

Satires about life in the academy—Jane Smiley’s *Moo*, Richard Russo’s *Straight Man*—typically skewer members of central administration. On Jon Hassler’s fictional campus, the president believes that a good motto for his northern Minnesota state school is “Paul Bunyan’s alma mater,” and wonders what Bunyan’s fee might be when a faculty member facetiously suggests him for the commencement speaker. Robert Grudin in his biting *Book* defines administrators as those who fulfill the

*timeworn obligations of his profession: bullying his subordinates and cringing before his superiors, stifling talent and rewarding mediocrity, promoting faddishness and punishing integrity, rejecting the most impassioned and justified individual plea yet acquiescing to every whim of political interest; . . . shirking decisions and articulating such decisions as had to be made in memos so vague, oblique and circumnavigational as barely to deserve the name language.*  
(10)

Traditionally, administrators of writing programs have joined in the president-as-buffoon conversation, probably without reflecting much on the

*The  
Administrative  
Audience:  
A Rhetorical  
Problem*

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Joyce Kinkead and  
Jeanne Simpson

implications of doing so. Writing Program Administrators tend to continue to regard themselves primarily as faculty, perhaps without understanding the implications of the administrative role they have undertaken. We encourage WPAs to find the common ground they share with other administrators—to reckon with them.

As administrators ourselves—one at the college level and one in central administration—we would like to share what we have learned about the administrative audience, what we wish we had known when we were directors of writing centers and writing programs. Had we been more savvy about administrative rhetoric, we believe we could have negotiated more dollars, more space, more options for expanding and improving services. We naively assumed that because we directed programs that we saw as intrinsically “good” and ethical that support should flow to them from university coffers.

Rather than work against the institution, we need to acknowledge that we are part of the institution and can be effective change agents. Our success in writing programs can translate to success for the university at large. By communicating well with the administrative culture in the terminology of administration, we stand to gain resources and respect. For our purposes here, we will assume that the usual administrator is reasonable (we recognize that Darth Administrator does exist, but rarely) and also has funds that could be allocated to a writing program. As Diana George notes, administrators are “more interested in the workings of writing centers [and writing programs] than we think they are. Many are enlightened. Many want to work with us” (38).

How do we work with them? The first step is to understand administrative *culture*. WPAs know how to administer, how to “walk the walk,” but they may not achieve their rhetorical goals because they do not know how to “talk the talk.” The perception of WPAs as lacking administrative skill or experience may stem from their ignorance of the frames of reference higher level administrators use. To move closer to solving this problem, it is helpful to know some of the key terms that pepper a typical provost’s meeting. The following glossary includes the most important of these terms. Each institution will have others, often in the form of acronyms to be deciphered, that refer to processes and units unique to that place. Using this common language in reports and proposals written by the WPA is part of finding common ground. Following the glossary, we’ll talk how to use these terms as well as other strategies.

## Key Administrative Terms

*Student retention* refers to steady progress made toward degree. Before a student even enters the institution's doors, significant funding has been spent on the student. Consider the staffing required to handle student applications, loans, scholarships, registration, and housing. While students invest tuition dollars, on many public campuses, tuition does not begin to pay for the price of a student's education. Moreover, state support may not cover the cost of education either. (The standard joke is that state schools have moved from state-supported to state-assisted and finally to simply state-located.) Retaining students is much less expensive than maintaining enrollment through a constant revolving door of recent recruits offsetting high attrition. A strong retention rate also enhances reputation and generally correlates to shorter *time-to-degree*, another statistic used to evaluate institutional strength. Retention is the only route to a reliable alumni base for developing endowments, and keeping students is also important in other ways—the National Merit scholar who may be the university's best chance at a reputation-enhancing Rhodes Scholarship, or the athlete whose completion or non-completion affects graduation rates monitored by athletic association watchdogs. Retention rate is one of the institutional vital signs that all administrators attend to.

*Student attrition*, the flip side of retention, creates questions such as “why is this institution losing 50% of its students after the first year” and casts a shadow on the institution's efficacy and efficiency.

*Student credit hours* (SCH) is the essential figure on credit hours generated. State allocations are often indexed directly to student credit hour production, in combination with another member of administrative alphabet soup, *FTE*, or full-time equivalents. Although a headcount of students is taken, FTEs represent how many students would be enrolled if all of them took a full load. Thus, a university might have a *headcount* of 20,453 students but only 17,343 FTE. To calculate FTE, it is necessary to know what is considered a “full load” for a student. On a semester system, a student carrying 12 hours may be considered full-time; two students going to school part-time in such a system, each carrying about six credits, equal one FTE student. The 17,343 student FTE in our example would generate 208,116 student credit hours. Why is this number important? Because it is the basis for projecting tuition income and, in many instances, for determining the size of a state budget allocation. For that reason, programs that do not generate credit hours are regarded as cost liabilities. In order to

get support, such programs need to prove some other kind of cost effectiveness, such as contributing to a high retention rate. A program with a high cost per student credit hour produced may have to justify itself similarly.

