

Opening Plenary Address: Locations of Administration; or, WPAs in Space

Rita Malenczyk

The title of my talk obviously references work Kathleen Blake Yancey and others have done regarding locations of writing: I'm thinking of the two *CCC* issues in 2014 that address that topic as well as work by Nedra Reynolds on geographies of writing and a lot of previous work by Marilyn Cooper, Sid Dobrin, Christian Weisser, and others.¹ Cooper's and Dobrin's work has also inspired more recent research on ecologies of WPA work as it relates to the situatedness of programs (see, for instance, Reiff et al.) and to other issues such as assessment—I'm thinking here particularly of Asao Inoue's book on race and writing assessment. I'd like to think with you tonight, though, in a somewhat different way about location and space and talk about representations of space, which is something of a timely topic, here in North Carolina—though one I won't address, not being really qualified to do that.² Instead, I'm going to talk about representations of academic space. Insofar as all representations of space can affect how people live and work, they're instructive to delve into and think about, and I'm hoping that maybe the next half hour or so will help us begin to ask ourselves certain questions in keeping with the theme of the conference, "Multiple Perspectives on Writing Program Administration." What I'm going to do over the next 35 minutes, then, is prime the pump for us to think about ourselves throughout this conference not only as WPAs at our individual institutions, but as members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, which has been in existence for almost 40 years now as an organization that's open to all who administer writing programs yet has in the course of time evolved in certain ways we might want to pay attention to (and I say this as Immediate Past President and someone who considers CWPA my much-loved professional home). Evolving, changing is a natural thing that happens in the course of organizational life; in fact, organizational theorists are now starting to use the word *organizing* as something organizations continually do, rather than do just at their inception (see, for

instance, Hernes and Maitlis). In any case, what I want to do is crack open a door to the idea of thinking about multiple perspectives with a talk that I hope will lead us to consider how we as WPAs live in and represent our own academic space, in contrast to how it might traditionally be represented.

So to approach that door, I open with a video from that satirical news outlet, *The Onion*. When I posted this video to my Facebook page a while

back (a year or so ago, I think), one of my friends, the former-WPA-and-dean Dave Schwalm, commented that it was hard to know what, exactly, the target of its satire was. I found this an intriguing (and perceptive) comment because many people would say, well, obviously, the target is the *U.S. News and World Report* annual ranking of the nation's best colleges and universities. What's



being satirized about that? Certainly its predictability: a reader of those rankings generally knows that every year one of the Ivy League schools will be ranked Number 1 in the Best National University category—this year the top three were, in descending order, Princeton, Harvard, and Yale. This ranking would no doubt be in the back of the mind of anyone watching this video and seeing the title “Nation’s Parents Release Annual Ranking of Top 50 ‘Perfectly Good’ State Schools.” Hand-in-hand with the issue of always knowing who will be first goes the perceived arbitrariness of the *U.S. News* list. What, exactly, is it that made Princeton better than Harvard this year? Informing *The Onion*’s satire, then, is the fact that anybody with a will and a website can create a set of college rankings; the criteria used to do so will differ depending on who’s doing the creating; and the criteria aren’t always known. Depending on who you are and the reputation of the creator, you might not care, either: if you’re an upper-echelon administrator at a school like mine, for instance, you know about the publicity that surrounds the release of the *U.S. News* rankings—publicity that gave exigence to *The Onion*’s satire—and you’ll be more than happy to crow about your ranking on your school’s website should it be appropriate to do so.

I’ll say more about administrators and my own institution’s promotional strategies—which, I’m guessing, are not unique—in a bit. But back to criteria: as we know, *U.S. News* does in fact have a set of criteria for their rankings, and they publish it. Here’s what their website says the criteria were for 2016:

The indicators we use to capture academic quality fall into a number of categories: assessment by administrators at peer institutions, retention of students, faculty resources, student selectivity, finan-

cial resources, alumni giving, graduation rate performance and, for National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges only, high school counselor ratings of colleges. (Morse et al.)

