

The Graduate Student as Apprentice WPA: Experiencing the Future

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This morning I teach two classes and hold conferences with students. Then I meet with the academic vice president and my department chair to discuss plans for a writing assessment program for the six hundred students who move through our composition program each year. By mid-afternoon, I hope to escape to the library to fine-tune plans for a faculty workshop later this week. It's a typical day in the life of this writing program administrator. I delight in the variety of tasks and relationships that make up my job, but sometimes I think back on graduate school and wonder: how did all those captivating seminars in Barth and Berthoff and Woolf prepare me for this?

Candidates entering the job market with Ph.D.s in Composition and Rhetoric quickly discover that they, more than other new instructors, must assume administrative responsibilities early in their careers. Many are hired immediately into positions as writing program administrators; others are hired with an eye toward moving into such positions within a few years. Yet often new WPAs have little preparation for administrative work. Discussions of the training of graduate students tend to focus solely upon their role as teachers and researchers, while paying virtually no attention to their future responsibilities as administrators. For example, the essays in *Training the New Teacher of Composition* (edited by Charles Bridges, NCTE, 1986) all deal with helping graduate students in their role as teachers, and none addresses their responsibilities beyond the classroom.

In the best of all possible worlds, writing programs would be administered by seasoned, tenured faculty members who could gradually apprentice their assistants. In the meantime, I am writing this article to suggest how writing program administrators can help graduate students in gaining understanding, and, better yet, experience in administering a writing program, even while still in graduate school. Specifically, I would like, first, to suggest some of the qualities to look for in prospective WPAs, and, second, to outline practical ways to help graduate students gain hands-on experience with administrative tasks. My suggestions require a

minimum of institutional change and do not place excessive demands on already busy WPAs.

Traits a Prospective WPA Should Possess

In addition to the research and teaching skills required of all new assistant professors, the ideal writing program administrator should possess the personal qualities listed below. When considering graduate students as potential WPAs, determine whether they have these abilities or could develop them.

1. Prospective WPAs must be willing to be advocates for students and teachers of writing. Since writing programs are at once vitally important and chronically under-funded and under-recognized, successful WPAs must be willing to espouse an unpopular cause. Advocacy of a writing program may range from serving as a representative of the program to fighting for improvements in curriculum and working conditions. A seasoned WPA who directs a large composition program in the Southwest describes his position vividly, saying, "I'm a paid professional pain in the neck."

In order to be effective advocates, prospective WPAs must also be able to develop political skills early in their academic careers, both within their own departments and the university at large. A person who is perceived as merely a "pain in the neck" will have little power or credibility. One who becomes a WPA before getting tenure will need to gain the support of tenured faculty members. Once tenured, a WPA will still need political savvy to continue to advance the cause of the program.

2. Prospective WPAs need vision. A person who is only crisis-oriented and geared to meeting short-term deadlines will have difficulties as a WPA. In order to develop and maintain a program to meet the changing needs of students, prospective WPAs need creative vision—the ability to anticipate the needs of students and respond innovatively. Underlying such vision should be the ability to see how writing courses fit into the picture of the total university, into American culture, and into human experience. WPAs need to find the right balance between commitment to what is already working in a program and an openness to new approaches, as well as the ability to plan and implement changes over one, five, or more years. Best suited to this career are persons with a high degree of initiative and energy.

3. Prospective WPAs should be adept at dealing with many kinds of people. While most professors choose to interact primarily with students, a WPA must work closely with a wider range of people in a variety of power positions. These will likely include department chairs, upper administrators, full-time and part-time faculty, faculty in other departments, high school teachers, and parents of students, as well as students themselves. In interacting with people, prospective WPAs should display confidence, diplomacy, a strong will, and the rhetorical skill and vocal capacity to speak forcefully. WPAs should possess finely honed "people-skills" and the emotional energy required to draw upon these skills on a daily basis.

Spotting These Traits

As a WPA, you can let your students know the value of these traits so they can decide for themselves whether they possess them. You can also develop ways to recognize them yourself. You might, for example, observe your students' behaviors in various work and social contexts, such as graduate seminars, their own classrooms, conferences with writing students, and committee or departmental meetings. As you observe, watch for the abilities to speak diplomatically, to express ideas or convictions with force, to be an advocate, and to cooperate with other people. Do you have students who display initiative in organizing workshops or who are leaders of graduate student organizations? Which graduate students speak up most for their own students or for the writing program in general? Who are your best teachers?

