WPA Symposium Response: Composition, Commonplaces, and Who Cares?

Melissa Ianetta

My professional career began rather modestly when I arrived at Ohio State University with an MA in literature and no formal training in writing studies. As one might expect from this background, my predominant memories of doctoral coursework are a mélange of panicked reading, a calmly fatalistic sense that I knew little about the field in which I was scrambling to qualify for a terminal degree, and a growing awareness that I was starting in composition studies just as it was losing some of its first founders. That last feeling, at least, can be verified in the historical record: when I arrived at OSU in late summer of 1998 Edward P. J. Corbett, the founder of the OSU program, had just passed away; a year later, James Kinneavy, after delivering the inaugural Corbett Lecture, passed; and the year after that Robert Connors, an OSU alum and a friend to some of my professors, died in a highway accident. From my teachers' reactions, I sensed that writing studies was losing its first wave of statesmen and mentors.

The thing that felt odd to me, however, was that I didn't actually *know* any of these people whose lives had shaped the field I wished to join. Moreover my ignorance was not merely personal, but scholarly: in those early years, I hadn't yet read deeply or broadly enough to fully appreciate their individual work, never mind their larger impact in the field. So as a novice reading the encomia offered in our disciplinary journals and on our listservs, I found myself focusing not just on the descriptions of lifetime achievements but also on the axioms of professional virtue and the uncontested values of the field expressed in this stream of epideictic rhetoric. To borrow from David Bartholomae, that is, I was unwittingly seeking the commonplaces of our profession:

> Each commonplace would dictate its own set of phrases, examples and conclusions… A "commonplace," then, is a culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement that carries with it its own necessary elaboration. We all use commonplaces to orient ourselves in the world; they provide points of reference and a set of "prearticulated" explanations that are readily available to organize and interpret experience. (626)

Reading across the testimonials to Corbett, Connors, and Kinneavy, I not only learned of their individual contributions but also discerned what we valued as a field: praise for their classical erudition, for example, seemed to be always paired with a description of their teaching skill, while catalogs of the exceptionalism of their achievements were paired with testimony to their personal modesty. In some ways, these descriptions were my first glimpse of the people who comprised the profession beyond my institution and my first understanding of the ethical and intellectual values that draw us together both as a community of individuals and as a field of study.

So too, when turning to the stories of starting that comprise this journal's recent symposium of "Mentoring the Work of WPAs," my strongest response is less to the individual particularities and personal choices that distinguish one story from another and more to those rhetorical commonplaces that seem to unite these stories as expressions of our field. For, as with the "In Memoriams" of my graduate training, I think the commonplaces contained in narratives offered by these new WPAs can tell much about what we value and much about the ways in which we organize these values into administrative strategies. Here, then, I want, first, to look at the ways in which these stories seem to express and celebrate deeply held disciplinary values and, secondly, to consider some of the ways in which these values might simultaneously fuel our work and undermine our best efforts. For while these may be the individual stories of newly minted WPAs, the community values I see expressed here, such as egalitarianism and selflessness, rank among the most common, the most laudable, and yet the most taxing to enact in writing program administration.

Scanning across these essays—and, more broadly, across the body of WPA mentoring literature—one of the more readily identifiable notions is our unquestioning acceptance of virtues of egalitarianism for WPA work. Kathryn Gindlesparger, for example, specifically refers to such "flattened hierarchy" as one of the "delights of the job" (153). Other contributors articulate this ideal less directly but appear no less influenced by it. Joyce Inman, for instance, refers to her professor/supervisor as her "colleague" and so elides the professor/graduate student, teacher/supervisor hierarchies (150). Tim McCormick, meanwhile, asserts that he "support[s] and enable[s]" the adjunct faculty at his institution and makes clear to the reader that he is "avoid[ing] the verb manage" (163), and so invokes a frame of friendly collegiality and specifically rejects the managerial administrative role decried by Marc Bousquet and James Sledd. Similarly, Darci Thourne lists such a collegial paradise among her goals when she describes how in her first year on the job she wanted "to create the teaching and learning community that [she] always wanted to belong to" (156). Finally, Collie

Fulford expresses her early desire that her new writing program would be "consolidated around some shared . . .. theory of writing" (161). In each and every story in the symposium, we see some longing for and exaltation of a community of like-minded peers in which the WPA is merely first among equals. Such ideals are not restricted to this symposium, of course, since the larger body of mentoring scholarship asserts similarly egalitarian values. Jennifer Fishman and Andrea Lunsford, for example, dispose of the term mentor altogether in order to sever their relationship from "the deeply hierarchal notion associated with traditional mentorship" (20). In its place, Fishman and Lunsford offer as their preferred term "colleague," for it "connotes partnerships created and maintained by choice and it suggests relationships founded on mutual respect rather than hierarchies" (29).

