(Re)Identifying the gWPA Experience

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ABSTRACT

Building on the authors' recent scholarship theorizing the concept of the liminal WPA, this article presents findings of an empirical study on graduate student administrators' workloads. The term liminal WPA describes a divergence between duties, institutional status, compensation, and authority that is not evident in the field's traditional taxonomy of g/j/sWPAs. Since existing scholarship suggests some gWPAs may be operating as liminals, this study investigates graduate administrators' workloads empirically through a survey and follow-up interviews. The findings reveal that graduate students engage in the full range of WPA work, including directing programs. They also show that half of respondents reported working more hours than in their contracts and that nearly one-third believed their workloads were more like those of j- or sWPAs than that of graduate students. Based on these and other findings, the authors argue that most respondents had positive experiences, but a small, significant number had far more complicated and ambiguous experiences and are better described as liminal WPAs. The authors also argue that accurate understandings of the work of graduate students and liminal WPAs are vital for supporting them successfully and offer a heuristic to ameliorate liminality if institutions are forced to develop liminal WPA positions.

In *GenAdmin*, Charlton et al. describe a new generation of graduate students who have trained for WPA work during graduate school and make it a primary professional goal, even actively pursuing WPA positions before tenure. Asking the questions, "What difference does it make when we *choose* WPA work?" and "[W]hat happens when more and more of us begin to choose writing program administration as the focus of our scholarly identity?" (xii; emphasis original), *GenAdmin* suggests that we are in the midst of an important shift in the who and why of WPA work.

What, then, does the reality of *GenAdmin* imply for the way the field has traditionally understood WPA work and workers? WPA workers are often described in terms of their institutional status/relationship to the tenure track: senior WPA (sWPA), junior WPA (jWPA), and graduate WPA (gWPA). This taxonomy—s-, j-, and gWPA—presumes an idealized trajectory from graduate student to tenured professor, privileging sWPAs as the goal and making assumptions about the work one does based on that worker's institutional status. Tenured WPAs, or sWPAs, are typically responsible for the full range of WPA work because of the institutional agency they hold, resources they can access, and their permanence as tenured professors. Untenured but often in a tenure-track position, jWPAs may be assistants to sWPAs or have already taken on director positions. Finally, gWPAs are often seen as office assistants who manage the less skilled aspects of the job, work with TAs as mentors, or plan TA events. Such gWPAs' positions ostensibly exist to provide graduate students with mentored exposure to the field and its work and to provide some preparation for future work as an sWPA.

Yet as we described in our 2014 article, "Thinking Liminally," our personal experiences suggested that the field's generic gWPA job description is far less tidy than it appears and the actual work of gWPAs is not always low stakes. There, we argued that many WPAs might be better served by instead viewing themselves as liminal WPAs. We conceived of the term liminal WPA to describe WPAs who operate outside of the g/j/sWPA taxonomy—a taxonomy that also orients much of the field's research. Those identifying as liminal WPAs may be graduate students, NTT faculty or administrators, or interim directors. Sometimes, the distinction between TT and NTT may even become muddled for a liminal, as a path to tenure may be designed for a lower institutional status, such as that of lecturer or instructor. A liminal may have an sWPA's job description but lack authority because she does not have the requisite degree or has a degree from the wrong field or is in an interim position while institutions search for long-term WPAs. The overarching traits are that liminal WPAs have the high-stakes, politically charged workloads of sWPAs but lack the institutional permanence, status, and/or resources that support sWPAs' work. Though liminals have much in common with jWPAs, jWPAs do typically benefit from having the protection of the degree, of being on the tenure track, and of having a clearly defined professional path. Liminals are likely to be at-will employees with short-term or no contracts whereas jWPAs typically have some status protections as tenure-track faculty, even though they have not yet earned tenure. At a minimum, jWPAs benefit from the departmental investment that accompanies a tenure-track search. Put simply, limin-

als are in more precarious situations than jWPAs but often have far greater responsibilities than gWPAs.

In articulating what it means to be a liminal WPA, it became clear that the field needs to know more about the experiences of other liminals, yet liminals are not easily identifiable because they hold a range of positions and statuses. We suspect many liminals remain hidden, as they work in job titles that do not accurately reflect their workloads and they may avoid participating in ongoing dialogues about that work because they do not feel they belong in those conversations. The nature of those that the term *liminal WPA* seeks to uncover means that it may be many years before the numbers of liminals in the field can be accurately described. It is likely that many liminals aren't connected to resources such as this journal, the Council of Writing Program Administrators, or the WPA-L, which could provide them with support and track their demographics.

