

## Invisible Administrators: The Possibilities and Perils of Graduate Student Administration

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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.

—Trudel Thomas, p. 41

To put the matter simply, the vast majority of [graduate composition and rhetoric] programs actively conceal the “tale too terrible to tell”: the generally unstated, untaught, yet tacitly acknowledged fact that composition specialists ... will be expected to take on significant administrative duties as part of their regular assignments.

—Michael Pemberton, p. 156

For many readers, these statements will not prove to be eye-opening—it is a commonly held assumption that scholars and teachers in rhetoric and composition are expected to serve in administrative positions at some point during their academic careers (and maybe throughout their careers). Not coincidentally, more graduate programs in composition and rhetoric are asking graduate students to work in administrative positions as part of their assistantships. For example, both of us worked in various administrative positions throughout our graduate studies. Since administrative work appears to be a foregone conclusion, one would believe that these graduate administrative positions would be beneficial, offering preparation for future roles as administrators.

Yet, little is known about the experiences of graduate student administrators (GSAs) and this lack of knowledge leaves open several questions. What do they learn from these experiences? What problems do they face? Do these positions prepare them for future administration, and what type

of preparation do they receive? Why are they being asked to serve in these positions, and what are the benefits and consequences? These questions, along with the quotes above, weighed heavily on our minds as we prepared to finish our doctoral studies and move into our first full-time teaching and administrative positions. However, as we read through the literature and research dealing with GSAs, we realized that there wasn't significant evidence to answer these questions. Most discussion on the topic was based on personal anecdotes or the experiences within an individual program. While these narratives offer valuable information, there are two aspects missing. First, there is a lack of large-scale empirical information on GSA experiences, including information on the tasks GSAs are asked to perform, the problems they encounter, and how, if at all, GSAs are prepared for future administrative work. The second is the voice of the GSA; most of the narratives are written by writing program administrators (WPAs) and/or by former GSAs who offer personal experience but little beyond that.

With this in mind, we prepared a survey to be distributed to both WPAs and GSAs in order to collect their reactions to the work GSAs do. Our study was rooted in both personal and professional contexts. Personally, both of us had served as graduate student administrators while completing our doctoral work. Anthony served for two years as an Assistant Director in both the WR program (which served the university's writing-across-the-curriculum population) and the Composition Program. In addition, he held the position of Coordinator of Placement for the Composition Program for three years (monitoring, reading, and entering the scores of incoming freshman and transfer students placement portfolios). Stacy served for two years as an Assistant Director in the Composition Program, one year each as an Assistant Director in the Writing Center and the Computer Assisted Instruction program, and as an editorial assistant for the *Henry James Review*. Currently, as junior faculty, we both continue to serve in administrative roles: Anthony as the Associate Director of both a composition program and writing center and Stacy as the Director of a writing center. Each of us brought numerous experiences, perspectives, and beliefs into this project from our own experiences as administrators.

Recent interest on this topic in journals and on listservs led to our belief that an empirical study was necessary. Most recently, articles from Marc Bousquet, including the thought-provoking "Composition as Management Science," have argued that the position of the WPA should be investigated and perhaps eliminated. In 2002, *Rhetoric Review* devoted a special section to the topic of graduate students and administrative work. Entitled "Future Perfect: Administrative Work and the Professionalization of Graduate Students," the articles discuss benefits and drawbacks for GSAs. Finally, the

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International Writing Centers Association published the “IWCA Position Statement on Graduate Students Writing Center Administration” because of their “concerns about the disparity between the prevalence of graduate student administrators in writing centers and their absence in writing center discussions, conferences, and publications” (“Why the Graduate”). The statement addresses issues such as what positions graduate students should be allowed to fill, time commitments, duties and responsibilities, compensation, and research/publication opportunities.

In this article, we focus on the benefits and criticisms concerning the work of GSAs that have been mentioned recently in composition literature. We compare these discussions with the findings of our surveys, juxtaposing the two conversations to see how the arguments in our journals, books, and listserv posts compare to the comments of current and past GSAs. Finally, we offer suggestions to help writing programs better consider the role of the GSA.

