

WPAing in a Pandemic and Beyond

Revision, Innovation, and Advocacy

EDITED BY

Todd Ruecker and Sheila Carter-Tod

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1

Introduction

TODD RUECKER AND SHEILA CARTER-TOD

Despite being marginalized in a variety of ways in their departments and institutions, writing program administrators (WPAs) have a long history of advocating for students, faculty, and their programs. This advocacy includes defending our work in the face of well-funded outside foundations and other entities that seek to dictate the work we do (Adler-Kassner, 2012). It includes challenging institutional policies that define student success in a narrow way (Ruecker et al., 2017) or create untenable conditions for writing faculty workloads (Lee, 2009). And it also includes challenging bullying from our own colleagues, upper-level administrators, and/or state policy makers (Davila & Elder, 2021) and making antiracism a central part of our writing programs (Carter-Tod & Sano-Franchini, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly created a variety of challenges for those working in education at all levels, and as the ongoing pandemic intertwined with newly visible reminders of racialized police violence toward people of color throughout 2020 and 2021, WPAs often found themselves in moment after moment of what Monroe (2021) has called “urgent agency” (p. 68). Whereas some institutions were gaining national recognition for their vaccination and testing programs (APLU, 2021), other university systems were threatening their faculty through a variety of means (Flaherty, 2021) or hiding

the results of failed testing programs to promote a narrative that in-person instruction presented minimal risk during surges (Damon, 2022). WPAs, often responsible for large numbers of contingent workers, were unwittingly put on the front lines of navigating these politics as liaisons who worked with students and colleagues to understand and implement COVID-related policies, fighting back against unjust policies when necessary, and struggling to save themselves from overwork (e.g., Hensley Owens, 2023; LaVeccia, 2023).

While working through the challenges of an international pandemic, WPAs have also been working through grander racial, political, and educational unrest (e.g., Fain, 2022; Flores et al., 2022). During the pandemic and beyond, there has been a constant waterfall-like flow of incidents of racial, social, and educational attacks. From the 2020 Black Lives Matter national and international protests—in response to the unjust murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade and countless others, resulting in unevenly just and unjust legal accountabilities—to the January 6 insurrection disrupting perspectives of how a democracy functions, to the ongoing attempts at censored language and discussions around the troubled racial history of the US through banned books and restrictions on critical race-based instruction, to the overturning of affirmative action in university admissions policies, the landscape of higher education is and will continue to be rapidly changing. And much like in the midst of the pandemic, these changes have forced WPAs to consider how such situations impact how we do our job in ways that respectfully react, consciously rebuff, and professionally survive. While this collection focuses specifically on lessons learned from the pandemic, none of these lessons happened in isolation.

As a field, we have just begun to write the pandemic. Yet while WPAs can offer solace and guidance within their programs, they often must also implement guidelines and policies enacted at higher levels of leadership. The next phase of the current pandemic is uncertain, but the likelihood of a similar crisis happening at some point is certainly high. Now that we will likely be living and working in an unsettled future for some time, this proposed collection seeks to bring together a variety of voices that have been involved in writing program administration in recent years to collectively reflect on the work we have done, both the successes and failures, so that we can learn together.

WPAs as Advocates

While the reality facing many faculty and WPAs in higher education has been dire in recent years due to a perpetual austerity mode and assaults on academic freedom (Scott, 2018; Welch, 2018), our scholarship is full of work on how WPAs have advocated over the years, work that we can draw on for inspiration on how to move forward in this increasingly threatening era. The history of this work goes back several decades, such as White's (1991) early piece titled "Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA," where he noted that "however powerless the WPA may feel, the administration often feels otherwise, and it is essential for the writing program that the WPA foster this illusion as much as possible" (11). As WPA work has traditionally been dominated by and associated with women, and increasingly undertaken by untenured or non-tenure-line faculty, the power that many WPAs hold can in actuality be limited. Malenczyk (2001) and Micciche (2002) decidedly made more sober assessments, with the former noting that retaliation against WPAs is often invisible and commonplace (a theme taken up later in Davila and Elder's collection). Micciche (2002) noted that "the WPA's authority and power are challenged, belittled, and seriously compromised every step of the way" (p. 434).

