose experiences present a variety of compelling issues, challenges, and questions for the field to consider. The contributors to this symposium, then, are all early-career WPAs. They are new WPAs whose individual narratives speak to their own unique institutional and professional circumstances—but we believe their stories will resonate with untenured, non-tenure-track, and tenured WPAs around the country.

Joyce Inman opens this symposium by discussing her work as acting-WPA at an institution where she is simultaneously earning her PhD. Inman accepted the position of acting-WPA out of a sense of duty to the students and the writing program she loved, but against the advice of her trusted mentors. Kathryn Johnson Gindlesparger’s position as WPA at a small, private 4-year university also falls outside of the tenure process. Working on a full-time administrative track rather than on a faculty line, Gindlesparger is empowered to affect dramatic changes to the writing programs at her university without ever fearing how those changes may affect her chances for tenure. However, Gindlesparger is in the process of researching what it might mean to transition from an administrative WPA line into a tenure line WPA position.

Darci L. Thoune is in both the enviable and unenviable position of being the inaugural WPA at her small Midwestern state university. While Thoune’s graduate work and post-doctorate fellowship focused on program administration and prepared her for the variety of administrative responsibilities she now has, she suggests she was not prepared for the vagaries

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of working in a department with “no established guidelines, expectations, or history of a WPA.” In her contribution to this Symposium, Collie Fulford discusses her experiences as “a white, queer, rhet-comp, New England transplant acclimating to life at a historically black southern university.” Fulford suggests that ethnographic methods have helped her to learn about her new department culture, but these methods may also occasionally mark her as an outsider. Finally, Tim McCormack reveals his struggles transitioning from being a once outspoken adjunct—one who argued passionately for improved working conditions for part-time writing faculty—to being a new WPA who is, in some ways, complicit in maintaining the very working conditions he once railed against.

In their narratives, some of these authors praise the mentoring already provided by the CWPA through the annual conference, workshop, and institutes; through the journal; and the listserv. But the overwhelming response to our call and the narratives presented here suggest that early-career WPAs may desire both acceptance and a greater connection with the council through one-on-one mentoring. New administrators—like Inman, Gindlesparger, Thoune, Fulford, and McCormack—need mentors who will help them make productive sense of the institutional and individual contexts in which they do their work. They need someone to listen to their stories of success, frustration, and failure. And we need to hear those stories.

We invite readers to contribute to this discussion, either on the WPA listserv or by proposing a response for the spring 2012 symposium of *WPA*. Please submit your response to ostergaa@oakland.edu.

Reflections on Year One as an Almost-WPA

Joyce Olewski Inman

My introduction to my responsibilities as the Acting Director of Composition at a comprehensive doctoral and research extensive university did not include a search committee, a formal job description, or an English department faculty welcome party. I am, after all, a full-time, non-tenure track instructor and a PhD candidate. I am an Almost-WPA.

Three years ago, collegial relationships with English department faculty led to an opportunity to serve as the Basic Writing Coordinator at an institution with which I have an interesting and lengthy affiliation. Four years before, I left the program as a full-time instructor and a PhD candidate in composition and rhetoric when my graduate program was put on what was described at the time as a “permanent hiatus.” With the new position, my

previous reluctance to re-enter academia turned to excitement as I formed a relationship with the new Director of Composition and began teaching again.

The new WPA was dynamic, and we worked well together. I re-invested in my role as a teacher and an administrator and in my scholarly research interests. Within a year, however, my colleague decided to leave. In hindsight, I realize that those were exciting days for me, but not for him. My instructor-level position and dedication to an underserved student population allowed me to negotiate departmental politics without concern for retribution, as I posed no threat to anyone; the majority of my colleagues viewed me either as a former graduate student or a non-tenure track instructor. My colleague, on the other hand, surely felt alone in his attempts make changes at our institution, and I was incapable of providing him with the kind of mentoring and support he provided me.

When he told me he was leaving, after promising to support me and to continue to serve on my dissertation committee, he advised me not to accept the Director of Composition position if it was offered. In the summer of 2010, I was asked four separate times by two different administrators to consider becoming the new director. I finally decided that the position would provide me with invaluable administrative experience and that I had enough support within the department to “keep the train on the tracks,” serve the students I cared about, and complete my degree until the department was in a position to conduct a search for a tenure-track WPA.