## THE STUDY

As we studied the previous research that had been conducted on this topic, we realized that most of these narratives and studies rely largely on personal experiences (i.e. WPAs discussing their experiences as graduate student administrators) and/or small-scale research, usually conducted by an administrator in his or her local environment. What is rare in the research is any large-scale data that maintains a strong focus on the work graduate students do while in administrative positions. Thus, as we designed our study, we kept in mind the following criteria, believing that the study had:

- to be large scale in nature, bringing in many responses from different parts of the composition community;
- to address issues related solely to graduate students working in administrative positions;
- to include a significant number of graduate student voices (again, something that is often missing in previous narratives and studies).

Led by these criteria and intrigued by our own administrative experiences, we constructed two online surveys, one of writing program administrators and the other for graduate student administrators (see Appendix A and B for copies of each survey). We believed that using online surveys was the most efficient means for contacting a large number of administrators for their feedback while also receiving diverse responses from different regions and institutions. In addition, since we were most interested in getting a general sense of feelings and experiences, we asked that surveys not

include personal or demographic information in the hopes of ensuring anonymity (although responders were offered the opportunity to include their name and email address if they wished to be interviewed at a later date). After piloting the surveys on local listservs, we sent two calls to participate (the first in early summer and a follow-up early in the fall) to two national listservs, one dealing with issues related to writing program administration (WPA-L) and one dealing with issues related to writing centers (WCENTER). We believed that a significant percentage of composition administrators (both WPA and GSA) were members of these two listservs, offering us the best opportunity of receiving back useful responses.

### **THE RESPONSE**

We received 16 responses from writing program administrators and 63 responses from graduate student administrators. While the low number of replies from WPAs discouraged us, we did feel that the replies from GSAs were more than sufficient to gain a valuable perspective on their experiences. For data collection and analysis, we each took one set of surveys and read through them, noting any significant trends or issues. We then switched the surveys and looked again for trends and issues. After reading through all the surveys, we met on a few occasions to talk about our findings, noting what we saw as most significant. Our talks became moments for us to not only wrestle over what we were hearing from our respondents, but also to compare their thoughts with our experiences and what we read in the scholarship. These discussions led to a conference presentation, more discussion after speaking with others at the conference, and then to the current article. We turn now to general thoughts about the surveys and discussion of specific trends in the composition literature and in our survey results.

### **GENERAL TRENDS**

According to the surveys, the average number of graduate student administrators per program was six, with one WPA reporting a high number of thirteen while two reported only one GSA. The length of appointments ranged from one to two years, and over 70% of the responses mentioned that appointments were usually competitively selected and often renewable, with decisions concerning renewal coming from the WPA or a group of graduate faculty. A few GSAs noted that these positions at their colleges/universities contained no set time limits and students could hold the positions throughout their graduate education.

Compensation for GSA work varied, with most receiving either a one-course release per semester or reassigned time (such as time devoted to writing center tutoring or additional time for research). A few respondents mentioned that GSAs in their program received either a complete release from teaching responsibilities, additional pay, or first chance at summer teaching. Other benefits noted were increased travel funds, increased access to administration and/or technology, tuition waivers, independent study credit, better resources (including office space), and the opportunity to teach advanced courses. One writing program director argued, “the compensation is experience ... it’s the chance to put administrative work on one’s resume/vitae” and did not note any other compensation for the work done by GSAs.

Finally, the type of positions offered usually fall into three areas; GSAs serve either as assistants to the Composition Program, assistants to the Writing Center, or assistants in a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum/Disciplines program. A few responses mentioned positions working in technology, editorial, and/or creative writing programs. GSAs are expected to take over some of the duties of program directors in each area, including preparing and mentoring future instructors or tutors, handling course or tutor scheduling, managing grade complaints, organizing and running writing-specific workshops, and, in a few cases, working with the director on budget issues. It could be argued that GSAs are being asked to take over most of the low-level or “dirty” work of the WPA, while others will contend that these duties are common to all program administrators and offer strong administrative experience to graduate students. These issues will reemerge later during discussions of GSA exploitation and the level of behind-the-scenes work they receive.

