

Thinking Liminally: Exploring the (com)Promising Positions of the Liminal WPA

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ABSTRACT

This article problematizes the hierarchy and taxonomy of senior/junior/graduate WPA through the lens of the authors' graduate student administrative experiences and suggests a fourth, more fluid category: liminal WPAs. The liminal WPA is typically outside the tenure track (graduate student, contingent faculty, etc.) and may lack other status markers such as a terminal degree, a job description, or a permanent position; however, the liminal WPA has a workload comparable to sWPAs and jWPAs. We argue that theorizing writing program administration in relationship to the tenure track minimizes the work of those who are outside it; thus, the field has minimized work done by those with fewer resources and more complicated relationships to power. We present not only a critical viewpoint of liminal WPA work but also show how thinking liminally, or exploiting one's institutional impermanence, can be a place for liminal WPAs to be productive, valued members of the discipline.

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Jamie is the interim director of a writing program who accepted the position after the director resigned in protest over budget cuts. Jamie's responsibilities include administering the exemption process for undergraduate writing courses, settling transfer disputes for writing courses, working with the director of composition, and training faculty in writing across the curriculum both individually and in university-wide workshops. In addition, Jamie reports directly to the provost, has been working closely with a dean to increase the number of writing-intensive courses on campus, and has authority to approve new writing-intensive courses. Jamie works with other major stakeholders to develop a common reader project to improve first-year retention. The program's \$250,000

budget also pays for the writing center and its coordinator, a non-tenure track, full-time administrator.

Based on this job description, is Jamie a junior WPA (jWPA)? A senior WPA (sWPA)? A graduate student WPA (gWPA)? What kind of WPA scholarship is most likely to be helpful to Jamie?

Our doctoral institution offered us many opportunities for writing program administration work as graduate students. We each held two or three assistant director positions, substantial positions with responsibilities that grew over time, which encompassed three or more years for each of us and sixteen years combined. We took these positions because we liked the work and wanted training for future administrative positions, thus increasing our marketability. Economic motivations also drove us; these were paid positions that, in some cases, included health insurance. We enjoyed our work and remain grateful for these opportunities.

However, the range of experiences and levels of responsibilities we held were sometimes problematic. Along with the good we accomplished, at times, we also felt powerless. For example, as assistant director of composition and third-year doctoral student, Megan was responsible for mentoring and, in some respects, supervising more advanced TAs. Unsurprisingly, she felt she didn't actually have the authority to carry out her job when this entailed failing a student in a professional development course after he had defended his dissertation. As interim directors of the writing center and WAC program respectively, Talinn and Paul found themselves in the awkward position of giving advice on writing instruction to tenured faculty, although they were not faculty themselves. We had the authority of graduate students, some of the tasks of sWPAs, and identified most with jWPAs' sense of being caught between our work and the institutional authority needed to achieve it. While the problems we experienced are part of the territory of WPA work, we wondered if these problems were so often a part of the territory of a graduate student's WPA work.

The debate surrounding who can and should do WPA work continues in our discipline. Conventional wisdom suggests that untenured faculty should not accept WPA positions before tenure; however, nearly all advertised WPA jobs require new hires to take (often substantial) administrative roles immediately. Refusing a position because it includes administration or renegotiating a position so that administrative work is delayed is often not possible. Further complicating the issue is that many young faculty have administration as a primary professional goal and identity, as Charlton et al. note in *GenAdmin*. A group of jWPAs, they encourage the field to move beyond "good idea/bad idea" discussions of untenured faculty and

WPA work. We suggest that many of the issues they raise apply not only to those the field classifies as jWPAs, but also to some graduate student and contingent WPAs. As we will explain, the hierarchy of gWPA, jWPA, and sWPA constrains and prevents the field from accounting for the true positionalities of many graduate students and other untenured administrators. We instead argue for a more fluid category: liminal WPAs. Liminal WPAs engage in the high-stakes work of j- or sWPAs but typically have an untenurable institutional rank: graduate student, contingent faculty, support staff, etc.

We begin this article by investigating our opening scenario as it relates to ways in which we typically understand the work of WPAs. We next examine the narrow ways the field has sometimes perceived graduate student administrative work and point to examples from the literature and our own experiences that challenge these definitions. We then offer an alternate view of some graduate student administrators as liminals whose identities and roles are complex and ever changing, and then we examine the relationship between these roles and the power and authority assigned to them. We situate our discussion of the liminal WPA within the historical theoretical framework of liminality. We conclude by suggesting that liminal WPAs might more productively navigate their roles through a strategy we call *thinking liminally* or exploiting the constraints of liminality to further their professionalization and strengthen their programs. We hope, overall, to not only present a critical perspective of liminal WPA work but also to show how this status creates spaces to be productive, valued members of the discipline.

