

Disabling Writing Program Administration

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests “disabling” writing program administration, which means bringing the insights of disabled people and perspectives in order to innovate, include, and transgress expected and exclusionary norms in writing program administration. Focusing on the stories we tell about ourselves, I analyze how WPA narratives are structured to shun or tolerate disability and how these narratives establish normative expectations of who WPAs are and can be, in terms of disability status. Using the critical and activist lens of disability studies, I identify how anxiety and depression often feature as inevitable and intolerable in our narratives; I examine how triumph-over-adversity tales are dangerous for disabled WPAs and all WPAs; and I punctuate my analysis with my own narrative of depression. More broadly, I suggest that disability can inform all writing program work by drawing attention to the bodies that do such work.

There is rich scholarship on disability and the teaching of college writing, but less attention has been paid to how disability can and does influence writing program administration beyond classroom practice.¹ Noticeably absent in the discussion is consideration of how disability shapes the identities of writing program administrators because a WPA is disabled and/or affiliates with disability studies perspectives.

In the many first-person stories published by WPAs, often called WPA narratives, few WPAs claim disability (on claiming, see Linton). Arguably, there is little discussion of and by disabled WPAs because, as Patricia Dunn states in her exploration of multiple literacies in the teaching of writing, “Composition specialists today were most likely yesterday’s linguistically talented students moving up in a linguisto-centric school system that privileged our way of knowing” (50). Put another way, it seems easy to assume that scholars with disabilities, particularly disabilities that impact writing and communication, aren’t likely to end up running writing programs. But

this isn't the reality; there *are* WPAs with various disabilities (including those that affect language and interaction), and disabled scholars in rhetoric and composition are increasingly securing faculty positions. Further, because a WPA can become disabled at any time, and because many universities expect rhetoric and composition scholars to rotate into an administrative role in a writing program at some point in their careers, it's important that WPA work be accessible to those with disabilities.

There are many ways that we might make writing program work more accessible, as disability is not only relevant when a disabled person is in a classroom or writing program but wherever bodies, figurative or literal, gather.² Most importantly, we must consider how WPA narratives are structured to shun or only tolerate disability and how these narratives establish normative expectations of who WPAs are and can be, in terms of disability status. In response, I suggest that we *disable* writing program work, which means knowingly and innovatively thinking through and with disability, particularly in terms of the stories we tell about ourselves. Disabling WPA narratives means making our writing program work accessible and inclusive which involves creating new narratives and critiquing existing ones. In doing this, we challenge the ways these narratives suppress disability and discourage disabled scholars and teachers from becoming WPAs, and we recognize how disability can inform all writing program work by drawing attention to the bodies that do such work.

I suggest *disabling* writing program administration in order to emphasize the term *disability* and explicitly invite disabled WPAs to join the discussion. By *disabling*, I mean the process of bringing the insights of disabled people and perspectives in order to innovate, include, and transgress expected and exclusionary norms.³ In some ways, what I am suggesting is similar to Brenda Brueggemann's articulation of enabling in her work on enabling pedagogy, where she notes that "disability enables insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, sensory, and pedagogical insight" (795). However, for me, the idea of enabling can sometimes eclipse disability and focus on how changes can be made to benefit all people, disabled or not.⁴ While benefitting all people is an admirable and often important goal (and one I'll make some reference to below), my intentions are a bit more activist at this stage, as I intend to welcome (not tolerate) disabled WPAs; recognize the discrimination they have experienced or might experience; and explore the perspectives that disability invites (not persists in spite of). To accomplish these goals, I use a disability studies lens to analyze published WPA narratives, and I punctuate that analysis with my own WPA narrative, in the context of my depression. While my story is not emblematic, my telling reveals the ways that disability hides in our narratives and suggests how

disability can more prominently figure in ways that challenge the rhetorical tropes of WPA work (and disability). My story invites further discussion about how to construct innovative narrative spaces for disabled WPAs to share their experiences and expertise.

My analysis is informed by the simultaneous abundance and dearth of disability in our WPA narratives. I begin by tracing how anxiety and depression often feature in our narratives and how these “conditions” are narrowly conceptualized as the result of WPA work. The ways in which anxiety and depression frequent our narratives position disability as both inevitable and unwanted (as these mental states never pre-figure WPA work), are assumed to be solvable, and are the only disabilities consistently mentioned in our stories. In response, the second part of my analysis asks how we can revise our WPA narratives to better include disability and diverse embodiment, and I argue that the WPA who inhabits our narratives is hyper-able, as she dashes to meetings, problem-solves around the clock, and confronts those who have the power to ruin her career. At the same time, the WPAs in our narratives are wounded by such work, often in the form of emotional and mental trauma that rhetorically manifests in her WPA narrative and, assumedly, in her body. To critique the common depiction of WPA-as-hero, I employ disability studies’ critiques of overcoming, which suggest that when we expect disabled people to work hard to “overcome” barriers, we ignore that those barriers are institutional inequities, not personal traumas to be surmounted. I re-purpose these critiques to assess how (ableist) hero narratives obscure broader inequities in our work as WPAs. Throughout my analysis, I posit that the deployment of this WPA figure, who is both hyper-able and disabled, does damage to abled and disabled WPAs as mental suffering cannot be par for the course nor can disability be a disqualification, for being a WPA.