The attentive rhetorician will note how much this list depends on what I'm going to call here self-reinforcing criteria: specifically, the existing reputations of schools that have shaped, and been shaped in turn by, student selectivity and assessment by administrators at peer institutions. Even criteria like retention are self-reinforcing, as work by researchers like Alexander Astin shows: excellent academic performance in high school is a predictor of success in college, and prestigious schools attract high school students who perform well, and on and on in a continuous loop (qtd. in Estrem et al. 208). If there's a high school counselor anywhere who's going to tell a kid that Yale or Cornell aren't good schools, I'll eat my non-existent hat.

There might be those counselors, however, who would delicately bring up the question of affordability, not to mention that justifiably vexed term, *fit*. *The Onion's* humor in any situation comes from its takedown of ideals implicit in mainstream media representation. A faithful *Onion* reader might remember, for example, the headline that appeared on its website the week of the 2008 Presidential election. On November 4, the media were understandably thrilled to cover the election of Barack Obama and to do so with, in the case of newspapers, large and expressive headlines. One of Obama's hometown papers, the *Chicago Tribune*, rose to the occasion by quoting the candidate: "Before a huge Grant Park crowd, President-Elect Obama declares, 'Change has come to America.'" The *Washington Post*, unable to convincingly imagine a community of Chicagoans, nonetheless managed to invoke a collective reality with "Obama Makes History: US Decisively Elects First Black President" (Barnes and Shear). *The New York Times*, willing to go slightly farther, opined, "Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls" (Nagourney). It was that last one that may have goaded *The Onion* into coming back with the ballsy-even-for-them headline, "Black Man Given Nation's Worst Job." (As a white woman, I personally find it comforting that they're doing something similar now with mainstream media narratives of gender progress: on June 8, shortly after Hillary Clinton's final primary victories, *The Onion* came out with "Elderly Voter Never Thought She'd Get to See Female Presidential Nominee Called Heartless Ice Bitch During Her Lifetime.") Where *The Onion* derives its humor, then, is from the alternate and, quite possibly, better-known and, in many peoples' minds, truer narratives of social situations that the mainstream media isn't taking into account.

But back to the *U.S. News* college rankings and, more specifically, how the media announces their release, makes them, as one might say, a thing.

What those rankings and their publicity machine don't take into account, *The Onion* satire suggests, is the reality of who in any given family actually makes the decision about which college a student will attend, and furthermore, what criteria are really used in that process. Certainly the son of one of "the nation's cold businessman fathers," depicted on the cover of their magazine with "You WILL Go to Yale" in the last frame of the video, isn't picking out his own school, a fact that's both his privilege and, as his expression on the cover of the magazine suggests, his curse. More prominently featured, though, are the children of what I'll simply call the non-elite. With two kids in college and another headed that way, I've been around a lot of high school parents in my middle-class town and its environs, and with the exception of those whose children are extremely academically focused or those who have money to burn (and there are a few), I've heard a version of any given one of the quotes that follow. None is beyond the pale, and a couple of them (specifically the ones about money and betrayal) could have come from my own lower-middle/working-class parents.

There's the wheedling, the discouraging, the manipulation:

- "Do they have professors? . . . What's wrong with these professors? They look pretty good to me."
- "Does any one school have a copyright on ivy?"
- "Do you think your mother and I are millionaires?" and
- "After all we've done for you, you're going to abandon us?"

And the consequent presentation of alternative criteria:

- "Schools Your Older Sister Went to and Had a Great Time At."
- "Schools That If You Really Hate You Can Transfer Out Of." and
- "Schools That Have Your Dad's Frat."

And my favorite because I did my PhD there, "NYU: You Probably Can't Get In." There are also others, not listed. Lots of kids in my town just go to the places that accepted them despite their spotty academic records or to the places that are warmer than where they live—and if you're from New England, that can be a draw. Some go to places where they've been recruited for athletics. Some go because the school has their dad's frat, because their sister loved it, and so on. (Some go for the parties.)