The term FTE may also be applied to *faculty full-time equivalents*; for instance, someone who teaches half-time is considered .50 FTE faculty. A faculty member who teaches 24-27 credit hours (approximately 3 or 4 courses per semester) over the academic year might be defined as one FTE; thus if the writing program needs someone to teach 12 credit hours, a .50 FTE would be requested. Using the term faculty FTE encourages more efficient thinking about staffing needs than counting individual people. The cost per faculty FTE is the “exchange rate” in the economy of staffing plans. This approach is not intended to dehumanize faculty, though it may be perceived that way. Ultimately, all academic issues boil down to budget decisions, and if the goal is to encourage a beneficial decision, the first step is to use the language of budgets.

Understanding this terminology will help a WPA to see how the economics of the institution work. Some institutions distribute funds according to the number of student credit hours (SCH) generated so that a department that opts for teaching large-enrollment sections of courses may be rewarded financially while a writing program that maintains relatively small class sizes needs to look elsewhere for funding justification. One alternative “currency” is contact hours between faculty and students. However, in a standard, three-semester hour writing class, there is no particular advantage to using this measure of faculty productivity. A WPA may need to consider carefully which measure to use, to present the writing program in the most advantageous way. Fortunately, for most institutions, courses that teach good communication skills are bedrock foundation courses. Given that institutions know that employers seek graduates not only with good communication skills but also those who are problem solvers and computer literate, writing programs should be in the catbird seat. Another rationale for supporting writing programs is that composition courses may be the only small class a first-year student enrolls in—the one class in which a student does not feel lost in an uncaring, anonymous lecture hall—which has a direct effect on retention rates.

On occasion, an administrator may believe that money could be saved by cutting required writing courses, thinking, “Just look at all of the graduate teaching assistants and part-time instructors funded to staff this

program.” In point of fact, the writing program is one of the least expensive programs to fund since TA and part-time salaries tend to be lower than the average salary of a full-time, tenure-line faculty member. Or, conversely, an administrator might look at the relatively small number of seats in the average first-year writing course and wonder how the department can afford such a luxury. Using full-time, tenure-line faculty might indeed be beyond the department’s reach, but using temporary faculty with no obligation for research and service makes the small class size cost-effective. A tenure-line FTE costs upwards of \$35,000 (not including an additional 35% for benefits) while a temporary faculty FTE might cost \$28,000 or less.

We are not arguing that this kind of calculation is always appropriate, especially at a significant sacrifice of quality. However, a WPA needs to understand how this equation works and why it appeals to central administration. To make the case for an alternate staffing plan, a WPA needs to be able to demonstrate how a similar—or at least acceptable—cost-to-benefit ratio can be achieved in other ways. The WPA needs to realize the administrator up the line is going to ask, “Why shouldn’t I just hire a batch of part-timers?” And the WPA needs to have an answer framed in terms the administrator understands and uses.

*Productivity* is a legitimate concern for central administrators as public institutions feel pressure from funding agencies to produce the most students (which may be defined as completed degrees or as student credit hours) for the least cost. Productivity is often figured as SCH plus tuition plus faculty load. The institutional data officer will also calculate cost per SCH for each program, a calculation by which the writing program turns out to be a bargain. Legislators tend to care more about teaching than scholarship or research, not least because teaching loads are more easily quantified than research or service activities. They scrutinize faculty workload, also derived from FTE and SCH numbers. It is common these days for the media to report research taking a beating on the floor of state congress as a member asks, “why is our faculty spending time on researching the digestive system of bottle flies when they could be teaching more classes?” While productivity may have a factory connotation offensive to some faculty, the input-output construct is a fact of life for administrators answerable to external constituents and agencies.

*Mission statement* defines the goals of the institution. A land-grant institution, for instance, generally has an outreach or extension mission, which means providing service to the state at large, while universities

created under the normal school banner have a teacher education mission. Tying writing program goals to the mission statement is a savvy way to demonstrate that the program supports institutional goals. An institution's general education program may feature its own mission statement (also supporting the larger statement), and its goals usually are integral to those of the writing program. In fact, the WPA is a logical person to sit on any general education oversight committee. Taking a page from other units, it is wise for the writing program itself to have its own mission statement as administrators will immediately recognize this familiar concept. If possible, a WPA also should draw on language from the region's accreditation handbook. (For example, the writing program "identifies student competencies, sequences its courses, provides synthesis of learning, and assesses learning outcomes." From *Commission on Colleges Accreditation Handbook*, Northwest region.)