A PRELIMINAL INVESTIGATION OF IDENTITIES

Due to our own experiences, we emphasize liminality as graduate students in this piece. However, it is clear that others experience liminality as staff, contingent, or NTT faculty. A lack of institutional status means liminals are typically without the attendant power, institutional position, or compensation of j- and sWPAs. They may have the protection of a terminal degree, but not a permanent job; they might have the protection of the job, but not the terminal degree. They may have neither. For example, one fellow liminal WPA works in an independent academic writing unit that has not gained departmental status. As such, she cannot be hired as a tenure-track assistant professor. Accordingly, she must make do as an instructor (with a PhD) with no potential for promotion. Liminals are likely to have lower salaries and less access to benefits and are less likely to be in effective mentoring relationships or have defined duties. The causes and conditions

of liminality are multiple; the common thread running through liminal WPA positions is a disparity between workload and institutional position, exacerbated by the reality that our discipline has only recently begun to account for such positions in its theory and research. Despite all the ways that liminals lack institutional status and authority, they are charged with real, demonstrable WPA work.

Take, for instance, Jamie, whose position as interim writing program director held little of the power or position granted to the previous director, a tenured, full professor with years of experience as a WPA. Yet the job description remained essentially unchanged. What had changed was that Jamie lacked the protection of the degree and a permanent job.

Is Jamie a gWPA? Technically, yes. Jamie is an ABD graduate student in a WPA position. That position, however, is very different from those outlined in gWPA literature. Jamie is neither a *de facto* “informant” for an sWPA (Latterell 31) nor an “administrative assistant” (Latterell 27), nor a jWPA nor NTT (as that term represents full-time faculty in non-tenure track positions with recurring contracts). Liminal positions like Jamie’s operate in more complex ways than traditional WPA terminology allows. These positions need to be named and understood so that we may address the needs of liminals in our programs and in our scholarship.

When we focus on an administrator’s relationship to the tenure track, we minimize the work of those who are not currently on a tenure track appointment or may plan never to be on it and increase the likelihood that administrators with fewer resources and more complicated relationships to power will be unsupported by the profession. In light of the work that liminal WPAs engage in, the theory, strategies, and practices currently afforded to them by our discipline are often unhelpful and leave them disadvantaged.

Consider the support and/or scholarship Jamie has access to. S/he might be written off as unsupportable. (*Obviously, you shouldn’t have taken an untenurable WPA position.*) Jamie might turn to scholarship that assumes those who do “legitimate” WPA work—the kind often described in connection to jWPAs or sWPAs—are tenured or on the tenure track. (*Use your power or lose it!*) Jamie might turn to scholarship for graduate student WPAs. (*Refer the difficult or politically dangerous problems to your mentor.*) None of these options are particularly useful though. By reconsidering how we think about and respond to those engaged in writing program administration, we hope to improve the practicality of scholarship and graduate curricula that focus on WPA issues.

(RE)PRESENTING THE ROLE OF gWPAs

When we consider how gWPAs are described in the scholarship, we find our discipline's cultural models too limiting. Scholar James Paul Gee refers to cultural models as:

Images, story lines, principles, or metaphors that capture what a particular group finds “normal” or “typical” in regard to a given phenomenon. . . . Cultural models are not true or false. Rather, they capture, and are meant to capture, only a partial view of reality, one that helps groups (and humans in general) go about their daily work without a great deal of preplanning and conscious thought. (143)

Typical presentations of gWPA work center first and foremost on the status of such WPAs as graduate students and the connected expectations that their duties are limited in certain ways. These cultural models are predicated on experiences designed by privileged programs, relate to “ideal” or “ethical” circumstances (negating, rather than practically responding to, those which don't correlate), and to experiences that transpire in calm, cool, and collected environments that fall outside the scope of curricular, financial, or medical flashpoints. Given our own experiences as graduate students who took on duties more aligned with j- or even sWPAs, the notion of graduate students engaging in gWPA work simply because they are graduate students quickly becomes untenable. Likewise, literature on gWPAs failed to address the issues we were facing, as did literature for j- or sWPAs.

If we were to write a job description based on the ways that established members of the field describe graduate student WPA work, it would include such duties as an office assistant who answers the phone and keeps records, a mentor who acts as a caregiver towards other students, or a spy who reports on and even disciplines peers. For instance, Ebest's survey of the Council of Writing Program Administrators describes gWPA work as “conduct TA training and counsel other TAs;” “administrative assistant;” “tutors;” “mentors;” and “research assistants” (75).

Similarly, Latterell's “Defining Roles for Graduate Students in Writing Program Administration” identifies three graduate student roles: “the liaison or go-between, the administrative assistant, and the co-policymaker” (24). According to Latterell, the primary responsibilities of the liaison are communicating the writing program's policies to TAs and reporting problems back to the WPA, while administrative assistants focus primarily on paperwork. Co-policymakers “occupy a more equal position in relationship to the WPA” and help with decision making, albeit under the guidance of a WPA (29). Latterell argues that all of these roles are limiting and that graduate students are capable of more substantial contributions—and we agree.

While Latterell rightly suggests more positive programmatic outcomes for gWPAs who play more significant roles than office assistants, we argue that broader involvement might simultaneously impact graduate student WPAs negatively.