The scholarship written by graduate students (see, e.g., Inman; Helmbrecht and Kendall; Mattison; Jukuri and Williamson) suggests that a number of them may actually be working in liminal WPA positions. Thus as an alternative and starting point to studying liminals as a whole, we surveyed graduate WPAs and conducted follow-up interviews to gain a data-driven understanding of their workloads and to begin identifying how many graduate student administrators might be better described as liminals.[1] We use these graduate students' experiences as liminals in order to shed light on liminals more broadly. Based on our findings, we argue that while most graduate students in our study had positive experiences, a small but significant number had far more complicated and ambiguous experiences and are better described as liminal WPAs. We use the concept of liminal writing program administration to tease out those complications and to further argue that articulating graduate students' work accurately is vital to valuing their contributions to the field and to supporting their success.

The Nature of Graduate Student WPAs

Most WPA literature provides pictures of gWPAs engaged in low stakes administrative assistant work, although gWPAs may also shape curriculum and monitor the work of fellow TAs (and possibly adjunct faculty) (see, e.g. Ebest; Latterell). In contrast, graduate students' own accounts of their work are much more fraught and depict workloads that are more complicated, more politically charged, and more comparable to those of sWPAs. Brown's "The Peer Who Isn't a Peer: Authority and the Graduate Student Administrator" highlights the liminality of a gWPA who doesn't fit into neat taxonomies. From the outset, Brown's experience is confined and obscured by the

language gWPA. She "supervised TAs and lecturers, visited classes, talked to students, and held mandatory staff meetings," also noting that she led the final week-long assessment for the program. She writes, "But I was not a WPA, and I felt as though I had no real power or authority" (121). Without knowing that she was a student, others would likely identify Brown as a WPA, not a gWPA, given the authority and responsibilities expected of her. The term *WPA* carries its own baggage, though, since it typically refers to tenured or tenure-track faculty. In either case, research on gWPAs or sWPAs excludes those like Brown because her status and duties don't line up with how our discipline traditionally conceives of gWPAs.

Joyce Olewski Inman, a graduate student in the same department where she became interim director of composition, highlights challenges—both for herself and for the writing program—of being a liminal WPA. She accepted the position believing she could be successful because of her long history at the institution and her positive relationships with both faculty and staff, but writes:

> Teaching a six-hour graduate practicum as a graduate student is difficult to say the least. Comments from colleagues who feel I am underqualified are always disconcerting. [M]ost challenging, however, is attempting to serve—with no real voice in departmental decisions— as one of the few advocates for our undergraduate student population. (149–50)

A disconnect between identities as graduate students and workload of the job is clear in the narratives of graduate students (see also Helmbrecht and Kendall; Mattison), but there has been little movement to integrate the implications of such narratives into mainstream WPA knowledge. Thus the realities of gWPA work remain (merely) as narratives or scary stories, rather than used to inform the field's strategies or best practices.

There is also little research into graduate students' actual workloads and their feelings about them. Edgington and Taylor open their 2007 study by noting this lack and attempt to begin addressing it. Their survey revealed that graduate student administrators felt they were gaining valuable work experience, but the survey also revealed that many students didn't seem to realize that their positions made them likely to be exploited:

> [T]here was virtually no mention of themselves as a form of cheap labor. While many did remark that they felt overworked and misused at times, most also appeared to believe that they were filling these positions because of their ability to do so or because the department was interested in offering them a chance for 'professional develop-

ment.' It did not seem to occur to them that a major reason for their inclusion was to save money nor was there any real discussion of their time being used to complete less valued tasks . . . (160).

Edgington and Taylor's research was quite important to us as it is the only empirical research that really examines gWPAs' workloads. However, the survey is quite brief and the short answer format prevents readers from understanding the relationships between responses. Respondents were asked about job duties, but readers don't know anything about the level of responsibility participants were expected to enact in those duties or about the mentorship available. We felt it particularly important to collect data that compared gWPAs' contracted hours with actual hours worked, especially since Elder et al.'s survey demonstrates that the number of graduate students pursuing WPA positions is on the rise.

Methodology

We conducted an electronic survey about graduate WPAs' work, recruiting participants via listservs and personal invitations (see Appendix A online at http://bit.ly/2g0hVUS or follow the QR code). The survey received IRB approval and all participants gave consent.[2] We received 131 responses. Of those, 73 responded from the perspective of jWPAs or sWPAs reporting on their program's treatment of graduate students and 58 responded based on their graduate school experiences. We focus here on those 58 responses. The method of participant recruitment makes it impossible to compute a response rate; however, as a point of comparison, at the time of writing there were 149 graduate student members of the CWPA. Our sample size is also comparable to Edgington and Taylor's of 63 (153).

All 58 graduate student respondents were from institutions in the continental US with the vast majority (92.5%) responding from the perspective of a public four-year institution that awards advanced degrees. The next largest group of respondents (3.8%) was from private four-year institutions awarding advanced degrees. Most respondents were at large institutions of 20,000 students or more (70.4%) with 24.1% of respondents coming from institutions with 10,000–20,000 students. The number of respondents from smaller schools was much lower (1.9% at 5,001–10,000 students; 0% at 2,001–5,000 students; 3.7% at fewer than 2,000 students). We attempted to recruit participants from within the TYCA community, but with little success.