Graduate applications, letters of recommendation, and curriculum vitae also offer clues as to whether students might be well-suited to administrative work. Successful administrative, managerial, or supervisory experience listed on a student resume or c.v. might indicate a talent for administration. Watch also for evidence of leadership, innovative planning, flexibility, and task-orientation (i.e., the ability to get the job done), as described in letters of recommendation or work history.

Standard measures of ability, such as student course evaluations and peer or faculty evaluations, should also prove useful in assessing a student's creative vision, fairness, and ability to cooperate with others. Syllabi, research proposals, and committee work offer further bases upon

which to judge a student's ability to plan imaginatively and to follow through. As students take advantage of the kinds of administrative opportunities suggested later in this article, you will have a sound basis upon which to evaluate their potential as administrators.

Helping Graduate Students Acquire Administrative Experience

Inasmuch as many graduate students, coming directly to graduate school from college, have little or no administrative experience, I would like to suggest some practical ways you might help a prospective WPA gain experience in and understanding of writing program administration.

1. **Create "apprenticeship" positions for aspiring WPAs.** As a WPA, find ways to provide hands-on administrative experience, organized in such a way that you can provide supervision and guidance.

If several graduate students in your department share a serious interest in exploring writing program administration as a career path, create a graduate seminar or practicum in which you guide them in acquiring a theoretical view of the field while offering them your insights into the practical demands of administration. Perhaps such a practicum could be linked with an "Introduction to Graduate Studies" or another already existing course, preferably one taken after the first year of graduate work.

One part of such a practicum would introduce students to the administrative organization of various types of universities, helping students to ask and answer questions such as the following. What is the administrative organization in a particular type of university (i.e., who reports to whom)? Who has power, in terms of controlling budgets, policy, curricula, and hiring? How is policy formulated? What activities and values are rewarded? What is the writing program expected to accomplish, in the eyes of higher administrators, of students, of other faculty? On what basis are budgetary decisions made?

Such a practicum would provide a good forum for leading students in the reading and discussion of relevant books and articles dealing with writing program administration. Your practicum syllabus might include books, such as Connolly and Vilaridi's *New Methods in College Writing*

Programs (MLA, 1986), Hartzog's *Composition in the Academy* (MLA, 1986), and White's *Developing Successful College Writing Programs* (Jossey-Bass, 1989). You could also include articles from CCC, WPA, *College English* and from journals outside English which deal with educational administration; for example, all aspiring WPAs should be familiar with the "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing" published in the October 1989 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. You might also include more expansive studies of the profession, such as Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987) and Ohmann's *English in America* (Oxford, 1976). On the practical side, readings in time management and personal organization could impress upon students the necessity for WPAs to be well-organized, adept at managing their time, efficient with paperwork, task-oriented, skilled in running a meeting, and good-humored.

If only a few students are interested in administration, perhaps you could link them up with opportunities to serve as student assistants or as liaisons to others directly concerned with the writing program. Can you hire student assistants to help with the planning and paperwork essential to running your writing program, such as a student assistant to the director of composition, or as an assistant director of a writing center? Work-study funds or graduate assistantships might help fund such positions. Can students be temporarily placed in positions as interim directors or assistants? One classmate of mine spent her last year in graduate school as an acting assistant director of the freshman English program while the English department conducted a search for a tenure-track assistant.

Another option would place students in internships where they could work as assistants for a term or more. You could link internships to a practicum or independent study in order to help student assistants process their experiences through discussion and seminar papers. A student might, for example, work as an assistant director of a writing center and at the same time enroll in an independent study course in writing program administration. Or graduate students might enroll in courses offered outside your department; one colleague of mine tells me he benefitted from education courses in "Methods and Curriculum" and "Educational Administration." Whether learning through a practicum, an assistant position, an internship, or specialized courses, students should be encouraged to document their experiences in anticipation of the time when they seek jobs; job candidates will be able to give search committees a clearer picture of their skills if they can present evidence of their adminis-

trative skills, either in their dossiers or in interviews. You might also guide them in assessing the value of prior administrative experience outside the university.

