

## Feminism, Mindfulness and the Small University jWPA

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article, I argue that our administrative ethos must be responsive to our location by detailing my move from practicing a feminist ethic of care as a graduate WPA to practicing contemplative administration as a tenure-track, junior WPA at a small, public liberal arts university. I examine how an ethic of care can be particularly unresponsive to the material changes in status that WPAs experience when taking on new positions. Problematizing recent configurations of care-driven administration and the models of servant leadership upon which they are built, I offer contemplative administration as a feminist alternative for WPA work, one that supports growing attention to the role of contemplative education within higher learning. I argue that contemplative administration preserves a feminist emphasis on relationships without the gendered weight of caring models and takes a fresh look at materiality and wellbeing by approaching these terms through the lens of mindfulness. Mindfulness, or moment-to-moment awareness, promotes a culture more responsive to the needs of both junior-faculty and tenured WPAs and more sensitive to the material boundaries of our leadership than a caring ethos, which tends to overwrite differences between locations and bodies.*

Rita Malenczyk reminds us that WPA identities, both those we choose to take on and those imposed upon us by the places and spaces of our work, are more than rhetorical markers for our narratives; they are instead the limits within which we are able to successfully administer our programs. WPAing necessarily involves navigating multiple and conflicting identities, a challenge Malenczyk hopes we meet by relying on our instincts and by keeping in mind our productive limitations (“Kitchen” 185). While Malenczyk focuses on narrative conflicts between the stories we tell about ourselves and the ways we become characterized in others’ stories, such as when the identities we willingly accept are not the same ones our schools

and colleagues see for us, I suggest here that the physical places of our stories serve as constraints for those narratives. We must include the material among our “productive limitations.” Indeed, my story points to how problematic it can be when we import administrative identities from school to school without considering how different material conditions may necessitate new ones—even when our old administrative identities are welcomed by new schools and new positions.

Below, I detail my experience with moving from a feminist ethic of care as a graduate WPA (gWPA) to practicing contemplative administration as a junior-faculty WPA (jWPA) to examine how changes to our material conditions necessitate corresponding changes to the ways we practice and theorize feminist administration. Based on the tenets of contemplative education, contemplative administration, I will explain, is a leadership style founded on the principles of mindfulness, or moment-to-moment awareness, and committed to the well-being of both individual leaders and their communities. Like all practices of mindfulness, contemplative administration asks for close attention, slow movement, and conscious action. Despite care’s reputation as a liberating practice for feminist administrators, my narrative shows the limits of an ethic of care to empower WPAs and to productively challenge some of the misconceptions of writing and WPA work. My experience demonstrates that when WPAs are thrust into campus narratives that name them as “caretakers of writing,” we are positioned to take personal responsibility for the health of the writing culture on our campuses. Such positioning frames change as individual, not as corporate and collaborative, and aligns action with reactivity. I will argue that contemplative administration provides a viable alternative to these pervasive care-based feminist administrative models. Redefining myself as a contemplative administrator has allowed me to transfer the mindfulness I originally discovered on my yoga mat to a mode of feminist leadership that is guided by this intentional awareness. Unlike care-based leadership models, contemplative administration respects the material realities and discursive limits of the stories I can tell from my current position as a jWPA at a small, Mid-Atlantic public liberal arts university.

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A few weeks into my first semester as a new jWPA, I had to rush to the gymnasium between teaching two sections of first-year composition. I had already settled into a routine to use the scant hour between these writing classes: I wolfed down a sandwich or whatever leftovers I had packed for lunch that day while lesson planning and responding to a never-ending stream of student, departmental and university emails. In between emails

and bites, I fielded questions from students dropping by my office and others hoping to see the department chair, who happened to have an office next to mine. On this day, however, I was scheduled for a insurance-driven “wellness check.” When I signed up for my university-sponsored insurance prior to the semester’s start, I was shocked to learn that my insurance premiums would be substantially more than I had paid as a graduate student and that my new insurance would cover less. When I expressed this frustration to the human resources director, she nodded knowingly, told me she and her daughter were on her husband’s plan and alerted me to an annual wellness check that would take place shortly after the start of the semester. She cautioned me to watch for emails and to sign up quickly because all time slots would fill up the day the check was scheduled to run on campus.

Like so many other managed care plans, my insurance tied financial incentives to “preventative care” measures like this health check. In exchange for a scheduling inconvenience, a missed lunch and a run across campus, I could lower my deductible by ten dollars a month, a savings I desperately wanted. However, there was a catch: if the combined blood test, weight and waist circumference measurements rated me in the yellow or red zones rather than the green, I could face mandatory doctor visits and increased medical costs. As someone who has inherited high cholesterol despite maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle, I worried about failing the test and driving up my premiums even higher. While seemingly a mundane task of adult life, this health test struck me as highly symbolic, echoing the limitations of an administrative identity based on care that I felt pressed into on my new campus.

As a jWPA straight from graduate school and as the first official writing program administrator at my school,<sup>2</sup> I had already been compelled to see my new administrative role in similar health-related terms. I felt my colleagues understood me more as a nurse assigned to care for the writing program and its “patients” than as a collaborator and pioneer of campus writing initiatives, including but not limited to the program itself. Beginning with the fall faculty assembly at which new professors are introduced, I’d been described as someone hired to “take care” of writing on campus. At the time, I didn’t like the way that sounded, but I initially tried to shake it off. Shortly after my introduction though, just as I was attempting to get a brownie and coffee from the selections laid out by campus dining services, I was greeted warmly—with no fewer than six repetitions of everyone’s desire for me to “take care” of students’ writing, so they could get “down to business” with those students in upper-level classes. Such loaded greetings, while certainly not unique to my particular school or position, felt like a singular burden, making me welcome the announcement that the

all-school meeting would begin and that we were to cease our mingling and take our seats.

