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INTRODUCTION

The (Invisible) Labor of Writing Center Directors

This is a book about a job. It is also a book about a profession and thus is a book about passion, identity, calling, preparation, and responsibilities. It is about luck, good and bad; relationships, difficult and easy. Ghosts of writing centers past and specters of writing centers future. This is a book about nine professionals working as new writing center directors: coming to understand the dimensions of their job, balancing disciplinary understandings with external pressures, being seen and heard as they keep their writing centers afloat.

In 1972, Studs Terkel published perhaps the most well-known American oral history project, *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel About It*, in which he captures the voices of Americans describing the day-to-day, hour-to-hour intricacies that compose their working lives. He observes, “I was constantly astonished by the extraordinary dreams of ordinary people. No matter how bewildering the times, no matter how dissembling the official language, those we call ordinary are aware of a personal sense of worth—or more often a lack of it—in the work they do” (Terkel 1972, xxiv).

Like Terkel’s participants, the nine writing center directors in this study were “ordinary people.” Yet ours, too, had extraordinary dreams despite bewildering and often difficult times. Each of our participants worked in educational environments in secondary or college-level, US or abroad, educational systems that strain under the residual effect of the recent global recession, the increased pressure for national standards packaged up by corporate interests, the yin and yang of the adjunctification of higher education and administrative bloat, and the increasing stratification of social classes resulting in even more unequal schooling for the poor. Given the times, each of our participants was glad to have a job—to have the job of writing center director—though most of our participants fell into this line of work serendipitously. This is a book of their stories: the day-to-day work they performed, the work they wanted to do but didn’t, and all the stuff that got in the way.

As much as this is a book about a job, it is not *just* a book about a job. Just as Terkel's *Working* revealed as much as about American society as it did about work, *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* reveals something broader about the state of education in the early twenty-first century. What it is and what it means to be a writing center director is connected in a deep way to existing educational systems, values about learning and learners, and, particularly, conceptions of writing and literacy. Reading how the nine new directors individually navigated their local systems and individual careers reveals not just what it takes to be a writing center director but how, in a reciprocal move, a system uses a writing center director—what part of the load the writing center director carries, what personal worth a director finds in their work, and what worth the system places on the director's work. Thus, this is a book about the intricacies and complexities of a job and the intricacies and complexities of a system wherein that job exists.

WRITING CENTER DIRECTORS: WHAT'S TYPICAL?

Like many professions, the job of writing center director was not profiled in Terkel's oral-history collection; more to the point, in 1972 it would have been difficult to find more than a few dozen Americans claiming this job title. Though origin stories of writing centers abound and conflict, what is clear is that the years since Terkel's collection was published have been a time of momentum building for writing centers. In the late 1970s and 1980s, directors of existing centers found one another, started regional, then national, meetings, and established journals exclusively focused on the work of writing centers. Observers of these efforts often took initiative to start writing centers in their own contexts. Today, the majority of US colleges and universities, many international schools, and K–12 schools have writing centers. Rigorous, insightful scholarship on writing center issues continues in conferences, journals, and books.

Yet, despite these past thirty years of growth, we have seen precious little attention given in the scholarship to the directors who initiate and run writing centers, despite the number of directors now reaching into the thousands. As a result, the work of directing a center is often rendered immaterial and invisible. Mentors guess about how to best prepare future administrators. Job seekers have no way of judging whether a director position is fair or feasible, relying instead on writing center lore about the perils of this or that type of position. Search committees who craft job descriptions sprinkle in additional responsibilities (e.g., WAC/WID directing, heavy teaching loads, and committee assignments)

without realizing the potential effect on the director and center. Those hired as directors may be hesitant to say no to additional responsibilities, as they are not sure what constitutes a “normal” directorship. Finally, those reviewing the work of writing center directors are often unsure what marks success (e.g., *Is an increase in tutoring sessions a sign of success? The only sign of success?* Conversations on WCenter and elsewhere sometimes suggest as much.).