In her analysis of discourses of disappointment in WPA work, Laura Micciche asks,

Enroute to hope, can we speak candidly about professional inequities and disappointments without being regarded as doomsayers, as spoilers of democratic identity that composition studies has constructed of itself? (98)

Similarly, in disabling WPA narratives, I suggest that we not view disability as a spoiler or problem to solve, but as Micciche suggests, as an opportunity to candidly assess professional inequities and how we delimit the quality of our work and ourselves.⁵ Because disabled can be something we are, and disabling can be something we do, in the name of inclusion and social justice in writing program administration.

VALUING WPA NARRATIVES

My department chair slides a sheet of paper with my annual review scores across her desk to me, and the score in writing program administration is, again, lower than I expected. I explain to her how much work I am doing, how I have met the categories in the criteria, and how I was explicitly told to do less administrative work the year before in my mid-tenure review (though I wasn't doing much less). She explains that the people on the committee who assigned the score don't really understand the nature of my contract or the criteria; she says that I can appeal. I begin to shake and cry, she hands me a tissue, and I look down. I quickly sign the form and collide with a newly-hired faculty member as I exit the building. I become so anxious that I start going into the department office on weekends to do my photocopying. It seems impossible that I will get tenure as a WPA.

The WPA narratives that are popular in our field typically involve a WPA sharing her experience of success and/or failure in the context of a particular college or university setting. While some have questioned the value of these typified narratives (more on this below), my purpose is not to determine whether we should be telling these stories but to examine how such narratives delimit WPA identities. In my mini-narrative above, I have emphasized my stress and hard work, as WPA narratives often do, but have elided the depression that informed but was only tangentially caused by my WPA work. Put another way, when I read this narrative, I know it's a story of depression, but WPAs may read it as a typical tale of WPA work.

Many have articulated the value of WPAs narrating their stories, and my analysis of these narratives similarly assumes that they are influential. In her analysis of the professional narratives of George Wykoff at Purdue, Shirley K Rose suggests that WPA narratives “give meaning and value . . . to what might otherwise seem to be singular, inexplicable experiences without significance, representing them in terms of familiar shared metanarratives” (222). Rose focuses on how to construct these narratives from less expected materials, and she concludes that we read “these stories with the expectation that they will help us better understand our work, be better at it, derive greater joy from it” (222). In her piece on documenting WPA work, Karen Bishop similarly suggests diverse ways of narrating WPA work, noting that whether the stories are positive or negative, “our challenge is to discover ways to appropriate those narratives and make visible the intellectual dimensions of our work” (42). She suggests a “consistent model” for doing this, using the metaphor and practice of documentary (43), and considers,

as does Rose, how we can revise the ways we produce narratives in order to push our field forward. In *The Activist WPA*, Linda Adler-Kassner focuses on how we tell stories of student writers and writing, and she highlights the ways these stories not only share identity but frame it, as they “to some extent prescribe the roles that we set for ourselves as WPAs” (183). She is more tentative about revising these narratives, as she asserts that “building a base and developing alliances” must come first (184). While each of these scholars suggests that WPA narratives importantly frame who we are and what we do, and that such narratives are necessarily informed by race, gender, and class (particularly Adler-Kassner), none mentions disability.

Others are more critical about the rhetorical work of WPA narratives, and these scholars frame them as cautionary tales (Pinard) or victim narratives (Dew and Horning). A thoroughgoing critique comes from *GenAdmin: Theorizing WPA Identities in the Twenty-First Century*, whose authors claim that these narratives offer a view of WPA work as agonistic and impossible without tenure. In arguing that “there doesn’t seem to be much space for our stories in the narrative patterns established by the field,” the authors focus on the ways WPA narratives are framed by “old metaphors, along binary continuums, and by the identification of rank” (Charlton, Charlton, Graban, Ryan, and Ferdinandt Stolley 35, 36). These authors’ arguments are useful because they drive us to identify and critique the metaphors in our narratives and to ask, “How do these stories include and exclude, liberate and oppress?” (38). The *GenAdmin* authors “encourage alternative, localized renditions of what might otherwise become grand narratives that could limit our field” (47); however, they seem to conclude that we already understand the common rhetorical strategies of WPA narratives and can move to re-inventing and re-invigorating them. Instead, I suggest that we revisit these narratives and critique what they have to say about who is qualified to do WPA work, especially in relation to disability.

MAPPING ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

I’m pulling into a campus parking lot when my phone rings. My colleague, and chair of my mid-tenure committee, kindly but urgently says it’s time to turn in my dossier, that it will reflect poorly on the department and on me if it goes out late to my external reviewers. I tell him I have most of it done but that I just got back in town from the funeral, or rather four funerals over a three-day period. I don’t say that I’ve been spending most of my time figuring out how to get a copy of a coroner’s report, and not long after, I’ll receive the wrong report in the mail (for an

88-year-old woman, not for my 35-year-old friend) and begin the process again. My colleague says to hurry up with the dossier, and I just say okay, then nearly smash the phone to bits on the hot July asphalt.