Finally, you can help your students in Composition and Rhetoric to acquire a sense of professionalism by encouraging them to attend conferences, to network with other WPAs, and to submit papers for presentation or publication. This is especially important for aspiring WPAs since they may soon be supervising other professionals, and therefore need to possess confidence and a sense of the field as a whole. Anson and Miller's article in *College Composition and Communication* (May 1988) provides a comprehensive list of journals in the field of writing instruction that should interest graduate students who want to become WPAs.

2. Encourage students to acquire a broad picture through service. As WPA, you need to help graduate students find opportunities for service in your department or university that will give them a wide-angle perspective on how an English department and a writing program function. In addition to initiating students into the power structure, reward system, jargon, and rituals of the profession, such service will provide a clearer picture of the part a writing program plays in the larger scheme of general education. Students can begin to understand firsthand the issues they may have discussed in your "administration practicum": administrative organization, how policy is made, expectations placed on the writing program.

Opportunities exist throughout the university for gaining a new perspective through service. Students might, for example, volunteer to serve as representatives on department and university committees. Serving on a steering committee, a search committee, a rank and tenure committee, a freshman English committee, or other ongoing or standing committees introduces students to the issues and problems faced by faculty members and administrators. While a graduate student, I sat on a few graduate faculty hiring committees that required me to take part in screening applications, interviewing candidates, and discussing their qualifications; this was an enlightening initiation into our profession.

Other avenues for service include interdepartmental or university-wide committees, such as a core curriculum or general education committee, a library committee, an interdepartmental search committee, a futures committee, or other committees that extend beyond the English department; even if not directly related to the writing program, such service may

help the student to better understand how the larger university operates and/or how others view the writing program (or English department). While serving on one committee may not in itself provide a broad picture, a few such experiences will; service also gives students the chance to move out of the "student" role and to begin to function as junior colleagues.

Students might also become active in graduate student organizations, preferably in leadership. If a university-wide graduate student association exists, prospective WPAs might volunteer to represent your department. You can also encourage students to get involved in their graduate English organization. If such a group does not yet exist, they can start one.

You can encourage students to learn how a curriculum is designed and how policy is made. If your school is developing new composition requirements, revising the present composition curriculum, or designing elective writing courses, involve graduate students in planning, implementing, and evaluating such innovations, perhaps as part of a task-force or special committee devoted to improving the writing curriculum.

Even if your university is not currently involved in curricular change, you as a WPA and others involved in departmental administration must continually make decisions about writing courses already in place: course goals, textbooks, policies, and teaching methods. Graduate students should assist in these decisions. If you have a method whereby teachers regularly visit one another's classrooms to enhance teaching quality, you might find ways for graduate students to accompany seasoned teachers on such visits. Students might, on their own, ask to sit in on the classes of more experienced teachers who are known to be especially skilled or innovative.

3. Help students to acquire varied teaching experience in writing courses. Naturally, graduate students preparing for the job market will want to gain as much varied teaching experience as possible. Because they may eventually supervise teachers of a wide range of writing courses, aspiring WPAs have a special need to teach as many different courses as possible while still in graduate school.

Many teaching assistantships routinely require that students teach a number of different courses in the freshman composition sequence, including basic or developmental writing, English as a Second Language, and Advanced Composition. If this is not the policy or design at your school,

you may try to promote such a policy, especially if you have control over scheduling TA teaching assignments or freshman writing courses. If someone else plans the schedule, encourage students to make sure that person knows of their desire to teach a variety of courses. Aspiring WPAs should find a way to teach every writing course offered in your program at least once, and to audit or observe the courses they cannot teach.

As WPA, you can also search out new opportunities for students to broaden their teaching experience. Perhaps you can involve students as instructors or assistants in courses in business or professional writing, in technical writing, in "popular writing," and/or in any other specialized writing courses your university offers. You might also help them to teach in a computer lab or to use Computer Assisted Instruction in some other teaching capacity, perhaps as a tutor. Students need to know that because educational work in this area is still so innovative, experience with teaching, writing, or tutoring with computers will improve their marketability.