The responses were analyzed by cross-tabulating responses through SurveyMonkey. Once trends and patterns were observed in the data, specific questions were further filtered for responses from our 58 graduate student respondents.

Megan then conducted semi-structured follow-up interviews with nine graduate student respondents using questions we drafted jointly based on our initial analysis of the survey (see Appendix B online: http://bit.ly/2g1lxsf). The interview aspect of our study also received IRB approval and all interviewees gave their consent. The interview questions asked about material conditions of interviewees' work, their workload, about their relationships with others (graduate students, supervisors, faculty), about satisfaction with their positions, and sought recommendations for the field's treatment of graduate students. Based on Geisler's method for analyzing spoken data, Talinn segmented the interviews into topical chains that derive from t-units but focus on one particular topic. They are typically identified by referentials or oral discourse markers (Geisler 35). We then developed a nested coding scheme for the segmented interviews. In a nested coding scheme, data are first coded for one characteristic or dimension and then re-coded according to a different characteristic or dimension. Our segmented transcripts were first coded according to Dimension One, *gWPA Life*, which included five categories: mentoring in the position, resources available to help complete the work, impact on academic/professional life, workload, and null/not applicable. We refined the coding scheme and Paul served as a second coder. We achieved a simple reliability of 94% on Dimension One and a Cohen's Kappa of .907. This strength of agreement is considered to be very good (Geisler 81). Talinn then coded the remainder of the interviews along Dimension One.

Next, the topical chains were re-coded along a second dimension, *Affect*. Coders re-read the topical chains to assess participants' affect regarding that chain. We used three categories: negative affect, positive affect, and null/not applicable. We achieved a simple reliability of 88% and a Cohen's Kappa of .866 for Dimension Two. Again, the strength of agreement is considered very good. Talinn then coded the remainder of the interviews along Dimension Two.

Results and Discussion

The results of our survey indicated five key findings that we discuss along-side reflections from our interview participants. We then consider what those findings might mean for the field at large, particularly for those engaged in the difficult work of being a liminal WPA or of creating and staffing liminal WPA positions. The survey itself and interview questions are available in Appendices A and B, respectively. These findings are based on participants' self-reports that, in this case, cannot be verified and may not be reliable; however, self-reports do serve as a valuable starting point for future research. More important, the students' perceptions are still vital for understanding their workload, agency, and available power, regardless of whether those perceptions are strictly accurate.

1. Respondents reported that graduate students hold a range of administrative positions and may even be asked to direct writing programs on an interim basis.

In addition to the positions traditionally associated with graduate students—Assistants to Directors of Composition and of Writing Centers, etc.—respondents revealed that graduate students may hold a range of administrative positions, including directing WAC programs, assisting with National Writing Project sites, directing or assisting with technology labs, and directing or assisting with faculty development. When asked who typically holds an administrative position, a very small number of respondents (1%) did note that more senior administrative positions were held by graduate students, and almost 23% of respondents indicated that graduate students could become interim directors, either officially or unofficially, during job vacancies, extended illnesses, etc.[4] This was one of the most surprising (and disturbing) findings of the survey as such graduate students are clearly functioning as liminal WPAs with complex, high-stakes workloads.

For example, two interview participants, Christine and Emma, served as interim directors. During her first summer as a gWPA, Christine learned that she would be the acting director of composition while the sWPA was on leave. While Christine had the protection of the title of acting director, she still was required to do a great deal of work beyond the role of gWPA. Emma also possessed much more responsibility than perhaps a gWPA should, but she did not have the title of acting or even interim director. When her sWPA left suddenly, Emma and her gWPA colleague became the ones with the most knowledge about their university's writing program. While a tenured faculty member was appointed interim WPA, he had less experience with the program than Emma and her co-gWPA. Thus, these

graduate students became de facto sWPAs, advising the tenured faculty member and continuing to maintain the day-to-day operations while the new sWPA adjusted to his role. Emma's de facto position caused a host of problems for both Emma and her co-gWPA as they were frequently disparaged by other graduate students, and they perceived that their role in the program was neither appreciated nor acknowledged by the rest of the department.

Although it may be tempting to ask graduate students to run writing programs, even on an interim basis, our research suggests that these students quickly move into liminal spaces that may be problematic. Emma, by nature of being a graduate student, was always already materially and emotionally ill-equipped to hold such power over her peers or over her supervisor (who could have also been her professor, her dissertation director, and/or her recommendation writer). Many liminal positions lack institutional permanence—it is their very temporariness that makes the positions liminal. Without some degree of institutional permanence, liminals lack the authority to discipline and sometimes even teach others, regardless of their actual knowledge, skills, or job descriptions. Liminals also often lack access to the financial and administrative resources available to sWPAs. Thus liminals are constrained in a variety of ways while trying to accomplish the same tasks as sWPAs.

