
Decentering the WPA

Jeanne Gunner

The WPA position is a problematic one, in ways that reach beyond the difficulty of its definition, though definition certainly is a crucial problem. The position's amorphousness often leads higher level administrators to treat it as a catchall service position outside the center of academic power (the topic of recent articles by Lynn Bloom, Joe Janangelo, and Ed White). Responding to the risk of professional diminution inherent in such perceptions, WPAs have issued statements arguing for the professional status and outlining the appropriate tasks of the position. The often-cited Olson and Moxley article, "Directing Freshman Composition: The Limits of Authority," endorses a tenured director with control over program policy; the CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards calls for a tenured WPA fully recognized within the department and academy; and the WPA's Portland Resolution details conditions and guidelines to achieve these goals (Hult).

In these documents, the ideal occupant of the WPA's office is defined as a tenured leader in control of program policy and personnel. This new and improved WPA should bring beneficial changes in the status of composition and composition professionals, especially, one assumes, writing teachers, and help the field as a whole move toward normalization and professional equity with traditional English Department faculty.

The question remains whether the model proposed by the various statements on professional status will actually work toward these ends, however, for the model is based on a still unexamined assumption about who should occupy the center and who the periphery in composition programs. The model perpetuates the traditional power relationship that exists between the WPA and writing instructors, especially those who do not hold tenure-track appointments, leading to a troubling degree of division—division by rank, according to the traditional academic hierarchy; often division of authority, separating instructor and curriculum; and division within writing programs themselves—by minimizing the role that all faculty should play in program direction. This centralized model may ironically be itself one possible source of the professional status problems that continue to plague us. In the professionally endorsed WPA job descriptions that currently hold sway, such as the one represented in the Portland Resolution, we see a model that seeks to center writing program authority in a WPA, treating the rights of this one office in isolation from the other aspects of a writing program, focusing on discrete elements of the position and overlooking the larger network that forms the WPA's world—perhaps because the definition of "professional" in the current national conversation on this issue has come to mean "tenured." But this "solution" is a flawed one, for it

reflects a desire to professionalize partially; it ignores the situation of writing instructors who are entitled to professional rights, too, rights that are ignored in this narrow approach to “professionalizing” the WPA position.

The WPA-centric administrative model, in which a tenured WPA controls the writing program, has a troublingly anti-democratic cast and potential. Most writing instructors working under this model are unlikely to have a voice in the WPA’s appointment or to participate in establishing program policies. The model includes no provision for the WPA to be reviewed by those who teach in his or her program, despite Olson and Moxley’s argument that a department’s “compositionists [should] have a major voice in selecting and continually evaluating the director (58), for “compositionist” is a term used to designate a tenurable specialty, in contrast to the term “writing instructor.” Nor is the WPA in this model held responsible for working to improve faculty conditions (in such areas, for example, as the Wyoming Resolution issues of salary and security of employment), or for enhancing professionalism through such measures as securing grants for faculty release time and curricular projects, instituting faculty development programs, arranging faculty participation in school-wide committees, and assuring faculty voting rights in departmental business. As a result, the model cannot but fail in meeting the goal of professionalizing the WPA position and the discipline, for the status of each is intimately connected to the working conditions of writing teachers.

If the true goal of reformulating the WPA position is to achieve increased professionalism for all those in the profession, and if “professionalism” is to mean something greater than “tenure,” then we need to consider how the position can be linked to faculty conditions and status and to reconsider the role faculty should play in the direction of a writing program. A professional writing instructor, a professional director, our profession—these need to have some shared foundation, for they are necessarily interlaced, and so we must find alternatives to the current model, which deprives the majority of individuals in the field a share in Olson and Moxley’s values of authority, control, and power. Although no single model can apply to all institutions, our experience at UCLA, discussed below, may be able to illustrate how one alternative model—a decentering of the WPA—allows for a collaborative structure, one that extends professional status throughout a program.

The WPA-centric Model: One Program’s Experience

Our faculty’s move to reorganize the UCLA program administratively derived from a shared perception that the Director’s position as it had come to exist allowed, even encouraged, the exclusion and silencing of the faculty. The situation we faced over a period of six years exemplifies how faculty exclusion can result not only from specific institutional conditions, nor from the authoritarian tendencies of any one individual occupying the office, but from the perception of the WPA position itself.