I have strong relationships with a few senior faculty members in the department, with administrators university-wide due to previous professional positions, and with our phenomenal office staff. I was certain that, with their support, I could effectively pursue my own research goals and exceed the expectations of colleagues who opposed my appointment as Director of Composition. Telling my former colleague that I accepted this position, however, was one of the most difficult things I have ever done professionally. I knew he would be disappointed, but I also knew he would ultimately support me. The next week we spent hours discussing my future responsibilities. In true mentor fashion, he made an exhaustive list of topics I needed to know, to consider, and to act upon. Numerous legal pads later, I had a list of responsibilities and tasks that seemed insurmountable.

For the most part, I have been successful in these ventures, especially given the circumstances, though the challenges have been considerable. Teaching a six-hour graduate practicum as a graduate student is difficult to say the least. Comments from colleagues who feel I am underqualified are always disconcerting. Fighting the apathy of colleagues who, as one suggested, “simply don’t give a shit about composition” is an uphill battle.

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Most challenging, however, is attempting to serve—with no real voice in departmental decisions—as one of the few advocates for our undergraduate student population. In my position, I attend departmental and university meetings, yet without the ability to vote, I constantly feel like a voyeur—watching the inner workings of the department from the sidelines. But I am not on the sidelines. I have more administrative responsibilities and am responsible to more students than nearly any other faculty member in the department. This subject position creates a situation that puts me in constant need of support from colleagues.

If I can be said to have achieved any success thus far, it is only through my former colleague's early guidance and the mentoring of colleagues willing to share their insights. However, their support is not the same as receiving mentoring from other compositionists who understand more fully the needs of a comprehensive writing program. I need mentoring from colleagues who will understand my frustrations and appreciate my successes in ways that my colleagues who are not vested in the success of composition courses simply cannot. Yet I am loath to request this mentoring, as I fear I am considered a traitor in my own field.

The CWPA Mentoring project, along with the narratives it includes and the narratives it suggests, effectively challenges our field to rethink the mentoring needs of those involved in various capacities of WPA work. Joe Janangelo's desire to learn from the CWPA community and his commitment to pay attention to the diverse needs of its members strike me as challenging, timely, and necessary. Sheldon Walcher's narrative of isolation, disconnect, and alienation and his attention to the changing demographic of WPAs certainly resonates with me. I am also intrigued by Duane Roen's emphasis on the local and the questions that need to be raised in our home institutions.

However, while the authors of the project acknowledge the need for mentoring of untenured and non-tenure track WPAs, I wonder if by not focusing on the nature and rhetoric of our field we might be glossing over the underlying issue. Historically our discipline has struggled to define itself as a legitimate academic discipline, which in turn may lend itself to a privileging of compositionists and WPAs who, for lack of a better term, are pedigreed. We can continue to write resolutions regarding support for WPAs who are not tenured, not tenure-track, or not serving in research extensive institutions, but the very nature of our field may preclude the success of these efforts.

For example, it is not uncommon to hear others in the field refer to compositionists whose terminal degrees are not in composition and rhetoric as "posers." Indeed, when I accepted this position, a compositionist friend

politely but sternly informed me that I was doing a disservice to our field by accepting even a temporary Director of Composition position at a research university without the appropriate qualifications.

Rhetoric and ways of reasoning such as these are common as economic, political, and professional pressures increasingly require members of our discipline to justify themselves and their work. Moreover, this same ideology is what makes it difficult for people in situations such as my own to ask for the mentoring we need. I am isolated from my field because when trying to garner advice from colleagues in composition at other institutions, I feel pressured to explain the situation and how it came to be—to apologize for accepting the position of WPA. I suppose part of me is ashamed, in part because I already anticipate more comments like the one I heard from my friend.

True mentoring of WPAs who are in the trenches requires a shift in attitude, an acceptance of those of us who have devoted ourselves to teaching composition that transcends status, affiliation, or degree and that respects the fact that most professionals who accept WPA positions do so because they are genuinely motivated to influence the writing culture of their institutions. I am not suggesting that WPAs should not be properly trained and qualified for the positions they hold, but I am suggesting that they should not have to apologize when asking for guidance and that our own rhetoric is often what leads to feelings of disenfranchisement among those of us whose experiences lead us to feel like “outsiders.” The CWPA Mentoring Project is a valuable start to such an initiative, and I am hopeful it will lead to additional reflection on how our field might become more accepting of the fact that ideal circumstances rarely exist and more conscious of the ways our own rhetoric may be dismissive, not supportive, of WPAs who find themselves in these less than ideal situations.