The ultimate question *The Onion* video raises is, of course, what's so special about elite schools anyway? Good teachers really are good teachers no matter what their context, and historic buildings are old buildings no matter where they are. This business about the buildings, though, is where the satire makes me, at least, a little uncomfortable. Because what *The Onion* also seems to be satirizing—and what I think may have prompted Dave

Schwalm's comment about the actual target—is lack of knowledge on the part of some working- and middle-class families about what landscape signifies in terms of academic space and just how effective and influential that signification can be when a kid develops a jones for a certain kind of college experience. The significance of signification, as it were, is why certain institutions market themselves in certain ways.

My own university is a case in point.

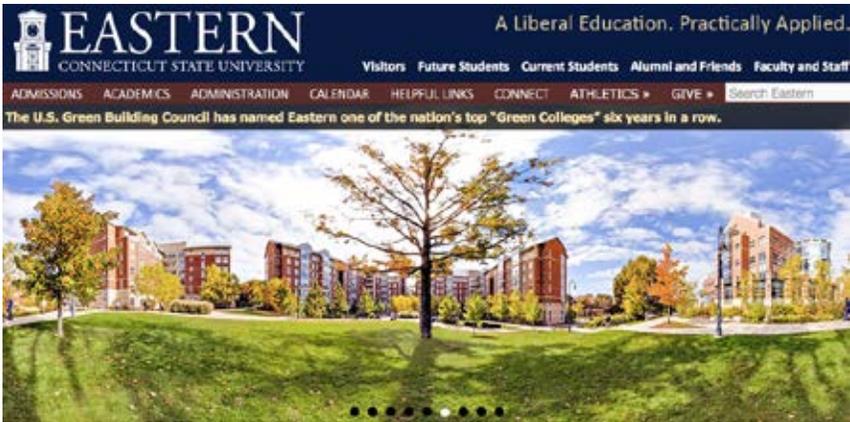


Fig. 1. Eastern's splash page.

I'm sure I'm not the only person in this room who's analyzed their school's website or viewbook (or had their students do it, too). Eastern Connecticut State University's, however, comes with a particular and relevant history. We're located in Willimantic, Connecticut, an old mill town of the kind you see all over semi-rural New England. Our former president, David Carter, who held office from 1988 to 2006, arrived at the campus of what was first a normal school and, then, primarily a commuter school with no real identity except for "the place you went if you lived in the area and didn't get into UCONN." Carter worked hard to transform Eastern into a primarily residential college with a liberal arts mission that would, he hoped, be desirable to potential students for reasons other than less competitive admissions standards and proximity to home. He built that mission on Eastern's existing strengths—relatively small size, a balance of science and humanities programs with neither really outweighing the other, the faculty's commitment to teaching, and the willingness of that faculty to embrace a liberal arts mission—and, helped by the academic job market, strengthened the faculty in terms of credentials. (Until about 25 or 30 years ago, it wasn't unusual for the faculty in our system not to have terminal degrees, and now most of them do: or, in other words, we have professors).

He also, I might add, greatly diversified the faculty and staff through a very strong office of Equity and Diversity—Carter was African American and grew up poor in Dayton, Ohio before embarking on his career in education, so it's not as if he was looking deliberately, through a contrived liberal arts mantra, to go back to a more racially and economically exclusive time.

What he did want, though, was to fulfill his liberal arts vision in both reality and imagination. Carter knew stuff about marketing and prestige and was a savvy rhetorician where the state's politicians were concerned, so it's no accident that he was able to get a lot of state funds appropriated for new buildings—he was great at getting on the agenda of the bonding commission—and in so doing, he essentially rebuilt the campus. I came to Eastern in 1994, and since then, I've seen the campus pretty much completely transformed. We now have new, and prominently-located, Administrative and Admissions Buildings; an Early Childhood Education Center and preschool; a new Student Center that contains, among other things, a nice fitness room; a very new Fine Arts building with a sweeping glass front;



Fig. 2. Eastern's new Administration and Fine Arts buildings.

and, last but not least, dorms whose tetradic structure forms quads, with one of those quads being anchored on one end by a new Science building, which also helped create a larger, central quad on which students throw Frisbees to bandanna-wearing dogs when the weather gets warm.