## THE ARGUMENTS

We turn now to five arguments that are prevalent in the literature on graduate student administrative work. With each argument, we recount some of the research and narratives from composition studies and then discuss our own findings on these issues, bringing in the voices of the WPAs and GSAs to help contextualize whether these arguments still influence GSA work or if these have become myths perpetuated throughout composition studies.

### *1. Administrative work during graduate studies offers students on-the-job experience that will be useful to them in current and future positions*

Advocates for offering graduate students administrative experience often cite the on-the-job training students acquire and how this prepares them

for future administrative positions, including offering knowledge in supervision, scheduling, grade disputes, mentoring, teacher preparation, and other administrative tasks. Trudell Thomas argues that we need to create more administrative positions, opportunities, and experiences for graduate students since this “allows students to test their wings and to acquire skills” while also discovering whether or not they are “unsuited to administration” (50). She suggests offering graduate students coursework in program administration, along with opportunities for mentoring, serving on committees, and the chance to present and network at conferences. Margaret Willard-Traub agrees; while GSAs may find themselves in uncomfortable and problematic situations, she believes “that administrative experience readily makes visible the very immediate ways in which all institutional work ... is political in nature, shaping and being shaped by larger institutional forces” (68). This can be highly beneficial and can provide

crucial information to them [graduate students] in their professionalization ... as well to their growth as scholars because of the ways in which it can make visible the powerful influence of institutional forces on the shaping of the forms and even outcomes of intellectual work. (69)

Thomas Miller supports graduate students working in administrative, publication, and civic positions with appropriate course release, suggesting that “these opportunities enable our graduate students to play leadership roles in general education and document their expertise in professional publications” (54). A related benefit is an increased level of marketability that will allegedly make GSAs more attractive on the job market. Chris Anson and Carol Rutz surveyed twelve former GSAs from their program and found that, for the most part, they all discussed their graduate administration experience positively. As one justification, the authors state

Many former administrative TAs reported that their experience ... set them apart from other [job] candidates, getting them interviews and eventually jobs. In most cases, teaching is at least as important as administrative experience, but the combination seems to be particularly attractive to hiring committees. (111-2)

The survey responses agree with most of these arguments. Almost every survey response (WPA and GSA) included some discussion of how the experience would be useful to the graduate student in the future. Most WPAs remarked that these administrative positions provided good “training” or “experience,” and many of the current GSAs stated that they hoped their graduate position would provide this preparation. One wrote that

there were “so many positives: learning how institutions work, how to document ‘service’ to the institution, learning how to apply knowledge of rhetoric/composition.” Others remarked that they learned about both the “mundane” and the “unseen” aspects of the job, feeling that their experience prepared them for not only administrative work, but also for faculty life.

In addition to the long-term benefits, many respondents pointed to what the position offered in relation to the job market. While only a few of the WPAs argued that recent graduates with administrative experience could add a few lines to the CV, several GSAs felt that their time in administration gave them “an advantage on the job market” when applying and interviewing for jobs. Some justified this by listing the number of interviews they had or were scheduled to have in the future; others talked about their ability to interview well because they relied on their administrative backgrounds. One GSA wrote that the experience was “a huge CV booster. At all of my interviews . . . I have been asked about my experience as an Assistant WPA and I feel certain the position and experience made me more marketable.” There was, however, some tension here between the WPA and GSA surveys. While WPAs argued that recent graduates should not consider another administrative position before gaining tenure (regardless of their graduate administrative experience), the GSAs felt, on the whole, that they could and would move right into administration while on tenure-track. A few GSAs even spoke glowingly of the ability to move straight from graduate student administrator to program administrator and seemed to see no problem with this upward move. Thus, WPAs may need to spend more time explaining not only the visible and invisible aspects of administrative work, but also discussing the differences between what the GSA is expected to accomplish in comparison to what the WPA may encounter. Laura Micciche argues that “WPAs daily find themselves immersed in anger, frustration, and disappointment” (434). She goes further asserting that it is the WPA’s duty to share this with graduate students and GSAs: “Given that a great number of recent job openings in composition studies require WPA work, faculty have an ethical responsibility to make visible the pleasures and rewards as well as the frustrations and disappointments that such work entails” (454).