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Snapshot of a Tenure Decision

Kathryn Johnson Gindlesparger

When I went on the job market in 2009, conventional wisdom dictated that administrative positions were a bad idea for junior faculty: at my graduate institution, faculty advised us not to take on WPA work until after

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tenure; I read piles of cautionary threads on the WPA-L warning against junior WPA positions; and at least one edited collection, assembled and brainstormed down the hall from my TA office, detailed the hazards of the job.¹ Recently, it seems that “safe” WPA work has slowly become the purview of graduate students and tenured faculty, two opposite ends of the same career continuum. This equation leaves junior faculty, many of whom are trained and practiced in administration, years from getting their hands on a program.

Ultimately, more and more WPA jobs will be filled by newly-minted PhDs and the conventional wisdom of the field will evolve to accommodate this reality. But what about the WPA positions that fall outside of the tenure track entirely? As an administrative-track WPA at a small university, it has been difficult to locate myself within the best practice debates over junior faculty and WPA. By mentoring new PhDs away from WPA positions, we keep young scholars from doing good work and writing programs from reaping the benefits. We also miss rich conversations about the various configurations of WPA and the attending benefits and disadvantages to the programs they serve.

As a graduate student, I got my administrative experience directing community literacy programs. These jobs were full-time experience in what I later realized was a pretty good fit for me: program building. This past fall I accepted a position as the Director of the Writing Program at Philadelphia University, a small four-year private institution in the midst of reorganizing around a new strategic plan. Formerly the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science, the institution has a rich history. Founded in 1884 to provide education for textile mill workers, the school now specializes in professional education informed by the liberal arts. I was attracted to the school for many of the same reasons I loved working in the nonprofit sector. Both are nimble and entrepreneurial, a little DIY. The pace of growth is infectious.

But Philadelphia University struggles with the changing dynamics present nationally in higher education: balancing the needs of tenure-track and contract faculty, a reliance on adjunct positions, the structure of and debate over the necessity of general education. As with many small universities, these issues feel especially acute due to the flattened hierarchical scale of the institution, and this flattening is especially apparent from my position as Director of the Writing Program. In this position, I have access to decisions that are often tucked out of sight at larger institutions, such as what programs should be a part of institutional assessment and why, and whether writing should have a permanent place in the structure of shared governance. My exposure to these pressing issues has been one delight of the job.

The position of Director of the Writing Program at Philadelphia University was built with this internal access in mind. The position oversees the first and second-year writing seminars, as well as the WAC initiative and a burgeoning relationship with the office of Student Development. The Writing Program is staffed by the Director, two full-time faculty in writing and literature, and a large pool of contract and adjunct faculty. While the position comes with near czar-like oversight—for example, any new undergraduate course at the university must be approved by the Director of the Writing Program—it is also non-tenure track. The administrative line coupled with academic rank² is, in many ways, what gives the position its power. It gives me the ability to build the program away from the gaze of a tenure committee. But it is not a true faculty position. The very thing that gives the position such safety, freedom from the traditional confines of tenure, is also what raises the most concerns among well-intentioned mentors.

As the institution reorganizes, I have begun to rethink the structure of my position: should it be tenure track, or is it wisest to keep the position as-is, full-time administrative? Already, my discussions with colleagues and mentors have illuminated the need for more clarity between the benefits and drawbacks of WPA positions on administrative, as opposed to faculty, lines. While there are many benefits for the person holding this position as an administrator, there are also some clear drawbacks for the institution. For instance, that czar-like oversight is a continuity problem in the making: the three-year contract means that the school might always lose their WPA. And while the administrative line offers me some shelter from the scrutiny demanded of a promotion and tenure committee, if the institution were to acquire less supportive leadership in academic affairs, the position could be significantly revised or disappear entirely, leaving me to find a new job. At the same time, turning it into a faculty line opens up a problem WPAs have dealt with for years: without radically altering the tenure structure of the university, nearly all of the work of the position looks like service. In fact, one of the concerns about converting this particular line is that I do not currently teach enough courses to build a sufficient dossier for tenure at this institution.

There are some amenities I'd lose if I moved to the tenure track, benefits that are largely dependent on our institutional culture here. For example, as an administrator, I have an ample travel and professional development fund, student workers at my disposal, and "sitting" privileges on nearly any committee or meeting I need access to in order to build the best writing program I can. My twelve-month contract allows for one research day per week, but I am not obligated to produce research. In many ways, this freedom from an impending tenure timeline allows me to be more engaged,

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more a part of the campus community than many of my pre-tenure faculty colleagues.