Fig. 3. Eastern's main quad.

All of this happened in the last 20 years, and the entire current government of the State of Connecticut—which is in a severe budget crisis—probably stays up late at night thinking about how much money for buildings our former president was able to convince them to fork over so Eastern could improve its reputation.

By now you might have guessed, though, that by at least one of *The Onion's* criteria for prestige, Eastern doesn't fit the definition of a desirable-for-some-students institution. We have new buildings, not old ones. But even though we don't have old buildings, we have other desirable things: we're located in New England, and if you want someplace that says college, well, you can't do better than New England because we have fall foliage which appears in just about every edition of Eastern's viewbook. Also, as I've said, our president was a savvy rhetorician, and there are things besides buildings that can confer an aura of prestige on a campus.



Fig. 4. Fall foliage.

Around 1998—when Eastern received its official designation from the legislature as the state’s liberal arts institution—work was being done by our PR folks to create the trappings of history and tradition. For example, around that time, a ceremony—or, as the PR office called it, “a new tradition”—was introduced at commencement whereby the procession of graduating seniors passed a fountain brought to campus and threw pennies in to “Make a Wish” for the future. In addition, a crest was designed that I haven’t really seen used anywhere prominently on campus (it’s on the gates at the front but nobody sees it because the gates are dark, gray-on-gray), which may not be a bad thing because, at least according to my department’s medievalist, checkeredness in heraldry—depending on how it’s used—can signify illegitimacy.



Fig. 5. Eastern's crest.

A more frequently-used symbol, however, was one of the structures built in 1998 with some of that legislative money—in fact, one of the earliest ones: a clock tower that stands at the main entrance to the university and really serves no utilitarian function except to sound every hour to remind us what time it is. It’s an imposing and unique structure, however, and shortly after it was built, the clock tower started showing up as the official logo of the university on our letterhead and on all of our business cards and on the website and in other places.



Fig. 6. The clock tower.

This appearance of the clock tower everywhere surprised a lot of the older faculty who had been around much, much longer than the clock tower or the president, for that matter, and were used to having input into a range of university affairs in what is nostalgically referred to as shared governance. Those faculty thought there should've been a larger conversation about what was apparently becoming Eastern's emblem. So at some point, a campus-wide email went out from some faculty to the administration inquiring about who had decided the clock tower would be our logo and on what basis, and while I don't remember the names of the faculty who sent the email or what the exact content of that email was, I clearly remember the response that came back from the Academic Vice President's office: "The clock tower symbolizes Eastern." Shortly thereafter, the faculty gave up the battle—we do, after all, have a 4/4 teaching load or, in my case, the equivalent—and the clock tower is on everything, and probably it really does, now, symbolize Eastern.

What something symbolizes, of course, depends on who's looking at it. In an essay called "What I Learned from the Campus Plumber," George Bergman, an English professor at Pacific Lutheran in Washington State, describes being asked to chair his campus sustainability committee. Bergman learns through his service on the committee that the very ivy figured prominently in *The Onion* satire ("Does any one institution have a copy-right on ivy?") is a problem on their campus because it kills the native Douglas fir and western hemlock (70). The ivy on their campus, he notes, is English ivy, "The same type of ivy that defines the campuses of higher education in England and Europe, as well as on the East Coast of the United States" (70). Yet, because it's an invasive species, Bergman says, "One of our projects to restore the campus is to rip out the ivy" (70).