In some cases, anxiety and depression are explicitly mapped to writing program work in WPA narratives. Such mapping is always part of the story but not the point of the story. Differently, in my story above, grief and budding depression intervene and intersect with my WPA work, instead of my WPA work primarily causing the anxiety. This conversation with my colleague and friend, who was kindly trying to help me and ultimately saved my job, was impossible—there was no allowable space for me to say that it had to be late. But when I've told the story in other places and spaces, I've focused on the stress of having to build both typical and administrative dossiers and the pressure of having additional reviewers. I've highlighted how the university tenure committee emphasized how overworked I was but how my position never changed. I've placed the anxiety and depression I was feeling, which was related to the death of my friend, off the map, or rather, kept the emotion and hid the cause. I just didn't see a space for figuring depression and anxiety into my WPA tale, or at least anxiety and depression that wasn't primarily related to my WPA work.

The ways that anxiety and depression figure and hide in WPA narratives are problematic for three reasons. First, anxiety and depression are represented as caused by WPA work, which suggests that WPAs do not enter the field disabled or become otherwise disabled. Second, these narratives mark anxiety and depression as intolerable and curable, leaving little space for disabled WPAs who are not passing through these health states. Third, these references to anxiety and depression appear to be the dominant (if not the only) representation of disability in these narratives, leaving little room to imagine WPAs with other disabilities. In analyzing these references, my goal is not to discourage people from being WPAs, suggest that WPA experiences are not legitimately difficult, or claim that having health problems should prevent someone from being or continuing as a WPA (unless they so choose). Instead, I analyze these references as indicators of the chilly climate for disability in WPA work.⁶

In existing WPA narratives, anxiety and depression are caused by WPA work, are not particularly concerning or unusual, and are relieved through hard work and/or tenure. In "On Coming to Voice" from *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers and Troubadours*, Mara Holt discusses her time as the "unofficial associate director of composition," where she did everything from running faculty workshops to training TAs to selecting textbooks (28–29). She

describes how she felt after going through the tenure process as an untitled administrator:

Wounded. Crazy from having kept my mouth shut for the previous year and a half, just in case I might inadvertently plant some malice where it could unconsciously sabotage me. I was developing physical symptoms of stress that I'd never seen any sign of before. (27)

She further frames her WPA experience as debilitating when she claims that she “was amazed at the physical and emotional effects” (27). Her experience of disability (or anxiety, though she uses neither term) as a consequence of her WPA work seems more than metaphorical, though she may not have had physical wounds or a DSM diagnosis.⁷ While she is disturbed by these bodily effects, she does not comment on them as extraordinary for a WPA in the position she was in. Disabling conditions appear to be par for the WPA course.

In the same collection, Mary Pinard focuses on the delight and worry of first directing a program, and anxiety is in her article and its title: “Surviving the Honeymoon: Bliss and Anxiety in a WPA’s First Year, or Appreciating the Plate Twirler’s Art.” She narrates her experience re-invigorating a writing center and then thinking twice about doing so after attending the WPA Workshop. In her section entitled “The Anxiety,” she describes: “Naked power. Power games. Broken promises. Funding cuts. Professional denigration. Slippery slopes. Fickle review standards . . . Burn out” (60). She goes on to note her bodily consequences: “I became overextended, exhausted, and worried about the expectations I’d set everywhere, like traps, for myself” (61). In describing both literal exhaustion and a metaphorical “whiplash” (62), she suggests that the best strategy is to make (better) use of the honeymoon period when you first arrive as a WPA, though this does little to resolve the ensuing anxiety she describes. The information Pinard received at the WPA Workshop was both a salve and a source of anxiety (60), and her piece makes clear that anxiety is simply part of being a WPA. It isn’t clear, however, how those who are unable to productively cope with such anxiety or who already have anxiety conditions that might be unreasonably exacerbated would fare in these positions. As such, this type of narrative—which embraces anxiety as part of the job and not something that can interfere with the job—places WPA positions out of reach for those without a certain kind of emotional fortitude. In my case, it made my persisting anxiety, not caused by WPA work, unspeakable.

Narrations of anxiety as necessarily part of WPA work also appear in *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*. In a piece on her time as a pre-tenure WPA, Camille Langston describes a bodily reaction

in a section entitled “Frantic Fall,” when she reacts to an email noting her administrative position is not recognized by her university: “After reading her response, I ‘sucked air,’ as my family fondly calls my immediate panic reaction” (185). Though perhaps intended to garner a laugh, it is another instance of a bodily, anxiety-ridden reaction to WPA work and one that Langston is only able to resolve by escaping her WPA position through a temporary overseas appointment, as she claimed that the “time and stress” could not be worth it (190). While her experience is not necessarily indicative of short- or long-term disability, the narrative frames anxiety as something that must be escaped, even if one loses her job as a result. Depression and anxiety are primarily metaphors *for* the job, rather than something real.

A more tragic article in the same collection warrants attention, as it is one of the few that directly identifies diagnosis and medication for anxiety. In “Identity Theft of a Writing Center Director: The New Art of Academic Punishment,” Margaret Weaver describes the “identity theft” she felt upon resigning as Writing Center director which ultimately led her to seek mental help and medication. She explains that she could not understand why she was “so filled with anxiety” upon resigning as Writing Center director (her resignation resulted from a scantily-described incident between two graduate student TAs). She notes: “[T]he anxiety I experienced in regard to my resignation was so immobilizing that my doctor mandated I take a two-week medical leave and started me on Zoloft” (282). Though clearly of concern to her, the incident is primarily articulated within a narrative of how powerful writing program or writing center identity can be. Again, anxiety and depression are articulated as par for the course, though at the same time, intolerable and in need of treatment. While I don’t want to diminish Weaver’s job-related anxiety or her sense that she was “the victim of some sort of violence” (281), such anxiety is positioned as a problem to solve and, in some ways, a badge of honor for being dedicated to your work. In narratives like Weaver’s, anxiety isn’t something that pre-exists or co-exists with WPA work, and while her narrative certainly lends insight into being a WPA, increased attention to the embodied consequences of WPA work—in terms of what it looks like to care for oneself and invite others to care for you—is important but intolerable within the bounds of typical WPA narratives.