More recently, Dardello (2019), Craig and Perryman-Clark (2011), Perryman-Clark and Craig (2019), and de Mueller and Ruiz (2017) have detailed the different ways that the bullying and marginalization of WPAs can be more pronounced for WPAs of color and how BIPOC WPAs can face much more scrutiny than their white counterparts. They have warned us about "white males in positions of power who speak as they wish without any accountability and responsibility" (Craig & Perryman-Clark, 2011, p. 44), as well as stories of white women fostering graduate teaching assistants' (GTAs) resistance against a Black WPA, crying when they get called out for their bullying (Perryman-Clark & Craig, 2019). Dardello (2019) made similar arguments, detailing how her supervisor became really upset when she "pointed out that the word hostile is a pejorative used by whites to speak negatively of African Americans" (p. 115). Clearly, BIPOC WPAs encounter additional barriers to advocating for their faculty and programs than their white counterparts and need to be even more strategic in finding allies in positions of power to join them in their advocacy work.

Recent work has also increasingly focused on the ableist structures of our institutions and programs and explored how WPAs can challenge these assumptions to create more inclusive programs. Nicolas (2017), for instance,

pointed to the ableist tendencies in attendance policies work from the assumption that “getting to class every day on time is a simple task” (p. 19), an assumption that became even more problematic during a pandemic in which many institutions failed to enact protections for the immunocompromised. Carillo (2021) has described how an approach widely embraced by our field, contract- or labor-based grading, “appear to assume an able-bodied student” (p. 19) as it substitutes one problematic standard for another—many labor-based contracts replace a focus on writing quality, which is deemed a subjective measure, with “objective” measures like attendance and time spent on a task, which we know privilege certain types of bodies and lives. The pandemic literature in our field is filled with stories of isolation, especially those who have chronic illnesses or lived traumas that prevent them from “moving on” from the pandemic as much of the world around them did (Clinnin, 2023; Hogan, 2022). As a number of chapters in this collection will detail, many institutions continued to move forward with what disability scholars have referred to as a “normate” student (or instructor) in mind, an individual who doesn’t actually exist in reality (Nicolas, 2017).

Adler-Kassner (2008) frames her book *The Activist WPA* with the quote, “Strategies without ideals is a menace, but ideals without strategies is a mess [sic]” (p. 5). She extensively discusses the need to form alliances with different stakeholders to make the value of our work and our programs known, thinking through both work internal to the institution as well as strategies beyond, such as sharing our work in the media. This theme of building diverse coalitions has been prevalent in other work as well, with Craig and Perryman-Clark (2011) writing, “Directors of composition must build coalitions with faculty and graduate students across race and gender lines to effectively create a culturally inclusive program and disciplinary perspective that best serves learning objectives” (p. 49). A number of chapters in this collection will detail these efforts at coalition building, whether used to push back against oppressive administrative structures or to simply form communities in the midst of a deeply isolating experience.

Overview of Collection

Through a combination of chapters and shorter vignettes, this collection offers opportunities for readers to connect, reflect, and learn. They can connect to the shared experiences and frantic pace of change by knowing that this was a shared experience, one that often feels like an isolated position for

WPAs. They can take time to reflect on their own experiences through the descriptions of the many and varied experiences of the contributors. And they can learn from the contributors' "lessons learned," equipping them with concrete documented texts that can inform their own challenges. We feel it is important to present the realities of what WPAs have done to grapple with the challenges for which there were no presidents or guidebooks. While our work, by nature, requires us to be problem-solvers, these chapters deal with problem-solving for problems with no clear boundaries. These chapters present a range of lessons learned that can assist readers in understanding how others dealt with and are continuing to navigate the ongoing challenges of COVID-19 in writing programs—embedded and independent.

We have divided the collection into four parts: Innovation and Revision, Collaboration and Care, Preparation Teacher Development and Training, and Transformation and Renewal. We have chosen these section titles because we all face administrative situations in which we have to take what we are given and use our own innovative skills to transform and create collaborative, care-based solutions for our students, graduate students, faculty, staff, and ourselves.

