

Getting fired tends to be something WPAs talk about in private rather than in public, though the firing narrative—perhaps it is a disciplinary genre—tends to be immediately recognizable. A WPA just out of graduate school steps on a dean’s toes by suggesting that perhaps first-year writing classes are too large; a writing center director’s long view of student development unsettles the university president who, owing to pressure from the state legislature, wants “immediate, measurable results” each semester. Off, then, with the WPA’s head. The WPA, bloodied, tries to show that he or she is unbowed by getting another job or contesting the dismissal. The circumstances that actually caused that dismissal remain largely undiscussed, in part because they are often difficult to pinpoint for certain, and in part because WPAs—their field being, after all, rhetoric—tend to be careful about making claims without evidence.

Yet for other faculty, getting fired has been the subject of public discussion for some time, due in part to the American Association of University Professors’ (AAUP) articulation of criteria and standards for academic freedom and tenure. In this essay I explore some of the historical reasons why, academic freedom and tenure notwithstanding, retaliation against WPAs remains rather invisible as well as rather commonplace. I also suggest that despite our continuing feelings of “otherness,” our habit of seeing ourselves as “handmaids to our institutions” and sites of exploitation (Janangelo 12), there is actually a good deal of historical connection between many WPAs’ and writing teachers’ present job circumstances and the circumstances that prompted the founding and activism of the AAUP; that connec-

Fighting Across the Curriculum: The WPA Joins the AAUP

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tion has, however, been lost to our sight as other disciplines have gained (or maintained) ascendancy over composition and rhetoric. In this essay I try to re-establish it. I hope to show how some local circumstances—my own—perhaps foreground some lost history, history that might help WPAs think about at least one possibility for action in the area of their own job security.

Some Local (and Personal) History

In 1994, I was hired into a tenure-track position as director of freshman writing and writing across the curriculum at Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU). Prior to my appointment, the WPA position had been held for several years by a children's literature specialist who had managed to establish an extensive WAC program bolstered by a University Senate bill. However, despite her success as WPA—or perhaps because of it—my predecessor remained committed to returning to full-time teaching in her field, as everyone else who had previously held the position had done. Faculty across the disciplines, as well as outside reviewers, felt that the scope of the new WAC program justified the creation of a new faculty line in the English Department for someone with a commitment to working in composition.

Things went swimmingly for that someone—me—until the spring of 1995, despite some problems of the kind Thomas Recchio and Lynn Z. Bloom have described as initiation rites for new WPAs. I did not, for example, receive the secretarial support I understood the administration to have promised me in my job negotiations, and my computer was a semester late in arriving. Furthermore, consistent with Gary A. Olson and Joseph M. Moxley's reflections on the WPA and the limits of authority, I did not have control over the hiring of freshman writing instructors—a number of whom were tenured, full-time members of the English Department—though I was usually consulted by the department chair about the appointment of part-time faculty. However, I was working well with the cross-disciplinary University Writing Board and the rest of the WAC faculty, and was managing to interest members of my department—all of whom were literature specialists, but most of whom taught writing courses as well—in new developments in the field of composition. Furthermore, I had with the faculty's support started a new peer tutor program and piloted a training course in composition theory for those tutors, a course which has since become a permanent part of the English Department's curriculum.

Around the middle of my first year, however, the Connecticut State University system had a good deal of its funding cut by the state legislature,

and noises were made about raising class sizes in writing-intensive courses, noises which I responded to publicly. Furthermore, I came under some pressure to replace our in-house writing placement test with standardized testing, another move I publicly opposed. Then, in December 1995, my reappointment—in most cases a formality—was quashed by a member of the higher administration, with no reasons given, even though it had been enthusiastically recommended by both the English Department and the dean of Arts and Sciences. The university president upheld this administrator's decision, so as of May 1996 I would, as things then stood, be out of a job.