WPA narratives more subtly negate disability by positioning health as a highly desirable and attainable state and by using health as a metaphor for success. In a non-narrative piece entitled “Developing Healthy Management and Leadership Styles: Surviving the WPA’s ‘Inside Game,’” Irene Ward iterates how WPA work can cause illness: “So as much as burnout will lessen your ability to be effective in your WPA position, more impor-

tant, it can cause serious health risks, and it can cause illness” (50). She also references the “resultant anxiety” when WPAs are not supported (54).⁸ That WPAs might be otherwise anxious is not considered, and Ward sketches what types of WPAs are more “likely” to become anxious, noting that certain “personal characteristics” can “help predict if a person will suffer from job stress,” including “being ‘anxiety prone,’ introverted, or flexible” (58). Though this would seem to be circular logic (anxiety-prone people tend to be more anxious), her identification of personal characteristics that are likely to lead to job stress locates anxiety as originating in WPA bodies which discounts how anxiety might be produced in the interaction of bodies and environments, as disability studies scholars often claim. She simply suggests that people fix their own anxiety: “Stop thinking you are a victim; take control” (61).

Equally interesting are the ways that Ward’s piece conflates being healthy and being successful, which pushes disability to the margins. She suggests that “[d]eveloping coping and leadership skills can help ensure that WPAs remain healthy and effective in the position of WPA” (49), making health and effectiveness linked (and a matter of choice) and disability unwanted. This occurs again when she urges WPAs to “move toward a sound healthy approach to their work that will sustain them over the long term” (52), as it isn’t clear if *healthy* means bodily health (as she’s discussed elsewhere in the article) or figurative health that she equates with success, or both. This is mirrored in the introduction to *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers and Troubadours* where Diana George similarly uses metaphors of health and disease to frame her four-page introduction, as she explains that “the health of the writing program is crucial to the health of many departments” (xii). Though health metaphors are certainly not unique to discussions of WPA work (and divorce metaphors are also common⁹), framing problematic on-the-job issues in terms of (ill) health stigmatizes those WPAs with existing health issues and subtly, if not eugenically, implies that only the fittest survive as WPAs.¹⁰

The goal of the foregoing analysis is not to pick out each time the word *anxiety* or *health* is used in a WPA narrative or to argue that WPA work always leads to anxiety or even to suggest that anxiety is always bad. Instead, my concern is that we are ignoring the ways that anxiety and depression are characterized in stories of WPA work, and we are not considering how we want to respond to those characterizations. If disability is only ever something bad that happens to WPAs and programs, there is scarce space for the disabled WPA to articulate her value and perspective, but more than this, there is no space to articulate an interdependent model

of WPA work where we care for ourselves, and each other, in the ways disability studies teaches.

DISABLING WPA NARRATIVES

In the months before my friend's death, I finish an article about the rhetorics of gastrointestinal distress. In the weeks before, I research detox programs, mail my friend a letter and a packet, and coordinate the beginning of an intervention. A few weeks later, after he's gone, I leak bad poetry, about taking suitcases of his photos on the plane, about throwing apologies down the drain, about what my friend taught me about my husband, his best friend. One of the poems details my struggle to tell the tale of my friend's death and my fear that I might write the story and "send it out," as I would an academic paper. It ends, "I'm not sure when the depression is talking, though, when I'm going down with the ship." I start going to all the poetry readings my department offers, coordinated by my mid-tenure review chair, who will suddenly die a few years after my friend. I'm running the writing program, but I'm not doing any academic writing. Nothing that "counts."

In my case, depression wasn't only a mental state; it was a textual intervention in my life as a scholar and administrator. My scholarship and teaching wandered one way, informed by my depression and disability studies research, while my WPA identity remained firmly rooted in a masquerade of health and success as I forced myself to attend meetings and maintain an open-door policy. As a consequence of this splitting of my WPA work from my embodied reality as a depressed person, my WPA duties felt unreal and burdensome and my depression more onerous.