You might arrange for students to have opportunities to work in a writing center as a tutor or as a trainer of peer tutors. If your university has no writing center, you could look into creating one. Encourage individual students to find ways to teach writing courses through a continuing education program, a local literacy program, or through a community education center. (One wonderful year I taught creative writing weekly to retirees at a local senior center!)

4. Involve students in faculty development/teacher training. Experienced WPAs are aware of the need to share new research in composition with their colleagues in English and in other departments through university-wide or intradepartmental faculty development workshops; such workshops might be offered as part of a program in Writing Across the Curriculum. You can help aspiring WPAs to gain experience in this area by involving them in existing programs and by encouraging them to exercise initiative in organizing new workshops. Involve experienced TAs in training programs for new teaching assistants and faculty (such as fall orientation or an ongoing teaching practicum for new teachers), perhaps by inviting outstanding teaching assistants to help plan the program, give guest lectures on some aspect of teaching at which they excel, or take part in a panel presentation.

A more formal way to help graduate students gain experience in faculty development is to involve them in the ongoing supervision or

mentoring of new graduate students. Does your department have some sort of mentor or "master teacher" program whereby professors or experienced TAs guide and supervise new teaching assistants? Or there may be such programs associated with Writing Across the Curriculum or the National Writing Project or community-based literacy programs. Your department might sponsor occasional workshops, perhaps organized by the graduate students themselves, designed to help update the faculty's methods of teaching writing. In graduate school, one classmate of mine organized a monthly brown-bag "Comp-Talk" that brought together writing teachers to discuss selected articles or to listen to presentations.

5. Help students gain experience in Testing/Assessment. Because accountability in writing programs is receiving greater and greater emphasis from administrators and legislators, you would be wise to help your students to understand the logistics, underlying assumptions, and relative merit of various methods for evaluating student writing, especially on a large scale. Encourage graduate students to read as much as they can about assessment, perhaps enrolling in courses in testing, experimental design, or statistics. (See the bibliography.)

You can also help your students find opportunities to gain hands-on testing experience. If your university requires either placement or exit examinations in composition, hire graduate students to administer and help grade them. Let your students know that the Educational Testing Service will pay graduate students to grade Advanced Placement exams. Encourage them to approach the principals or English department heads of local high schools to inquire about opportunities for involvement in their large-scale testing programs; high schools are sometimes more progressive than colleges in instituting assessment programs. Colleagues in the Education department at your own university might be able to offer students useful guidance.

By the time your graduate students complete their degrees, they should plan to have a working knowledge of the theory underlying writing assessment, as well as having some hands-on experience. Through your supervision and their own reading and experience, they will come to understand terms, such as holistic scoring, portfolio assessment, barrier exams, proficiency exams, and exit exams. Such knowledge and experience will prepare them for the time when they will be called upon to provide leadership in planning or updating assessment programs in their new schools.

Satisfactions

Helping graduate students to gain administrative experience aids our profession as well as the students themselves. It allows students to test their wings and to acquire skills beneficial for seeking full-time academic posts. A student unsuited to administration is better off to find that out now, before moving a thousand miles for a "permanent" position. And those who are well-suited to administration will be able to "hit the ground running" as new WPAs. When new faculty members serve competently and with a measure of satisfaction, their colleagues and the profession as a whole are enriched.

Writing program administration requires creativity, savvy, and hard work. As in any professional career, WPAs may grow so mired in day-to-day minutiae that they lose the passion that drew them to the profession in the first place. Moreover, students whose central desire is to teach literature should not choose this career path, since they could be permanently pigeonholed as WPAs. But for those genuinely committed to the field of writing instruction and temperamentally suited to administration, the job can be most rewarding. I informally polled several WPA colleagues as to what they found satisfying about their jobs. They responded that they enjoyed the opportunity to shape a program; working as a team with the department chair, dean, and others; influencing hundreds or thousands of students, not simply one classroom; the variety of tasks; the opportunity to network with other WPAs; having high-visibility on campus; the opportunities to develop one's talents; many chances to help students to "find a voice" and gain confidence; and being responsible for the most important course in the English department (some would say the university). In spite of all its aggravations and demands, writing program administration provides many of us with an avenue for making a satisfying and important contribution.

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