*Assessment* is required for accreditation by regional and national bodies. The WPA organization has been clever to establish its own review and campus visit protocol—again, a recognizable process valued by administrators.

The larger institution has a plethora of assessment data to gather; however, writing programs are responsible primarily for *program review*—in brief, is the program achieving its goals and objectives? This means that the WPA and any governing committee are responsible for defining program objectives, putting them in place, reviewing effectiveness, and then revising as needed.

Assessment is typically one of the weak points of writing programs. Numerical assessments of student writing skills are notoriously crude, and qualitative methods may be perceived as too subjective. Even so, central administrations frequently experience strong pressure to use assessment to document "value added" or "productivity." The demand for assessment of programs means that WPAs must consider how they will address assessment issues.

Accreditation teams that visit a campus determine if there is evidence that students who take required writing courses or engage in writing across the curriculum (WAC) program really are better writers at mid-career and end-of-career. If there is no WAC program, then students might show gains in writing skill from first year to mid-career and then show losses in skill by graduation. Administrators may be surprised to learn that writing courses do not inoculate the student for the entire undergraduate career and that

writing skills may actually atrophy if not reinforced and expanded to include disciplinary discourse conventions. In fact, administrators may blame the writing program for declining writing skills among students unless they understand this concept.

According to accreditation standards, the responsibility for program development and assessment is vested in the faculty, but the WPA has the responsibility to see that these tasks get done. Knowing the assessment methods and formats used in the rest of the institution, and especially by central administration, can help the WPA to guide the process and prevent faculty from pursuing dead ends. The unique assessment problems of writing programs should be made clear but with due attention as well to the institution's common assessment models.

*Accountability* refers to reports to off-campus authorities or stakeholders, such as the institution's governing board, the state governing body, the commissioner for higher education, the governor, or the legislature. Given the erosion in public trust and respect for universities, accountability receives increasing emphasis. The WPA can join in the cause to regain public trust by contributing information and narratives about successes. This activity may vary from "hometown news" releases about students who win writing awards to public readings of stellar first-year essays, from bulleted reports to the department chair and dean to invited presentations before governing boards.

Administrators use these terms frequently. Their meanings are well-understood and so embedded that, as with a nation's currency, everyone is expected to know how to use them and how they relate to each other.

## **Words in Action**

Using a vocabulary recognizable by administrators is one part of solving the rhetorical problem of communicating with administrators. WPAs need to study the data, politics and protocols of their institutions. Giving evidence of being an uninformed amateur can end your efforts to get support suddenly and prematurely. Another way to fail is to submit a document blotched with errors; writing professionals are held to a higher standard of correctness. In brief, proofread carefully. Likewise, be sure to calculate your own data accurately, drawing on institutional planning and research facilities. Make friends with the chief information officer (at least know the correct title and the name of the incumbent); obtain a copy of the university's annual data report—a volume too often unfamiliar to faculty.

Educate yourself about budget lines and the rules regarding them. Be aware of any constraints such as freeze dates or rules about transferring from one budget category to another. (Some universities offer primers about institutional rules, perhaps in a code, in a department head handbook, or through on-site workshops. Harvard and Higher Education Resource Services [HERS]—an organization that promotes women in administrative roles—offer summer workshops focused on understanding institutional finances for those interested in administrative careers. Year long fellowships in administration that encourage a macro view of the institution are sponsored by the American Council on Education.)

An isolated WPA is a WPA ineffective at getting resources and support. Find out who is doing what on your campus that might dovetail with the writing program in order to combine efforts with others and avoid duplication of efforts. For instance, if your department seeks an undergraduate major in writing, a likely question will be “how does this duplicate what the Communication department is already doing” or “how is this similar to the corporate communications major in Business.” Making friends with colleagues in other departments also means finding allies who will support proposals when they come before institutional curriculum committees.

Perhaps the most important advice for getting what you want as a WPA addresses the format of documents you send forward. Consider that 80% of an administrator’s day is scheduled, which leaves precious little time for reading. As a result, administrators value proposals—not essays or editorials—that are short, communicate effectively, use graphs, figures, and lists. The subtext of the proposal is “I am a team player; we can help each other; we have mutual goals.” Data should be pictured graphically; for instance, a writing center that wants to expand its funding sources might use one pie chart to demonstrate that majors using its services come from Arts & Sciences (40%), Education (30%), Technology (20%), and Business (10%) while in a second chart, funding sources are defined as Arts & Sciences (85%) and all others (15%). Clearly the message here is that the writing center serves a university-wide audience and should receive funds from central allocation. Or, a retention bar chart might demonstrate that students who use the writing center are more likely to stay in college than those who do not.