Part 1, Innovation and Revision, explores how often the most commonly utilized lessons during and after the pandemic were related to revisions—modifying what structures, practices, and support existed to try to address the complexities of ever evolving challenges. We see this in Anderson et al.'s "Shift Happens: Equity-Centered Composition at an HSI," Crowley-Watson's "Implementing a Writing Lab Corequisite Without the Lab: Spring 2020 Course Launch to Present," and Bayraktar et al.'s "Equity-Minded Writing Placement for a 'New Normal': Four Case Studies of Student Self-Placement (SSP)." While revision often leads to a better-adapted and better-situated understanding, it can also lead to innovations. An example of such an innovation is presented in Easterbrook et al.'s "Starting a First-Year Writing Program on a 'Tech-Light' Campus During COVID-19" and Mendenhall et al.'s "Math Problems: Disaster Austerity and the Redefinition of First-Year Composition Workloads." Part of the work that we do as WPAs, be it revision or innovation, is effective because we are uniquely situated to be working between upper administrators and faculty and students and with broader communities in the field. We see this detailed in the vignettes by Niestepski, Cutrufello, and Kimball.

Part 2, Collaboration and Care, explores the range of ways that WPAs work, which is inherently collaborative and can be utilized to survive crisis. These

collaborative efforts are explored as benefits for building and utilizing community, as described in Jensen et al.'s chapter "We're Better Together: Surviving Crisis Through a Community of Practice," Stuckey and Sims's vignette "Taking Care Online: Creating Sustainable Conditions for a Community of Care," and Snyder and Kato's vignette "From Me to We: Community Building Through Resource Development and WPA Advocacy." Such communities can further serve to foster advocacy as described in Ruecker and Sawan's chapter "Collaborative Advocacy During a Pandemic: Alliance Building and Evolving Strategies." Advocacy and community building can take place in ways of keeping connected, as is described in Horton and Rodrigo's vignette "Extra! Extra! Programmatic Newsletters as Ways to Read All About It." On the other end, Webb-Sunderhaus et al.'s chapter provides a cautionary tale of what can happen without this collaborative sense of community in their chapter "Rugged Individualism, Labor, and Burnout: WPA Strategies of Support During the Pandemic."

Part 3, Preparation Teacher Development and Training, turns our attention inward to consider how and what we learned about professional development opportunities for GTAs and faculty in multiple manifestations of instruction. Acknowledging and discussing concepts of collaborative labor, and professional development, Arnold and Hassel's chapter "Navigating Chaotic Waters: Collaborative WPA Labor and TA Training During the COVID-19 'Pivot'" explores these ideas as "chaotic waters" that, while navigated, can indeed yield ongoing lessons. Martin and Robertson's vignette, "Crossing the Finish Line: Post-Pandemic Challenges for Writing Instructors," and Marshall and Saengngoen's chapter, "Disrupted Spaces: A WPA and a Peer Tutor's Reflections on Reconceptualizing a Graduate Writing Center," continue this exploration, adding further insights for lessons learned about GTA, faculty, and tutor preparation. With considerations of where and how such concepts are situated, Carter-Tod's vignette "Better Understanding Students' Concept of Classroom: Lessons in Students' Perceptions" explores how the idea of writing/learning spaces has changed so much during the pandemic that we may need to invent or reinvent how and what we talk about when we talk about writing classrooms. This navigation of space is further explored in Jankens and Varty's chapter "Navigating 'A More Tense Area,'"

Part 4, Transformation and Advocacy, explores opportunities for reflection, as in Busser's chapter "Harnessing Pace to Resolve Dissonance, or What Cancer Taught One WPA About Patience" and Lehman et al.'s chapter "CWPA Summer Workshop: A Litmus Test of Professional Values in the Fray of

Reckoning,” to vulnerabilities, as in Dominy et al.’s chapter “Losing Ground in the Pandemic: The Continued Vulnerability of Writing Program Leadership” and Williams et al.’s “How We Keep Ourselves from Drowning: Sustaining and Building Communities (of Care) Through Adjunct-Centered WPA Advocacy,” to productive moments of transformation and moving forward in Dibrell et al.’s chapter “Productive Tensions: Writing Program Administration as a Practice of Hope,” Bearden et al.’s chapter “Moments of Opportunity: A Kairotic Approach to Writing Program Administration and Curricular Transformation,” and Corbett et al.’s “Finish Strong: Directing a Successful Writing-Centered QEP During a Pandemic.”

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