Converting the position to faculty means radically restructuring the job and thus, the program. To accommodate the increased teaching load necessary for our tenure and promotion process, I would need to give away pieces of the Writing Program to other faculty members. I'm spellbound by how the exodus would transform the personality of the Writing Program: the basic writing coordination goes to a friend down the hall in exchange for a course release, the management of first-year composition, to another rhet/comp faculty member. The summer reading blog? To the longtime lecturer who relishes teaching the summer honors literature course. The transition would create a community-held writing program, one in which all writing faculty are invested; this seems like a move in the right direction. I also can't help but wonder if the possibility of tenure makes up for the loss in oversight.

Any conversation about the benefits of living out your junior years on an administrative line is a tricky one to navigate with elders in the field who often stridently advise graduate students against taking such positions (see the recent WPA-L thread, "Preparing job candidates for administrative interviews"). But this conversation can be fruitful. On my campus, it is a generative place to be, this intersection between tenure and administration. It's a shame I have to choose.

NOTES

1. See Enos and Borrowman, *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration* (2008).

2. While I have the title of Assistant Professor, because I am not tenure track I am not, technically, faculty. I can advance to associate and full professor, but the system for doing so is murky.

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The Pleasures and Perils of Being First

Darci L. Thoune

The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse is a relatively small state university located in southwestern Wisconsin. Three years ago I was hired as an assistant professor and the Freshman Writing Program Coordinator, a tenure-track position located in an English department that is primarily literature focused. I am also the inaugural WPA at my institution. The decision to hire for my newly-created position occurred outside of the department, and although my colleagues supported hiring someone to do the WPA work in the department, most faculty had little idea what that work might be. Additionally, the departmental approach towards the instruction of first-year writing courses was uneven at best. Although there were pockets of instructors committed to best practices in first-year writing, in a program where everyone teaches a 4/4 load, where many faculty have other administrative commitments, and where a history of “hands off” instructor autonomy exists, it is challenging to create a centralized focus for a writing program. In other words, establishing a community of first-year writing instructors (comprised of full-time and part-time non-tenure track faculty as well as tenured and tenure-track faculty) has been difficult. In fact, my attempts to create a community of instructors willing to participate in even low-stakes conversations about teaching practices has been met with both suspicion and some resistance.

I should acknowledge here that I was incredibly fortunate to have a post-doctorate fellowship before I accepted my position at UW-L. During my fellowship, I was mentored in all matters of writing program work ranging from the challenging (budget and assessment issues) to the more mundane (grade disputes and reviewing syllabi). However, despite my excellent graduate and post-graduate educations, I remained underprepared for what it meant to work in a department that had no established guidelines, expectations, or history of a WPA. In many ways, I've not only had to create my own job, but also my own professional development opportunities as well.

My first year on the job was rough. I was eager to impress, to share all the wonders of first-year writing, and to create the teaching and learning community that I always wanted to belong to. However, all the education in the world could not have prepared me for the utter lack of accomplishment I felt after that first year. My well-planned workshops were poorly attended, my pleas with the chair for meaningful work (such as participating in the hiring process of new instructors, planning and coordinating assessment projects, and increasing the visibility of our writing program in

the department and on campus) were unheard, my requests to faculty for examples of syllabi and assignments to share were met with skepticism (I didn't even have any samples to build my own syllabus from when I was hired), and my discovery that there were no guidelines (other than student learning outcomes) for our first-year writing course left me scrambling and depressed. Also, it appeared that if I didn't intervene on my own behalf, my job could quickly become merely managerial in that my only real contribution to the department that year was to write end-of-the-semester reports assessing the work of our adjunct faculty.

I realized that if I wanted to be more than just a manager, I needed to learn more about the program I was joining, so I quietly set about a fact-finding mission to discover what was really going on in our first-year writing classes. After some serious consideration, I concluded that if I could observe some classes I might better understand how to be an effective WPA in this department. However, because I am untenured, observing tenured or tenure-track faculty felt risky. Consequently, I began observing our adjunct faculty to get a sense of the range of approaches to teaching first-year writing. What I found both inspired and disappointed. Some instructors were engaged in wonderful work—teaching that was rhetorically situated and pedagogically inspiring. Other classes confused me with their emphases on novels (ranging from *Lord of the Flies* to science fiction classics), current-traditional approaches, and a general lack of sophistication (too much love for the 5-paragraph essay). What I hoped to promote was a more rhetorically situated model of writing instruction that encouraged instructors to challenge their students to wrestle with writing in various contexts and genres and for multiple purposes and audiences.