The scholarship that does exist on writing center directors often tries to pin down what is “typical” about the work of directing a writing center. Dave Healy (1995), for example, reports on a national survey of writing center directors in “Writing Center Directors: An Emerging Portrait of the Profession.” He finds,

Writing center directors are disproportionately female: 74%. Nearly all directors (96%) have a graduate degree: 44% with an MA, 40% with a PhD, and 12% with another degree (e.g., MEd, EdD, MFA). Writing center directors are most likely to be trained in English/literature (66%), followed by education (20%) and composition/rhetoric (10%). Their salaries range from \$9,600 to \$71,000, with a mean of \$33,323. Eighty-six percent of respondents teach in addition to their administrative responsibilities in the writing center, spending an average of 36% of their time teaching, while 25% also serve as writing program director. Sixty-nine percent of respondents have a faculty appointment, while 46% have a tenure-track position. Respondents work an average of 44 hours per week and spend half of that time on center-related business. (30)

Other surveys conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s offer similar findings on backgrounds, degrees, and appointment types for writing center director positions (e.g., Balester and McDonald 2001; Erwin 2002; Charlton 2009; WCRP as described in Griffin, et al. 2005; Isaacs and Knight 2014). In short, each of these surveys shows that aside from having a graduate degree, likely having a teaching responsibility, and likely being identified as female, there is no “typical” writing center director. Some positions are teaching intensive with minimal administrative responsibilities while some are administrative positions with no teaching; some require a terminal degree while some don’t.

There have been other attempts to typify who directs writing centers and the work that takes place there. In “Polylog: Are Writing Center Directors Writing Program Administrators?” Melissa Ianetta, Linda Bergman, Lauren Fitzgerald, Carol Peterson Haviland, Lisa Lubduska, and Mary Wislocki argue that while there isn’t one typical writing center director position, writing center directors do fall into more or less one of three types: the universal professional, the local professional, and the

academic iconoclast (Ianetta et al. 2006). The universal professional has a PhD in rhetoric and composition, has experience in administrative work, and values engaging the disciplinary conversation, both as consumer and producer of scholarship. The local professional primarily values first-hand experience; they “understand the best practices circulating in the field, but more importantly, they should have the professional ability to understand their individual contexts” (15). The academic iconoclast promotes “attention to the individual”—individual students, campuses, and writing centers. Carried to the extreme, the academic iconoclast “rejects affiliation not just with other fields of writing studies but with its own institution’s priorities” (16).

Alternatively, Neal Lerner (2006) offers two classifications typical of writing center directors: the haves and the have-nots. In his view, some positions are tenable and optimal and others are not. He explains, “The terrain of our field seems separated into two types of directors: an active, enfranchised group with faculty or secure status and a part-time, contingent—and largely silent—group doing the best they can do under very difficult conditions” (10). Lerner’s classification assumes that those directors in more permanent positions are more likely to be active in disciplinary conversations than those whose roles are more tenuous.

In addition to survey and theoretical portraits of writing center directors, we also have access to anecdotal tales in writing center literature, so much so that Stephen North (1984), in “Writing Center Research,” conjectures that “as writing centers move toward the 1990s, though, [writing centers] are gaining some measure of professional stability, and we can expect their growth rate to level off. It is no longer necessary for all new writing center directors to compose a reflective essay detailing the experiences of their traumatic first year” (27). Though it may not be necessary, a number of directors still indulge in such reflection. For example, Amy Getty (2003) writes in “The Short and Sputtering Life of a Small Community College Writing Center: A Cautionary Tale” about her charge to open a center at a new job where she is given no funding and no space and a dean won’t answer her e-mails. And, Mike Mattison (2007; 2008) tells tales of his first years as a tenure-track director in an established center in “Someone to Watch Over Me” and *Centered: A Year in the Life of a Writing Center Director*. While insightful and engaging, these anecdotal accounts provide us a singular vantage point for understanding writing center directors. Because so many directors, as North has written, write about their struggles, the anecdotal scholarship tends to underscore only the difficulties of directing a writing center.