How can we reframe WPA narratives to include disability in more productive ways? How might I have done so? What are the rhetorical strategies and risks? Beyond the risks of disclosing disability, a significant barrier to sharing disabled WPA narratives is the expectation to overcome the problem(s) highlighted in the narrative; this expectation of overcoming is common to both WPA narratives and typical/stereotyped disability narratives. Engaging the rich scholarship on overcoming in disability studies helps identify the damage that triumph-over-adversity tales pose for disabled WPAs and all WPAs and helps resist simply encouraging "more" disabled WPA narratives if they only reify existing expectations to independently overcome disability and all WPA hardship.¹¹

Disability scholars have long critiqued the expectation that people overcome their disabilities. Hero narratives are particularly dangerous for dis-

abled WPAs because they intersect with existing expectations to overcome disability, creating a double-overcoming bind for the disabled WPA. These overcoming narratives also function problematically for those without disabilities (or those in the space between disability and ability), as they provide little room to reflect upon and grieve the failures that are inevitable to WPA work, as hero narratives require a relentless search for solutions. In “The Second Phase: From Disability Rights to Disability Culture,” from his collection *Why I Burned My Book*, Paul Longmore asserts, “In order for people with disabilities to be respected as worthy Americans . . . they have been instructed that they must perpetually labor to ‘overcome’ their disabilities,” which involves “continuous cheerful striving toward some semblance of normality” (221). He explains that this pressure to overcome is “rooted in nondisabled interests and values,” which tucks disability away and fails to recognize or rectify the power differential between disabled and nondisabled people. Simi Linton argues that overcoming narratives locate disability in particular problem bodies, rather than in interactions of bodies and environments. She notes the consequences:

If we, as a society, place the onus on individuals with disabilities to work harder to “compensate” for their disabilities or to “overcome” their condition or the barriers in the environment, we have no need for civil rights legislation or affirmative action. (19) (On overcoming, see also Dolmage in *Disability Rhetoric*.)

Asking the disabled WPA to “compensate” might take the form of tolerating an inaccessible office, failing to provide needed technology, or construing a disability-related personal assistant as a “bonus.”

In “The Empire of the ‘Normal’: A Forum on Disability and Self-Representation,” G.T. Couser identifies the impediments to writing and publishing disability autobiography, and his analysis speaks to some of the narrative barriers of writing and sharing disabled WPA narratives. He explains that while disability autobiography “offers an alternative to patronizing and marginalizing (mis)representation by others,” as it is likely to represent disability as “a ‘living condition’ not a metaphor for some undesirable moral status” (306), disabled people struggle to publish autobiographies because their stories often cannot conform to the “tyranny of the comic plot” (308). The alternative to the comic plot for disability narratives is a narrative of failure and abjection, and typically death, as evidenced in mainstream movies that prominently feature disabled characters. (See Dolmage and DeGenero on *Million Dollar Baby*.) These options are mirrored in WPA narratives which push the WPA to save the day or narrate her tragic fall. Finally, Couser highlights the practical challenges of writing disability autobiogra-

phy such as using sometimes slow-moving adaptive software in the writing process, and I suggest that we encourage and create more diverse textual spaces for WPA narratives beyond published collections and articles.

While the intersection of overcoming themes in disability and WPA narratives is particularly problematic for disabled WPAs, the overcoming narratives of WPA work also position all WPAs as needing to fix impossible issues on their own. While such narratives have been critiqued as hyper-masculine hero narratives (see Charlton et al. on Ed White's "Use It or Lose It: Power and WPA"), so are these narratives hyper-able. For example, in "Tenure-Track Faculty as WPAs: Notes from a New WPA," Megan Fulwiler claims:

I am a magician, physician, fix-it person, exorcist, exterminator. I am the solution, the cure, the answer. I am lieutenant and janitor, reformer and rookie. . . . I am an untenured administrator of a writing program at a small liberal arts college (92)

Though intended to elicit a knowing laugh, this model is not reasonable for most folks but particularly not for disabled people, who may not have the ability or energy to be the "solution" to everything and/or have come to understand that they shouldn't be. Similarly, in "Why I Won't Keep My Head Down or Follow Other Bad Advice for the Junior Faculty WPA," Stephanie Roach passionately argues for the value of her WPA position, and she claims that her job is about "keeping her head up, serving on more committees, going to more meetings, not staying out of trouble, and actively, vocally paying out dues" (117). This model leaves little room for a disabled WPA who may not be vocal, literally or figuratively. Finally, in a narrative focused on the benefits of being a pre-tenure WPA, Lauren Sewell Ingraham states, "In short, I earned tenure because I performed well in all aspects of my position and didn't give composition-resistant faculty much to complain about" (295–96). These are tough acts to follow for any WPA, particularly for disabled WPAs who may work at different paces and in different manners. While these WPAs have clearly worked hard, I am countering with a disabled model of WPA work that honors productive delegation of tasks to a support team, encourages reliance on communication modes that work best for the WPA and her program (which may be electronic and/or less confrontational), and broadly imagines WPAs as embodied, but not the embodiment of their programs.

In addition to reifying unreasonable job expectations, these overcoming narratives assume that we all enter WPA positions with the same abilities, tools, and goals, when disabled WPAs may enter with different (though not necessarily lesser) abilities, skills, and mind-sets. For example, in *Praxis*

and Allies: The WPA Game, Bras et al. introduce a board game designed to teach readers/players about being WPAs. Their game offers a new, smart take on the often-told tale of road-weary WPAs, and each player is allotted seven knowledge tokens, seven *ethos* tokens, eight funding tokens, and twelve energy tokens. They note that “successful WPAs must avoid burnout by managing stress and caring for themselves” (79); however, by suggesting that all WPAs have the same tokens (including plenty of energy tokens), there is little room for those whose disabilities may require adaptations to “play the game.” This assumption is paralleled when WPAs are metaphorized as hyper-able figures, particularly runners. For example, Roach notes that being a WPA was the course she “wanted to run” (111), and in a chapter aptly titled “Overcoming Disappointment: Constructing Writing Program Identity Through Postmodern Mapping,” Sharon James McGee provides this analogy: “She does not harness her power to beat the other runners—for many marathon runners, success is not in beating others but in finishing the race—she harnesses it to endure” (61). This leaves little space for a disabled WPA, who may smash against the hurdles of inaccessibility (and be blamed for that), rather than weaving and darting toward the finish line.