During the meeting, I ruminated on my unease with these expectations of care and how they positioned me to react to existing problems instead of positioning me as an agent of change and as someone who could bring a new and lively awareness to writing at our school. In the days following, there were many more encounters with colleagues across campus, casual meetings that occur frequently at my small university. Each time, these exchanges played out similarly, as if they were scripted: I'd exchange pleasantries with my colleague, and before I could say much else, I'd listen to stories about the diseased and mangled texts students were producing in seemingly every discipline. Story after story warranted more care and extorted me as the one to deliver it. One of the most heated encounters with an art history colleague ended with his vague warning that "obviously not enough care [was] being taken in first-year writing" because his sophomore students seemed to lack "even basic writing skills." That this occurred in front of our Dean of Teaching and Learning and was acknowledged by her defeatist shrug left me dispirited. These are the moments, of course, that solidify institutional narratives about the role of writing programs and administrators on our campuses. These are the narratives I needed to change.

Slotted into an identity that positioned me as a "caretaker of writing," I felt caught by a system of managed care created out of good intentions, but carrying with it a promise of a test through which I'd be measured for qualities of health not fully under my control. Ostensibly a way to create a culture of health, both my medical screening and my presence on campus were imagined as the available means of enforcing individual (not collective) responsibility for "problems" within these systems of managed care. Care—both what I needed to 'take' with my own body as measured by the medical screening and what I needed to provide the writing program and students through my leadership—seemed coercive and isolating.

As a feminist and a gWPA, I'd previously understood care as a means of flattening hierarchies and redefining professional relationships. When working as both the graduate assistant director of the writing program and the writing center at my doctoral institution, I'd happily and consciously accepted an administrative identity defined by care because it freed me to work collaboratively with others invested in writing. Indeed, I'd been told that one of the reasons I was chosen for those positions and continued to perform them year after year was because my peers and senior colleagues saw me as a considerate and approachable colleague who genuinely cared for others. But, I wasn't just called to care; I actively chose this identity

position for myself because it was an easy fit for my outgoing nature and because I could find support for care-based leadership in feminist literature. Utilizing an ethic of care by letting concern for writing instructors dominate my interactions with them, from observing their teaching to discussing their syllabi, allowed me to use my (minimal) power as a gWPA in nonthreatening, collegial ways. It set the tone of my teaching workshops as collaborative and friendly pedagogical spaces where tenured faculty and graduate students alike could mingle and, coached by me, learn from each other. Those are experiences I still treasure.

But in those early moments on my new campus as a jWPA, I was forced to confront the limitations of the caring perspective that had worked so well for me in the past. Ironically, before I began my tenure-track position, I had been ready and willing to be identified again as a caretaker, as a feminist who exercised an ethic of care in her interactions with others. But quickly, I felt the material differences between my current position and my previous positioning as a gWPA, differences that seemed to converge around the issue of care. The feminist ethic of care I had carried proudly to my new campus as a cornerstone of my administrative identity—which initially seemed to match so well with my new university's expectations of me—suddenly felt unresponsive to my changed material situatedness. The most obvious conflict between my previous administrative experience and my current tenure as a jWPA was the way I was no longer just one of many writing administrators on campus but instead was the *sole* “caretaker” of writing and the only faculty member ever hired for this purpose. I quickly realized that on my small campus where I am the only WPA of any sort, I didn't just *represent* the writing program, I *was* the program to many people.<sup>3</sup> And, as a young, female administrator, often much younger than fellow colleagues around campus or within my program, defining myself through care seemed to position me within campus narratives more as a young nanny or nurse than as a feminist administrator committed to change and growth. With these new realizations, I worried that if I accepted the ways my new colleagues were calling me to become a manager of care, would that care begin to manage me? Could I really “fight” care with care? Most importantly, did I want to?

The rest of this essay “interrupts” the dominance of care-driven administration as the most viable means of feminist leadership, intentionally invoking Nedra Reynold's definition of interruption as a rhetorical move that “offers a tactical, practical means toward discursive agency” (72). What follows is not an out-of-hand dismissal of care for feminist jWPAs but a contextualized interruption of the dominance of the ethic of care. The space for administrative agency I hope to create is both discursive and

material, as both matter to WPA work. To clear out an alternative space for jWPA identity and agency, I problematize recent feminist configurations of care-driven administration and the models of leadership upon which they are built. I then offer contemplative administration as a feminist alternative for WPA work, one that hasn't yet been given serious attention despite recent and growing interest in contemplative education within institutions of higher learning.<sup>4</sup>

Contemplative administration preserves a feminist emphasis on relationships and alternative means of knowing and acting without the gendered weight of caring models, and takes a fresh look at wellbeing—of people, programs and leadership—by approaching these terms through the lens of mindfulness. If the most important aspect of writing program administration is not managerial, as Bruffee asserts in his 1977 *WPA* editorial, but educational, aimed at “creat[ing] conditions in which learning can occur” (11), then mindfulness better positions WPAs than caring to be aware of the emotional and physical management of writing programs and people, to resist our construction as an exploitable presence and to carve out new possibilities for how we might become effective change agents within our programs and campuses. Because mindfulness asks us to slow down and focus on the present moment, it helps administrators to develop openness and acceptance of experiences as they unfold, delaying hasty judgment. Delayed judgment, openness to experience, and acceptance of ambiguity are some of the necessary conditions for the learning process. Such openness and careful attention can help us to better assess the content and contexts of work-related problems; it can also give us a means to react consciously and with purpose as opposed to reacting defensively, paving the way for WPAs to create purposeful counter-narratives about their roles and goals on campus. While especially important for untenured jWPAs, this kind of agency can transform both junior and senior administrators' roles on their campuses and within their programs.