The final genre of scholarship on writing center directorships is the advice narrative. Though such narratives are grounded in personal experience, these narratives necessarily overgeneralize personal experience as the norm. That is, instead of saying how things are, advice narratives say how they ought to be. Instead of saying what writing center director positions are like, advice narratives say how they should be. Wallace and Wallace's (2006) "Growing Our Own: Writing Centers as Historically Fertile Fields" in the *Writing Center Director's Resource Book* is an example of this kind of narrative. Wallace and Wallace warn against falling into the "generalizing pit" when talking about the current state of writing centers, yet they also note that "we can make some statements [about writing centers and writing center directors] with a degree of certainty" (48). Wallace and Wallace conclude,

We have more writing centers now than ever before. They are lead [*sic*] now by more trained personnel than ever before. . . . We are in good shape, and we have produced a few generations of writing center personnel who have learned what it is to be involved in a movement. (48)

Truth is, these statements *cannot* actually be made with any certainty; no evidence is offered to support these claims of professionalization or directors' sense of belonging. Wallace and Wallace continue,

A successful writing center director is an entry-level administrator and not a faculty member. This administrator relies on statistics, spreadsheets, budgets, Request for Proposals, attrition rates, pass rates, standardized testing norms, retention figures, graphs, and projections. A successful writing center director is a person others in administration can count on to demonstrate the real picture. A successful writing center director is not the same person as a successful tutor trainer, but, instead, this director is the person who leads both the center's offense and defense. Therefore, when writing center personnel make the argument that their centers improve writing skills, they had better be able to prove it, and prove it with real statistics that others outside of the humanities can comprehend. (50)

Paradoxically, although Wallace and Wallace warn that writing center directors will always need evidence (i.e., statistics) for their claims, they—and other writers of advice narratives—make fairly unsubstantiated claims like these about writing center directors and their responsibilities.

Another example of the advice narrative is Sally Crisp's (2000) "One Leading the Writing Center: A Sort of Credo and Some Advice for Beginners and Oldtimers, Too." Crisp begins by situating the need for her advice.

A young colleague and I visited as we left a session at the first NWCA conference in New Orleans. We were continuing the conversation the session had inspired when she asked me—with some urgency, some frustration in her voice—“Why don’t they tell us how it’s really done?” She went on, then, to confess a feeling of inadequacy as a new writing center director. She told me she had “grown up” professionally as a tutor in the writing center and had come to feel confident and competent in one-on-one teaching. Now she needed to supervise the center’s staff, plan the program and budget, design and implement publicity—in other words, take care of the many responsibilities of the organization. This was not what she had been prepared for. (1)

Crisp goes on to say tutoring is not the same as leadership and new directors should not assume they know how to direct simply because they know how to tutor (2). As far as concrete advice about what leadership takes, Crisp offers little. Generalities such as “be proactive” and “remember to keep your balance” abound and seem to do little to assuage the frustration the new director she mentions is stewing in.

Critiques of the ubiquitous advice narrative have begun to surface. Colin Charlton et al. (2011), in their compelling manifesto, *GenAdmin*, on the related profession of writing program administrators (WPAs), identify the form these advice narratives usually take—narratives of heroes and victims—and caution against their uncritical acceptance.