Clearly defined positions in which students receive limited, structured exposure to WPA duties are the purpose of gWPA roles in some programs; we don't dispute their existence. We do suggest that they account for one kind of graduate student experience. The assumption that such protected gWPA roles represent all graduate student experiences as WPAs obscures the more complicated, politically dangerous work of graduate students in liminal positions. Mattison, in "Just Between Me and Me," focuses on the complexity of his roles, observing "you take on an authority role that asks you to supervise tutors, some of whom are other graduate students. These dual roles are not without conflict. In fact, your dual roles of student and administrator can pull you in opposite directions" (16–17). We encountered these dual—in fact, multiple—roles in our own gWPA work constantly. For instance, Megan regularly engaged in work associated with sWPAs as she taught and supervised graduate students and served on university committees that determined curriculum and debated retention strategies. Such work may be especially problematic because she was ostensibly a mentor (and figurehead of institutional authority as instructor) to students she also had to relate to, as a peer, in graduate courses. The shifting roles and the resulting problem of authority that she experienced are hallmarks of liminal WPA work.

In contrast to the relatively static, low-responsibility roles described by more senior members of the field (e.g., Ebest; Latterell), graduate students paint more complicated pictures of their gWPA work. In our own graduate work and in scrutinizing that of our colleagues, we were struck by the liminal nature of our WPA work. Among ourselves, the term came up during a heated conversation in the campus coffeehouse, probably a result of Paul's undergraduate studies in Anthropology. But as soon as we began exploring the literature, it was clear that others, too, had independently used the same term to describe their situations. Although not a rhetoric and composition or WPA scholar, Bryant Alexander articulates the liminal nature of his work as a graduate student administrator in a communications department. He outlines duties that included "facilitating the graduate orientation . . . troubleshooting for and advising teaching assistants, and conducting mid-term teacher evaluations and classroom visitations" (16). Although some of Alexander's duties fit the "office assistant" model, others certainly did not. While he wasn't specifically describing gWPA positions, Alexander's use of the liminality concept was intriguing to us. Like Alexander, we were also

“expected to negotiate two conflicting cultures” and were “betwixt and between the power structure of the administration and the cultural community of graduate students in which [we] technically held membership” (18). Despite this conflict, Alexander argues that although the different administrative roles assigned to graduate students result in “unequal portions” of power, they are ultimately invaluable experiences (19).

Other graduate WPAs describe even heavier loads of sWPA work. For instance, Joyce Inman characterizes herself as an “almost WPA” as she directs a writing program as a “full-time, non-tenure track instructor and a PhD candidate” (149). Helmbrecht and Kendall describe their work “administer[ing]” a portfolio program and later “oversee[ing] the program itself” in “Graduates Students Hearing Voices” (173–74); they argue that they did tenure-track writing program administration (173). This sentiment is echoed by the participants in Edgington and Taylor’s survey of graduate students. In their survey “a few [graduate students] argued that they were doing the work ‘of an administrator and faculty member—as a graduate student,’ but receiving less pay and fewer perks for it” (162).

Like us, Helmbrecht and Kendall recognized themselves in the definition of a jWPA and call for a reconsideration of what it means to do gWPA work (173). However, we fear that recategorizing gWPA work as jWPA work only reinforces the hierarchy that causes confusion in the first place. Instead, liminality offers us a lens that problematizes that hierarchy or at least better describes particular positionalities in relation to it. While Edgington and Taylor offer recommendations for making gWPA positions more robust, such as creating stronger support networks for gWPAs (165), spending more time mentoring and preparing them for the job market (166), and calling on programs to take more responsibility in assessing such positions (167), what they suggest still doesn’t account for work we engaged in while serving as interim directors, supervising peers, and advising tenured faculty. Further, they do not interrogate the problems these robust positions might create for graduate students.

Examples such as these demonstrate that there are spaces between g/j/ sWPA where graduate students’ duties may slip between categorizations and thus make their work harder to define. As graduate students, we were not alone in having performed the more sophisticated, high-stakes work typically attributed to j- or sWPAs. The g/j/ sWPA taxonomy simply doesn’t account for the work that some graduate students do or provide strategies to encourage their success.

A gWPA JOB DESCRIPTION

Liminality originated as an anthropological concept in the work of Arnold van Gennep in the early twentieth century and was further developed by Vincent Turner in the 1960s. We found van Gennep's and Turner's early explanations especially valuable as a lens for understanding the work of writing program administration.

Van Gennep identified three rites of passage: rites of separation, which are preliminal (e.g. being ABD); transition rites, which are liminal or threshold (e.g. a dissertation defense); and rites of incorporation, which are postliminal (e.g. being addressed as Dr. after a successful defense) (11). Postsecondary education and the tenure process can easily be seen as an extended rite of passage from layperson or initiate to professional, marked with smaller rites along the way. Each landmark reshapes our status, identity, agency, and power. Even as progress is made towards the next rite, the person remains firmly positioned in the previous role.

One's statuses, roles, and identities are more or less stable in preliminal and postliminal stages; it is in the liminal state that one enters a strange and shifting environment, as one "pass[es] through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 94). As the literature and our own examples demonstrate, gWPAs often have attributes of both the past state—student—and the coming state—professor. They may take classes and be subordinate to advisers, but they may also teach their own classes and grade their own students. A graduate student's liminality might also mean that he controls a sizeable budget but lacks the institutional rank to access the necessary financial management systems the university uses to track financial transactions.