While it would be hard to argue with the noble impulses that drive such democratic assertions, we should consider the unintended consequences to which these impulses may lead. For such commonplaces inevitably "organize and interpret experience" (Bartholomae, 626) and the interpretations they generate can, in fact, run counter to our professional goals. A rhetorical analysis of the symposium stories, for example, reveals the tensions and fissures that emerge when this impulse towards flattening of the hierarchy collides with the position of the WPA. That is, as the name "writing program administrator" asserts, this position is, in fact defined by its place in the institutional administrative hierarchy. And yet, in stories built on our democratic ideals, the WPA seems to be identified neither by her institutional role nor by her hard-won scholarly expertise. Rather, the unique value of the WPA's knowledge is suppressed in a flattened system and all teachers' voices—regardless of their experience or the authority of the position they occupy—are treated as equal. In such an egalitarian vision, all professional expertise—a degree in writing studies, a long term of teaching, or enthusiasm for one's students—is framed as equally valid and is often expressed in the rhetorical commonplace that "we are all excellent teachers in the writing program." Here, WPA ethos appears to be characterized not in terms of intellectual capital—since we are all equally excellent and authorized—but through reference to the individual WPA's self-sacrifice, duty and altruism. Inman, for example, grounds her ethos, at least in part, on her role as "one of the few advocates for our undergraduate population" (151); Gindlesparger shares with us that she is "more a part of the campus community than many …pre-tenure faculty colleagues" (155); and McCormick describes the way "a single consultation with an adjunct professor … can take all the available scholarship hours out of [his] week" (165). In claims such as these, the authors offer as exceptional not their disciplinary

knowledge or professional abilities, but their personal commitment and sacrificial readiness.

To say this is not to question the writers' sincerity, of course. It is, however, to draw the CWPA readership's attention to the ways in which our democratic impulses can drive us to flatten hierarchies even as those same impulses lead us to think we care more—and care better—than do our colleagues in other disciplines. I will leave aside the problematic local politics that can emerge from such commonplaces of compositionists' caring—such as the difficulties in evaluating instructors or enforcing policy when you've worked to establish yourself as but one voice among many. Rather, I want to focus on the difficulties such commonplaces present for the individual WPA. That is, I wonder if the idealism and pursuit of inter-program equality I find so attractive in the stories of many WPA peers is, in fact, also a contributing factor in that "climate of [WPA] disappointment" Laura Micciche so deftly captures (432). When we assert these commonplaces of intra-program equality and our exceptional level of personal sacrifice and caring, that is, do we take into consideration the physical and emotional cost to the WPA herself? I worry that WPAs in the kinds of novice positions described in the symposium—which are all stories of starting as a WPA—are particularly susceptible to suppressing the authority of their expertise in an attempt to build coalition and establish friendly relations in their programs. And, after all, authority once given away is hard to reclaim.

Moreover, if our pastoral ideals lead us to unconsciously see ourselves as "the ones who care," they likewise lead us to see those who do not agree with our priorities as "those who do not care." Under this rubric we can discern two groupings: that seemingly apathetic cadre external to the program who "simply do not give a shit about composition" (Inman 150); and that internal group of instructors who McCormick describes as "present[ing] daunting obstacles to advancing [the] writing program" (165). These groups are both, I think, familiar in WPA discourse and often ground our rallying cries and commiseration with other WPAs. But here too, the suppression of the WPA's disciplinary-based authority can lead to arguments founded in interpersonal relations rather than professional allegiances. Put another way, I see my scholarly knowledge and relevant professional experience as the reason I was appointed to be the WPA—it was not because of extraordinary caring or sacrifice on my part. Accordingly, I can face my Americanist colleague's indifference towards the writing program with equanimity. Writing studies is not his scholarly interest after all, and I in turn find nothing of interest to me in his intellectual passion, Thomas Paine. So too, when confronted by writing program faculty who resist the revision of the writing curricula or enforcement of program policies, I understand that for many of

them it is a result of our different disciplinary orientations and intellectual commitments. For few of the part-time teachers in my program chose to pursue writing degrees but are, as in many institutions, literary specialists who were unable to find employment in their field of choice. Their understandings of textual production and writing pedagogy were formed by this prior orientation and, by extension, their resistance is not likely indifference to their students or a desire to present obstacles to the writing program itself. Addressing our pedagogical differences as the product of our differing intellectual commitments and institutional perspectives is far less emotionally exhausting—and far more generative—than thinking in terms of attending to emotional commitments—or lack thereof.

Such comments on the celebration of community feeling that are for many of us the most appealing quality of this profession may seem cold blooded, but I am not, of course, arguing that we replace our "ethic of care" with an ethic of "I don't care." Rather, my argument here has been that we have accepted our discipline's commonplaces about its communitarian ideals without fully considering the unintended, and counterproductive, effects to which these commonplaces can often lead. All of us, then—both our newly-appointed colleagues and those senior WPAs who mentor them—can have much to gain from thinking through more carefully the role of our utopic ideals in program building and the commonplaces that we use to express them.