Indeed, at UCLA we suffered not from a single monomaniacal WPA ruling over us, but from a plethora of different WPAs—five successive Acting Directors, to be precise, all of whom saw themselves as serving in the stead of some Director-to-Be, some real Director who was to arrive imminently to take over the program. In this *Waiting for Godot* scenario, the faculty found themselves working for a phantom Director who, despite being nonexistent, nevertheless managed to exert extraordinary control over the program. No changes to program structure could be made, we were told, because change requires a Director's approval; no significant curricular innovations could be enacted, because innovations depend on a Director to innovate them. Each of our Acting Directors saw the Director's position as the seat of total program authority. The position itself thus rendered the faculty powerless and brought curricular renewal to a standstill. Faculty efforts to revitalize the program were perceived as a usurping threat to the position's authority. As a result, each Acting Director became responsible for protecting the status quo, which meant assuring the phantom Director that until he or she did arrive, the WPA office would be preserved with all its privileges and powers intact, and no change would ever occur. The simple fact of the Director's nonexistence would not be allowed to become an excuse for the faculty to assert itself. We were being led by the centralized WPA model, if not by a WPA.

As we continued to work under this centralized model, our faculty rights were increasingly curtailed, to the serious detriment of the program. Because (it was then assumed) the new Director would be a tenured professor of composition, the rest of us came to be seen as subordinates whose task it would be to carry out the agenda set by the Director. Under the sway of this perception (and very likely under the actual leadership of such a Director, were he or she to have materialized), we as a faculty continued to find our participation in the program severely restricted. Some of the more destructive effects that can result from this model are evident in our particular situation, but they are problems likely to be familiar to those who teach elsewhere under similar WPA-centric conditions.

Operating under the expectation of a centralized authority (because the new Director would have a tenured position), the program began to change in distressing ways. In the early years of the program, the faculty had an active role in and held real responsibility for the program. Committees were a major structural feature, and faculty members had their say through their committee participation. Faculty were encouraged, in fact required, to contribute to program development in the form of new courses and new curricula, developed through collaborative efforts. Over time, with some power to influence the shape and future of the program, we saw the faculty and the program prosper and grow. With the departure of the original Director and Executive Director and the arrival of the first of the Acting Directors, however, the reign of the bogeyman WPA began, and the flaws in the centralized model became increasingly apparent.

Throughout the search for a tenured Director, furthermore, it was assumed that the Director would be little involved with actually teaching our

courses because the position was perceived as professional, that is, traditionally academic; a Director's duties would be "above" such a teaching assignment. The Director would set policy and the instructors would carry it out, serving as the objects on which the Director's power would be inscribed. By logical consequence, the duties of a writing instructor were beneath directorial duties, and so involvement in policy issues came to be seen as outside the sphere of the faculty. Under the influence of these perceptions and assumptions, a rift began to develop between our caretaker administrators (the Acting Director and various assistants) and the teaching faculty. The administrators were increasingly caught up in service to the noumenal Director, keeping things on course, assuring that stasis ruled, tending the program's "directorial" issues, with the result that they did not teach, or taught sporadically. As the administrators removed themselves from courses and teaching, a blurring of academic/staff responsibilities ensued; teachers came to be perceived as not much more than undifferentiated units of staffing or objects of personnel decisions, and staffing and personnel decisions became the administrators' central concerns. This in turn allowed administrative assistants to develop an exaggerated importance in the program, usurping the faculty's role and eroding academic quality. The program's center became its administrative work, its purpose for existing to support its administration. Faculty moved to the periphery.

Predictably, faculty morale suffered due to this increasing exclusion from program decisions, the result of the perception of the Director, absent though he or she was, as the single professional voice of the program, bodily represented by the committee of caretaker administrators. Faculty saw little hold placed on administrators' actions, and thus paranoia and a fear of speaking out grew. With diminishing opportunities to speak and be heard, the faculty became cynical in its view of the program and its administrators, with predictably negative results. For one thing, the level of moonlighting increased dramatically, the result of disaffection and a diminished sense of loyalty to and investment in the program. Program development came to a halt; people were uninterested in working for an organization that denied them individual recognition, that seemed both to demean and absorb their labor for its own benefit while forbidding them to have any influence on the program. Motivation for professional involvement, scholarship, or publication decreased. The program's isolation from other campus bodies increased. The result was a deprofessionalizing of the faculty and, so, the discipline they represent.