The term *liminality* reveals the inability of static concepts of WPA to represent those engaged in such work. Turner uses the terms *liminal personae* and *threshold people*, noting that such people "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (95). For us, the network of classifications describes conventional WPA work in terms such as gWPA, jWPA, and sWPA. Our experiences were not located in the typically described and expected "states and positions in [the] cultural space [of our profession]" (Turner 95). The conventional network of classifications, or hierarchy, obscures our realities because it is inextricably tied to the way we understand those states and positions in the cultural space of our profession. Because much of our scholarship, especially that focused on power, exploitation, and economics, is predicated on taxonomies that fail to account for liminal WPAs, the concept of liminal WPAs sets the scene for a reappraisal of just who we are

describing when we refer to gWPAs, jWPAs, sWPAs, in addition to who we are excising and the implications of those classifications.

We remember existing in the threshold vividly, unable and unwilling to retreat to the more protected status of graduate student but also unable to claim the institutional status as Dr., Director, or tenure-track. While we believe that all graduate students experience some degree of liminality as they transition to professionals, graduate students who serve as liminal WPAs experience a more startling and less connected (or scaffolded) chasm between their role as students and their experience as professionals. A gWPA might have clearly defined duties, close, systematic mentoring, and be protected in other ways, but a liminal may be running a program alone in an office on a satellite campus. This ambiguity has its benefits and disadvantages. While we did wield power that was atypical for graduate students, we also lacked amenities, compensation, and power offered to sWPAs who had crossed the threshold and entered the postliminal space. We found ourselves disadvantaged in our work with tenured faculty and among graduate students, as well. Yet as we learned to embrace our liminal selves, we developed strategies to empower us within those same populations, strategies that served us well in later administrative roles.

The term *liminal* paves the way for a conceptualization of writing program administrators based on the characteristics of their work and not on a taxonomy based on educational or career track. Liminality also provides a way to triangulate contradictory positions in order to consider alternatives to conventional research/advice that doesn't serve the liminal WPAs we've described. The term *liminal WPA* is not about delineating another well-defined preliminary or postliminal state on the cultural landscape but rather about opening up the potential for the critical analysis of the particulars of particular WPAs.

EXPLOITATION IN LIMINAL WPA WORK

Although conventional taxonomies of WPAs and the assumptions that come with them often spark calls of exploitation, we hope to move beyond such discussions here because they inadvertently erase traces of liminals who continue to exist despite the ideal labor scenarios we as a profession proclaim to value. Economic exploitation is clearly a factor in the situations we describe, especially by the institutional forces that create liminal positions, and the current economic landscape suggests that these practices are unlikely to disappear.

Graduate students and other liminals are often complicit in their exploitation because they feel a sense of responsibility to their work. Adler-Kass-

ner reminds us that our work as WPAs is “always rooted in *our* emotions, *our* ambitions, *our* goals” (22). The more a liminal feels connected to a writing program (personally and professionally) and the more autonomy and investment a liminal has in that program, the more willing she or he will be to ensure the health of a program, even at great personal cost. For example, Talinn had gone to great lengths to help establish a site of the National Writing Project. When her replacement unexpectedly stepped down, Talinn resumed the position for several months—in addition to being the full-time interim coordinator of the writing center and finishing her dissertation. She recognized that this choice was extremely problematic, but having invested so much to develop the program, she couldn’t bear to see it disintegrate. When Megan became assistant director of composition, she did so because she wanted to support the director of composition, who was dealing with a medical issue. Despite the inappropriate hours she worked (sometimes thirty to forty hours per week in addition to teaching and coursework), Megan’s work supported the director and helped to keep the program running smoothly.

That we could perform those duties well stemmed largely from the fact that we—underpaid, half-finished, powerless graduate students—were considered by the institution to be the best people for the job at that moment. We had the day-to-day programmatic experience needed and were deeply invested in our programs that we wanted to see succeed. In addition, attractive financial and psychological advantages—for graduate students—came with the job. As liminals, Paul and Talinn had the first real salaries of their lives and access to significant amounts of travel funding while Megan earned money towards upcoming expenses. Paul received health benefits for himself, his wife, and his new child. Even the small trappings of a “real job” carry great psychological weight. The possibility of a less-used computer and an office not shared with three other people, of a job title to mention to parents, of *health insurance*—these are real benefits to those inhabiting the liminal spaces of graduate school. Thus we were complicit, in part, because exploitation still represented improvement. We are also confident that we were neither the first nor will be the last graduate students to be considered “the best person for the job,” especially in light of increasing financial pressures on higher education. Is it wrong to accept such a position in order to secure healthcare for your child and spouse? Would an ethical mentor have suggested that Paul and his family forgo dental care for a few more years? Would it be ethical to tell Talinn to throw in the towel on a program that she was invested in?

We recognize the elements of exploitation in our experiences. We not only survived but are proud of our graduate program and of the work we

discuss here. We're also satisfied with the tenure-track futures such work helped prepare us for. We hope to use our experiences to help others who find themselves in similar positions—particularly those with less voice—see more possibilities for negotiating challenging power structures.

In particular, we want readers to know that our experiences should not simply be chalked up to exploitation. Discussions with other students in our program suggest the more problematic aspects of our experiences are not typical, but rooted in particular historical moments. Many of these experiences are the repercussions of mentors and friends suffering devastating losses and grappling with serious disabilities. Within our small faculty, three members experienced life-altering tragedies within twenty-four hours. These events understandably threw the writing programs into crisis for months with lifelong aftereffects for the faculty involved. Other experiences were a result of the global financial crisis.