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Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Posers; or, the I's Have It

Rita Malenczyk

It was the end of the day Monday, and I had read and responded to e-mail; prepared a class; designed a Writing Center survey and sent it out (results are good so far); finished up yet another survey and circulated it for review to some colleagues; read and responded to more e-mail; written a recommendation; met with our coordinator of first-year composition to discuss modifications to our online placement process; signed student employment paperwork; written some e-mails of my own; gone to another meeting; talked with panicked peer tutors about their tutoring schedules and, in some cases, changed said schedules; read and responded to the responses to the e-mails I sent out; taught a seminar (truncated version, it being the first day of classes). I went home.

* * *

Some things about being a writing program administrator don't change, no matter how long you've been doing the job. I've been doing mine for 16 years now, and in the narratives comprising the Mentoring Symposium, I recognize myself—not just the self I was 16 years ago, but the self I am today. On one particular day, it's the WPA as plate-twirler (in Mary Pinard's 1999 formulation); sometimes it's the WPA as Incredible Hulk. Certain things about the job simply have not evolved that much over the years. The themes that emerge, or that I notice, in this collection of narratives are constant. For no particular reason, I'm calling said themes the three "I"s, as follows:

Identity

Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—I completed a Ph.D in nineteenth-century American literature at New York University and started searching for a job directing a writing program. These two events were not unrelated—but (for the conclusion-jumpers among you) not for the reasons you might think. As my colleague Alfred Guy and I have detailed elsewhere, NYU at the time was a hotbed of dissensus. That dissensus extended to the English Department's stewardship of the Expository Writing Program, which was owned by the department but directed largely by English Education faculty whose expertise and passions were in the field of composition. As a result, a lot of what one might call current-traditional vs. process fighting went on, with the English Department looking to stan-

dardize curricula and exert other forms of control over the program. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, an Expository Writing Program joke emerged that "the graduate students were left to run the program while the faculty directors were busy fighting for its existence" (Guy and Malenczyk 238). Whether or not that was completely true, many of us were able to be junior WPAs with a lot of authority: with our nominal leaders otherwise engaged, we mentored each other. The resulting intellectual excitement, opportunities for leadership, and relevance to the real world led many of us, including me, into long and usually satisfying WPA careers.[1]

Of course, according to some people quoted by Joyce Olewski Inman, this narrative makes me—as well as the many other non–rhet-comp students from NYU and elsewhere who went on to learn all we could about the field of writing studies and to direct writing programs and writing centers—a "poser" (151). I don't find that a particularly useful label, and if you ask me neither should Inman, especially since, as I see it, all WPAs are to some extent posers. I don't dispute the value of a degree in rhetoric and composition as the best credential for directing a writing program—I would've gotten one if certain circumstances, too complicated to explain here, had been different. Nevertheless, such a degree is not exactly a stay against self-doubt. Collie Fulford, winner of the CCCC Best Dissertation Award in 2011, worries how her "white, queer, rhet-comp, New England transplant" self will transfer to a southern historically black university with, as far as she can tell, "no other gay people" in the department and precious few rhet-comp faculty (159). Tim McCormack, with the admonitions of Marc Bousquet ringing in his ears, wonders how to remain true to the values of his former adjunct self as he becomes a full-time WPA (163–66). Darci Thoune looks around her and sees that her new institution doesn't look much like graduate school, what with its lack of obvious faculty commitment to writing and its inconsistent approach to first-year composition. How can she get along in this environment and yet represent the field that, she feels, defines her (156–59)? What these narratives have in common is their concern with how WPA identities, and the values that come with those identities—at least in the WPA's perception—are closely tied to a WPA's ability to effectively administer his or her program.

Instinct

In these narratives I see beginning WPAs confronting problems—including problems created by their conflicted identities, as above—and trusting their instincts as they try to find ways to solve them. It's this ability to use intuition and be creative that informs much effective WPA leadership, par-

ticularly if one's instincts involve a basic notion of respect for others. Yet, as Malcolm Gladwell articulated in *Blink,* what looks like instinct is often past experience or practice. Fulford, for instance, plugs into her background as an ethnographer as she observes and learns from the existing dynamics of her program (160). McCormack's experience as a labor advocate allows him to push back at his initial resentment toward resistant faculty members and, instead, sit down and talk with those faculty members to learn something he hadn't known before (165). Kathryn Johnson Gindlesparger recognizes "program building" as that which her previous work in community literacy and her job as a WPA have in common, though she is not completely satisfied with the places that job has led her, in particular the need to choose whether she will continue in an administrative line or advocate for her current line to be converted to faculty status (155). This leads me to the third "I":