Another challenge in narrating disability in WPA work is the lack of data about how many disabled WPAs there are, where *we/they* are geographically located, how disability intersects with other identities, and how disability positively and negatively impacts WPA work. Disabled WPAs have not typically been queried about their experiences or seen themselves represented in survey results (though disability has cropped up in some responses anyway).¹² In *The Promise and Peril of Writing Program Administration*, Skeffington, Enos, and Borrowman discuss their WPA survey and the nine questions that they wanted to ask WPAs but felt “no one would have answered in a survey, regardless of assurances of anonymity” (8). I am particularly interested in their question about anxiety and depression: “Have you ever been under a physician’s care—or been prescribed medication—for anxiety or depression related to your work?” (9). While I have concerns with how this question is framed, it is not unaskable and could signal that those experiencing mental stress or mental health conditions due to or alongside WPA work require and deserve support. The WPA Census asks about disability with a single question: “Do you identify as disabled?” The question was designed to match the “Writing Center Directors and Diversity: A Survey,” created by Sarah Banschbach, Rebecca Day Babcock, and Karen Keaton Jackson. Of the 313 people who responded to their survey, ten noted they had disabilities, and the authors sent these respondents follow-up questions and ultimately wished they had asked more about dis-

ability in their original survey.¹³ Current research on faculty disclosure of disability can also help shape future survey questions directed at learning more about and from disabled WPAs.¹⁴

We must make more rhetorical room for narratives by disabled WPAs so they can articulate how disability may not only limit but also benefit their WPA work. In line with blossoming discussions of multimodal and multimedia approaches in writing classrooms, disabled WPAs can narrate how they are implementing universal design practices to create accessible and innovative spaces for all teachers and students *and* for themselves. Disabled WPA narratives can sometimes disclose disability *and* tell a story of failure, without an assumption of a relation between the two or that either will be overcome. And when safe to do so, narratives by disabled WPAs can identify disability discrimination whether that occurs overtly (through the tenure process and beyond) or covertly, as when I played able while depressed. Broadening our WPA narratives in these ways invites all WPAs to figure their embodiment in sharing the stories of what we do and who we are.

INNOVATING DISABLED WPA NARRATIVES

In early summer, my husband learns his best friend is gone, one year and one month after attending our wedding as best man. He has died of alcoholism and, I think, unresolved grief from his sister's death more than a decade before. We fly to California and sort through his jumbled apartment. Over five days, we coordinate a memorial for friends and attend another for family, drive deep into the desert for the funeral of a grandparent, then fly to Texas that night for the burial of our friend the next day. I assemble photo packets and scan the rest to a memorial site, and we begin a long debate about whether to tow our friend's old VW bus from Texas to Colorado. At the same time, I assemble my mid-tenure dossier and run a week-long TA training; then in the fall, I teach the graduate-level practicum for new composition TAs. My husband gets up for work each day, and most days, I pretend I'm getting up too, then I eat a lot and go back to bed after he leaves. I teach, sort email, and get lower course evaluations than usual. After a rough winter break, I am diagnosed with "major depression," which I do not disclose to my department or anyone else on campus, out of fear and confusion.

In the spring of my depression, I receive a report from my university's tenure committee, stating that my administrative load is not reasonable and needs to be rectified. This was the good news I had

longed for, but to turn the letter's contents into the reality of my work-life, I needed to singularly advocate for myself and implement the loosely-described changes by meeting with my dean and other power-brokers on campus. Uncharacteristically, I find that I am unable to engage in such high-stakes negotiations or to do so well. I end up making the situation worse (or believe that I have) then give up and wait for what feels like an improbable tenure. I don't have the words, or can't find the rhetorical space to articulate that it is my depression that is impacting my ability to be a WPA, and that while being a WPA isn't helping my depression, it's not at the heart of my embodied circumstance.

In *Mad at School*, Margaret Price describes what she calls “kairotic space,” the key element of which is “the pairing of spontaneity with high levels of professional/academic impact” (61). She notes that these spaces can be “fraught” for those with disabilities, as they are typically real-time social situations which are high-stakes, in-person, and impromptu (61–62). The actions I needed to undertake to renegotiate my contract functioned in such a space, and in the end, I missed the moment in which to address my own exploitation. By the time I emerged from my depression, it made little sense to me, and I figured to anybody else, to be trying to act on a letter—and in a “kairotic space”—that was now more than a year old. My mentor had since left campus for a visiting professor gig, and my unfettered access to emotional situations that directly impacted my future employment compounded my depression.

The temptation to put a happy ending on my story is almost irresistible. Did the depression resolve? Did I get tenure? Did the latter help resolve the former? Maybe, but that's not the center of my story. This is where disabling writing program administration moves beyond the story of the struggle because while I did not enjoy my depression, it shaped me as scholar, teacher, and WPA in ways that are important, in ways I want to keep.