Finally, on more than a few occasions, the respondents felt that their administrative experience prepared them to become stronger researchers and scholars. Many respondents pointed to the publication opportunities that emerged from their administrative work (including articles, book chapters, conference presentations, and contacts with publishers) as well as learning more about being a faculty member because of closer and more fre-

quent communication with other faculty. A significant focus was on how administration helped GSAs strengthen their pedagogy. Many remarked that having the opportunity to mentor and observe other teachers and/or co-teach graduate courses in writing pedagogy expanded their teaching experiences. One respondent felt the administrative experience helped her “think a lot about pedagogy in complex ways” and led to more “confidence in discussing writing instruction practices” while another respondent argued that “teaching, research and scholarship, and administration triangulate productively in my mind, and I believe it’s important to help build, shape, and structure the environments in which teaching and research take place.” This final comment appears to point to one of the great advantages of graduate student administrative work: besides helping to prepare the student for future faculty life and making him/her more marketable, administrative work led many to a greater sense of what the field of composition and rhetoric truly encompasses and provided a fuller picture of the life they had chosen to lead.

*2. Administrative work offers the possibility for more collaborative work within the department, across the university, and with outside scholars*

The collaborative experience is often cited as a benefit to graduate administrative work. Anson and Rutz found that time spent as a graduate student administrator led to “improved communication” and “a broader sense of disciplinary community” (114). Suellynn Duffy and her co-authors argue “collaboration can foster critical self-reflection ... and establish a community of teachers with their own professional identities” (80). While Duffy and her co-writers (many who served as graduate peer mentors) acknowledge that collaboration can be difficult due to misplaced authority and complex relationships, they found that the experience was most often beneficial to all involved.

Conflicts with other graduate students who may resist taking advice or orders from a GSA can be an area of concern. Fontaine suggests that graduate students may be “unwilling to respect supervision by their peers” (85). Others cite problems GSAs face when getting involved in faculty disputes. Willard-Traub, while promoting the graduate student administrator experience, concedes that GSAs will often witness first hand the communication problems and subjectivities that occur between tenured, untenured, and graduate student faculty. Roxanne Mountford suggests that negative feelings among graduate students may actually be a result of an overall distrust of administration, seeing the GSA as “one of them.” Mark Long, Jennifer Holberg, and Marcy Taylor suggest that the problem goes beyond

just GSAs. They believe that defining graduate students as teaching “assistants” or “apprentices” leads to a hierarchical system that produces “TAs,” not colleagues and future administrators. Because of this hierarchy, “graduate students themselves play only a passive part in their own professional development” (67). They argue for a more collegial, non-hierarchical model that offers graduate students experience not only inside the classroom, but also in departmental, curricular, and administrative environments while encouraging feedback and responses from everyone in the system (a perspective that Fontaine also shares). If this change occurs, composition administrators will discover that “the best professional development programs ... demonstrate a more dynamic and equitable form of administrative collaboration between peers” (76).