2. Graduate WPA respondents report often working more hours than they are contracted for. A number of them also believe that their work is more like that of an sWPA than a gWPA.

There were several trends when we compared gWPAs' contracted and reported workloads. When asked, "How many hours are graduate students contracted to work for in their WPA capacities?," the most popular answers were 6–10 hours/week (36.8%) and 16–20 hours/week (31.6%), followed by 11–15 hours/week (13.2%) and 0–5 hours/week (7.9%). Some respondents commented that it was difficult to gauge, as they were granted course releases instead of being contracted for a specific number of hours. While some respondents were specific—"We were given one course release (we teach two courses a semester), so that equals 10 hours a week"—others were more ambiguous: "It is a 1/1 course release. Not sure what the hourly equivalency is." This may lead to the difficulty some respondents had answering the follow-up question "How many hours do graduate students actually work in their WPA capacities?"

While the clear majority of respondents stated that gWPAs were contracted to work an average of 6–10 hours/week, the responses regarding

reported hours worked were much more varied. The most popular responses were divided among three categories (20.5% each): 6–10 hours/week, 11–15 hours/week, and 16–20 hours/week, with 17.9% saying 21–40 hours/week, and 10.3% answering 0–5 hours/week. After comparing individual responses to these two questions, we found that our respondents typically reported working more hours than contracted. Of the 14 graduate WPAs who answered that their contracts were for 6–10 hours a week, only 5 actually reported working that number of hours. Five more reported that they actually worked 11–15 hours/week, and 2 reported that they worked 16–20 hours/week. One respondent observed that students in that program most likely "work more hours than they are required, even though the program encourages/cautions them not to do so." The participant who stated that graduate students receive a course release and was unsure of the equivalency estimated working 6–10 hours/week but stated that this is "an estimate" and that "the work varies greatly from week to week."

For the 12 respondents who replied that graduate WPAs are contracted for 16–20 hours/week, the trend of working more hours than allotted continued. While 5 of 12 respondents stated that they did work the 16–20 hours/week in their contracts, 6 stated they actually worked 21–40 hours/week. One respondent who commented that students work 21–40 hours a week noted that "It certainly depends on the week and the needs of the program at any one time, as well as the graduate student's ability to refuse an overload of work."

Overall, 25 respondents, or 50% of respondents for that question, reported that they worked more hours than contractually obligated. Even though the sample size for any one response is small and respondents might be over-reporting their hours, this disparity between reported and contracted hours is still very troubling. While some graduate students may need their supervisors to help them manage time effectively or somehow enforce the contracted number of hours, a more likely source of this discrepancy is that students don't feel that they can say no, even when they have clearly exceeded the workload they agreed to.

For other respondents, the inflated hours reflect their liminality. Many in the academy work more hours than contracted, but the compensation and job security of full professors is rather different from that of graduate students. For liminals, the mismatch between contracted and actual hours is often inherent in the structure of the job. The supervisors of liminals may be trying to rationalize an unreasonable workload by minimizing it with a description of "5–10 hours a week." Liminals may also be asked to manage time-sensitive tasks that have material consequences for others (e.g. grade disputes, scheduling of classes, transfer credit). When these kinds of tasks

are paired with a general overload of work, a lack of job support, and/or a lack of knowledge of institutional bureaucracies, liminals are likely to trade their own time and wellbeing to meet what they view as ethical obligations to others, even when the existence of those obligations is inherently unethical. Finally, the lack of institutional permanence inherent in many liminal positions makes liminals especially concerned about job security or securing good references, which encourages them to work more than required.

Multiple interview participants concurred with the survey findings. For instance, Christine noted that she should have been working just "5 hours" a week but that "it's easily – easily twice that . . . Maybe more than that." Pat stated that while he couldn't quite remember the actual number of hours in his contract, his schedule was "unpredictable" and he often ended up working more than 16–20 hours/week. Micah shared that his administrative internship was designed to be five hours a week across the year but "It often became much more than that [laughing]."

Also of concern was the high number of respondents—32%—who reported that their work more closely matched that of a j- or sWPA than that of a graduate student. While it is possible that some respondents have a poor understanding of the work of tenured/tenure-track WPAs, it is highly unlikely that all of them do. Substantial numbers of respondents felt that their workloads were somehow out of balance, either in the volume of that work or in its appropriateness for graduate students. Is this because students recognize that they consistently work more hours than they should? Because they see peers earning the same compensation for easier work? Because sWPAs have shifted undesirable or difficult tasks onto those who lack the power to say "no?" Some combination of the above?