I come to realize that disability has had far less impact on the writing program I direct than it has on my teaching and research. When I take a look at my assessment procedure, I realize the rushed timed session isn't accessible to anyone (including me). When textbook reps appear in my office, I ask them about accessible textbook options and get promises to find out “something about that.” I slow down the week-long TA training I coordinate—what the TAs call boot camp—to leave more time for informal interactions and problem-solving and for life outside of camp. I re-craft

the syllabus for the graduate TA practicum to focus on TAs exploring their own embodied needs and identities as teachers, in contrast to the one-size-fits-all pedagogy that dominated my previous curriculum. I find that my teachers, some disabled and some not, want to take up making their courses accessible. I begin to take the anxiety some of my graduate student TAs disclose to me more seriously, realizing it's not just about the new teaching situations they are in. I speak about my depression in my undergraduate classes, if and when the time is right, and some students start sharing the real reasons they missed class and turned in late assignments. Together, we find ways to work around these issues, ways that weren't available when they were just "lazy." I finally write about my chronic pain and connect with a new realm of disability scholars. I learn, a little late in life, to productively (de)tangle work priorities and bodily priorities, as crip time requires.

My depression is not the only key that could have opened these doors, but in my case, it shifted the locks. Though I've been in the field of disability studies more than a decade, I'm still learning how to speak about (my) disability without negating or resolving it. This is the challenge of disabling WPA narratives: We must invite disability in new and diverse ways. I intend my story to prop open the inaccessible door for more narratives. At the same time, I know how hard these stories are to write; this article took me longer than anything I've written, and it simply could not find its ending until after my tenure decision because deep down, I felt unsafe with it in my tenure dossier.¹⁵ This was not only because my story didn't fit with the ways our narratives position anxiety and depression but also because discrimination often happens when disability is disclosed. This is why disabling writing program administration isn't only about disabled WPAs telling their stories: It's about creating inclusive environments for all WPAs, not only at the time they are hired, but in ways that account for the embodied realities that come with time. For me, those embodied realities came with grief and manifested as depression and will likely come again.

In sorting through the stack of poetry I wrote after my friend died, I found a poem that I don't remember writing. It begins, "In the cold of our basement, I admitted depression, I said it out loud." The poem details the process of coming to terms with my depression through my experience of getting rid of old plastic hangers in favor of sleek faux-velvet-covered hangers and the fierce competition that ensued when I listed the plastic hangers for free online. In experiencing depression and moving away from it, at least for now, I traded in old hangers for new ones, but equally important,

I learned to see how my clothes laid differently on those hangers, in my work as WPA and in my life. In disabling our WPA narratives, we not only remove problematic and dysfunctional practices but also innovate in the ways that disability invites. Because disabled WPAs aren't fundamentally unlike other WPAs, but we hang a little different. And I'm glad.

NOTES

1. Existing scholarship considers the use of disability studies pedagogy and curricula in writing classrooms (Price, "Accessing"; Stuckey and Agnew; Vidali, "Embodying"; Walters); the ways that specific university programs and technologies might support particular disabled students (Carmichael and Alden; Barber-Fendley and Hamel; Yergeau, Wozniak, and Vandenburg); how disability and rhetoric more broadly figure in higher education and our field (Dolmage, *Disability*; Jung; Price, *Mad*; Vidali, "Performing"; Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson); the relationship of multimedia and disability in writing studies (Yergeau, Brewer et al.); the role of disability in/and writing centers (Hawkes; Banschbach, Babcock, and Jackson); and why disabled teachers are both successful and necessary (Brueggemann and Moddlemog; Lindgren), among other topics (see Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann). There is also a disability studies CompPile bibliography (<http://comppile.org/wpa/bibliographies/Bib19/DisabilityStudies.pdf>), though as Lucchesi notes, most of these (important) articles do not focus on "the WPA's unique role in making a writing program more accessible" ("Disabling"). A dated exception is McLeod and Garretson's "The Disabled Student and the Writing Program: A Guide for Administrators" published in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* in 1989. While this article reveals progress around disability and writing programs (as the article suggests that teachers with extra energy work with disabled students, which wouldn't now be acceptable [47]), some of the issues raised by the authors remain salient, particularly their suggestions regarding "alternatives to written composition" (48, see also Dunn).

2. For example, the theory and practice of assessing college writing can draw on scholarship on alternate assessment from primary and secondary education which sometimes discourages the creation of truly inclusive assessments in favor of alternate versions for disabled students, but more often, advocates a rethinking of assessment to be more inclusive for all, with alternatives limited to those with severe disabilities (see Kleinert and Kearns; Taylor, Phillips, and Joseph). A disability approach to textbook selection suggests attention to the availability of electronic copies and accessible textbook websites (see AccessText; Kolowich) as well as accessible electronic learning platforms (see Burgstahler, Corrigan and McCarter). To get started on making college programs more accessible, see Burgstahler and Cory.

3. In *Disability Rhetoric*, Jay Dolmage disables the history of rhetoric and notes, "When I use the term *disabled* here, I gesture both to pejorative disablism and to the idea that disability can be a positive thing" (81). I position *disabling*

in a similar way, in contrast to typical uses of disabling (which now often refer to removing or suspending technology on a computer or mobile device, typically because the function is useless, uninteresting, or annoying.) Also, enabling and disabling are often counterpoised (see Adam and Kreps 216), and I seek to challenge that binary.