The proposal should be worded in such a way that administrators have reasons to say “yes” to the request. Any project that results in tangible

success stories—bragging rights for them—has a greater likelihood of being funded. Consider that a president, provost, or dean spends considerable time in fund-raising activities and needs academic “stories” and big dreams to share with potential donors. It’s the WPA’s job to provide content for these stories and dreams to the administrator and give her the opportunity to make the school and the program look good. If the administrator cannot say yes at the moment, then she may be able to say yes later if the proposal includes a plan for stages of development, including seed money for year one, increasing over a five-year period. Or, the plan might include viable alternatives, offering three options, so the administrator may choose the one most attractive or most fundable at the moment.

Even if the proposal does not earn a yes the first time, a WPA should not give up a good idea. Not being able to say yes is not the same as saying a final, definitive no. A good proposal should be kept “on the table” with regular revision and submission.

We often find that administrators have neither time nor patience to read beyond page one, but if a report must be longer than that, then it is wise to begin with an executive summary (again, no longer than one page). Bullet points (e.g., • the writing program introduced on-line instruction) offer essential kernels of information not to be overlooked. Headings provide signposts for the reader and make the document easy to follow. Likewise, the title should be written in such a way to make the document easy to file—and then easy to find. The focus of a document should be simple, especially if it is a request for funds. A request for money buried in a 20-page document is unlikely to be fulfilled. Exact figures for funds should be used whenever possible, and relevant institutional policies and reports should be cited with date and page.

WPAs particularly should be sensitive to the issue of *chain of command*. Making “end runs” is frowned upon in the academy, and on some campuses is a “capital” offense. Thus, any report or proposal may pass through departmental curriculum committees, department chairs/heads, deans, college curriculum committees, provosts/vice-presidents. Not only does this process follow the communication links, it also builds support for the request as each group or body approves. Knowing the chain of command helps the WPA identify the persons who need to be lobbied for support. Not following chain of command can have disastrous results. One dean told us the story of a faculty member who went around him to make a request of the provost, a request that did not fit in college priorities but was

funded centrally; as the dean ended the story, he added, “doesn’t he know that I can hurt him?” The perils of end runs.

This group of committees and administrators will include a variety of audiences with multiple interests and priorities. They should be kept in mind as you collect data, process it, and then write it up. What do they not know? Why should they support your ideas and requests? Does any of them have a vested interest in NOT supporting your proposal? Why? How could you change the situation to make it more advantageous?

Given the chain of command, a proposal may take some time to travel through this process, so planning ahead and knowing dates for requests is also important. For instance, on some campuses, annual budget requests for the fiscal year following the upcoming one are made in March; yes, that’s a two-year lead time for requests for state funds. Last minute or late budget requests generally go to the bottom of the priority list, and being late or untimely with requests creates a negative impression. And a realistic understanding of the budget process allows a WPA to do effective planning.

College-level administrators typically need ideas for budget requests, especially for programmatic requests. The format for proposals may be rigid, but models should be available in departmental or college offices. Keep in mind that *new* programs are more likely to be funded than ongoing programs, and no administrator wants to sink money into a weak or dying enterprise, so the language should always focus on how a program is strong or adds value to the institution or to the curriculum.

As you prepare proposals, think big and for the long term as well as considering immediate, smaller scale needs. Nickel-and-dime requests often disappear in the shadow of more glamorous, big-ticket items. A good rule of thumb is to ask for everything you want, know what is not really essential so you can revise your plan quickly, and then take what you can get and build on it. Have some proposals ready to revise up or down quickly.

### **Training Your Staff to Use “Admin-Speak”**

Using cases with program staff and committees or in the graduate courses offered to doctoral students looking to careers in writing program administration can help identify problems, avenues for resolution, and routes for requests. Rather than waiting for the next request to come along, by discussing cases, the staff can anticipate problems, share solutions, and plan for improved writing program practice. The efficacy of cases allows

staff to exchange ideas and also rehearse administrative talk. Cases may range from how to deal with ethical situations (e.g., plagiarism, harassment) to how to position the program for fund-raising. We offer the following case—a request for technology proposals asap—for discussion in staff meetings. In doing so, we use the term *staff* rather loosely, acknowledging that a center's staff may vary from undergraduate to graduate students, from paraprofessionals to volunteers. Consequently, appropriate topics for the case depend on the type of staff. And, in fact, members of the staff may write cases at year's end for use in future meetings.