I suppose some might feel elation at the prospect of creating their own job, but I just felt desperate. No matter my enthusiasm to be in the department or my desire to win over my colleagues, I had to figure out something else to do—obviously, my earnestness alone was not going to create any converts. And, while my fellow rhetoric and composition colleagues were very supportive, as the minority we hold relatively little sway in the department. Therefore, when the call came out for the CWPA Conference in the spring of 2009, I jumped at the chance to seek more experienced and enlightened minds. I scrounged around campus for the funds to attend the workshop and the conference (leftover start-up funds, departmental travel funds, pleading with the dean, etc.). Fortunately, the conference was in Minneapolis that year, which was close enough for me to drive to from La Crosse, and I had a colleague living in Minneapolis who was willing to let me sleep in her spare room for a week. Empowered by both the conference and the workshop, I resolved to be brave and to make programmatic deci-

sions that might risk what I perceived to be my precarious position in the department.

My second year, with a new chair and a renewed sense of purpose, marked a new beginning. I decided that instead of creating workshops that nobody was interested in attending, I would create a new ad hoc Composition Committee that was committed to all things first-year writing. With regular meetings, this committee became a place where we could begin the work of sharing our teaching materials and leaning on each other for help with the day-to-day work of teaching first-year writing. I also managed to secure a small grant that allowed me and two of my colleagues to study how students approach inquiry in first-year writing and to then present these findings back to the rest of our colleagues during a departmental colloquium. Perhaps the greatest triumph of this year was to revise (with the help of my fellow rhetoric and composition colleagues) several pieces of policy governing our College Writing I course. The first revision affected the acceptance of AP credit so that students who earned a 3 or 4 on either the AP English Language or English Literature exams were no longer exempt from our first-year writing course. Instead, students who earned 3s and 4s were required to take either the standard first-year writing course or a special section (College Writing I—Advanced Placement) designed with those students specifically in mind. Now, only students earning 5s were exempted from first-year writing. Additionally, we worked to change the passing grade required for our first-year writing class from a B/C to strictly a C. The logic behind this change was that if a C is average, or competent, then students should only have to be competent to satisfy this writing requirement. We also hoped that adjusting the passing grade to a C might counteract suspected grade inflation (instructors bumping students up to a B/C in order to pass them). This change also aligned the course with other General Education courses such as speech, math, and biology. At this point, I finally began to feel as if the work I did might matter.

If I complained that I didn't have enough to do as I completed my first year, I had no such complaints entering the summer of my second year. During that year I learned, late in the game, that I was also responsible for a neglected dual credit program at a local high school. While initially distraught (I had no background or training in such things), I have come to see this as a turning point in my brief career in the department. The discovery of the dual credit program coincided brilliantly with new publications and conversations on the subject. Again, the CWPA Conference proved invaluable in terms of providing resources for cultivating a program that was sustainable and adhering to best practices in the field. And, perhaps best of all, working with the dual credit program would provide the writing pro-

gram, with the consent of my chair, a modest budget and opportunities to work with area high school teachers. In fact, it has been working with these teachers that I have found some of the best mentoring and teaching experiences I've had while at UW-L.

I just finished my third year in this position and while I know there is still so much work to do, I feel supported and energized to do it. With the addition of a budget I was able to do the first-ever programmatic assessment of the writing program and to plan for an undergraduate writing conference next year. More importantly, perhaps, I feel less defensive about my position and more visible on campus. Change comes much more slowly than I ever anticipated, and I've had to learn to find pleasure in the small victories as well as the major ones. Small moments, like witnessing colleagues chatting about new class activities and the changes they've made to their writing classes have been priceless—even in the face of all the overwhelming work yet to be done.

Hit the Ground Listening: An Ethnographic Approach to New WPA Learning

Collie Fulford

North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is a mid-sized urban public HBCU. In 2009, I began a tenure-track faculty position in NCCU's Department of English and Mass Communication. The position included directing freshman composition. I started just two months after defending my dissertation.

Although intellectually well prepared for this position, I often felt overwhelmed and culturally displaced during my first months on the job. These are not unusual sensations for new faculty members, especially those who become WPAs for programs very different from where we were TAs. Complicating my transition were my cultural differences from many members of the institution. I am a white, queer, rhet-comp, New England transplant acclimating to life at a historically black southern university. The large department I joined is a racially mixed disciplinary cornucopia. There were evidently no other gay people and only one other compositionist when I was hired. The other twenty-eight tenure line faculty had backgrounds in literature, journalism, communication, education, creative writing, philosophy, linguistics, and history—a range further diversified by the thirty non-tenure track faculty.