4. Another option is to cripp writing program administration. As Carrie Sandahl notes, “Crippling spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects” (37), and disabling does something similar in highlighting ableism and exclusion. Crippling has been productively articulated in relationship to queering (see McRuer; Elman; Sandahl), and while I find this connection important, I do not take up the relationship of queering and disabling writing program administration here (see Lucchesi, “Crippling”).

5. Micciche variously engages disability in her book, including her discussion of a course on eating disorders and her analysis of teaching anxiety. She also mentions disability in her discussion of “deep embodiment,” where students engage in activities “designed to generate empathy for the embodied life experience of others” (54–55), though this raises concerns regarding disability simulation exercises (see Burgstahler and Doe).

6. The broader issue of representing and including disabled faculty in higher education is more than I can explore here, though it surely impacts disabled WPAs. See Margaret Price’s *Mad at School*, particularly her critique of how disabled faculty are represented as difficult (114–15). Scholarship on accommodating disabled faculty is also relevant but beyond my scope here (see Kerschbaum et al.; Vance).

7. Micciche analyzes this same moment and reads Holt’s symptoms and experience as “a form of emotion management that enhances and affirms the emotional and professional well-being of others often to the neglect of one’s own emotional stability” (88). We might consider emotion management in the context of mental health, illness, and disability.

8. Ward notes that she is focusing on burnout, not anxiety, though both terms appear in her chapter. The research she cites locates burnout solely in employment and not in private life, though the boundaries between these realms feel blurred for WPAs (if not everyone).

9. Alice Gillam speaks of “reliving the nightmare of her divorce” in a debate about assigned course readings in her program (66), and Doug Hesse narrates the relationship of his WPA work to his divorce and uses metaphors of health (and following Ward, burnout): “After nine years of being WPA, I hadn’t exactly burnt out, but I felt it was healthier for both of us, the program and me, to move on” (53). Though these are not explicit indications of anxiety or depression, the mapping of WPA work to divorce implies a high level of mental stress.

10. To some degree, WPA narratives are tenure narratives that similarly position depression and anxiety. In a recent essay on the impact of the tenure process, Cheryl Ball argues for something called Tenure Brain, which she describes as a “precious, and precarious, mental state” akin to paranoia which ensues when waiting for a tenure decision. She explains that Tenure Brain sometimes turns to anger after the tenure decision, when you realize you spent so much time “under a mighty, mighty emotional weight” that probably “made you a little less human.” Though not specifically a WPA narrative (though Ball is in rhetoric and composition), the discourses of anxiety and depression are again prominent as Ball notes,

It’s not healthy. I got tenure and thought about seeing a psychiatrist just to talk through some of the pain, and I definitely had to see a physician and several physical therapists to work through the health-related issues that arose because of the stress. (n. pag.)

She adds that she’s still “working through some of the emotional and physical baggage” five years later, and that the “ravages of tenure” are known to most. In another *Inside Higher Ed* piece that Ball cites, Trish Roberts-Miller discusses how much of the tenure advice she received assumed that “panic = motivation.” She says: “They say, ‘You need to publish more!’ Or, ‘You need to finish your book now!’ That’s like telling an anxious person they need to calm down, or a depressed person they need to cheer up. Duh.” While I appreciate Roberts-Miller’s note that those who are depressed or anxious shouldn’t be told to get over it, such comments again position depression and anxiety as useful allusions and metaphors but not as spaces scholar-teachers regularly inhabit.

11. For critiques of simply increasing disability representation, see Martin on composition textbooks and Sheppard on *Glee*.

12. For example, in Sally Barr-Ebest’s survey, “Gender Differences in Writing Program Administration,” disability was not surveyed, but two male respondents noted, “The pressure can easily lead to depression,” while another declares, “Thanksgiving in the Cardiac Care Unit! Enough said!” A female respondent also noted, “Of course my duties have affected my personal life. I might be able to have a healthier life if I weren’t always in service of the institution” (59–61).

13. The follow-up questions focused on the type of disability and experiences of discrimination. Four respondents sent back information, and the disability descriptions included a “reading processing problem,” dyslexia, chronic illness that affects stamina, and having no left hand. Three of the four identified as having experienced some discrimination.

14. A study led by Margaret Price, Stephanie Kerschbaum, Mark Salzer, and Alyssa Balletta surveys faculty respondents about how they have identified as disabled in higher education. Their survey questions approach disability in multiple ways, such as asking about services received and supports provided, and their phrasing importantly allows for multiple and contradictory disability identifications. Similarly, in asking about disability, I suggest that questions allow

respondents to discuss their experiences without disclosing diagnoses (“If you consider yourself disabled, in what ways has your disability shaped your work?”), and emphasize disability’s positive valence (“How has disability shaped your administration of a writing program?”). Questions can also be attentive to how disability is perceived (“How have/do your department and university colleagues respond to your disability?”), and consider issues of intolerance and exclusion (“In the context of your writing program work, have you experienced discrimination because of your disability?”). Finally, surveys can ask disabled WPAs for their input (“What sort of policy work needs to be undertaken to support disabled WPAs? Who should perform this work and what should it look like?”).

15. I ultimately disclosed my depression in my research narrative in my tenure file, carefully and quickly, both to claim my disability and contextualize my work. This pre-tenure disclosure felt notably safer than including a draft of this article.

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