At that time, then, I began to work with our faculty union, the ECSU chapter of the AAUP, to get my nonrenewal decision overturned. (AAUP is in itself not a labor union, though it sometimes functions as a collective bargaining agent; see *Policy Documents and Reports*, 215-33.) Our chapter president felt that there had been possible academic freedom, and therefore procedural, violations because my nonrenewal appeared to have been based on my refusal to change the writing placement test. Several months earlier, immediately following a meeting in which I'd spoken against standardized testing, I had been peremptorily summoned to the office of the higher administrator who later refused to support my renewal; there I was told that "this university cannot afford negative people," that the WAC program had to justify its existence, and that I should strongly consider changing the placement testing procedure and implement pre- and post-testing procedures without consulting the University Writing Board (which oversees such matters).¹ My refusal to make these changes was based in large part on research in the field of composition—specifically, assessment and WAC. Hence, our AAUP president felt my nonrenewal violated an academic freedom. The union and I requested an extension of time to file a grievance contesting my nonrenewal—a formality when an alleged contractual violation takes place between semesters. Following that request, discussion with union representatives, and written protests over my nonrenewal from faculty within and outside of my department, the university president reversed his decision and renewed my appointment.

I'm still here, having just received tenure in Spring 2000.

Some Organizational (and Parallel) History

What I believe happened to me in December of 1995 was not all that unusual, though retaliation tends, as I have already said, to be something WPAs talk about in private rather than in public. At the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Milwaukee several months after these events, I gave a talk in which I made reference to my disagree-

ments with the ECSU administration and subsequent nonrenewal, and was struck by the way the circumstances I described seemed to hit home with the audience and my co-presenters: one audience member shared the bare bones of a similar situation, and one of my co-presenters commented, "You know, this happens all the time." I felt as if there was some relief in my having broached a taboo subject, though one that is burned into the consciousness of WPAs as well as other members of the English profession. When I was on the job market, an MLA official cautioned me against taking a tenure-track position as a writing program director for the simple reason that, unlike other assistant professors, untenured WPAs don't have the luxury of keeping quiet and not saying what they think. When one has program responsibilities, one has to take positions and to do so publicly. And research in the field of composition and rhetoric has given WPAs many reasons to take positions against, for example, reductive assessment procedures, invalid placement procedures, preexistent course syllabi, and larger curricular requirements that do not reflect attention to the way students actually learn to write over time.

What is ironic is that those who potentially risk the most by exhibiting and applying their knowledge in their discipline—i.e., untenured WPAs and other untenured faculty with administrative responsibilities—are also the least protected by that which protects other faculty who do the same thing, albeit in the context of research or classroom teaching: the idea of academic freedom, as it has been articulated and is presently understood. The history of the AAUP, and the university structure that set that history in motion, goes a long way toward explaining why. In 1913, a letter went out from members of the Johns Hopkins University faculty to professors at nine other universities, suggesting that a professional organization be formed to advance the "institutional and societal interests" of faculty across the disciplines. Two years later, with 650 professors as charter members, the AAUP was established. One of the issues that brought these faculty together was, as might be expected, academic freedom: the American Economic Association, American Political Science Association, and American Sociological Society had been investigating what seemed to be the politically motivated dismissal of their members from institutions (Hofstadter and Metzger 442-43; Warren 696). These founders of the AAUP felt that a concerted joint effort of faculty across the disciplines was needed to counteract what seemed to be a pattern of punishing professors for the public expression of certain economic, religious, and political views (Metzger, "The First Investigation" 206-07).

Of course, academic freedom was not the only problem facing professors at the end of the nineteenth century. Another fighting issue for

the AAUP was “the inadequacy of the rewards, especially the pecuniary rewards” available to college faculty, and of even greater concern was the gradual increase between 1869 and 1908 in the number of faculty members on probationary appointments. During those years, writes Walter P. Metzger, “the proportion of full professors on the nation’s faculties had shrunk from two-thirds to one-fifth, whereas the proportion of instructors and assistant professors had gone up from one-fifth to one-third” (“Origins of the Association” 231). In what sounds remarkably like a recent description of the lot of the teacher of writing and/or the overworked WPA, Metzger describes the quandary of “the typical assistant professor” at this time:

Typically, his [*sic*] primary function was to relieve his seniors of the burden of elementary instruction and the tedium of examination grading; at the same time, he was obliged to carry on his own research in order to qualify for promotion. But, typically, he did not know when that promotion would be considered, since the length of the probationary period had not been stipulated, and the ultimate decision, when arrived at, was likely to be made by the department head, whose judgment might be capricious but whose recommendatory word was often law. [. . .]