#### ADMINISTERING CARE

Conversations about feminist leadership often begin with a discussion of how care works through networks that reach out rather than up, which is contrasted to hierarchal power structures in traditional patriarchal systems of administration and management. In *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition Studies*, Carrie Leverenz overviews the central principles of ethical feminist administration and notes feminist WPAs' preference for care. Care is often viewed as a moral and egalitarian means of leadership, one that spreads out rather than reaches up. Power in

these leadership approaches is shared and facilitative, built through relationships and governed by support not control. Indeed, care-driven administration is often used to advance models of collaborative leading, which emphasizes “community, shared responsibility, and open exchange” (Gunner 254). When outlining the roots of a feminist ethic of care, administrators most commonly cite three feminist theories of care, including Carol Gilligan’s “injunction to care,” Nel Noddings’s “reactive and responsive” ethic of care, and Sara Ruddick’s global application of care in the form of maternal thinking (Leverenz 9-10). A feminist ethic of care in our own field has emerged as one that includes, minimally, upholding a decision-making process “made in the context of specific human relationships where feelings, not just rationality, play a key role” and demanding “that care be the dominant term in all of our interactions with others” (Leverenz 9;10).

Seeing care as the controlling force for all interactions is a heady task, one that, as E. Shelley Reid argues, may require feminist administrators to adopt strategies that allow them to “manage care” within their programs so as not to become overwhelmed. Because WPAs must lead by example and must work within traditional structures that do not present caring as a viable heuristic or action, Reid claims, “I need better ways to manage... caring and to ensure that the caring supports a range of management actions I might need or want to perform” (133). Mentoring is for Reid a key strategy of the “good enough” feminist WPA—a liberating construction Reid uses to remind us of the limits of any one administrator—who seeks to lead through caring. She defines mentoring more expansively than most, choosing to see it as the local application of feminist administration, including day-to-day interactions with others and the relationship-building that sustains a writing program (128). Mentor-as-caregiver is therefore the way Reid suggests we bridge conflicting identities as feminist women and “boss compositionists” while keeping in mind our productive limitations.

Mentoring is a fruitful site of leadership because it is gendered both masculine and feminine: it contains the mentor-as-protégé model, which is masculinist as mentors work on the principles of indoctrination into the status quo, but it also contains the distinctly feminine model of mentoring as selfless, “unlimited caregiving (Enos)” (129). Reid capitalizes on this tension to carve an in-between space that allows her to conclude: “I can mentor people in ways that help me foreground not just caregiving, but an ethic of care—an approach to problem solving that (as writers such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings explain) emphasizes relationships and individual circumstances more than abstract principles or rules” (129). In these ways, caring becomes both the means and the end of feminist administration.

I easily identify with Reid's preference for mentoring as the locus of her feminist administrative identity and care-driven action. As a gWPA, I spent most hours on campus not only teaching my own composition classes but also talking in my office, in the hallways, and in the common rooms to other instructors about their pedagogy and practice. My office door was always open, and in return, I served the program through mentoring on a daily basis. My colleagues knew I cared and valued developing relationships over criticizing or emphasizing power, so they didn't hesitate to come to me with problems or troubles—even when these admissions might compromise idealistic images of their teaching. When fellow graduate students would lose patience with their students not talking in class, they would seek me out and ask for suggestions on how to engage them. When an adjunct's students struggled with formulating claims in their writing, she asked for sample worksheets and assignments, and we spent time together strategizing for the next class meeting. I often counseled my peers through rocky emotions related to their own studies and their teaching identities. And, just as often, they willingly invited me into their classrooms to do extra observations, not required by the program, simply to get my feedback on their courses and teaching strategies. As a gWPA, I intentionally crafted my administrative identity through the lens of caring and applied it through a practice of mentoring, like Reid. And, this was easy to do because I could leave the "boss compositionist" parts of administering the writing program to the tenured director to whom I reported. If I was the "woman on the ground," he was the man in the office, who, in his obvious position of power, allowed me to deflect mine for the sake of resisting binaries and creating a collaborative network of teaching and mentoring that easily complemented my care-driven feminism.

But, I understand Reid's argument differently now. I can neither ignore the "boss compositionist" power that I maintain these days, nor can I fail to see how my administrative ethos shapes that power, and how the leadership methods I consciously employ define the ways I can enact change. I have "expert power" on my campus, to use Irene Ward's term, because of my degree and credentials as well as the singularity of my presence as a WPA. Even so, I am still earning "referent power" based on my interactions with others and the narratives they craft of me based on individual experiences with my leadership and the institutional relationships I create (Ward 64). As a gWPA, my ethos, or referent power, was boosted by the commonalities I shared with others in the writing program; like the adjuncts, I was a marginalized instructor of writing, and like the other graduate students, despite my title, I went home to my dissertation every night.

In my new position, however, my power is challenged by material difference, namely my positioning as a young, female administrator. In my program, my relative youth means that the adjuncts and faculty I am called to mentor and lead often have ten to twenty more years of experience in the local classrooms than me—usually at my university and sometimes within our writing program. Demographics of my cross-curricular colleagues are very similar to those within the writing program. To talk and work effectively across this difference, I need to be fully aware of the leadership models that shape my administrative ethos and help to create my referent power. A care-based ethos is one highly implicated in service, which is evident when we unpack the ways Reid's administrative model is indebted to the application of servant leadership in higher education, a leadership style attributable to Robert Greenleaf, which recently has been incorporated into feminist ethics of care. To take on a care-based ethos, then, is to define myself in terms of service models of leadership. In the next section, I examine how these models may limit the agency of young, untenured program directors, and suggest, in turn, that alternative feminist models are needed to help better position jWPAs as agents of change on our campuses.