The pressure that crises place on writing programs may create demands from liminals that are incommensurate with their compensation, status, and workload. While other faculty may be genuinely unaware of the volume and complexity of work involved in asking a liminal to direct a writing program—even on an interim basis—we write in the hopes that such lack of awareness will no longer be a legitimate excuse.

Readers who respond to our essay by viewing our graduate program critically are missing the point. Our intention is to respond practically to some of the issues we've faced, issues that a few months on the job market clearly demonstrate are problematic at other institutions as well. We argue that readers should consider our essay as an opportunity to more fully scrutinize their own programs and institutions and explore how graduate positions are defined, staffed, and supported.

THE CHALLENGES OF LIMINAL WPA POWER

A liminal's power, like his or her roles, is constantly shifting. Success as liminal WPAs thus requires an awareness of how power shifts from moment to moment and in relation to the taxonomies that attempt to contain them. Success also requires an honest assessment of what is worth risking and what the benefits are. A mentor taught us that "there are some ditches worth dying in," a fitting maxim for a tenured, senior WPA. Liminals, on the other hand, may spend more time searching for the few ditches to survive in.

Though we are certainly not the first to constructively critique the conception of WPA power offered by Ed White in "Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA," we suggest that it is an example of scholarship particularly

unhelpful for liminal WPAs because they have such little institutional power to begin with. After saving his institution's WAC program, White says "I am convinced that any WPA could have done what I did." He precedes this statement with the disclaimer, "Of course, it helped to be a tenured professor who knew the ropes" (6).

Paul's experience as interim director of the WAC program offers a more realistic depiction of liminal WPA power. In the midst of curricular revision, Paul attended a meeting of tenured faculty and curriculum coordinators where he encouraged them to develop writing-intensive courses. To prepare, Paul read a variety of WPA scholarship, including White. After Paul offered detailed motivations and benefits for developing writing-intensive courses, a tenured faculty member said "That's all well and good, but can you give us one good reason why we should be developing writing classes in our departments?" Paul's position as a liminal WPA certainly did not grant him the power of a tenured sWPA, from which he might have been able to construct an *ethos* enabling him to be heard.

There is little doubt that most WPAs (regardless of rank) wish they were afforded more power to carry out their jobs; however, liminal WPAs are multiply disadvantaged when it comes to issues of power. As we mentioned earlier, liminals may lack the minimal authority that comes with having the initials PhD behind their names. Negotiating power successfully among upper administrators while still categorized as a student is a Herculean task. Further, liminals may not have the privilege or advantage of choosing their ditches. While this can also be true of sWPAs, there is a tremendous disparity between a dean asking a liminal to lead curricular reform and a dean asking a sWPA to complete the same task.

While this piece highlights our graduate student experiences as liminal WPAs, these scenarios could easily apply to other liminal WPAs. Liminal WPAs also may lack the (again, minimal) authority that comes with having a quasi-permanent position or official job title. Nita Danko, a literature MA and assistant writing center director, was left "running . . . the writing center, without title" while the director was on leave (136). She reflects that she was "not a PhD, not tenured, and only behind closed doors was [she] recognized for [her] ability to run the center" (136). We would suggest that, although Danko was not a graduate student, she was also operating as a liminal WPA. Danko encountered numerous problems and, in retrospect, realized that she expected others to perceive her as someone with authority, but that she "had never really been given any authority" and was defined not by what she was, but by what she was not (138). Overall, the lack of outward acknowledgement of Danko's position kept her at the bottom of the hierarchy and impacted her relationship with her tutors and with the

institution at large; she laments: “I’m not a peer, and I’m not really even faculty” (139).

Megan’s experience as assistant director of composition also yielded similar gaps between perceived and actual power, as well as between peer and faculty. One of Megan’s jobs was course scheduling for graduate teaching assistants and adjunct faculty. Megan was publicly confronted by an angry adjunct (and fellow graduate student) over not receiving courses for spring term. While the adjunct clearly perceived that Megan had the power to grant her courses, she did not believe Megan’s authority was such that Megan was above being berated in public. Megan’s perception was opposite; she believed her authority should put her above such reproach (Would an adjunct treat a sWPA in such a manner?) but that her power did not extend to creating classes. Both Megan and the adjunct perceived Megan’s power and authority to be somewhere in-between that of a gWPA and that of a sWPA, but their respective perceptions of said power and authority were markedly different.

The liminal existences described in this section belie the power that sWPAs may take for granted but that many liminal WPAs wish they had. It also reflects liminals’ multiple disadvantages. Without a PhD or job title, Danko had no official place within the institutional hierarchy and its decision-making processes. She simply doesn’t exist. Even if she makes powerful allies and convinces them of her abilities, she will still be disadvantaged by her interim status. The transience of Danko and other liminal WPAs makes them easy to discount: “It’s a good idea, but she won’t be around to finish it, so why bother?” Likewise, the adjunct would continue in her position longer than Megan would, so Megan was easy to disregard: “She’s just the latest lackey to the director who will leave soon, so why not take my anger out on her?”