Generalized Problems: Other Programs, Similar Results

This situation, though localized in its particulars, reflects the situation of many writing faculty nationwide. It is likely to occur wherever the centralized WPA model exists, which in turn is likely to be most schools with even a rudimentary writing program. Certainly non-tenure-track faculty are most often the ones unquestioningly excluded from program participation. But the lack of involvement may exist, with equally destructive effects, even within those

programs where the faculty consists of TAs or tenure-track and tenured professors.

In the case of a largely TA-staffed program, the problems arise from an assumption that is seen in the adjunct or temporary faculty situation as well, an assumption that invokes the "myth of the novice." The WPA is perceived as the seat not only of program authority but disciplinary authority; this authority derives from the position itself. Because the TA, like the adjunct and temporary instructor, does not hold a position of authority—a traditional appointment within the tenure system—he or she is considered a beginner outside the power system. In a hierarchy, outsiders are always perceived as both less powerful and less competent than those within the structure. Thus TAs, adjuncts, and temporary faculty are perceived as inexperienced and in need of direction, regardless of their scholarly preparation in the field, regardless of their years of experience in the classroom. Because they do not hold a professorial appointment within the power structure, they are doomed to an unending apprenticeship; since they are not among the masters, they can only be novices—for as long as their job titles require them to be seen so. They are thus excluded from full program participation and denied professional recognition due to their "inferior" status.

Obtaining professional participation and status therefore remains a struggle for such experienced non-tenure-track writing professionals. Ironically, however, such recognition (and thus program power) is easily accorded where the instructors are literature faculty, as in the case of writing programs whose faculties include tenure-track and tenured professors. In this structure, we see a reverse assumption of competence, again the result of the position held rather than any actual preparation in composition studies. William S. Robinson, bluntly criticizing hiring practices in composition and critiquing the language of the CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards, identifies the irony of the Statement's position that "it's fine that literature specialists teach composition courses; in fact, it's encouraged, though 'ideally' they should have some training in doing so" (347). The presence of a centralized WPA in departments who employ literature faculty in writing courses actually validates this very questionable practice of allowing so-called "professionals" to teach composition, even as it is the scenario in which WPAs are most likely to have limited authority and status. As Marcia Dickson points out,

In most schools, each faculty member possesses the right to determine the way they conduct their classes, the manner in which they grade, and to a certain extent, the content of their courses. In short, they function under a sort of tribal anarchy . . . [N]either chairs nor WPAs possess the absolute power to hire, fire, reward, or punish tenure-track faculty members who do not follow their administrative directives." (142)

In such circumstances, the presence of a centralized WPA clearly cannot guarantee a program's competence. The belief that such a structure enhances professionalism is a delusion, for it allows writing instruction to remain an idiosyncratic activity unconnected to a body of knowledge and carried out by

non-specialists, who nonetheless have power equal to the WPA's and greater than any non-tenure-track instructor's.

We continue to accept the wisdom of centering power in a WPA, however, because we assume that a program without a single, permanent director is in a weakened position, open to institutional pressure and lacking in continuity of professional leadership. We assume that a central WPA is necessary so that he or she can serve as a department's resource center for writing issues. In reality, though, this is often the way a department justifies not hiring sufficient writing professionals to staff its writing courses, instead using literature graduate students and faculty to do a composition job. The WPA develops the curriculum, orders the textbook, designs the course, and then hands it over to these typically untrained instructors, in effect dividing instructor from course material. Such a plan is objectionable on at least two counts. First, it abrogates the instructor's prerogative to design his or her own course, as the CCCC Committee on Professional Standards argued in their "Progress Report": "Many teachers of writing are denied a basic right inherent in academic freedom when they are ordered to teach from mandated syllabi and/or required texts" (335). Further, it assumes that disciplinary knowledge can reside in course material alone or in position alone. But one person, one WPA, cannot "give" knowledge to others via a prescribed syllabus, a pre-selected textbook, a set of assignments. Faculty involved in teaching composition should be trained, theoretically informed faculty, working together to develop a unified program that reflects their knowledge.

For these reasons, the tenured WPA model represented in texts such as the Portland Resolution and the Olson and Moxley article is not sufficient to ensure a truly professional writing program. We know that tenure alone cannot in all cases, perhaps not in most cases, endow a WPA with real power; he or she is all too often the only compositionist among an English department's regular faculty. In the ideal program—in a truly professional program—the intellectual agenda and authority would come from a synthesis of informed instructors and the program they develop—it would be a group, or collaborative, entity, in need of a spokesperson or liaison, perhaps, but not a single position assigned total curricular responsibility or autocratic power.