I appreciated the diversity of my new home, but I felt lonely for other rhetoric and composition people, hyperaware of my own privileged and suspect race, and my gaydar wasn't beeping. Although I genuinely felt welcomed, there was no formal mentoring program to help me acclimate. So I turned to familiar research approaches to answer my teaching and administrative questions and to gradually develop a sense of belonging. As an ethnographer, listening and observing were my first instincts. These practiced research methods occasionally conflicted with the institutional culture, though, such as when I erred too often on the side of listening rather than speaking up. Overall, however, the ethnographic principle of receptively "being there" helped me find informal mentoring and begin to understand my new institution.

During my campus visit, I explained my listen-and-learn philosophy up front. This afforded me a vital period of acclimation once I was hired. Since I was ignorant about this particular context in all but the most superficial ways, I argued, I would need time to learn local realities, form relationships, and develop a basis for program decisions. At that time, I had not read Cynthia Nearman's analysis of her position as a white novice WPA obliged to make changes too abruptly in an HBCU's writing program. Nearman identifies early missteps that underwrote her subsequent departure from that position. Although her actions were well-theorized and well-intended, she explains that they were not sufficiently grounded in local realities to be successful. Her cautionary reflection makes me especially glad I had time to learn the terrain so I could begin to map how diverse intellectual commitments and racial complexities within the department affected the ways writing was taught.

The program I inherited consisted of three courses. These seemed awkwardly pasted together from a number of good intentions. A developmental course had been newly reconfigured to address many students' need for intensive writing instruction. It was very differently conceived than the Bartholomae and Petrosky-inspired basic writing program I had taught in as a graduate student. Instructors reported using a sentences-to-paragraphs-to-essays building blocks method. The Comp I guidelines seemed an amalgamation of approaches, including modes, process, literature, and frequent timed writing. The most theoretically familiar course was Comp II. At the chair's insistence, the course had been radically redesigned from its literature-based tradition to align instead with writing across disciplines approaches of other local universities. Changes to Comp II had reportedly been the cause of intense rancor within the department that fell loosely along racial lines. Discord lingered as I took on the directorship.

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In contrast to Nearman's experience, I entered on the heels of change rather than having to take the heat for it. Initially, I worked on behalf of the existing revisions while figuring out where I stood for the future. I advocated for the developmental course within a university system ambivalent about "remedial" education. I listened and advised Comp II faculty as they struggled with an unfamiliar curriculum. Comp I was due for a new textbook decision; I let the established book committee process take its course as I learned about the curriculum and my colleagues' rationales for their approaches.

A much greater range of disciplines and pedagogical approaches were in evidence than I had experienced at my former university's writing program. There, English TAs taught most sections and rhetoric and composition faculty shaped the program. At NCCU, half of the tenure line faculty taught composition classes. Non-tenure faculty with literature and education backgrounds handled many sections, thus the comfort with literature-based approaches. Some had been TAs in writing programs with more contemporary curriculums. Instructors with degrees in creative writing, philosophy, history, and professional writing also taught the course, and their teaching approaches were as disparate as their backgrounds. Because of our heavy workloads, I found it difficult to arrange regular teacher meetings to reconcile our divergences or learn from each others' perspectives. Yet by and large, faculty cared deeply about their students and their teaching even while holding widely divergent ideas about what constituted appropriate curriculum and pedagogy.

I hoped to build on our shared ethic of care for students and utilize the vibrancy of faculty interests. I also hoped to consolidate the program around some shared theory about writing. I could see promise in curricula centered by inquiry, argumentation, discourse community theory, or writing about writing, although I could not predict which were most likely to fly here until I knew the context better. So my practice included asking lots of questions. I asked colleagues to explain what worked, what needed work, and aspects of the program and institution that mystified me. And I asked for mentoring when I sensed I had blundered. For instance, early on I advocated that we adopt an online handbook for cost savings. Faculty response was mixed. The writing studio director was more familiar with our students and the digital infrastructure of the university, and she gently redirected my position by noting where my assumptions about digital access were not likely to be borne out by the local realities.

That moment of advocacy was atypical during my first year. My listener ethos was generally stronger than my voice. Yet having the spine to speak up and speak out matters here, and a member who mainly listens can be

suspect. What might quietness conceal? Recently, two trusted colleagues advised me against my usual reticence: “Collie, I can barely hear your voice in meetings. Speak up!” I interpret this comment two ways: 1) I need to improve my public speaking (true), and 2) perhaps I have done enough listening groundwork to make my voice welcome, even though it reveals my agenda and my disciplinarity, and its source is a queer, white body.