THINKING LIMINALLY: NEGOTIATING OUR (COM)PROMISING POSITIONS

We have suggested that many liminals are without degree, without title, without institutional permanence and therefore have little power to enact the change that drew most of us to WPA work. We sometimes found ourselves frustrated, thwarted, and defeated, yet we would not erase our liminal WPA pasts. Although liminals can certainly benefit from the s- and jWPA literature, Fremo points out that jWPAs may not hold the same “values, beliefs, and educational or cultural histories” as their senior colleagues and thus must “circumvent such boundaries in order to make connections with [their] more powerful, institutionally sanctioned audiences” (198). Liminals may find themselves circumventing boundaries as well, yet with

even less power and visibility than more privileged j- and sWPAs; thus, effective strategies for j- and sWPAs may not be helpful for liminals. How, then, does one survive, much less thrive, as a liminal WPA?

For us, the solution was to think liminally. First, we had to make an honest assessment of the power we had, then assess other power that might be available to us, and finally, use our institutional impermanence and invisibility to our advantage. In retrospect, some of our greatest successes occurred when we chose to think liminally and exploit our liminal status. We identified six tactics in an overall strategy of thinking liminally.

Remember that No One Wants This Job

The liminal's greatest power lies in taking a job no one else wants: If a more powerful person wanted the job, she or he would have it. The conventional wisdom of waiting until tenure to take on administrative work obscures power that those in such positions may exploit. As Roach, Norris, and others have suggested, liminals can use this reality to their advantage by doing excellently a job that others believe is important enough to fund, but not fund well. Remembering that no one wants this job can encourage liminals to fly under the radar. It may also lead to opportunities where supervision is minimal, and therefore liminals might have more leeway to initiate projects or manage (modest) resources. Inman identifies some of these liminal opportunities in her own work, writing "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" (150). And while it may serve our discipline as a whole to create tenure-track positions that encourage long, meaningful careers from the outset, in spite of the risks, liminals can still parlay their experience into long and meaningful careers, though often at different institutions.

Choose Your Ditches

"Choose the ditches you're willing to die in" is useful advice for any WPA, but for liminals the criteria for choosing might look a bit different. Liminals have to be realists because the fiscal realities and institutional politics can be overwhelming. Liminals, if they are to thrive, must recognize that they will often lose and lose on issues of great importance, just like other WPAs. Instead of being rendered powerless by the losses, liminals need to focus on the power that is available to make gains, even if those gains aren't the ideal.

For instance, liminals might focus their energies on problems and projects that don't threaten the status quo or someone else's budget. They also might find that they can reap greater rewards by working on less impor-

tant projects where they can be successful rather than engaging in some Sisyphean task like spearheading curricular reform. For example, during Paul's year as interim director of the WAC program, the university was in the midst of curricular reform and the future of WAC courses was in serious doubt. Paul recognized that he lacked the institutional authority to make significant headway on this problem, even though he believed it very important. Instead, he put his time and effort into a common reader project (in tandem with Megan and two librarians) that improved first-year writing for years afterwards.

Talinn accepted the writing center position knowing that she would only direct it for one year. As she considered what she wanted to accomplish, she made choices mindful of the permanent director's management style and writing center philosophy. Though there were some aspects of the writing center's culture that Talinn would have liked to change, she was confident that the permanent director would not appreciate such changes. Instead, Talinn focused on lower-stakes, contained projects that increased the writing center's efficiency without expanding its role and thus the workload of the director. For instance, she codified unwritten policies, moved from paper to online scheduling, updated promotional materials, and revised the writing center's website instead of, for example, changing supervision practices or starting a new workshop series that the permanent director might not want to continue. Talinn focused her time on substantial projects that required minimal future maintenance instead of on projects that might threaten the permanent director in some way or confuse the university community by starting new services that wouldn't last.

For liminals, the need for widespread institutional change may be irrelevant. Institutional change, even within a small program, is unlikely to happen in a year or two, and a liminal who attempts it will most likely end up frustrating herself, her colleagues, and anyone she supervises. Instead, liminals might focus on short-term projects that can be completed within a semester or two and that will require little maintenance by future directors.

Similarly, liminals might tackle projects that the university wants but that powerful people won't complete. Or liminals might develop a program that gives the university great publicity without costing others much time or money. Paul and Megan were junior members on the committee to create a first-year common reader. The university believed this was important to first-year retention and initially a broad constituency, including tenured faculty from across campus, was part of the planning. As the project developed, though, fewer and fewer of the tenured faculty and upper-level administrators were significantly involved and, in the end, Paul, Megan, and librarians did much of the work. That project ultimately became a

space for Paul and Megan to shine. The university valued the project, but Paul and Megan had broad freedom in executing it because other members of the committee couldn't or didn't want to invest the time. While this could have been a high-stakes, politically charged situation, the lack of involvement by tenured faculty opened doors for Paul and Megan to have a substantial impact on curriculum without threatening others.