IMPERFECTION

In "For Slow Agency"—an article that appears in the same *WPA* issue as the Mentoring Symposium and which I would, if it were up to me, give every new WPA to read and plaster on his or her heart—Laura Micciche eloquently critiques WPAs' obsession with (a) making quick changes in programs and (b) taking sole responsibility for those changes. The "plate-twirling WPA," she says, "is no imperative" (78). We might approach our work, as Micciche does with a large curriculum-development project, "as a marathon rather than a sprint" (81). We are, furthermore, rarely in control of organizational time, as Micciche demonstrates in her essay: the other players—and in colleges and universities, there are many—also have something to say about that.

Unlike the first two "I's", then, I find the presence of this last one—imperfection, or the worry over same—troubling in these essays. In some of them I find not only unrealistic expectations for what can be accomplished in any given year, but also a striving for a prelapsarian universe in which there is no definition and, therefore, no need to self-identify. Realistically, however, this need is simply part of the scene, here in the fallen world. McCormack worries that he'll become the boss compositionist—and yet he *did*, after all, take the WPA job, with a better salary and benefits than he had before. While he can and does learn from his adjuncts how to be a more humane and better administrator, he will (as he himself acknowledges) nevertheless be faced with the difficult decisions administrators make and have to make them, even though he can and should continue to keep labor equity as a touchstone for making those decisions. Gindlesparger

seems not to want to accept the faculty vs. administrative bind (which kind of position is more desirable?): but on some campuses, particularly unionized campuses like mine, one has to define oneself as one or the other and accept that definition—and it is still possible, even having done so, to see oneself in what Gindlesparger calls the "generative place . . . between tenure and administration" (155). Overall, I'm not sure how productive it is to worry this issue—i.e., Why must I choose what to be? Why can't I have it all?—too much, particularly when one has already, to some extent, chosen.

Unless, of course, the worry leads one to embrace the contradictions. In yet another essay I think all new WPAs should read, "Queering the Institution: Politics and Power in the Assistant Professor Administrator Position," Tara Pauliny describes her experiences as not only a queer WPA but also as a queer theorist, and argues for how queer theory can help any WPA re-envision his or her work. As Michele Eodice has explained, "Being queer in and of itself . . . has nothing to do with queer theory":

> It is really more about queer as a way to understand identity, through a theory that borrows its bends and twists from the actual experiences of the fringe—and the performance that follows these experiences—to form a generative way to view the world. (92)

For Pauliny, though "WPAs must function within the institution and be a regulatory force in their own right," the "inherently queer" position of the WPA, particularly the untenured WPA—authorized yet de-authorized, faculty yet administration, in possession of "an ethos that is mobile and shifting as she moves through her daily roles" (1)—can be used to productively disrupt norms and create Gindlesparger's "generative space."[2]

Which is what I like about WPA work: its institutional instability. But then, I'm sort of an odd duck. My outsider/insider status within the field has given me a complicated relationship not only to WPA work but also to mentoring: the idea of it, the practice of it, the sense of who ought to do it. On some level, I wish I'd had a strong faculty mentor in graduate school. When I listen to people who studied in other programs—particularly programs in composition and rhetoric—describe their experiences learning their field and craft and their collegial relationship to the program faculty, I get a little jealous: I start feeling as if they had the big house, the nice bike, and the birthday parties while I struggled to survive a childhood staffed by mean-spirited nuns. On the other hand, by having only (well, mostly only) my graduate-school colleagues to mentor me, I learned a lot about trusting my own instincts, accepting the pros and cons of the position I found myself in, and—above all—looking to the wisdom of other colleagues on the same level as I. Mentoring need not be hierarchical. I would simply

say to these new and relatively new WPAs, what you're doing—working, watching, listening—is exactly what you should be doing. Keep doing it. Talk to each other. Get over the imperfections. Keep self-flagellation to a minimum. You will perhaps mentor others in the future; you will add to the storehouse of knowledge in the field; you will, I'm guessing, do the best you can.

Notes

1. As Alfie Guy and I detail, approximately 29 graduate students whom we could name went on to direct writing programs. Several, including Joseph Harris, Joseph Janangelo, and Lauren Fitzgerald went on to become influential figures in the fields of composition, writing program administration, and writing center direction despite not having Ph.Ds in composition and rhetoric (Guy and Malenczyk 235).

2. On the topic of WPA ethos as "mobile and shifting," see also Geller et al.'s *The Everyday Writing Center*, which applies Lewis Hyde's reading of the mythological figure Trickster—a shapeshifter and boundary-crosser—to writing center directors' work. As Melissa Ianetta has pointed out, *The Everyday Writing Center* and its readings of administrative work are eminently applicable to WPAs as well.

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