Bergman acknowledges the metaphoric aspect of what's being done by getting rid of the ivy:

As we rip out the ivy, we are also deconstructing the traditional idea of a campus landscape. Ivy is part of the iconography of . . . the academic pastoral. Ivy has been one of the principal plants through which a campus speaks. What ivy says is that the campus is a privileged location in the 'landscape of the mind.' (70)

The pastoral, Bergman says,

is a shaping figure in our conception of the college campus and of academic life. As an inheritor of the medieval church's monastic ideal, the scholastic life invites us to see the campus as a place set apart from the real world, a refuge and a retreat into contemplation. As a principal locus in the contemplative life, the university campus

is traditionally imagined as an idyllic retreat, sequestered and cloistered. Under sheltering trees and within its ivied walls, the academic world is a retreat that parallels a pastoral retreat. Both offer a contemplative retreat into a nature whose topography is defined by its place in the mind. (70)

However, none of this applies if you're the campus plumber—or even, I'd submit, a teacher. Bergman notes that for Francis Bacon, in the Renaissance, "The culture of the mind is a kind of magical process, like the tilling and husbandry of soil, producing its crop of virtue in the actual life of the student" (71). Yet anybody who's ever taught a course and spent time preparing syllabi, grading exams, responding to writing, and meeting with students knows that, unless you're teaching at Hogwarts, there isn't anything magical about culturing the mind; likewise, anyone who takes care of landscaping, mowing or digging, planting or plowing, also knows that there isn't anything magical about how the pastoral landscape is created.

The latter group will also note their own absence from that landscape, which may have been what bothered the hypothetical parents in *The Onion* satire who didn't understand what's so important about ivy; something similar may also have been what bothered at least some of my colleagues about Eastern's clock-tower logo. Certainly, a building such as a clock tower, not something contemporary folks usually build, confers an aura of the ancient, the monastic. But it's also important to understand what the monastic ideal leaves out. What didn't find its way into the emblem-related emails to our administration in 1998 were the jokes that a lot of senior female faculty had started cracking about the clock tower. A building at the main entrance to campus—and Eastern is a small campus—where there hadn't been one before kind of gets your attention, and because our all-male administration had the reputation of being patriarchal figures not brooking much, if any, dissent, you can probably figure out how feminist women faculty who had made their bones during the second wave would respond to an enormous phallic structure not only located at the entrance to campus but also used as the emblem for the institution.

I didn't have tenure at the time, though I did cheer my colleagues on in my heart. Yet brouhaha over the clock tower notwithstanding, *ancient* and *monastic* certainly aren't words one can justify applying to Eastern if one looks more closely at its history, specifically the history buried, under "History"—the place hardly anyone ever looks—on our website. There, you can find a booklet that gives you a quick run-through of Eastern's history. Like many such institutions, including our three sister universities in the system, Eastern, as I've said, was originally a normal school founded in the late nineteenth century and then was a teacher's college; while it wasn't

officially designated a women's college, the student body in those early years looked like this:



Fig. 7. Eastern's student body.

And this (Figure 8) was the only basketball team on campus in 1898. But by the 1940s, for a range of reasons, more men had begun attending, and male attendance coincides, in this history viewbook, with depiction of men's sports teams: the baseball team; the basketball team. One of the women's teams still gets a sign (Figure 9). Yet photographic—or iconographic—depiction of female students and female athletes recedes into the background as the text moves closer to the current moment and Eastern's current iteration—toward which, I might add, the narrative seems to inevitably proceed.