Once again, this finding suggests that many of our respondents may be better understood as liminals who are negotiating the high-stakes, complex tasks of sWPAs without job security or the authority of faculty or of holding the doctorate. When graduate students report that their workloads—even if in limited ways—are comparable to those of tenured faculty, the field does those workers a great disservice by instead equating their work with that of office assistants because their job titles are gWPA. To be sure, sWPAs and other departmental leaders need to regularly review graduate students' workloads and give students an opportunity to voice concerns about what they've been asked to do. More broadly though, the field needs to consider how to advise liminals to, for instance, enforce the writing curriculum among adjunct instructors or engage in other complicated, political tasks with the power they actually have. In many cases, the literature and advice that (mostly senior) WPAs have curated over the years can't be usefully applied to those in the tenuous positions of liminality.

3. Some gWPA respondents provide significant input for activities normally identified with sWPAs and also lead some activities with little/no mentorship.

Respondents to both the survey and interviews were asked to identify elements of their gWPA work portfolios, including the level of participation they were expected to enact in that work. Available responses included:

1. participate with limited input,

2. participate with significant input,

3. co-lead the activity,

4. lead, but with supervision and mentorship, and

5. lead with little/no supervision or mentorship.

Unsurprisingly, graduate students were most likely to participate with only limited input in activities traditionally identified with sWPAs. We defined these sWPA activities as 1) assessing other faculty, 2) budgeting for the writing program, 3) writing grants to support the writing program's work, 4) assessing other TAs, and 5) composing reports on the status of the writing program. We aligned these activities with the work of sWPAs because they often require a level of experience, job security, and authority that graduate students do not have. Most graduate students, for example, would not be required to assess part-time or full-time faculty nor would they be expected to assess their peers, as these activities would put them in a position that might negatively impact their relationships with their peers or their superiors. An sWPA, on the other hand, would have the protection of tenure and the authority (and experience) to offer constructive observations of all these groups. Further, when such tasks are covered in our field's scholarship, such articles are generally aimed at a more seasoned audience than graduate students.

Graduate students were most likely to provide significant input when participating in meetings and committees (42%); assessing writing programs (31%); and assessing student writing (30%). They were most likely to co-lead assessing writing programs (16%); designing curriculum for faculty development experiences (16.2%); and mentoring graduate students (15%). They were most likely to lead (with supervision) mentoring of TAs (30%), assessing other TAs (21%), and assessing student writing (22%). Where little or no supervision or mentorship was provided, students were most likely to be mentoring TAs (10%), assessing student writing (10%), and completing other administrative tasks (8%). In 8 of the 14 task areas we identified, a small but significant number (>5%) of respondents reported that graduate

students were engaging in the work with little or no supervision or mentorship, as described in Table 1.

Table 1
gWPAs Lead Activities with Little or No Supervision

Activities Led with Little or No Supervision	Portion of responses (n = 47)
Mentor other graduate students	10%
Assess student writing	10%
Complete other administrative tasks	9%
Represent the writing program	9%
Compose reports on the status of the writing program	7%
Participate in meetings/committees	6%
Lead/facilitate faculty development	6%
Assess other TAs	6%

While overall the survey clearly supports a picture of graduate student administrators handling smaller-stakes tasks and having sheltered exposure to WPA work, these eight areas where students received little or no supervision or mentorship raise questions. In some cases ("complete other administrative tasks," "participate in meetings/committees"), this lack of supervision may indicate that the student was capable and excelled at his or her duties. Other tasks, such as "assess other TAs," "lead/facilitate faculty development," "represent the writing program," and "compose reports on the status of the writing program," are much more complex and politically charged. Again, additional research is certainly needed before wide-scale conclusions are drawn, but it does seem potentially problematic for graduate students to engage in these tasks with little or no supervision. These responses suggest that these gWPAs may be in exploitative and/or liminal situations.

Several of our interview participants affirmed that they were given a great deal of authority in tasks that would typically be assigned to an

sWPA. Laurie worked on a large team of WPAs, headed by an sWPA, but had several duties for which she was greatly, if not solely, responsible. For instance, Laurie recalled that she helped to plan "the week-long orientation for [the] new TAs," but stated: "I'm basically the person in charge during that." She also administered the year-long TA mentoring program, which involved meeting with new TAs to discuss readings and teaching concerns, and planning professional development workshops during the spring semester. She also facilitated the portfolio assessment at the end of each semester.

Others had similar experiences. As a graduate assistant director, Lily's duties included "reviewing textbooks, observing TAs' classes, making recommendations on the program, [and] helping write program policies," and she described her duties as "sWPA-like." Likewise, as the writing center assistant director, Sam provided consultations and workshops for faculty, promoted the writing center's services, developed new systems, and integrated technology to improve one-on-one tutoring sessions.