The system [. . .] exploited and retarded apprentice scholars in the very years when they were asked to prove their worth. (“Origins” 233)

One of the reasons for this burgeoning of junior faculty positions was the transformation of the American university after 1870 from an embodiment of the liberal arts tradition to a more compartmentalized institution based on the German model. This transformation gradually caused academic departments to become more and more isolated from one another, an isolation which in turn resulted in a more hierarchical organization for the departments themselves. As John C. Brereton points out, after 1870 “professors immersed themselves in their studies or laboratories to produce research, the disciplines organized themselves on scholarly rather than pedagogical lines, and universities slowly abandoned much low-level teaching to an underclass of instructors and graduate student assistants” (5).

Changes in the idea and structure of the American university caused not only a disparity between the working conditions of senior professors and those of their junior colleagues, but also a rift between faculty and

administration. Prior to 1869, universities had been governed, as Metzger puts it, “en famille,” due primarily to the fact that administrators as well as faculty were clergymen with “a shared religious purpose, a common pedagogic function, [and] a similar intellectual background” (“Origins” 235). However, increasing specialization, coupled with a dramatic increase in the number of undergraduate students, led to an increase in enrollment in graduate programs, producing a larger and more heterogeneous faculty: between 1883 and 1913, the number of university professors in the United States more than tripled (Brereton 7; Metzger, “Origins” 231). These professors, furthermore, were increasingly more loyal to their disciplines, and less loyal to their institutions, as the arbiters and determiners of truth; in the late nineteenth century, clerical furor over Darwin’s theory of evolution had eroded scientists’ confidence in the ability of the clergy who still headed colleges and universities to “control the dominion of knowledge” (Hofstadter and Metzger 350; see also 320-66). The scientific method (and, eventually, discipline-based methods of inquiry generally) replaced the clergy and the board of trustees as the ultimate reference point for validity in academic inquiry; what constituted truth—insofar as truth could be known—was now, academics felt, determined by disciplines and their growing bodies of knowledge.

Faced, then, with larger faculties, the members of which no longer had that much in common, university presidents “abandoned teaching and research to concentrate on administration: the cleavage of academe into two vocations ended the harmony of a shared routine” (Metzger, “Origins” 235). This “cleavage” became more pronounced when presidents proceeded to delegate authority to vice presidents and deans, thereby moving farther away from the faculty and their concerns. As a result, presidents and faculty began to look on each other with a good deal of suspicion:

[W]ith the delegation of executive authority to a graded lieutenantancy of deans, the relations of the president to the faculty became less direct and more impersonal. Separation, if it did not automatically create hostility, did create discordant self-perceptions. [. . .] the president, perched atop a hierarchy, was likely to regard the faculty as subordinates to whom he could state wishes as commands. But the faculty, as it gained prominence in the specialties, was likely to regard the president, who was a specialist in nothing but administration, as organizationally very powerful but academically second-

class. [. . .] the stage was set for that clash of expectancies, that divorce of legitimacy from power, that has troubled faculty-administration relationships to this very day. (Metzger, "Origins" 235)

Administrators, then, in an attempt to curry favor with a faculty that was becoming increasingly hostile to them, left departments to themselves: "[Administrations] recognized the need to demarcate certain institutional provinces where the professional spirit could be accommodated and which the professional man [*sic*] could call his own. Thus, they recognized the classroom as the teacher's sanctuary and fenced it off from administrative patrol" (Metzger, "Origins" 235). Faculty, in turn, began to see themselves by definition as other than administrators.

Connections and Disconnections

The first three of the aforementioned historical circumstances—arbitrary dismissal, indefinite probation, and the founding of the AAUP—resulted, ultimately, in the tenure system as we know it. From 1915 until 1940, and in collaboration with the Association of American Colleges (AAC) and other professional organizations, the AAUP worked to develop a statement of policies and procedures on academic freedom and tenure; in 1940, and after negotiation and some compromise, the statement was adopted by both the AAC and the AAUP (Hofstadter and Metzger 474-90; AAUP 3-7). Though colleges and universities seldom granted the policy "official" status—by incorporating it into their bylaws, for example—it nevertheless became *de facto* policy at most American colleges and universities, where administrators as well as faculty saw the need for a uniform agreement on probationary periods and tenure rules (Hofstadter and Metzger 474-90).