First and foremost, while their institutions and their colleagues have mistreated many WPAs, any narrative on the hero to victim spectrum constructs a vastly incomplete profile of WPAs. Most acting WPAs know this, but those whose only insight into WPA work is through such narratives may not. The images of suffering can be overwhelming; likewise, the conclusions put forward by “advice narratives” that are built on the perilous premises of the victim and hero narratives establish generalized knowledge that we find too limited in their assumptions about what WPA work is and who should do it. (55)

When we propagate advice narratives, we forward a very narrow viewpoint, one that often comes with minimal evidence. Wallace and Wallace never say why a “successful” writing center director should not be a faculty member; in fact, the other contributors published alongside their chapter in *The Writing Center Director’s Resource Book* are mostly faculty members and mostly writing center directors. Yet, advice like this circulates nonetheless and contributes to our fuzzy perspective on writing center labor.

In *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*, we make a conscious attempt to strike a new path in scholarship on the topic of writing center administration. We appreciate what can be gleaned from

surveys and personal experience, and we understand new professionals want advice, but we wanted a deeper look at labor than is offered by these strategies. Instead of telling others how to do their job and basing our advice on widely circulated, now naturalized disciplinary narratives, we wanted to see who new writing center directors really were and how those directors really worked. We wanted to hear their voices and privilege their experiences; we wanted to understand them within their own contexts—not as numbers, not as types, not as heroes, and not as victims. This desire led us to qualitative case-study inquiry.

OUR STUDY

Our study sets aside the idea that we should aim to craft a portrait of a typical writing center director, one that we can generalize about, one that could be invoked in any discussion about writing center directorships. Instead, we embraced the case-study researcher's quest to understand the particular contours and complexities of writing center directors' work as it played out in a range of different institutional contexts. This is exactly the sort of research Healy suggests at the end of his survey project: empirical research on "how and why writing center directors entered the profession" using a case-study approach (Healy 1995, 38).

In the twenty years since publication, however, Healy's call for interviews and case-study research on writing center directors has gone unanswered with, so far as we know, only one (recent) exception: Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny's award-winning "Of Ladybugs, Low Status, and Loving the Job: Writing Center Professionals Navigating Their Careers," an article reporting on interviews with fourteen early- to mid-career writing center professionals who attended (or knew someone who attended) the 2005 IWCA Summer Institute (Geller and Denny 2013). Our study is similar in spirit to Geller and Denny's in that we seek rich portraits of writing center directors and their work on the job. Our empirical approach, however, is different. Geller and Denny interviewed their participants once and left participants unnamed. Their aim was not to distinguish participants by context but rather to see what patterns emerged among participants. Alternatively, we returned to Healy's call for case-study research on writing center directors, interviewing nine new directors over the course of their first or second years on the job, writing up their stories of labor as individual cases, and, in a final cross-case synthesis, offering a series of "working positions" (Stake 2000, 197) on the data, designed to pull together threads from the whole without reducing the particulars to pat generalizations. Such is the "real business

of case study,” according to Robert Stake: “to take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does” (8).

In this multicase study, we document the working lives of contemporary writing center administrators. The writing center directors who speak to us here surprise us in their diversity; they cannot be typified by classifications used in categorizations previous scholars have tried to use—credentials, experience, current institutions, current positions, or disciplinary embeddedness. Yet, regardless of their positions or backgrounds, our participants all do everyday (day-to-day, administrative tasks), emotional (building and sustaining relationships), and disciplinary (engaging with/in the academic field) labor. Listening to our participants talk about their labor, we gained insight into how writing center directors select which labor to engage in and when. Put simply, our participants helped us see that the labor we engage in is never restricted to a list of job responsibilities, although those play a role. Labor is shaped/motivated by complex and unique combinations of requirements, expectations, values, perceived strengths, interests and desires, identities, and knowledge. Our interviews showed us what labor participants performed and suggested the reasons and motivations for the labor they engaged in and the labor they ignored or deferred or sideline temporarily. The interviews also made us privy to participants’ thoughts *about* the labor they performed and the negotiations they had to make in deciding “this labor over that labor.” Interviews also provided insight into how participants experienced their jobs in terms of emotion. In brief, the case studies revealed facets of writing center director labor that other types of research or scholarship have up to now left invisible.