Laurie, Lily, and Sam all were gWPAs by job title, but the work for which they were often solely responsible mirrored that of tenured faculty; thus, they are more accurately (and productively) understood as liminal WPAs who are negotiating the complex tasks of sWPAs without an sWPA's status or support. Their true work was likely hidden from public view because it was labeled as gWPA work. Liminals exist in a variety of contexts and in order for Laurie, Lily, and Sam to feel supported, the field (and their programs) need to acknowledge and support them in the work they are actually doing instead of pretending that they are doing gWPA work.

4. Most respondents reported that their work was rewarding, that they felt supported in that work, and that the workload was manageable. However, a small but significant number responded negatively to questions about the manageability and appropriateness of their workloads.

Respondents were next asked about their feelings towards their work. Most reported that their work was rewarding, that they felt supported in that work, and that the workload was manageable. (See Table 2). In response to "My work is rewarding," 22 respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 14 agreed, while 4 were neutral. (No one disagreed.) Thirteen respondents strongly agreed with the statement "I feel supported in my work," while 14 agreed, 7 were neutral, and 6 disagreed. Nineteen respondents strongly agreed with "I feel capable of the work I'm asked to do;" 20 agreed, and just 1 was neutral with no respondents disagreeing. Finally, 21 respondents strongly agreed with "If I have questions, I have safe people to ask," while 14 agreed, 4 were neutral, and only 2 disagreed.

Table 2
Feelings Towards gWPA Work and Future Plans

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My work is rewarding.	22	14	4	0	0
I feel supported in my work.	13	14	7	6	0
I feel capable of the work I'm asked to do.	19	20	1	0	0
If I have questions, I have safe people to ask.	21	14	4	1	0
I feel exploited in my current position.	2	4	11	7	16
This position makes me feel discouraged and disempowered.	1	2	5	15	16
I am more likely to be successful in future administrative positions.	25	14	1	0	0
I am more likely to seek out or accept future administrative positions because of my work in this writing program.	20	15	3	2	0

However, when focusing only on respondents who answered "My workload is manageable" with *Neutral*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* (n=14), we found that 50% of those respondents also disagreed with the statement "If my workload becomes unmanageable, I feel safe in asking my supervisor to reassign tasks or to give me more time." A majority of those respondents (64%) also disagreed with or were neutral towards "The work I'm asked to do is appropriate for a graduate student." Fifty percent of respondents who found their workloads unmanageable also disagreed when asked whether the amount of responsibility they carried was appropriate for graduate students.

Furthermore, out of all the respondents, 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed with "The amount of responsibility I carry is appropriate for a graduate student," and 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed with "I believe I've been sheltered from the more unpleasant and difficult aspects of this writing program." When asked to respond to "My work more closely matches

that of a tenured/tenure-track WPA than of a graduate student administrator," 32% gave positive responses. Forty-three percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed and the remaining 25% were neutral.

As with our other findings, the overall picture regarding workload appropriateness and manageability was a positive one. However, the approximately 20% of students whose experiences were negative suggests that, at a minimum, those who supervise graduate students may need to do more to give them regular, safe spaces to express concerns about their workloads. A re-evaluation of job duties may also be appropriate.

These numbers also point to the existence of graduate student liminals. These responses suggest workloads that may be inappropriate for graduate students and more consistent with the field's understanding of sWPA work. If they are to continue in this work, these liminals will benefit from targeted support from mentors and from the field in order to help them do that work as liminals—with liminals' power and affordances—instead of wishing such positions didn't exist or asking liminals to adapt the literature written by and for sWPAs.

The survey concluded by asking about students' future plans. Respondents overwhelmingly stated they were more likely to seek out future administrative positions and be successful in them. Eighty-seven percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to seek out or accept future administrative positions because of their gWPA work and 97% of respondents reported that they were more likely to be successful as a result. If graduate WPAs approach their work with this long-term view, they are probably less likely to risk complaining about the number of hours they work and/or inappropriate job duties that some participants reported.

5. Respondents declined to describe themselves in strongly negative terms, such as exploited or disempowered.

Finally, we gave respondents the opportunity to express negative views about their work by framing two questions in strongly negative terms: "I feel exploited in my current position" and "This position makes me feel discouraged and disempowered." Most respondents rejected this loaded, negative language; 57.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the use of the term *exploited* to describe their gWPA work, and 80% rejected the notion that their positions made them feel disempowered. However, as Table 2 shows, the positive responses were not unanimous.

Despite respondents' disagreement with statements about the appropriateness of their workloads, they roundly refused to describe themselves as exploited, disempowered, or discouraged when given the opportunity. This

finding was also supported by the interviews. Even though some interviewees described situations that were, to us, quite exploitative, they did not embrace language of exploitation and disempowerment. For example, Christine commented that she "did not realize" she would be interim composition director as soon as she assumed the role of gWPA, and had a long list of responsibilities that took more than the five hours a week in her job description. However, Christine maintained close contact with the sWPA, felt "extremely supported," and was clearly dedicated to her work.