#### CARING AS SERVICE

Reid makes visible the ways contemporary applications of care-based leadership discussed in writing studies and within the pages of this journal are indebted to recent feminist incarnations of servant leadership in management and leadership studies. Described by Marlene Fine and Patrice Buzzanell, two feminist academic administrators, servant leadership is “serving the faculty and students (or multiple stakeholders, particularly employees). On the most basic level, serving means doing things for others that enable them to do their jobs; serving means taking obstacles out of employees’ way” (131). Working from Fine and Buzzanell’s definition, Reid claims that while there are still conflicts to be navigated in the real life situations of WPAing, the model of servant leadership allows her to bridge the gap between mentoring and leadership and to see mentoring as creating a viable method of leading by caring and producing actionable outcomes and paths that can humanize the process of leadership (138). Writing in leadership studies, Kae Reynolds makes the correlate argument to Reid’s that studies of servant leadership can be strengthened by overt attention to a feminist ethic of care (164). Serving and caring share a similar sensitivity to reacting to other’s needs, and so, at first blush, servant leadership seems to be a promising care-driven model for feminist administrators. Servant leadership crafts referent power out of a daily exercise of care, demonstrated by

the service the feminist administrator provides to her university, her program, and, especially, the people within it. Her administrative ethos thus rests on a connection between serving and caring, as care becomes the primary service these WPAs perform.

This unlikely connection between leading and caring is true to the both-and nature of servant leadership as originally coined by Greenleaf. In his 1977 *Servant Leadership*, Greenleaf begins with a binary between serving and leading in order to upset it, asking, “Servant and leader—can these two roles be fused in one real person, in all levels of status or calling? (7). He uses this book and further publications to promote the fusion and complementarity of these roles. Greenleaf sees service as the prerequisite to effective leadership and defines service as “the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (13). Servant leadership is therefore driven by fellowship and concern for others. Servant leadership is also, then, largely reactive, fueled as it is by addressing the problems and needs of others in ways that demonstrate caring.

Reid’s own discussion and application of servant leadership evidences the servant leader’s responsiveness. Reid begins her discussion of care-driven leadership by crafting a composite adjunct, Lacie, whom she must serve through caring, and states that her whole essay is a response to “figuring out how to be(come) the feminist WPA Lacie needs” (126). Building her leadership strategy from Lacie’s needs highlights the centrality of interpersonal relationships to Reid’s method and the additional responsibility of emotional manager that this strategy carries. As Reid demonstrates through her interactions with Lacie as well as her choice to use this composite adjunct as a central lens through which to view her leadership, listening and working toward mutual understanding are common approaches of the servant leader because “servant leaders in particular understand that they lead through relationships with others” (Wheeler 39). The metric of success for this leader is community development via attention to the individual achievement of goals as well as the characteristic of care in the relationships within that community (McClellan 42-3). Service, caring and advocacy are, in turn, seen in primarily other-centered terms: “Servant leaders understand service is not about them but about working through others to accomplish dreams and growth in others and the organization” (Wheeler 18). If this language begs the question of self-sacrifice, Greenleaf’s original models leave no room for question, as they use Jesus as a model example of the servant leader.

While not widely popular when first introduced, Greenleaf’s concept has recently seen a surge of interest in leadership education. The way that servant leadership bridges binaristic terms like serving and leading, fronts

relational connections to others and becomes a method not just of leading but one of living, makes visible the ways it can be understood as promoting a feminist ethic of care. And, servant leadership insists that it is not only women who can enact such an approach: “the feminization of leadership, promoted by the pairing of the words ‘servant’ and ‘leadership’ appears to successfully de-gender or ‘demasculinize’ the mainstream language of authoritarian leadership” (Eicher-Catt 19). It follows that servant leadership might ultimately become a “gender-holistic” model of integrative leading that works toward inclusion and awareness (Reynolds 155). However, seeing servant leadership as integrative might be more idealistic than realistic.

When she deconstructs the language surrounding servant leadership, Deborah Eicher-Catt finds that this promised gender holism too easily becomes a kind of promised gender/less leadership. As with other totalizing views, servant leadership may not acknowledge the different experiences of men and women who seek to apply its methods to administration. Too, when women engage in servant leadership, argues Eicher-Catt, we may align ourselves with the very oppressive management practices we seek to avoid as we become emotional managers of those we lead: “While on the surface the language or logos of S-L appears to promote an innocent ethic of resistance to standardized, perhaps oppressive, leadership practices; it operates by a logic of rhetorical substitution that maintains, or at least can maintain, those oppressive practices...[and] that nurtures patriarchal and androcentric organizational norms and practices” (Eicher-Catt 23). Through Eicher-Catt’s analysis, we can see how servant leadership may be dangerous for feminist administrators as it can position them as exploitable resources by encouraging them to be emotional managers so that programs run smoothly. Even if WPAs adopt Reid’s “good enough” attitude, intentionally defining ourselves through this kind of reactive emotional management may limit the ways we can become agents of change.

Additionally, feminist administration built upon such an ethic of care may be less sensitive to the material limitations of our leadership and may overwrite differences between locations and bodies. For some feminist administrators who share embodied similarities with those they mentor or who convey seniority through their embodied presence, this may not be a divisive factor; for young, female jWPAs, it most certainly has a significant impact on their ability to successfully lead their programs. My 30-something body “outs” me as a director with more credentials and education than teaching experience. I am therefore positioned more in the realm of knowledgeable scholar than seasoned teacher, when it is the latter that tends to be valued most at my school. This is not lost on the instructors in my program who often remark that I am closer in age to their children

than I am to them. Age and teaching experience can challenge even the best attempts at mentoring in my program because the traditional hierarchy is undermined: “traditional mentoring typically involves a hierarchal relationship...comprised of a senior person who advises and guides a junior or less-experienced colleague” (Dunbar and Kinnersley 17). Positioning myself as a caretaker of writing only serves to contribute to this imbalance. What I need then is a feminist leadership tradition that promotes a culture more mindful of material difference, more responsive to the needs of young jWPAs and less reactive to the “problems” within a particular writing culture as diagnosed by others’ narratives. In the next section, I propose feminist contemplative administration as one such possibility.