Feelings of both belonging and isolation come through in the survey responses. For example, the respondents often cited positive relationships with faculty, peers, and fellow administrators. Many valued these relationships because of the opportunity to work “with people in a relationship different from student/teacher,” stating that these relationships were both “invigorating ... [and] exasperating.” As one GSA explained, “The ‘ivory tower attitude’ tends to be so much less” when working with other composition administrators, signaling perhaps a growing confidence in the GSA along with a rising level of equality. Others felt these relationships increased one’s knowledge about the professional field, providing opportunities to learn “how to get work done in a setting with many different personalities, as well as how to communicate with administrators in other departments” while also offering “long-standing connections with colleagues at other schools.” Other positive attributes were enhancing one’s campus involvement and visibility; greater chances of networking with current and future employers; mentoring relationships with both the WPA and other graduate students; and the chance to collaborate on conference presentations and publications. As one GSA observed:

Administrative work (the environment, the people, the communities you become a part of) help to structure everything else: what you talk about with peers, which surprising resources they recommend, how they cope with their teaching dilemmas. Like everything else, administrative work offers a community.

According to Micciche, though, this is a community characterized by “disappointment” because of working “with a lack of support staff, in departments that fail to acknowledge the intellectual work required to develop curricula, syllabi, and teacher-training courses, and in universities

that generally neglect to count these materials as fulfilling requirements for tenure” (434). Belonging to the new community of administrators also may take the GSA out of communities in which they previously belonged; chief among these is a loss of community with other graduate students, who may “pass judgment” or display “jealousy,” especially if they were not chosen for the administrative position. When asked to communicate with other graduate students, GSAs reported problems related to authority and acceptance from these peers—“for better or for worse, they saw me differently ... many grad students saw me as ‘one of them’ (i.e. ‘one of the administrators’) which can sometimes take on negative implications.” Some believed that this view carried over into personal relationships as well: “you’re not really ‘one of the gang’ among the grad teaching assistants ... once you get the [administrative] role, people are more distant—less inclined to ‘hang out.’” In addition, more than a few spoke to problems with the different roles they were asked to fulfill—administrator, teacher, student, peer, mentor, supervisor—and how these various roles led to problems in peer relationships.

Another, perhaps more disturbing, issue related to loss of community/relationship is the difficulty that GSAs may experience working with other faculty members or administrators. In general, GSA work was not highly valued—“there were several times that, although I was performing real faculty duties, my work and my credibility were questioned because I was ONLY a graduate student.” Other professors outwardly shunned or resisted working with GSAs, feeling that these students had “died or tainted themselves so that they’re not ‘serious scholars’ anymore and therefore no longer merit being treated as such.” A question that remains is whether it is the student or the work that is undervalued; from the responses, it appears that it is not only the student administrator, but also writing program administration (in its different forms) that receives little validation from those outside of the program. Micciche asserts that “most faculty beyond composition studies—and, indeed, some within it—assume that WPAs are managers of sorts, administrators who simply *manage* writing programs as one would any other institutional site” (440). So long as WPA work is devalued as simply management or management science without consideration for the intellectual work WPAs do, then the role of the GSA, or the WPA-in-training, will be discounted.

*3. Using graduate students in administrative positions provide benefits to the program, chief among them cheaper labor and more time available for the writing program director to focus on more important or desirable duties*

Another apparent benefit to the composition program or English department is that GSAs provide a cheap source of labor—since they often

complete much of the work at a significantly lower cost than an assistant professor in an administrative position—while freeing up time for the writing program administrator, who (it is argued) can focus more on other inequities and problems within the program. Sally Ebest writes about her experience as a GSA, stressing that “this experience was invaluable to my understanding of writing program administration ... [and] ... it was also a means of cheap labor for the university. In this era of dwindling resources and tight job market, developing these internships benefits all involved” (81). Bradley Peters remarks that a position like assistant or associate director of composition (a position that is sometimes occupied by a graduate student) becomes “a catch-all for duties [to] which the director could not attend...an *ad hoc* directorship” (127, author’s italics). Mixed reactions were apparent in the literature, as writers and researchers debated over this sensitive issue.

What is immediately interesting about the survey responses is that among the GSAs, there was virtually no mention of themselves as a form of cheap labor. While many did remark that they felt overworked and misused at times, most also appeared to believe that they were filling these positions because of their ability to do so or because the department was interested in offering them a chance for “professional development.” It did not seem to occur to them that a major reason for their inclusion was to save money nor was there any real discussion of their time being used to complete less valued tasks, such as scheduling, observing, and reporting.