Respondents may have also felt some need to protect their programs in their responses. Another possible explanation is that, even in objectively exploitative situations, graduate students felt they had agency in them and therefore rejected this language of victimhood.

gWPAs or Liminals? What is at Stake?

The impetus for this research was, first, to gather concrete data about the work that graduate WPAs actually do and, second, to use that data on graduate students to take steps towards identifying the number of liminal WPAs in the field, a group that includes graduate students as well as non-tenure-track faculty and administrators. Overall, the survey clearly reveals a picture of graduate students who enjoy their work and are deeply invested in it, believing that it is preparing them for a professional future. This is the part of the story that makes the field feel good; this is the part of the story that is referenced when considering what a gWPA does and who a gWPA is.

The survey findings also revealed that gWPAs work in all areas of administration and that they complete all kinds of WPA tasks. While the majority of the gWPAs in our survey have responsibilities and workloads commensurate with the field's conception of gWPA, almost half report working more hours than they are being compensated for. Further, between 5%–32% of the responses to most questions were problematic and suggested that the gWPAs who gave them were actually liminals. These figures are high enough that they deserve the field's attention, concern, and further research. Ultimately, given the tasks they are expected to complete, the level of responsibility they assume for those tasks, and their own comparisons of their work to that of jWPAs and sWPAs, we estimate that somewhere between 20–30% of our graduate student respondents are more accurately described as liminal WPAs. What, then, is the field's responsibility to these and other liminals?

First, we don't see liminal WPAs as problems to be fixed and forgotten or cautionary tales of programs that have made mistakes. These initial findings suggest there is much more below the surface. We have argued else-

where that liminal WPAs are not inherently exploited and that, regardless, institutions will continue to create liminal positions and that those outside of the tenure track will continue to staff them.

Certainly, there are a range of circumstances that may make a graduate student the best choice for the job. Graduate students have day-to-day knowledge of the program's workings that outside faculty probably lack. They also may need to take the position for economic reasons and may legitimately have more time available than many faculty members. The experience of being an interim director is also valuable on the job market. We are thus less concerned that some graduate students are doing this work than that the term *WPA* masks the political realities of it, setting these students up for exploitation, unrealistic work expectations, and even failure. A very real tension exists between preparing graduate students for future WPA work and recognizing that some work needs to be done by those with more clout and protection.

The concept of the liminal WPA offers starting points for addressing our current concerns regarding graduate students in liminal WPA positions. First, it reveals the slippage between realities and ideals that occurred in the first place. It's likely that, for a variety of reasons, such disconnects will persist. The liminal WPA perspective offers a starting point for more clearly identifying potential conflicts between status, job duties, the ability to reasonably carry out those duties, and benefits associated with them (as opposed with those associated with the statuses of j- or sWPAs). It acknowledges those conflicts rather than creating an illusion of static identities.

Second, it offers a more inclusive schema for considering, acknowledging, and detailing the work that people do in administrative roles. Writing program administrators can more accurately describe their programs' positions to themselves and to others. This means admitting when the realities of the job don't match traditional constructs of graduate student writing program administration or those of NTT faculty.

There is also a power in naming and demystifying the context of one's work. Liminals gain agency by naming their work as such instead of having it minimized or obscured by terms such as gWPA. We also argue that liminals will be better able to navigate their experiences and adapt WPA research and literature to their needs if the lens of liminal WPA work is available to them—if they understand that a kind of power is still available to them, that they might tackle different kinds of projects than sWPAs, and that they can use their institutional impermanence to their advantage.[3] Likewise, liminals are better served when faculty members or mentors also have that liminal lens. The imperative for those with more power is to operate from a new set of assumptions that includes liminal writing program

administration rather than assumptions derived from our existing termi-nology for WPAs.

During our interviews, we asked participants how they saw themselves represented in the literature. April, a graduate student liminal observed:

> I don't think grad students are very well represented in literature at all. Why? Well, one, they're too busy to write because they're writing dissertations. And two, . . . if you want to feel like who is represented in the literature, it's the WPA with a capital W, right? It's the person who has tenure . . . I feel like it's a shortsightedness of our field, that we want to spend more time talking about theories and stories, and less time saying, "What is this work?"