### FEMINIST CONTEMPLATIVE ADMINISTRATION

I was hired into my jWPA position with the stipulation that I would begin immediately the work of assessing the program as part of a larger, campus-wide assessment initiative. My Chair and Dean both expected me to “take care” of writing by producing data that proved students’ writing was “fixed” by the conclusion of our two-semester sequence of first-year composition. That such value-added assessment was listed in my job description’s yearly deliverables made me feel initially that I needed to begin this work without delay. Two months into my position, however, I recognized that our program was so diffuse that any data-driven assessment would produce results more scattered than conclusive. Not only was I still too unsure what our classes’ goals were to assess them accurately, but no one else seemed able to articulate a consistent message of these curricular goals either. With no director and without a strong sense of leadership, teachers in the program had largely grown comfortable with defining our first-year writing curricula in ways they saw fit, allowing them a great degree of freedom in designing their individual classes even if that came at the cost of consistency between sections of the same course.

On one hand, I knew I had to respond to the need for assessment demanded by my superiors; on the other, I didn’t want my response to be one that reinforced narratives that I would simply be the “caretaker” of writing on campus. To meet these demands on my own terms, I needed to align my beginning actions as director with those of a change agent, but I also needed to assuage the fears of our instructors who worried how my presence would affect them. If, as Malenczyk reminds us, we do not have to be limited solely by the administrative identities our universities choose for us, then we can construct our ethos or presence as directors by defining ourselves within new narratives. As a jWPA, I have chosen to define myself

as a contemplative administrator and to model the mindfulness I see at the heart of this leadership style in my relationships with others on campus and through my actions as a writing program director. Contemplative administration is the means by which I enact my feminism and remain sensitive to my material placement as a young, female jWPA.

It is a common view that what makes us strong teachers can make us effective administrators. Richard Gebhart in, "Administration as Focus for Understanding the Teaching of Writing" included in the *Longman Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators* defines administration as macro-level teaching. While writing program directors may not work with all students directly, they do touch every student through "policies, committees, staff members, programs of training and supervision, appeals procedures, and the like" (Gebhart 36). Gebhart encourages us to draw upon the very pedagogies we use in our classrooms to help us navigate our administrative roles and responsibilities.

As Gebhart suggests we might, I came to contemplative administration naturally through teaching after I experienced care-based administration as unsuited to the material conditions and writing culture present at my current university, as I explain above. For the past five years, I have engaged students in a feminist contemplative writing pedagogy that is based on the tenets of contemplative education. Contemplative education is a globalized, holistic learning approach that fuses a traditional curriculum with contemplative practices including yoga, meditation and the martial arts, among others. Because this pedagogical approach is integrative, asking us to see our students and ourselves as minds and bodies and valuing first-person knowledge alongside other substantiated forms of evidence, I find it to be one that harmonizes with the tenets of feminist pedagogy. And so, passersby to my classrooms are as likely to find me asking students to close their eyes and concentrate on their breath through meditation as they are to witness me conducting a writing workshop on generating claims. Indeed, I believe that the two acts can reinforce each other. I continue to teach using contemplative pedagogy because my students seem calmer and more aware of their writing and learning habits, and because they tell me that our practices help them to focus and learn more in my classes and to feel more engaged in and control over their writing processes.

Like other teaching methods, contemplative education forwards a cohesive picture of theory, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; unlike traditional methods, "an emphasis on open awareness distinguishes the contemplative approach" (Grossenbacher and Parkin 2). This emphasis on open and attentive awareness isn't a separate pedagogical component to be put alongside theory, assessment and the like, but instead infuses every aspect

of the contemplative educational process. The contemplative educational process has a history in our own field. James Moffett was an early proponent of contemplative pedagogy in writing studies when he argued that “writing and meditating are naturally allied activities” (231). Our current decade has seen an explosion of interest in the contemplative with academic initiatives such as the Mind and Life Institute, responsible for neuroimaging the brains of meditators like the Dalai Lama, and the Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE), a “multidisciplinary, not-for-profit, professional academic association with a membership of educators, scholars, and administrators in higher education,” which “promotes the emergence of a broad culture of contemplation in the academy by connecting a network of leading institutions and academics committed to the recovery and development of the contemplative dimension of teaching, learning and knowing,” according to its website. Academic interest has been buoyed by new scientific evidence testifying to the beneficial psychophysiological effects of contemplative practices like mediation and yoga. Growing acceptance and inclusion of the contemplative within the university “is happening, not coincidentally [then], as the scientific research on mindfulness is expanding and producing results relevant to teaching, learning and knowing,” notes Mirabai Bush, cofounder of ACMHE (183). And, this expansion is itself notable: “[o]ver the last twenty years, there has been an exponential increase in research...from some eighty published papers in 1990 to over six hundred in 2000” (Smalley and Winston 2). This research often centers on the effects of mindfulness, cited as the main benefit of contemplative practice.

In light of a long tradition of Eastern contemplative philosophy and practice, contemplative educators understand attention in terms of mindfulness, or, most simply, moment-to-moment awareness. In particular, mindfulness is a *learned* moment-to-moment awareness where each “thought feeling or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is” (Bishop et al 8). Rather than over-identifying with or immediately reacting to thoughts and feelings as they play out in the moment, the practitioner of mindfulness creates a critical distance, a space between perception and response, that allows for eventual, intentional response as opposed to automatic, unthinking, and habitual reaction (Bishop et al 9). Because mindfulness is regulation of the here and now, *this* moment, it is always situated in a particular body and responsive to material conditions. And because it asks us to interrupt our ruminative thoughts *about* experience to focus on experience itself, inhibiting “secondary elaborative processing of the thoughts, feelings and sensations that arise in the stream of consciousness,” it involves a direct experience of embodied events (Bishop 10). The

act of turning off rumination temporarily (or at least putting our resources toward that noble goal), increases our capacity for attending to the present because our attentional range is limited when focused on both rumination and processing (Schneider & Shiffrin 1977, qtd Bishop et al 10).