OUR STORIES

As all researchers do, we came to this study with backgrounds and biases that most certainly shaped the recruitment of subjects, the collection of data, the analysis, and the selection of findings elaborated here. Each of us has been a writing center director as tenure-track faculty; all of us have PhDs in rhetoric and composition, though none of us did a writing center dissertation. Each of us took a writing center director position as our first job out of graduate school. Each of us had a particular type of preparation for this labor that included tutoring and administrative positions in previous writing centers, coursework in writing (center) studies, and writing center conference attendance and presentations. Finally, we represent a generational writing center chain of influence:

Becky worked with and directed Jackie's MA thesis at New Mexico State University; Jackie worked with Nikki and sat on her MA thesis committee at Ball State University. Our backgrounds do not put us in the majority in comparison to the survey data—most writing center directors are not tenure-track faculty, nor do they have PhDs in rhetoric and composition. Our backgrounds and circumstances put us in the privileged “universal professional” category in Ianetta et al.'s scheme or the “haves” in Lerner's. What we share with our participants, however, is a passion for writing center work and a commitment to the spirit and practice of collaboration that permeates that work at most every level. In the following brief narratives, we reflect on our own interests in this research project.

Becky: Ask anyone who knows me and they'll tell you I'm interested in stories. I enjoy telling them, of course, but I'm most interested in listening to and thinking about them. In academic parlance, I am a *narrative inquirer*. My interest in the current project was piqued by the survey study of writing center nontutoring work Jackie and I conducted in 2011. As part of that survey, we asked participants to respond to several open-ended questions about nontutoring work and the role they thought it played in carrying out the vision they had for their writing centers. In these responses, we heard stories of writing center futures and stories of directors and other writing center folks laboring in any number of different ways to craft writing centers that mattered to their students, faculty, universities, and communities.

I wanted to know more about this work—the work writing center directors perform every day—their everyday labor—but also the intellectual and relational labor they engage in. More than that, I wanted to hear from directors themselves about how their labors mesh and are intertwined, built on and from each other. I wanted, in other words, the story of this labor as it plays out in vastly different contexts, told by directors we both know and don't know from current scholarship. My story as a researcher, then, is a narrative about narrative. I am interested in this project for what it tells us about the stories of writing center work, who narrates these stories, and the ways in which these narrators “story” their working lives.

Jackie: For years I've been haunted by a single comment. I was brought to campus to interview for a writing center position at a well-known university. A senior faculty member in rhetoric and composition, who had worked with the writing center for the past few years, was the first person I spoke to. He opened with, “So, why do you want to be a writing center director? Anyone can direct a writing center.” I've played this moment forward and backward in my mind many times. They had

invited me to apply, launched a national search, screened applicants, and flown finalists to campus for three-day visits; if it were true that “anyone can direct a writing center,” then why bother with all of that?

I’m still not sure whether he was being sincere or just trying to provoke a reaction; still, his comment invoked an unraveling. *What if he’s right? What does it take to direct a writing center? What are the actual responsibilities, written and unwritten, that directors have?* This project has allowed me to begin to answer these nagging questions in a formal way. This study also required that I rethink my previously tightly held belief that tenure-track faculty positions are always better for writing center directors; our findings forced me to loosen my grip on that belief. In addition, after completing *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* (Grutsch McKinney 2013), I sought to hear individual stories as a counterbalance to the field’s grand narratives I write about there.

Nikki: Whether I realized it early on or not, I’ve been preparing to direct a writing center since my days as an undergraduate peer tutor and then as a graduate-assistant writing center director at Ball State University, where I pursued my MA in English and worked closely with Jackie. At Kent State University, working on my PhD, I turned my attention to writing assessment and writing program administration, although writing center studies was never far from view. I continued to present at regional writing center conferences and to stay current in writing center scholarship. Fast forward to 2012 when I landed the job I’d dreamed of and prepared for all those years: a tenure-track writing center director position.