April's commentary makes two points. First, graduate students do not nec-essarily see themselves effectively and accurately represented in WPA litera-ture. Second, and more importantly, April points out that the field values theoretical approaches to WPA work, but who is served by a discipline that fails to account for the context of that work? Joyce Olewski Inman, in her article, "Reflections on Year One as an Almost-WPA," shares similar con-cerns more poignantly:

> I am isolated from my field because when trying to garner advice from colleagues in composition at other institutions, I feel pressured to explain the situation and how it came to be—to apologize for accepting the position of WPA. . . . I am not suggesting that WPAs should not be properly trained and qualified for the positions they hold, but I am suggesting that they should not have to apologize when asking for guidance and that our own rhetoric is what leads to feelings of disenfranchisement among those of us whose experiences lead us to feel like "outsiders." (152)

Attention to theory and traditional hierarchies in the field and the research that serves them both maintains the status quo and privileges tenured or tenure-track WPAs. Such research assumes that all WPAs have access to similar *ethoi* defined by their PhDs, promotion, and tenure. WPA positions are understood, both anecdotally and in the literature, as tenured or tenure-track positions with long debates over whether an individual should take such a position without tenure. The advice for those who are not tenure-track or tenured is too often a simple "don't take the position." This puts liminal WPAs at the disadvantage Inman describes. They are effectively erased from the literature as a result of a different status that is incompatible with expected norms.

Far from the logic of accommodation, the perspective of the liminal WPA opens the way for transformation of composition research,

hierarchies, and the agency afforded others through a revision of reifying terminology. April encourages the field to "empower and protect our grad students." We would add that the field needs to empower its liminal WPAs as well, allowing for the multiple identities that occur in the academic and administrative contexts of writing program administration.

Institutions that create such liminal positions, regardless of rationale, should have honest conversations with graduate students, untenured faculty, or staff about what is at stake for them, negotiate appropriate expectations and compensation, and develop a support system. When circumstances force institutions into offering liminal WPA positions, the liminal WPA concept offers a heuristic for limiting or mitigating that liminality by asking questions such as

1. How can the hiring process for a permanent replacement be sped up so that the liminal position is brief?

2. What are the most politically charged yet essential components of this job? Could a faculty member or someone with more clout handle them?

3. What are the essential elements of this job, and what can be placed on hold until a permanent replacement is found so as to minimize this liminal's time commitment?

4. What aspects of this job will be most valuable for the liminal, and what aspects is she most excited about? What aspects is she most concerned about? How can we maximize the former and minimize the latter so that she has the most useful experience?

5. Is there a clear and realistic job description? Does it include clear boundaries so that the liminal can say "no" to requests from others for additional or inappropriate work?

6. Do departmental colleagues understand and respect the job description and the job's limitations and boundaries?

7. What faculty and staff members have committed to provide support, mentorship, and protection for the liminal during this period? and

8. What is appropriate and fair market compensation for doing this work?

Creating liminal WPA positions is an inherently tricky and dangerous business, but forcing ourselves to answer questions like these minimizes the exploitative possibilities and maximizes the chances that liminals have positive and valuable experiences.

The field has an obligation to recognize the complexity of liminals' work and provide them with resources to help them be successful in these liminal contexts instead of operating from the tacit assumption that existing resources—primarily developed by and for j- and s-WPAs who have more power, more protection, and more resources—are sufficient.

Conclusion

Gaps exist between the stories told about graduate administrators and many of the realities they experience. The gap also exists in a disciplinary context in terms of the research conducted and written about writing program administration. This gap can affect the field's program design and graduate curriculum.

Our findings demonstrate that there are graduate WPAs whose status conflicts with their positions, workloads, etc., and that these liminal students need guidance and support as they negotiate the conflicts that accompany their jobs. It is heartening that the majority of our respondents found WPA work rewarding and were likely to seek it out after graduation, but we remain concerned about graduate students engaging in liminal work without adequate support. The liminal WPA identity can thus provide a space where the slipperiness of graduate students' identities can co-exist and provide them with a language to discuss their positions. We hope this research highlights the importance of recognizing that gWPA work takes many different forms, as well as the importance of lending a voice to all graduate WPAs, regardless of their work.

Notes

1. A detailed discussion of our interview data is beyond the scope of this article. We draw lightly on our interview data here and present it more fully in "An Exercise in Cognitive Dissonance: Liminal WPA Transitions," to be published in *WPAs in Transition*, edited by Courtney Adams Wooten, Jacob Babb, and Brian Ray. It is forthcoming from Utah State University Press.

2. This study was approved by Rider University's IRB committee on January 24, 2012. All names are pseudonyms.

3. In the survey, we were primarily interested in individuals' experiences, and in order to protect respondents' anonymity, we did not ask them to identify their institutions. It is thus possible that this number is inflated by multiple responses from one or a few institutions where this practice occurs. Even if this is the case, we would remind readers that our participants are likely from established programs with larger faculties. This practice is more likely to occur at institutions with fewer faculty members (which are less well represented in our data).

4. We discuss these possibilities in "Thinking Liminally: Exploring the (com) Promising Positions of the Liminal WPA" (Phillips, Shovlin, and Titus), published in the Fall 2014 issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*.

Appendix A: Survey

Appendix B: Representative Topic List for Interviews

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