Having African American colleagues insist that I speak up and speak out was the impetus I needed to shift my identity emphatically from observer-participant to observant participating *member*. This is a crucial distinction for WPAs with ethnographic predilections. The image of a safari-suited outsider taking notes on the natives is a distressing, racist residue of ethnography’s roots. This colonizing anthropological gaze is precisely what I do not want to replicate in my WPA observations. Modifying the researcher’s investigative stance of “being there,” my evolving ethnographer-WPA identity becomes about being *here*, working side by side with colleagues. To enact that principle, I must balance observant practice with audible leadership. I also must mitigate objectification by using another contemporary ethnographic strategy: involving participants/colleagues in analysis. I usually co-design my WPA-related investigations with other faculty because we are shaping and using this program together. I have plenty of ideas about ways to improve our writing program, yet placement, assessment, faculty development, and curriculum design are all more functional when other writing faculty share in the design, use, and analysis.

Even though I embrace the complementary identities of ethnographer-administrator, I remain self-conscious about the ethics of this practice. I must take care that my instinctive approaches of listening and observing do not objectify or alienate other members of this community, especially since I am a white member of a historically black institution. Despite these ethical considerations, I recommend ethnography to other new WPAs. Ethnographic practices help us augment the disciplinary perspectives we arrive with by opening us to the vital local knowledge that can make our decisions truly contextual.

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Boss of Me: When the Former Adjunct Runs the Writing Shop

Tim McCormack

Here's a line from my "Adjunct Grooves" column in the alternative college newspaper, *The Messenger*, published at the City College of New York, where I worked as an adjunct long ago: "If the adjuncts who taught the writing courses were on the curriculum committees or the test development committees, we might be able to do a better job making the tests a meaningful and educational experience for the students, rather than the scatter-shot semester wrecker they have become." In that column from 1999, I rant about adjunct faculty's lack of say in writing testing policy, even though adjunct faculty taught 95 percent of the writing courses in the English Department.

Vitriol came easy then. For six years, I had moved through various college campuses clinging to the fringe of university faculty life as a graduate teaching fellow, adjunct faculty member, and one-time holder of the wind-fall semester: the substitute line. As a "gypsy scholar" or "migrant teacher"¹ and a zealot utopian, I was fueled by radical pedagogy, justified by theoretical critiques of the university as corporation, invigorated by raucous union rallies, and buoyed by national calls from the CCCCs for changes in higher education labor practices education.² I questioned my WPAs and department chairs about university mandated exit exams, unpaid office hours, lack of copy machine privileges, and all sorts of belittling practices and limitations on my ability to serve my students well. It was easy to be all "us against them"—even though I often liked "them" and was on a career path to be one of them.

Today I am. For the past two years I have directed the writing program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY: an urban, commuter school with a public service mission and a midtown Manhattan location. Our 13,000 multicultural, multilingual undergraduate students have access to diverse majors in criminal justice, forensic science, legal studies, and the humanities. When I started as WPA, adjunct faculty taught up to 85 percent of each semester's 120 courses in basic writing, freshmen year composition, English as a second language, and professional writing (all part of my responsibility). Thus, I support and enable (deliberately avoiding the verb "manage" here) a diverse group of adjunct faculty: MFAs who publish short stories, poems, children's books, and novels, but have little income; former graduate teaching fellows who stay on as adjunct faculty to keep health

insurance and tuition remission; un-hired PhDs in literature and history who do their best to not be disgruntled about their wasted academic talent and dismal prospects for scholarly rebirth; and long-term adjunct faculty who have outlived a half-dozen WPAs prior to my arrival.

Adjunct faculty are no different than tenure track faculty: most are worthy, dedicated, and energetic teachers who decry the college's lack of curricular support, lack of access to professional office space and services, and lack of salary commensurate with their educational and employment experience. Mostly they cry out to me, as my door is open and my ears sympathetic, since their concerns stir my memory of my own adjunct faculty past.

Though John Jay does many things right for its adjunct faculty, I find myself speaking up for their rights and their professionalization. I have tried to train myself to use the full title adjunct professor in conversation, emails and memorandums—with the emphasis on “professor.” I have improved scheduling processes and classroom observation procedures, making them more explicit, fair, and expedient. I warn adjunct professors early when enrollment is down or when some other unforeseen structure will impact the courses they are offered. I invite adjunct faculty to join our outcomes assessment process to influence the direction of course requirements—and ask the college to pay them for this work.