Rethink the Meaning of Investment

Senior and jWPAs are trained to allocate resources with the expectation that their tenure will continue. This might mean protecting a budget that rolls over in order to safeguard future interests. It could also mean focusing on long-term goals and other projects that are important but difficult to achieve, or that require multi-year funding. Yet liminals may actually be better served by exploiting their impermanence. Roles, power, and ethics for liminals shift and become more contextual than they are sometimes represented in j- or sWPA literature. In consequence, liminals may reasonably make different decisions based on the nature of their exploitation, the limits of their power, or time available. Thus, instead of protecting funds for future projects that probably won't materialize, a liminal might instead spend the funds at her disposal (instead of having them commandeered at the end of the year) by funding a project more generously, allocating equipment to benefit allies, or providing travel funding to other liminals.

Although Megan did not receive funding for her work, she was able to demonstrate another type of investment in the composition program to her fellow TAs. TAs had limited options to complete required professional development hours each semester. They also often complained about the choices available, and Megan and her co-assistant director frequently had to remind TAs to complete the hours. After the first year, Megan and her colleague took recommendations from the TAs and created a new, broader list of options. The TAs were grateful for the investment Megan and her colleague made in the professional development program, and (mostly) completed their hours more quickly and with more interest and vigor. While the director of composition and faculty may not have seen these hours as important, they were very important for the TAs, as they represented graduation credits. Megan and her colleague demonstrated their investment to the TAs and the professional development program and were rewarded for that investment.

Protect Allies

While establishing relationships with powerful benefactors is useful, liminals should also carefully maintain relationships with other liminals, peers, and staff. Liminals may be able to take advantage of strength in numbers. In addition, the objectives that one liminal has power to achieve may well overlap with those of other liminals. It is ethical for liminals to protect their interests and their allies, given that they are powerful conduits for liminals' limited access to success, for the good of programs, and of institutions. This doesn't mean organizing extravagant junkets to Vegas, but it might mean fully funding travel to an important conference. Another possibility is re-locating equipment to other liminals or addressing underfunded programs.

Cultivate Benefactors, Especially Unlikely Ones

Liminals may have little institutional power themselves, but they can work to build relationships with those who do, whether that power is formal or informal. McGlaun notes that to secure appropriate materials and funds for the writing center, she did not go to academic affairs where the center was housed but instead built relationships with another departmental secretary and student technology which gave her a grant to upgrade computers (242). Similarly, Ranieri forged relationships within a university curriculum program and used those relationships to build his "institutional ethos" within and beyond his department (253). As McGlaun and Ranieri demonstrate, liminals might work to build relationships with those outside their programs/departments and, in particular, with more powerful administrators on campus. At times, each of us wished that the provost actually knew our names. Liminals aren't likely to make strong allies of a provost or dean, but when one is completely unknown, it's difficult to even find the footing to defend a program in person.

Sometimes powerful administrators can be found in unlikely places as well. A liminal should take the time to seek out administrators who might benefit her cause and carefully consider how that administrator might help, or even defend, one's program. In particular, a liminal might look to a center for teaching or academic success or even to deans/chairs of other schools and departments. As White argues, we need to "see where our allies are and find out ways to strengthen them and keep them happy" (6)—wherever support for writing and a strong writing program might lurk. Those higher up in other programs can provide support and clout in crucial arguments or even provide funding.

One might also find benefactors by locating common ground with enemies amid hostile terrain. At a time when relations were strained between

the different threads of the department, Paul relied on tension between English and other departments to secure an unlikely ally for WAC, a tenured faculty member from outside of rhetoric and composition who could defend Paul from other departments when disagreements arose about the teaching and staffing of composition courses.

Establishing connections with other services and programs can also offer liminals more resources than they might otherwise have. Paul's WAC center forged a partnership with other faculty support services to offer a course redesign studio to support curricular change. By pooling resources and expertise with other units, Paul was able to participate in demonstrably successful faculty development, personally noticed by the provost as contributing to the core visions of the university.

Finally, we recommend that liminals cultivate relationships with those who appear less powerful such as support staff or librarians. These less-obvious allies may not provide funding or job security, but they often wield the informal power that can help a liminal get the job done. Megan worked with an administrator who, in terms of institutional hierarchy, wasn't very powerful; yet this administrator actually wielded enormous power and influence and was able to help Megan assert authority on scheduling issues with adjunct faculty. She also worked with librarians to encourage resistant faculty to incorporate information literacy into their assignments. Together, Megan and the librarians identified resistant instructors and worked with them to develop engaging research assignments. While the instructors might have brushed off librarians, Megan served as a liaison between resistant instructors and the librarians and was able to encourage the instructors to meet with librarians to plan their class research projects. Megan and the librarians also ran several workshops on developing research assignments for TAs and adjuncts and brought new TAs to the library for a pedagogy session run by the librarians. By the end of Megan's tenure, the majority of first-year writing instructors were fully utilizing the library's resources in their research assignments. Megan and Paul's experiences suggest that while sWPAs might not need to consider benefactors beyond their departments, this is vital for liminal WPAs.

Walk Softly Sans Sticks

While liminal WPAs often have to look outside their departments to cultivate allies, it is developing advisory or working relationships with peers that can be the most challenging. For Talinn, one of the most stressful aspects of being interim director of the writing center was supervising peers. Many of the tutors had years of experience—as many as Talinn—and in the past,

Talinn had tutored alongside them. Three of the tutors were writing dissertations, just as she was. Not only was Talinn supervising peers for the first time, but she was doing so with little additional status. She found the possibility of having to discipline her friends extremely stressful and, before she started, considered how she would approach such situations. Talinn opted to deepen her rapport with the tutors and establish clear expectations to minimize the possibility of having to discipline a tutor.