What became the standard practice articulated in the 1940 statement—tenure, after a probationary period—was, of course, justified in part by the assumption that it would guarantee academic freedom, defined as freedom in responsible, informed teaching and research within one's discipline. In the statement, academic freedom and tenure are presented as having a reciprocal relationship: "Tenure is a means to certain ends: specifically [. . .] freedom of teaching and research" (AAUP 3). However, due to the widening gap between administration and faculty—and what Metzger describes as administrators' desire to "demarcate certain institutional provinces which the professional man could call his own"—the concept of academic freedom articulated by the statement was circumscribed by the boundaries of the classroom, the library, and the academic

journal or book: “Teachers,” says the statement,

are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties. [. . .]

Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject. [. . .] Limitations of freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in *writing* at the time of the appointment. (AAUP 3)

Nowhere within the statement is there a sense that academic freedom exists beyond the bounds of the classroom or the research article—e.g., in a meeting between someone who directs a writing program and a higher-level administrator; in the pages of a faculty handbook articulating how to develop a writing-intensive course; in a faculty senate meeting arguing for the merits of the current placement-testing system vs. standardized testing. In other words, academic freedom does not exist in the halls, where WPAs do much of their work. That composition studies—of which writing program administration is a subfield—evolved differently from, and at a different time than, other disciplines undoubtedly has much to do with the omission of the halls from the university’s free spaces. The idea of academic freedom itself, however, is probably more to blame: based in part on the German concepts of *Lernfreiheit* and *Lehrfreiheit*—freedoms, loosely translated, to learn and to teach—it meant freedom from “administrative coercion” (Hofstadter and Metzger 383-412). And the very thing a WPA tries to do in the halls, of course, is influence what goes on in the classroom.²

Where to Go Next

This activity does not, however, necessarily make the WPA an administrator in the same sense that deans and college presidents are administrators. Though WPAs have managerial and administrative duties and often hold administrative appointments—hence, as one reviewer of this piece pointed out to me, the “A” in WPA—I would argue, as has the WPA Council, that the difference between a WPA and a dean or a higher-level manager is that WPA work, like the work of more traditional academic disciplines, is grounded in research and scholarship and is ultimately intellectual and pedagogical rather than managerial (“Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administration”). WPAs should, therefore, be entitled to academic freedom in the halls when, to borrow

and modify Christine A. Hult's formulation, they apply disciplinary and theoretical knowledge to solve curricular and programmatic problems (120). Unfortunately, WPAs weren't around at the end of the nineteenth century, when the terms "faculty member" and "administrator" were in the process of being defined; if they had been, they might have been able to promote a wider view of where freedom of research, teaching, and inquiry should take place. (WPAs are good at such things.) Admittedly, sometimes WPA work is, yes, just managerial; it would be helpful if the complexities of WPA positions—as described throughout Tim Peeples's fine essay, "'Seeing' the WPA With/Through Postmodern Mapping," on the shifting roles of the WPA—were immediately apparent all day, every day. Postmodernity notwithstanding, however, university politics and the realities of labor law often require that WPAs be defined—and therefore define themselves—as one thing or another; so the faculty/administration split that began not so long before the establishment of the tenure system, and that continues to widen today, effectively bars academic freedom for WPAs unless the WPA is—as I have been—a faculty member in an AAUP chapter with status as a collective bargaining unit and a good deal of power on campus.

The push in composition studies has been for WPAs to establish themselves more firmly within the faculty camp, and, therefore, take some of the precariousness out of their strangely dual roles, by presenting their work as intellectual; this has proved, needless to say, an ongoing and difficult task. As Hult's "The Scholarship of Administration" and the document on the intellectual work of the WPA make clear, composition specialists must continually labor to redefine their work so it will be understood and valued adequately as *faculty* work: "WPAs," Hult observes, "need to do a better job of persuading others in the academy of the scholarly merit of the work we are engaged in" (120). Doing a better job might ultimately—the argument implies—result in more faculty appointments for WPAs, more promotion and tenure, and less frequent occurrences of the firing narrative.

I wonder, however, if it really would. Tenure, for one thing, does not always prevent removal from WPA duties: a tenured WPA could, for example, be returned to full-time teaching and see his or her program taken away. It seems that, in order for the stories WPAs tell to change, faculty in other disciplines might have to begin seeing work done in the halls as the same as work done in the classroom: as, in other words, something that needed to be protected for everybody's good. And this kind of vision is rare. If I might revert back, for a moment, to personal narrative: during my nonrenewal proceedings, the officials of our AAUP chapter with whom I worked—a biologist and a sociologist—saw my

case as a potentially successful academic freedom grievance. However, its potential was never tested; I received renewal papers without actually going to grievance. I have since been appointed to the Connecticut State University Academic Freedom Panel, and similar cases have suggested that very traditional views of academic freedom (e.g., if it's in the classroom, it's protected; if it's not, it's not) still prevail.