Like critical thinking, mindfulness is a particular, intentional application of awareness and is best seen as a skill that can be developed with practice. As I yogi, I practice mindfulness each time I sit on my mat to meditate, and each time I flow through a series of poses, a *vinyasana*, linking breath and movement together. But, mindfulness doesn't just stay on the mat; not only can mindfulness learned through contemplative traditions transfer to our daily activities, but the very act of performing our day-to-day experiences can become a viable means of practicing mindfulness and learning to develop contemplative presence. Thus, it makes sense to apply mindfulness to the acts of WPAing and to make those administrative acts contemplative exercises in themselves.

Unlike feminist administration built on an ethic of care and indebted to a troublesome history of servant leadership, contemplative administration is built upon a foundation of mindfulness as understood through Eastern philosophy and practice. And, because it rests on focused attention, contemplative administration is useful for all WPAs who hope to break a cycle of automatic reactivity, whereby we may be pressed by our universities to react to existing problems rather than to reframe them in order to invite a slower and intentional responsiveness. The benefits of focusing on the here-and-now can certainly be reaped by jWPAs and experienced administrators alike. Mindfulness also respects embodied difference as it attunes us to our environments and asks us to alter our frames of perception to include the materiality of experiences as they occur. Respect for and attention to embodiment as lived and real and not a discursive production makes mindfulness a dynamic and vital practice of feminism. Finally, mindfulness asks us to simultaneously respect the wellbeing of our bodies as administrators at the same time that we work toward the wellbeing of our programs.

While interest in contemplative education is growing, contemplative administration remains undertheorized. In one of the few articles on this topic, Laura Beer reports her study of Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado to define this leadership style. Naropa, according to Beer, is committed to providing not only a contemplative education for students but also a contemplative workplace environment for faculty and staff. This university, created on the tenets of contemplative philosophy and practice, advocates and illustrates "a way of performing administrative duties with a high degree of self-awareness, respect for others, active feedback, and acceptance of diverse experiences and backgrounds" (Beer 218). At Naropa, meetings are begun

with a group bowing ritual and a moment of silence. Faculty, staff and students are also encouraged and supported in practicing mindfulness through a variety of contemplative activities from meditation, yoga and even labyrinth walking—spaces for each can be found on campus. Beer reports that as a result of contemplative administration, employees of Naropa identified workplace benefits such as greater communication between departments, faculty and administrators, more transparency and less anxiety, increased job satisfaction and performance as well as a greater sense of well being (224). Beer concludes that contemplative administration can be practiced anywhere, not just at a university committed to a contemplative educational mission, as long as mindfulness is used as a guide to practice.

As a jWPA, I am interested in how mindfulness can be used by contemplative administrators to interrupt a cycle of reactivity and to reframe the actions we take to ensure the success of our programs and our own wellbeing. In my case, I knew that I needed a better understanding of my program, a picture of what it looked like in the present, not clouded by my hopes for future improvement and apart from the pressures of assessment, before I could begin the actions that would position me as a change agent. From there, growth would be possible. Growth of my program was, in other words, dependent on my ability to view it mindfully, inserting a space between my perception of it and the intentional response that I wanted to characterize my leadership. Thich Nhat Hanh gives contemplative administrators a way of understanding this kind of growth with his definition of mindfulness as applied to the seemingly trivial act of washing the dishes:

While washing dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes. At first glance that might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that's precisely the point. The fact that I am standing there and washing this bowl is a wondrous reality, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts and actions. There's no way I can be tossed around mindlessly like a bottle slapped here and there on the waves. (4-5)

Growth in Hanh's example is to be wholly focused on the "nowness" of dish washing and nothing else. In other words, washing the dishes with mindful presence is both the means and the end of this contemplative act. Transferring these lessons to administration means I must apply such slow, conscious, and open presence to my program and the people in it.

So rather than speeding through changes, I have chosen to spend my first two years as a jWPA building presence in my program and among the

adjuncts that staff the majority of our first-year writing courses. Conscious of the ways my referent power will develop from the ethos I cultivate and embody as director, I have intentionally sought to manage through mindful presence. To establish this presence, I set up meetings with faculty and adjuncts to discuss their experiences of teaching in our program and to solicit their opinions of what was working well and what wasn't. I saw this practice as one of mindfulness because it asked for sustained attention and not big action. Still collaborative and focused on relationships, I also saw it as distinctly feminist. On a small campus like mine, so much of my narrative presence is constructed from one-on-one connections with others; as a contemplative administrator, I can use this to my advantage by allowing the principles of mindfulness to guide these interactions.

Consequently, I tried to refrain from domineering these meetings so that my primary actions were to ask leading questions and to listen. In fact, I often thought about Hanh's advice during the discussions I had with instructors in our program. The purpose of these meetings was not to "fix" the program or even to provide personalized care; I was simply "washing the dishes" with as much mindfulness and presence as I could muster on any given day. That my first impulse was not to fix the problems diagnosed by those within the program and quickly filling my notebook is reflective of the ways contemplative administrators must practice self-care, so as not to subsume their own well-being for the sake of caring for others. I also "washed the dishes" by choosing to teach all the classes I could within our program, so I would be able to enter conversations about our courses based on my own experiences on campus. During one of these early meetings, an experienced adjunct, Susie,<sup>5</sup> asked me directly what my plan was for change, and I answered truthfully that I wasn't sure at that point because I hadn't yet done enough listening. A narrow focus on caring may encourage us to speed through change, so that we may respond quickly to others' needs as we initially see them; mindfulness requires an application of slow and measured attention for a more comprehensive view.