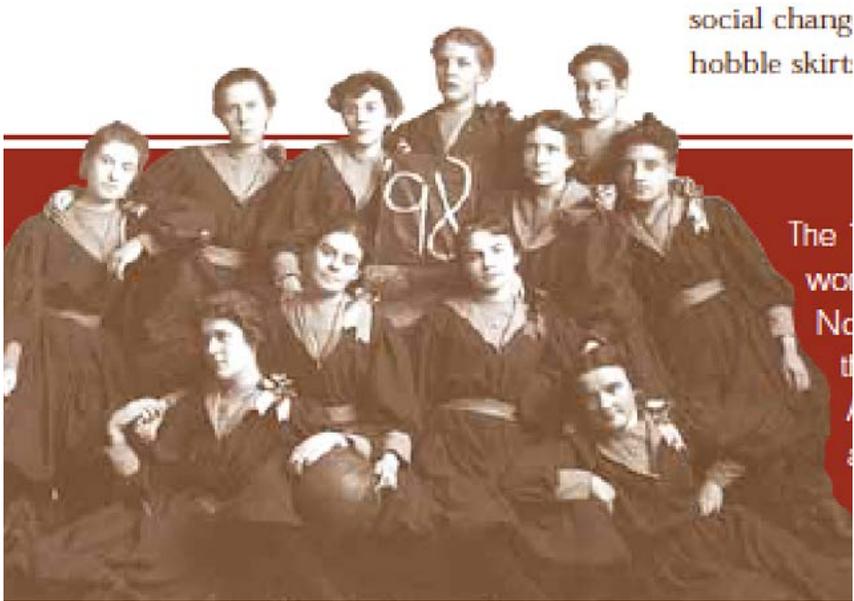


Fig. 8. Women's basketball team.

I was pulled up short in reading that narrative, however, by a somewhat offhand mention in the middle of it of a 1928 commencement tradition. You'll recall my description of a new commencement tradition our administration created around 15 years ago, a tradition in which graduates pass a fountain and throw coins into it. It's called "Make a Wish." However, if one happens to be reading that history book, one will see there was another tradition already in our background: it was called "Make a Daisy Chain." (Figure 10.)

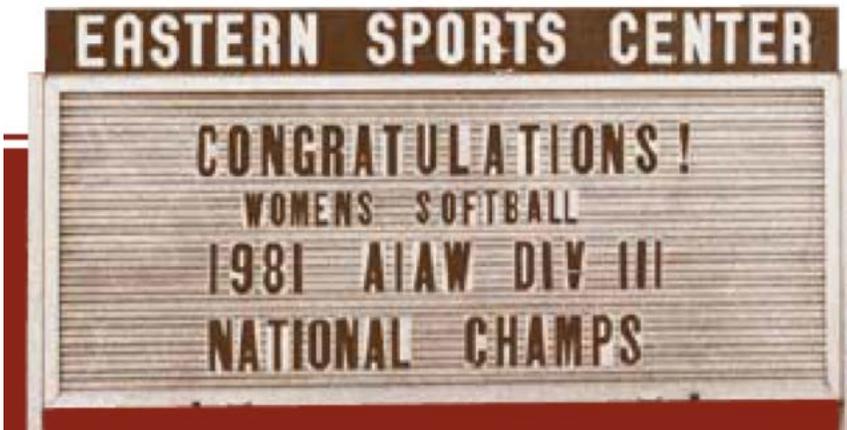


Fig. 9. Women's softball win sign.



Fig. 10. Making the daisy chain.

The text describing that tradition reads, in part, as follows:

The Daisy Chain tradition started in the 1920s and ended in the early 1940s. Being selected to work on the chain was an honor, with juniors being dispensed . . . to pick daisies the day before commencement so that the chain could be woven and used the next day. The chain became two chains, with seniors walking to Commencement through two rows of daisies held by juniors.

Though Eastern clearly knows its history—witness this history book—this daisy chain business is something that hasn't been prominently shown in our major forms or—recalling the clock tower, form—of representation. I don't mean to pick on my home institution; universities reinventing themselves—even re-gendering themselves—isn't unusual, as Kelly Ritter has illustrated in *To Know Her Own History*. Nor do I want to make too many stupidly obvious Freudian jokes. My point, rather, and here I hark back to *The Onion* satire with which I started, is that for some people, the traditional trappings of academic space signal success; for others, depending on who they are, those trappings can signify something quite different—and perhaps the most prominent something, if you really think about it, is erasure. There are ways other than putting in ivy to crowd out the plants that were already there.



Fig. 11. WPA logo.

This, of course, is our logo, the logo of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. I did some research on the early days of CWPA last year at Purdue, where the organization's archives are kept, as part of another project; and I didn't happen to find anything about how that came to be our logo (it's quite possible that this information does exist and I just didn't find it—I was looking for other things at the time). It first appeared, as far as I can tell, on the cover of the Fall-Winter 1984 issue of the WPA journal; the editor announced its appearance in his editor's note (see Smith) but didn't provide any other information about it—for example, who designed it, how it came to be. In my research at Purdue, I did happen to run across a couple of earlier designs that seem to have been tentatively used to symbolize the organization in various contexts: one a drawing of typewriter, another consisting simply of the initials WPA. But by 1990, the current logo seems to have been firmly established, in the journal, and on the organization's letterhead.