I started that first year with confidence. After all, I knew what was supposed to happen in a session, how to prepare tutors, how to work with faculty, how to budget and schedule and evaluate. What I didn’t know so well was how to manage these responsibilities while also teaching and maintaining a research agenda. When Jackie and Becky requested research participants for a study on writing center directors’ work, I jumped at the chance. Participating would give me an opportunity to reflect systematically on my work—an obvious avenue toward informed practice, I thought. It would also give me easy access to ongoing mentoring—and I needed that.

When Becky and Jackie later asked me to be part of the research team, I began to think about the value for all of us. For me, the project would encourage mindfulness about my own personal experience as well as mindfulness about my own experience in relation to others’ experiences—a kaleidoscopic view of writing center direction, if you will. Jackie and Becky, both of whom had been in the field for quite

some time, would gain from my first-year perspective. Later, as we began to work through our data, noting in interview transcripts the overwhelming presence of emotion and emotional labor, we realized just how serendipitous our partnership really was. I knew the scholarship of emotional labor because I had been studying it in other contexts for some time. This study would help me think through the nature and role of various forms of labor in the writing center context. It would also challenge me to interrogate our disciplinary narratives about preparing graduate students for the work of writing center administration.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors is arranged in a format typical of empirical studies: introduction, methods, findings, and discussion. As such, the next chapter is the methods chapter, which describes our qualitative case-study approach and details our methods for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data.

The second part of the book presents findings from interviews with each of our participants. Each of these case chapters follows roughly the same format. We begin by giving a rich profile of the participant and writing center context: describing what's important to the participant, what social identifiers they claim, what working relationships are significant, what institutional histories they step into, and what responsibilities they have (Ellis 2010). Thus, the first part of each case chapter addresses the first of our research questions about who is doing the work of directing a writing center. Our cases give, as much as we could, a flesh-and-blood person—not just titles or degrees—so that the discussion in the second part of the chapter about the work a writing center director does has a clear agent. We did not want our participants to remain abstract types; we wanted any further discussion of writing center director positions or responsibilities to be grounded in these particular lives.

The second and third parts of each chapter (“Labor” and “Discussion”) attend to the second research question: what is the work of directing a writing center? Here we use our categories of “everyday,” “disciplinary,” and “emotional” labor, which we’ll discuss more in the next chapter, in order to name and sort the various tasks the participants reported. Here, too, we offer tentative interpretations about what motivated the work they took on and what it meant for their institutions and for the field that certain responsibilities were prioritized over others. Within each discussion of labor, we present a table that lists the tasks participants reported they did. Our tables are organized in such a way as to

demonstrate the overlap between the types of labor. While these task lists are obviously incomplete (participants didn't tell us every task they performed), the tables do allow us to show something of the scope of the labor our participants performed over the course of the year.

While we occasionally make small gestures of comparison between cases within the case chapters, most of the cross-case analysis is reserved for the conclusion in part three of the book. And while we are careful not to generalize from our limited sample to all writing center directors, we do point to some commonalities and differences among our nine participants: in their backgrounds, in the tasks they completed as directors, in the motivators of and constraints on their labor, and in their conceptions of their work. In the conclusion, we also explore the implications of the answers we found to our research questions. We find that directors labor in untenable positions or in positions where they lack necessary resources, struggle for visibility, and thus select labor that brings them recognition and satisfaction. Based on what we discovered about who is directing writing centers and what that work is, we make suggestions for further study, for how writing center directors are storied in the scholarship, and for how mentoring and preparation of new writing center directors must evolve.

Finally, the cases collectively distill for us how different institutions define writing and appropriate resources to writing instruction and support. This study makes alive and human a few of the players in the ongoing wider cultural debates about skills (writing and otherwise), the preparation of educators, the renewal/tenuring of educators, and administrative bloat in academe. We end the book with a wide view, discussing the role of our participants in the academic labor market.