Laura Micciche argues that we far too often succumb to the pressure of instituting dramatic changes, which she calls "big agency" in her recent *WPA* article, "For Slow Agency" (73). *WPA* work often hinges on the big agency of creation and revision, of forward and fast action that produces structural results. But, this can lead to what Micciche herself experienced as a jWPA: sleepless nights and a feeling of being overtaken by her job. Big agency in our field is symptomatic of American culture's focus on doing over being: "[w]e want to do, to succeed, to produce. Those of us who are good at the doing seem to fare well in many of our institutions and corporations.... We are so focused on doing that we have forgotten all about being,

and the toll this takes on our physical, mental, and emotional health is palpable” (Smalley et al 17-18). Micciche uses the metaphor of hypermilling, or the practice of slowing down to conserve energy and gas while driving a vehicle, to argue against this cultural trend and for attending to productive stillness and slowness in our administrative conceptions of agency. She hopes that the slowness this metaphor stresses will change the ways we understand what it is to act as WPAs.

I appreciate Micciche’s argument because it creates a space for mindfulness in the application of feminist administration. If the status quo is to equate WPAing with rushing to action, then there is value in slowing down, in focusing on being and not just doing, just what mindfulness asks of us. Contemplative administration helps to fill a gap in our feminist models, which haven’t necessarily adjusted expectations for big agency and fast-paced actions even if they have forwarded a focus on collaboration. In a time when the economy is tight, admissions are down and our program budgets are getting cut back while our responsibilities as administrators are growing, the long-term benefits of slow and mindful agency are increasingly important. Mindful agency can help ensure the success of our programs and help us acknowledge the kinds of support we need to carry out writing initiatives that are feasible and actionable on our campuses without resulting in WPA burnout. Because these are realities all WPAs are now experiencing, contemplative administration is a practical choice for all of us, not just those of us who count ourselves among the untenured ranks. So, while my argument has been driven by the specifics of my experiences as a jWPA, contemplative leadership can benefit us all.

And yet, when we are expected to deliver big changes and to work quickly, slowing down can be a risk. So while “[s]lowing one’s pace is not equivalent to loafing,” we must still make our case through “persuasive, strategic communication” (Micciche 84). As with any approach, contemplative administration is best received when we are clear about our intentions and goals. Conscious of this, I made sure to communicate my contemplative administrative goals to my department chair and received her support to focus on the smaller acts of developing presence within and insight into our program before I suggested large changes to our curriculum. But being seen as a loafer, as refusing to act, is not the only risk we take. No matter how communicative we are, our slow movement can also be misinterpreted as refusing to collaborate with others, a problem I initially encountered. Because slow movement can lengthen the process of change, it can confuse our peers who expect swift action. If swift action doesn’t occur, speculations can arise that administrators are scheming behind the scenes. Initially, some faculty read my attempts to listen and collect experiences before insti-

tuting changes to our curriculum as proof that I would introduce those changes top-down, without discussion or collaboration.

Practicing mindfulness, I had labored over a new curricular structure that would address some of the concerns that instructors had raised in the one-on-ones I conducted, increase consistency between sections, and yet allow for as much freedom as possible to respect the program culture I had inherited and the teaching experience of many of our instructors. While I took responsibility to draft an initial version of these documents, I did so in collaboration with our instructors, using their feedback to inspire changes that would offer potential solutions to the areas in our old curriculum that they felt were problematic. Because I was moving slowly, I first introduced working curriculum documents at a composition committee meeting. These were meetings I called to order usually about once a month in order to discuss any issues within the writing program and to collaborate on projects. Upon taking my position, I learned that members of this committee were both tenured and adjunct, and that I was to use this group as a sounding board and starting place for any new initiatives. I hoped to flesh out these documents with the committee first and then to disseminate to the larger pool of instructors in the program for feedback and discussion after any initial kinks had been worked out. However, one faculty member, Susie, read my slow action and mindful movement as a lack of transparency. Though Susie wouldn't engage me in dialogue, I inferred from the few comments she did offer in group settings that she was worried I would run down the clock just enough so that there wouldn't be sufficient time for collaboration. She seemed to interpret my mindful movement as a means of passive-aggressively gaining individual control. So, despite my request to first keep these curriculum revision documents among the committee (of which she was the representative adjunct member), she immediately disseminated them to the entire program. Because those documents were released by someone other than me and without appropriate contextualization, they caused a flurry of anxiety and heated discussion among our instructors. And, because they did not know these were draft documents upon their release, many instructors believed that they indicated changes to be acted upon immediately, without time for them to provide feedback before they were adopted.

As a new jWPA trying to build trust within my campus community, this leak easily could have caused me many sleepless nights—what Micciche means us to avoid. But, my training in mindfulness allowed me to take a step back and assess the situation before reacting defensively or internalizing this struggle as a sign of my failure. This is why contemplative administration, in particular, is so valuable. Unlike Micciche's hypermill-

ing, mindfulness isn't just a metaphor for our work, but it can be a practice with measurable effects on jWPA's wellbeing, as it was for me in this case. By affirming my practice of mindfulness and bringing the contemplative to the places and spaces of my work, contemplative administration helps me get a handle on the stressors of my job and promotes my wellbeing, or "neural integration," which can create integrative pathways in my brain that promote my intrapersonal and interpersonal attunement, according to neural research (Siegel 40). While mindfulness cannot change the demands made on us, it changes the ways we view those demands and makes apparent that we have choices about how to respond. Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein write that "[h]ow we respond has less to do with the actual event than how we make meaning of the event" (27). Mindfulness allows me to be more responsive to my automatic stress reactions by noting them and their triggers. When I understand stress as a choice in my control, I can choose to respond differently to stressful situations. Because our brains are as plastic as our programs, as jWPAs we can literally rewire ourselves for less stress by using mindfulness as a personal and professional practice.