This logo isn't, of course, immutable. Modifications to it have occurred for a range of purposes. Perhaps the best-known modification is the one made by WPA-GO, our graduate organization, in which the word *GO* appeared in place of the hand:



Fig. 12. WPA-GO logo.

The Network for Media Action/also modified the logo thus:

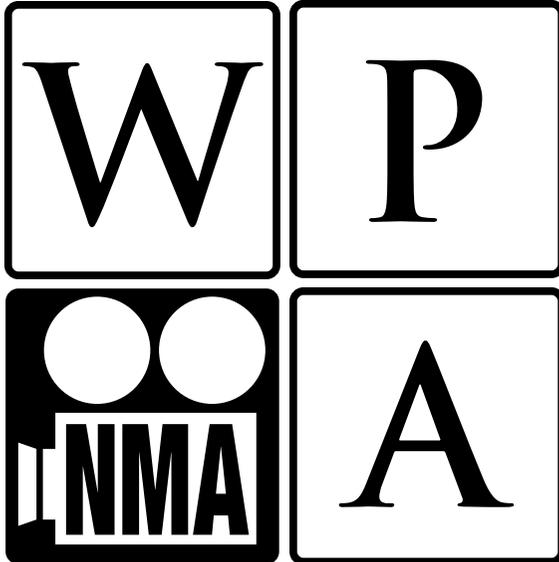


Fig. 13. WPA Network for Media Action logo.

And it's been modified, too, for some conference programs. Possibly the most memorable of those modifications—or memorable to me in any

case—was the one made for the 1997 conference program at Michigan Tech, the first CWPA conference I ever went to, where in response to an activist mood brought on by what seemed to be a trend of administrative retaliation against WPAs, the writing hand had dropped the pen and was closed into a fist. One of the plenary speakers at that conference, Chris Anson, suggested in his talk (though he may not remember doing so) that other hand gestures might have been even more appropriate for the logo at that particular time.

And, of course, there's one that was never used, but which Chuck Paine jokingly shared with me as an option for the 2012 Albuquerque conference—Albuquerque being a city full of brewpubs and local craft beer:

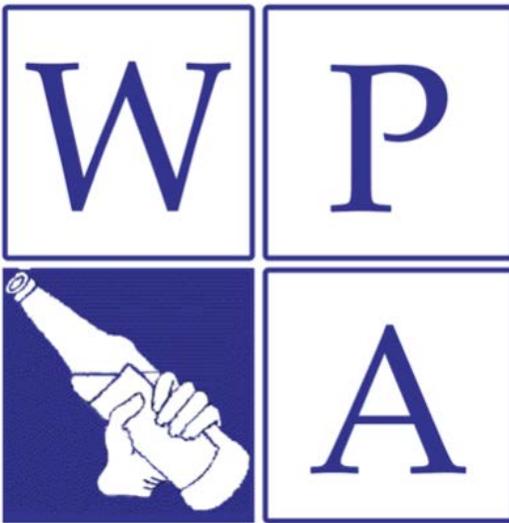


Fig. 14. WPA logo for Albuquerque conference (not used).

This might perhaps be the real narrative underlying all of our representations of ourselves. Satire, as I've suggested, brings that out.