The Decentered WPA

The crisis in faculty rights as we experienced it at UCLA culminated in a call for an entirely different administrative structure and a redefined WPA. We had begun to doubt that the arrival of a tenured professor of composition was necessarily the best thing for our program. Turned down by the candidate we most desired to hire, we recognized that the situation had created an opportunity for an entirely new approach. We designed an administrative structure that de-emphasizes the Director's position and allows the faculty to share program authority. In this system, no one position or person occupies the center, as the

following guidelines outlined in our program plan ("UCLA Writing Programs in the 1990s") describe:

- The administrative structure will consist of both committees and individually held positions.
- The positions will rotate.
- At least some positions will be elected.
- There will be a process of administrative review (of both individual performance and program structure) (29).

These changes have served as steps in a democratizing process that enhances professionalism (the sharing of power, control and authority over the program) and thus program excellence.

Certainly, this decentered model flies in the face of dominant professional opinion. It does provide, however, a system that protects the faculty's voice by assuring administrative flexibility. The WPA holds a renewable position, similar to the chair's position in most departments, where the individual is nominated by the faculty and appointed by the dean, reviewed by all program colleagues, and, depending on review results, then reappointed or replaced. At the end of his or her service, the Director resumes his or her place within the faculty ranks. He or she (along with all other academic administrators) must teach the program's courses (and not the TA training course exclusively, but a range of the program's course offerings). The rift between teaching and administration can thus be avoided (or mended, where needed); the fear that the Director will be uninvolved in the program at its most fundamental level—its courses and students—is allayed. Administrative responsibility is spread out rather than condensed, allowing interested faculty to learn about the mechanics of program operations, debate budgetary decisions, and amend practices that threaten to distort the program's academic interests. Decentering the WPA and democratizing program administration gives all instructors a voice in program governance and professional responsibility for the program.

Conclusion

It seems time to acknowledge that some of the oppressive conditions writing teachers face come not only from the institutional values and practices of higher administration but from the WPA position itself. It seems time to take seriously Trimbur and Cambridge's call for "a revision of the current hierarchy," (17); to ensure, as they have urged, that professionalization does not "increase social distance among writing faculty and within writing programs" (16). We cannot in good faith endorse collaboration as a pedagogy and turn away from it as an administrative model. A model allowing for faculty rights and shared governance is the more promising route to professional excellence.

Finally, though, the strongest argument in defense of a decentered WPA is a political one: it is a democratic model. It places power in the hands of *all* faculty, giving them the means to influence the direction of the program they

form, and it supports continued program vitality by preventing the potentially calcifying effect of the Director-for-life model, where room for change is difficult to ensure.

It may be asking too much of already beleaguered WPAs to engage in such self-criticism and to cede to subordinates a share of whatever power they have attained, no doubt at high cost and through much effort. But we cannot let the struggle for professional status falter in a too-early stage of progress. The current center should not hold: power vested in one office or individual will not only not solve the professional problems that face us, but will actually continue the system of oppression that we ostensibly are trying to overcome. Improved conditions for the WPA is only one goal on the way to professional conditions for all of us.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Lynn Z. "I Want a Writing Director." CCC 43 (May 1992): 176-178.
- CCCC Executive Committee. "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing." CCC 40 (October 1989): 329-336.
- Dickson, Marcia. "Directing Without Power: Adventures in Constructing a Model of Feminist Writing Programs Administration." *Writing Ourselves Into the Story: Unheard Voice from Composition Studies*. Eds. Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1993; 140-153.
- Hult, Christine and the Portland Resolution Committee. "The Portland Resolution." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 16.1-2 (1992): 88-94.
- Janangelo, Joseph. "Somewhere Between Disparity and Despair: Writing Program Administrators, Image Problems, and the *MLA Job Information List*." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 15.1-2 (1991): 60-66.
- Olson, Gary A. and Joseph M. Moxley. "Directing Freshman Composition: The Limits of Authority." CCC 40 (February 1989): 51-59.
- "Progress Report from the CCCC Committee on Professional Standards." CCC 42 (October 1991): 330-344.
- Robinson, William S. "The CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards: A (Partly) Dissenting View." CCC 42 (October 1991): 345-349.
- Trimbur, John and Barbara Cambridge. "The Wyoming Conference Resolution: A Beginning." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 12.1-2(1988): 13-17.
- "UCLA Writing Programs in the 1990s." UCLA Writing Programs, June, 1992.
- White, Edward M. "Use it or Lose it: Power and the WPA." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 15.1-2 (1991): 3-12.