In my case, rather than reacting in anger toward Susie, I funneled my emotional energy into finding a way to mitigate the damage done when the working curriculum documents were leaked. Because I was able to step out of the ruminative loop that would normally have me more worried about what had *already* happened than the ways I could positively affect the leak of the documents, I was able to use this event to characterize my administrative ethos as one dominated by slow, conscious change—as one of mindfulness. Instead of hastily attempting to patch up misunderstandings via email, I conferred with my chair and on my recommendation, we invited all of our writing instructors, adjunct and tenure-track, to the next department meeting to discuss with me and the rest of the faculty the changes represented in the curriculum documents. That I was able to open up a normally private forum to include adjunct voices was a testament to my allegiance to transparency and my genuine desire to receive feedback. The department meeting itself became an exercise of mindfulness as it acknowledged and accepted the feelings provoked by the proposed curriculum and created a space between initial reaction and the intentional response that would follow. Instead of using the meeting to convince instructors of the value of the documents, I asked attendees to become a part of the early revision process and to approach the meeting as a chance to brainstorm positive as well as negative consequences of adopting the new curricular goals and outcomes. Instead of only venting concerns, then, instructors became part of a mindful process of noticing and listening to each other and to me. I also used the meeting to listen to instructor concerns with mindfulness, so that I could

hear all comments and accept them without initial judgment. For many WPAs, criticism can be especially difficult because of how closely we carry our administrative identities and how many hours we invest in our jobs. With an attitude of mindfulness, however, I am reminded of the limits of my own perspective and the need to join with others for the strongest and most comprehensive view.

Even now with the new curriculum in place, our instructors still cite that meeting as a valued forum in which their voices were heard. For me, it has become a key moment of understanding how contemplative administration can produce both positive effects for my program and my own wellbeing. By choosing my action slowly and with focused attention, I made progress in becoming the change agent I hoped to, and I created distance from the expectation that I was to react quickly to “fix” problems and smooth emotions. I also created a positive forum that helped to shake up preconceived expectations and alter old habits (and their accompanying fears and resulting scripts). Reid is most certainly correct to warn feminist administrators to be satisfied with “good enough” lest we allow our jobs to take over the entirety of our personal and emotional lives. Though, that is an attitude that may be easier to adopt when programs are approached mindfully through contemplative administration than when administrators reactively respond with care. And, with its focus on self-reflection and insistence on self-care, mindfulness becomes a sharper tool than care for feminists who want to resist the gendered hierarchy of labor in our field.

Slow movement and mindfulness may yet be the exception rather than the rule on my campus at large, but my goal as an administrator is to use mindfulness to slowly transform my writing program’s culture to one that stresses wellbeing through the application of mindfulness focused on intention and action (not just reaction) as well as engaged thoughtfulness. So, while my application of mindfulness may slow down my movements as an administrator, it does so with measurable, positive effects. In addition to changing dominant narratives within my program through my interactions with writing instructors during workshops, meetings and one-on-one’s, I have used my small campus to my advantage to consistently characterize myself as a mindful administrator. My colleagues know that I value mindfulness as a practice and skill because I’ve purposefully made this public: I’ve volunteered to speak about its advantages within various classes; I’ve openly shared my research connecting mindfulness and writing during campus events, such as when my university hosted a regional conference for the English Honor Society, Sigma Tau Delta; I also label myself a contemplative writer-teacher-administrator every chance I get. Colleagues have also seen me on the quad practicing yoga with my students and some may

have even joined in on the various meditation flash mobs or community yoga events my classes have organized. In short, I've embraced opportunities to be aligned with my contemplative practices and interests. If, on my small campus, I am going to "become," to some degree, my program, then I might as well use this slippage to insist on my and my program's contemplative presence. And while my application of contemplative administration is surely enhanced by my personal practice of yoga and meditation and supported by my teaching methods, I could still utilize contemplative administration without these additional practices. As the contemplative practice of yoga teaches us, "[e]ach moment of your life is a moment of potential practice" (xxi). Practicing mindfulness in our daily exercise of leadership within our programs is all that is needed to be contemplative administrators and to give our administrative actions, even the small ones, a renewed sense of purpose.



## NOTES

1. While there was a sequence of writing classes established at my university upon my arrival, there was no cohesive writing program per se. My colleagues in literature had worked to manage these classes as best they could without release time, administrative titles or self-claimed "expertise" in writing studies in years past, but pressed the need for a WPA assistant professor position in writing to help create a program that unified these courses with a common purpose and in light of best practices in composition and rhetoric. Their advocacy resulted in my hire.

2. Often, when the topic of writing or the writing program comes up in campus or school meetings, my colleagues will often look at me and say, "You know, *you*." Such declarations equate me with the writing program in campus narratives, testifying to me that if either the program or I are aligned with care, the other will surely take on this presence as well.

3. While Ellen Langer has researched the effect of mindfulness on learning for decades, Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace date the current interest in contemplative education to the 1990s and through the 2000s. During this time, there was an increase in publications on this topic, coverage of newly-built centers for meditation and mindfulness on college campuses nationwide and the creation of academic initiatives like the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society and the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University (xiv). These authors explore recent incarnations of contemplative education in their 2011 *Meditation and the Classroom*.

4. See the “Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership” at [greenleaf.org](http://greenleaf.org) for current research on and applications of this leadership approach.
5. To protect privacy, I have used pseudonyms.

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