But the one with the writing hand is our representation of ourselves. What's compelling to me about it is that as I think about space, particularly academic space, and how that space is represented, and obviously not knowing what was behind this design, and knowing that the way things mean is very complicated—still, I wonder how well this logo represents our work and our membership at this given time. Ken Bruffee, one of the founders of the organization and the first editor of the journal, thought WPAs were both teachers and, perhaps not coincidentally, workers: Doug Hesse talked in his 2014 plenary address about Bruffee's disappointment when Doug took over as journal editor and innocently changed the journal cover from red to yel-

low, because for Bruffee, red signified solidarity with workers (Hesse 134). In some senses—and I don't want to push this too far, as I am speaking figuratively—WPAs have more in common with George Bergman's campus plumber than they have with the owner of the hand depicted in this logo, writing with a perhaps outdated implement in an empty space that seems to connote solitude—or, at least as I read it, in a representation of traditional academic space. That's not really WPA space, and we might as well admit it. We, like the plumber, know how the machinery works, even if it's a different kind of machinery: We know how students are placed into classes; we know the histories of those placement methods; we know who develops standardized curricula and assessments, and often we know for what motives; we know how race, class, and gender affect students' literacy experiences; we know how local, regional, and national policies affect those experiences. In other words, we know how the spaces we teach and administer in are built. We have to know these things because we don't get to sequester ourselves in quiet, contemplative, traditional academic space if we want to do our jobs and serve our students well. Rather, we work (as any number of scholars has pointed out in any number of ways) in the spaces between and sometimes the spaces outside. It's the nature of our field.

To bring this talk to a close, here are two things I'm not saying. First, I'm not saying that the current CWPA logo is evil and must be stopped. (It does, after all, represent—however imperfectly—our concern, writing, as opposed to the concerns of other organizations; googling CWPA will bring you, among other places, to the Collegiate Water Polo Association.) I'm also not saying that we must decide once and for all whether we're faculty or administrators. (Where one exists on an organizational chart depends on local circumstances; there are many different kinds of WPA positions.) What I do want us to bear in mind, though, is the continually evolving nature of any organization, which I think is important to remember in a conference themed around multiple perspectives and more broadly around inclusion. As the organization moves forward, we should ask ourselves, I think, whose perspectives are currently left out of our self-representations and, more importantly, out of the organization itself. There is, for instance, the predominantly white membership of the organization, but the next plenary speaker will address that. From the National Census of Writing, we know that there are a lot of people out there doing WPA work who don't identify themselves as WPAs. I've encountered this too, when working the organization's booth at 4Cs: people come up to the booth, and I'll ask them if they know about CWPA. And they'll say, yeah, but I'm not a WPA. And I'll say, well, what do you do? And they say well, I coordinate placement, I do faculty development, I help develop curricula . . . What they're describ-

ing is, in fact, WPA work. These are the kind of people our organization should serve, and furthermore, they should know we serve them. As immediate past president I wonder, sometimes: if we could rewind our history, what would we do differently—or would we do anything differently?—to organize and represent ourselves so that a broader range of people sees themselves in us?

Thank you.

NOTES

1. In transcribing this talk to the printed page, I've tried to keep its original conversational feel, hence the casual construction of some sentences. I have made some minor edits here and there for flow and/or accuracy and have eliminated a number of the images that didn't seem to add much to the written text but added visual interest to the talk. *The Onion* video was obviously central to my argument, so with help from the *WPA: Writing Program Administration* editors, I've provided a couple of ways to access it. Images from Eastern Connecticut State University's website are included in this text; the use of such images for critical, scholarly, non-commercial purposes constitutes fair use, as provided in Title 17 U.S.C Section 107 of U.S. Copyright Law.

2. In July 2016, when this talk was given, North Carolina had passed H.B. 2, which among other things, required that people use whichever rest room corresponded with the gender assigned to them at birth.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank Beth Boquet for listening and responding to a draft of this talk while feeding me Italian deli sandwiches, rice balls, and cannoli from Gaetano's, which gets its bread daily from Arthur Avenue in the Bronx (no small thing).

Rita Malenczyk is professor of English and director of the Writing Program and Writing Center at Eastern Connecticut State University and Immediate Past President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and edited collections, including Kelly Ritter and Paul Kei Matsuda's Exploring Composition Studies (Utah State UP, 2012) and Heidi Estrem et al.'s Overcoming Writer's Block: Retention, Persistence and Writing Programs (forthcoming, Utah State UP). The second edition of her own edited collection, A Rhetoric for Writing Programs, appeared from Parlor Press in summer 2016.