As WPA at Upstate Tech University (UTU), you are frustrated to see funding and overhead monies lavished on the engineering and science colleges as they get cutting-edge equipment. Meanwhile, your writing program/center has a dozen outdated computers whose drives goes "clunk, whirr, sputter." What you would really like is increased space with more and newer computer stations so that the students enrolled in writing courses could use word processing, e-mail, software that promotes classroom interchanges and oral presentations. Your department head has just heard that UTU will receive some one-time monies from the state legislature earmarked for technology. Of course, the deans of science and engineering assume that it will come their way. As WPA, how do you go about getting part of the technology pie? At the college level—your department is housed within the College of Liberal Arts—the Dean determines how the college allotment will be parceled out while the provost divides the funds among the colleges. In an emergency writing staff meeting, you ask your colleagues how to position the writing program to channel part of the funds to the long-dreamed-of computer addition.

When we have used this case with our own staffs, they have enthusiastically brain stormed, coming up with the following ideas:

- if a foundation has not already been laid to establish university allies, it may be fruitless to apply; have interdepartmental alliances been formed?
- read and review the legislative document and use its language in any request;
- use key words from the institution's strategic plan (e.g., retention, computer literacy);
- structure the request so it is clear that it is not only the writing program that will benefit from the new computer addition but that

- it will also have an impact university-wide;
- stress the benefits of a new writing computer room to engineering and science colleges;
  - suggest that a student from science or engineering will be employed as technical support;
  - provide data with a breakdown of student majors enrolled in the writing program;
  - demonstrate that electronic classroom could help the university overall with desktop publishing applications;
  - survey faculty computer needs and assess student need by working with director of computer services;
  - demonstrate how this request will provide seed funding that allows the writing program to seek additional extramural funds;
  - bring in outside consultants to help develop a vision statement for the program;
  - compare the program to “peer” institutions to demonstrate we are falling behind our competitors; or, conversely, show how the program has national status but is in danger of losing that if new program is not approved;
  - show that this is a cost-efficient plan—that the committee has discarded more expensive proposals;
  - if the department or college is financially able, suggest matching funds;
  - draw on national studies or alumni surveys that show computer skills need to be emphasized;
  - gather statistics on the writing program (e.g., SCHs) and develop a multi year plan;
  - avoid whining.

The brainstorming approach developed a strong selection of options for our imaginary WPA while providing practice in honing “admin-speak.” The same process can be used for actual circumstances, allowing the WPA to draft written requests built on the suggestions generated once the group understands the administrative audience.

### **The Common Ground: Stable or Volatile?**

At any one time, states vary in their financial stability; some institutions may be downsizing (or “right-sizing” as it is euphemistically

termed) while others are facing enrollment surges. Still others are changing institutional personality and philosophy, some turning to a corporatization of academe. For the WPA, it is important, in flush times or hard times, to report consistently on the writing program's work and to make requests for support. Even in financially-difficult times, unforeseen opportunities may arise.

Harold Shapiro, President of Princeton, believes that the central administration exists to "serve and to lead," freeing the faculty of "administrative chores" (74). He recalls, though, President (of Princeton) Woodrow Wilson's analysis of college faculties as "sometimes touched with as much sensitiveness and personal jealousy as church choirs" (82). In other words, satires of faculty and faculty life can be as biting as those of administrators. The tension between the two worlds exists, in part, because of a language barrier. WPAs stand on the boundary between them, often implementing administration policy and transmitting faculty concerns, and therefore have a significant opportunity to improve communication and to diminish the stereotypes and perceptions that cause so much frustration. We suggest that WPAs need to be translators and mediators, and to do so, they need to know the terminology and values of administration as well as those of faculty.

Even when faculty present rhetorically savvy requests, additional funding may not be forthcoming. A WPA may do everything right and still not get needed support—even if the administrator is sympathetic. Perhaps it is the year that the chemistry program needs federally-mandated safety equipment or health insurance costs skyrocket. The university must respond to multiple needs simultaneously.

When do we know that the WPA has been an effective communicator? When the provost supports funding for a new communication across the curriculum program. When the department head understands that the new writing center director must be a tenure-track position, not a staff position. When the computers in the writing lab are upgraded or replaced every four years. When the faculty senate supports an increased writing requirement in general education. When the president invites the WPA to make a presentation at the governing board meeting. When the development officer offers a naming opportunity for the writing program. When the dean turns down a new writing position request regretfully.

As WPAs we have the opportunity to shape and reshape the institution

in ways that matter. We share with presidents and vice presidents the responsibility to “serve and lead.”

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