However, among the WPAs, there was a strong connection between the use of graduate student administrators and the apparent benefits to the department. Some mentioned outright that GSAs were cheaper, providing programs with some economic “relief” during times of decreasing budgets. Others mentioned the lack of individuals in the department to fill the positions; one respondent argued “we need them! They’re valuable simply for their labor” since, apparently, there were few faculty who could fill these administrative voids or, as another respondent pointed out, few who were willing to “free up” their time to do the work. Nonetheless, there was also a feeling among the WPA responses that graduate students were necessary because they could accomplish tasks that most faculty could not. Many remarked that graduate students were a better choice for mentoring new teachers; as peer mentors/mediators, “they keep communication between (graduate) instructors and faculty administrators flowing, bring fresh ideas into administration and curriculum development, help TAs learn to balance schoolwork and teaching work, help us work collaboratively rather than by simply dictating policy.” There was also the need for GSAs to help in areas of technology; more than one WPA remarked that the faculty at his

or her program were inadequately equipped to deal with technology issues (i.e. maintaining websites, using curriculum software packages and online communication tools, and conducting online research) and that GSAs were invaluable for providing this service. Of course, relying on GSAs for technological support, as opposed to intellectual work, may lead to exploitation, since it appears the graduate students provide this technical support at a cheaper rate than an IT administrator (it may also be problematic that graduate students are asked to provide this technical support instead of working in areas directly related to their composition studies). This leads us into the issue of graduate student exploitation.

#### *4. Using graduate students in administrative positions can lead to exploitation*

Some writers suggest that the use of GSAs can lead to exploitation and a possible transfer of obligations from WPA to GSA. Possible ways of being exploited include being offered less pay, asked to complete more menial tasks, and receiving fewer benefits than other administrators. In addition, Shirley Fontaine argues that shifting obligations from faculty to graduate students leads to a shifting of values within the program. She points out that having graduate students responsible for administrative work could lead to a devaluing of the WPA; she writes, “when a task that was once completed by a full-time faculty member is reassigned to a graduate student, the importance of the task has diminished in the minds of those who make the assignment” (84). Thus, the work of writing program administration comes to be seen more as a job rather than as a skill or as intellectual work, causing a devaluing in the eyes of upper administration and undergraduates, who may wonder why a graduate student is handling their grade grievance or transfer credit, wondering why their “complaints are considered to be less important than they once were” (Fontaine 85). Outside of composition, GSAs are often deemed less important and those deemed “less than” are the most likely to be exploited.

As mentioned earlier, WPAs did note the use of graduate students as a cheaper form of labor, although we are unsure if the directors see this as exploitation or simply a way of benefiting the program. However, GSAs were less clear about whether they felt they were being exploited in their administrative positions. When exploitation was discussed or hinted at, it often came in one of three areas. First, graduate students discussed how time-consuming the administrative position became for them. These respondents often used phrases such as “overtime” and “monopolize” when defining their administrative work. One response noted that “graduate stu-

dents in these positions are often exploited and must be adamant in sticking to whatever time commitment they agreed to.” These responses were often linked to what was neglected due to these time constraints, including teaching and research. The area that seemed most affected was the dissertation, as many lamented the fact that their research and writing time was severely limited. The following statement is indicative: “It [the administrative position] seriously sucks up time that I need if I’m ever going to finish my dissertation. Honestly, at this point I’m not sure if I really will finish it.”

Second, and related to the previous point, some GSAs commented that their administrative duties were greater than what they would do for a typical class and questioned if one course release was enough. Many of these respondents argued that administrative positions carried a “heavy workload” and could be “burdensome.” Questioning how the position was described, one GSA wrote

Although the position(s) was/were advertised as 10 hours per week, I put in many more than that on a weekly basis. As an administrator, you learn that you must work until the work is finished. As a student (supposedly first) I felt torn at times meeting all the deadlines required and fell behind with some of my own work as a student.