As I am sure every WPA has, I occasionally receive compliments from some adjunct faculty that I am the best WPA they have ever had. Faint comparative praise, which nonetheless bolsters my belief that I am doing the best I can for my part-time colleagues. However, it never really leaves me that I am now a complicit participant in what one of my own former WPAs used to call “the university's dirty little secret.” The administration at John Jay has tried to minimize the vagaries of adjunct faculty life, and our college is more supportive than most, even hiring lecturer lines directly from the adjunct faculty pool. Still, in my administrative role, I have hired and fired adjunct faculty the week before classes start based on enrollment; I have been unable to upgrade adjunct faculty phone access and computer equipment; and I have agreed to lower the pay rate for certain writing electives that were not in line with equivalent courses. (It was exactly the kind of decision that I would have decried when I was an adjunct. But, I knew I could not win the argument.) Each semester, I listen to adjunct faculty stories of needed income, lost health insurance, and other consequences of life on the edge of full time employment. I too often respond with a cursory, “there's nothing I can do.” When I am feeling quite complicit, I am reminded of *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*, where Marc Bousquet writes, “Though composition has commonly expressed a politically committed orientation, many people who do composition scholarship find that

they are being asked to supervise, theorize and legitimate the steady degradation of the scene of college writing” (5). Working in a discipline with a long-established history of speaking up for the marginalized, is my only option to take a stand and opt out of WPA?

Of course, as an untenured faculty member running a large writing program, my status sometimes feels as tenuous as it did when I was an adjunct professor. These are my “publish or perish” years, and my meager steps to avoid the longstanding practices of adjunct labor abuse takes time from my work. A single consultation with an adjunct professor who has received a poor observation can take all the available scholarship hours out of my week. The necessary “meetin’ and testifyin’” to cajole and manipulate the hegemonic structures of this labor system can overwhelm my career. It seems easier and more personally fruitful to step in line.

Facing the possibility of my own tenure track demise, the conflicted realities of acting as the adjunct boss I never wanted to be came to a head when I realized that not all adjunct faculty were teaching their courses according to our five-year-old FYC curriculum. The new writing curriculum emphasizes writing to learn, reflective writing, scaffolded steps to a research project, and writing across the curriculum. It is outside the norm, and quite different from the traditional Literature-based, unit-by-unit curriculum that preceded it. As I looked closer at the faculty resistance, some of these faculty members, many of whom had not been observed in years, received consistently low student evaluations, had poorly written syllabi and were not participating in the paid faculty development hours the department offered. Clearly, some of the entrenched adjunct faculty posed daunting obstacles to advancing our writing program. My first reaction from my newly-minted administrative brain was to do the quick and easy thing: to clean house. But my former adjunct life helped me resist this instinct. I wondered if these adjunct professors had ever been given a voice in the new curriculum. Had their years of classroom experience been ignored? Did they feel resentful, marginalized and ostracized?

I invited them in, sometimes in groups, sometimes one-on-one. It took a full year, but each faculty member told a nuanced tale, and revealed their willingness to move toward the new curriculum—or not. None of the faculty turned out to be the lazy malcontents that they first appeared. I am certain that my status as WPA-forced-to-capitulate-to-the-forces-of-the-university-structure-that-marginalizes-adjunct-faculty led me to see their work and their disposability as the norm. It was only my previous adjunct life that enabled me to complicate that view. After initial discussions, some adjunct faculty appreciated the department’s interest in their work, reinvigorated their teaching, and tried out aspects of the new curriculum to a suf-

ficient degree. However, the story did not end happily for all. Others failed to address their low student evaluations, resisted opportunities to work on their curriculum collaboratively, and it became harder and harder to justify rehiring them.

My WPA role at the college has evolved from my unquestioning righteousness in support of adjunct faculty to a more nuanced understanding that includes making decisions based on what is good for the writing program and our students. Still, I remain complicit in unfair labor practices I cannot control. Often I am unable to change policy and ensure that adjunct faculty can teach courses to the best of their ability. Yet, I am conflicted in how much time to spend on these WPA issues, when my own career is not justified or enhanced by working in support of adjunct faculty. As I write this, our union has just announced that adjunct faculty health insurance is in jeopardy. The union claims that the university has chronically underfunded adjunct health insurance and, therefore, the welfare fund is going bankrupt. A loss of health insurance will drive some of the best adjunct faculty away from John Jay College. When the inevitable rounds of discussion take place on this issue, how will my lack of time and precarious career position limit and change my role in this debate? Will I and can I stand up with my adjunct faculty colleagues?

NOTES

1. Though almost generic terms at this point, Rudolphus Teeuwen and Steffen Hantke deserve mention here.

2. Of course the CCCC position statement calling the overuse of adjunct labor “the worst scandal in higher education” had come out in 1989 without impact, but I was a believer in the dawn of the new millennium.

WORKS CITED

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