First, she codified unwritten policies and expectations into a handbook. She also codified the tutor job description. She felt it was easier to communicate these things in writing at the beginning of the year during training than to bring them up after a problem occurred. Having policies and procedures documented in writing imbued the policies with more authority and gave Talinn more authority in the event that a tutor did become a problem. In case of a dispute, or worse yet, an escalation to some higher authority, Talinn could point to the policies that had been discussed and distributed earlier.

Second, Talinn considered her overall demeanor towards tutors. It seemed strange and inauthentic to suddenly begin behaving as The Boss. Instead, Talinn chose to continue interacting with graduate tutors and other experienced tutors like a peer, albeit as a peer with more responsibility. Instead of working to separate herself from the tutors, Talinn continued to develop those relationships based on their shared status as students, dissertation writers, job hunters, etc. The increased rapport meant that that tutors would have to transgress even further in order to misbehave because they would be disappointing both a friend and a boss through inappropriate behavior.

While Talinn developed a strong working relationship with tutors who were also peers, Megan struggled to develop a strong working relationship with other graduate students, especially her co-assistant director of composition. Although they shared the job equally, Megan found herself doing more of the work, mainly because she was faster to respond to emails and thus more visible to graduate students. However, Megan and her colleague established a written list of shared duties. They divided the TAs into two groups for reporting professional development hours and observations. They also divided the professional development workshops they would run for the TAs and, during the semester that they co-taught the pedagogy course, they attended class on alternate days. While Megan handled scheduling with the director, her colleague mentored TAs struggling with teaching.

This division of duties might seem obvious, but it was an important part of the success of having co-assistant directors of composition. Because

Megan and her colleague were often the *de facto* directors for the TAs, it was important that they establish clearly defined roles for themselves so that the TAs knew who was in charge of what. While this wasn't always successful, it gave the TAs—and the department—a sense of security in the leadership of the program.

These kinds of leadership choices won't always be successful, but they do offer liminals a tactic for minimizing disciplinary problems. Talinn's situation was caused by her lack of a degree and Megan's by the lack of a degree and job title, but many liminals might find parallels when supervising adjuncts, when in a temporary role, or when they lack the preferred credential for the job.

CONCLUSION

Let's return to the story of Jamie, the ABD graduate student who is the assistant director of the writing program. Imagine that Jamie has consulted with an sWPA at another institution for advice about the job offer to become interim director. Jamie has a spouse, twins on the way, a mortgage, and enough experience to not only do the job, but do it well, politics and rank notwithstanding. However, Jamie will not have the protection of a PhD or tenure, and the job will be eliminated after one year. How should the sWPA respond?

We hope that the answer will be more complex than a simple "Don't take an administrative position without tenure." In fact, we hope that these stories have caused readers to reconsider the categories within which WPAs are positioned. We have attempted to complicate commonplace roles by demonstrating the complex roles and relations to power that liminal WPAs, in this case graduate student liminals, deal with every day: teacher-administrator-supervisor-graduate student-MFA, etc.

Liminal WPAs also remind us to reconsider definitions of success. In a recent piece in *Harlot*, Kristin Bivens et al. challenge Baliff et al.'s definition of women's ways of making it in rhetoric and composition. Baliff et al. established quite ambitious criteria for making it: Women who are successful in the field of rhetoric and composition hold a PhD, are tenured, and are able to balance scholarship and real life. Bivens et al. counter that success in rhetoric and composition needs to be more inclusive and empowering, especially given today's climate of contingent faculty in instructor and administrative roles.

Similarly, we do not hold that a liminal's success is necessarily signaled by getting a tenure-track job and thus moving up in the hierarchy although that is what we have been able to do. Others might find success in contin-

ued liminal work because they find it meaningful or because continuing in it makes a particular lifestyle possible (e.g., living close to family or in a particular geographical area, allowing a spouse to keep a better paying job, having added time to spend with young children). Trade-offs are inherent in academic life, and liminals are certainly not an exception to that. We would suggest, though, that liminals are successful when we make choices aware of the taxonomies and power structures we operate in. We are successful when we make choices in pursuit of our goals. We are successful when we make decisions with our eyes open. We can be successful if we choose continued liminality and successful if we choose to leave it, whether we leave for a tenure-track job or for a job outside the academy.

We do not dismiss the ethics of institutions choosing to staff programs with liminal WPAs, but we argue that liminal positions are not going to disappear and may even grow given the current budget climate. The untenured and uncredentialed will continue to accept WPA positions, and our current taxonomies obscure the liminal WPAs already in our midst. Liminal WPAs are a growing presence in the field of rhetoric and composition who work at the margins without the protection of a degree and/or job security. They are resourceful administrators who locate power in unusual places and use it to benefit their programs and institutions. Liminals will continue to enact positive change at their institutions, even while simultaneously experiencing the anxiety, frustration, and exploitation that comes with liminality.

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