There are, of course, many arenas in which WPAs—and perhaps the Council of Writing Program Administrators—should work to better the lot of WPAs generally. I would argue that one of these is AAUP, because of AAUP's historical—and continuing—commitment to protecting disciplinary expertise, and because of the fact that our current circumstances mirror those that prompted the founding of the organization in 1915. We have, in addition to all our other ongoing and difficult jobs, some catching up to do, some blanks to fill in. Here are some suggestions:

- When AAUP President James Perley, a biologist, addressed the 1997 WPA Conference at Michigan Tech after having sat in on sessions for two days, he commented not only on the validity of writing program administration's claim to disciplinaryity but also on the fact that, before coming to the conference, he had known very little about that discipline. Individual WPAs might be more vigilant about requesting AAUP investigations when they feel their disciplinary prerogatives have been violated. By requesting investigations, we might bring the existence of our discipline *as a discipline* to the attention of a national organization of faculty in other fields, who can then begin to see our work in a larger context than its immediate institutional one. We can then begin cross-disciplinary dialogues about where our common interests lie.
- Members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators might talk with AAUP Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure about how the Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure might be rethought to accommodate such disciplines as our own, which have evolved since the last time the statement was revised. The 1940 statement is predicated on a faculty/administration divide that may need to be reconsidered in light of

the way certain disciplines—e.g., composition—not only apply but also construct knowledge.

- WPAs might be aware that AAUP also concerns itself with such matters as due process, curriculum, and governance, not simply with academic freedom (see, for instance, AAUP, *Policy Documents and Reports* 177-213). If the Council of Writing Program Administrators is unable to expand the definition of academic freedom, WPAs might consider asking for more investigations in these other areas when they feel retaliation has taken place without just cause.
- Those of us in unions—AAUP or other—might become more knowledgeable about whether our contracts define us as faculty or administration, and work to change those aspects of our contracts that might endanger our jobs if we exercise our disciplinary judgment. If our contracts classify us as faculty, we might also work to demonstrate solidarity with other faculty members by taking active roles in our unions (e.g., becoming grievance officers), demonstrating good faith with other faculty and thereby initiating dialogue about what we have in common with them. Such issues as class size, for example, and exploitation of part-timers are concerns not only of WPAs but of other faculty, as well (AAUP 50-61).
- Since—as Marcia Dickson has pointed out—WPAs are sometimes perceived as threatening individual faculty members' academic freedom, we might point out organizational and theoretical work in our field that preserves that freedom (271-72). Barbara Walvoord's work in WAC, for example, stresses the importance of cross-disciplinary dialogue in WAC curriculum development and has recently called into question the notion of the WPA as missionary; the Spring 1998 issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, guest-edited by Jeanne Gunner, gathers into one place our discipline's recent thoughts on administration, collaboration, and authority. Furthermore, those of us who have been working to develop the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year

Composition are also developing supporting materials that suggest how the Outcomes Statement might be used to help writing programs articulate common goals while allowing a variety of individual approaches to the first-year composition course itself; such materials might be used to demonstrate our discipline's commitment to individual instructors' autonomy in the classroom (Harrington, et al.).

Obviously, AAUP is only one organization with which we might work to better our working lives. But I think it is one with which we need to work because historically it has had a good deal to do with how disciplinary expertise is perceived, honored, and protected. In any case, working with a cross-disciplinary organization may help us feel less isolated. After my nonrenewal debacle, I got myself elected to the ECSU-AAUP union council, and when I get together with my colleagues in other disciplines and discuss the matters we discuss—class sizes, hiring policies, promotion and tenure practices—I am struck not by how different I am as a WPA from many others on the faculty but by how much I have in common with many of them in terms of concerns, fears, and hopes for the future. And if one of those hopes is that the genre of the firing narrative will, at some point, become a genre of the past—well, I'm there, I'm a member, sign me up.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed discussion of a very similar situation, see my essay in Myers-Breslin, 146-64.

² Metzger gives a full explanation of the German idea of academic freedom and how it both did and did not transfer to the United States; see Hofstadter and Metzger, 367-412.

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