A few responses pointed out that since administrative work consisted of different duties and responsibilities, it was much more difficult and time-consuming than teaching a course; these respondents outright questioned why only one course release was offered. The number of hours one put into the position fluctuated (often falling between 15-20 hours per week), but there were a few GSAs who mentioned devoting 40+ hours per week to their position(s).

Third, a few GSAs argued that they were doing the work “of an administrator and faculty member—as a graduate student,” but receiving less pay and fewer perks for it. One respondent understood that his role in the university hierarchy was to allow “the university [to] neglect to hire tenured faculty lines for these positions.” One WPA also acknowledged this issue, stating that his/her department placed graduate students into administrative positions because it was “primarily ... a way to supervise undergraduate peer tutors without having to free up a full time faculty slot.” One GSA strongly believed that:

There is no question that graduate assistants are exploited. In my program, the three assistant directors of the programs did ALL the work in terms of creating materials and most of the direct training of new [GSAs]. At that time, we had no health or other benefits.

In fact, there were three occasions when the GSAs equated their administrative work to a form of slave labor. As one student put it, “the work was DEMANDING—in terms of time and expertise—and worth well more than the one course release I was given. Basically, I was slave labor” (GSA emphasis).

So, if exploitation does seem to occur to varying degrees, why didn't more survey respondents address these problems? It's tough to know exactly, but the responses do offer some suggestions. For one, it seemed that although some graduate students recognized the heavy workload, they believed simply that this was “part of the job” or part of the “learning experience.” A few even took pleasure in the fact they were completing faculty and upper administrator related tasks, seeing their increased workload as a badge of honor and solidifying, for them, their ability to be future administrators. More troubling, perhaps, is the GSAs acknowledgement that administrative work is “inevitable”; the feeling is that sooner or later one will have to do administrative work as a composition faculty member, so why not gain practice and expertise while in graduate school? The insinuation here appeared to be that “yes, we are exploited, but all composition administration is exploited, so we are no different than the rest.” Thus, graduate students seemed to be accepting the inevitable and attempting to gain productive experience as a way of preparing them for their future administrative lives.

*5. Graduate student administrators only see “part” of the job, being offered rare glimpses of the dirty, behind-the-scenes work of writing program administration*

Finally, there are those in composition studies who suggest that there is little “behind-the-scenes” experiences for GSAs, since WPAs and programs do not allow graduate administrators to become involved in the dirty details of administrative work (such as budgets, political clashes, internal and external conflicts, hiring/firing, etc). Ebest writes that preparation for administrative work while in graduate school is often a “matter of chance” (67). Mountford argues that her experience as a GSA “was wonderful training for the intellectual work of directing a writing program. But it had not prepared me for the political realities of being the WPA” (49). A survey conducted by Scott Miller and his co-authors found that graduate students were satisfied with their coursework, program flexibility, and mentors, but were very nervous and unsatisfied concerning how they were prepared for the future, including preparation for administrative work. As the authors write, “there clearly have not been many concerted efforts to foster under-

standing about rhetoric and composition as a profession, as an institutional structure situated within other institutional structures” (398).

A lack of coursework in program administration is also regularly cited as a concern. Thomas Miller writes that offering WPA seminars helps graduate students “understand that writing program administration is a profession and not an avocation” (42). Michael Pemberton believes “graduate programs rarely engage administrative issues or matters of university policy; neither do they place much emphasis on the ‘engineering’ of composition scholarship, of moving theoretical principles to the embodiment of those principles in well-defined program structures” (159). Pemberton suggests that WPA-related courses (which are often neglected for practical, ideological, and political reasons) are necessary because these courses would “provide [graduate students] with an important new arena for discovering new information and synthesizing it with the knowledge they have garnered from other courses” (165). Ideally, these writers believe that administrative courses would offer experience and background to all graduate students—including those who do not or cannot do administrative work while in graduate school yet will still be expected to serve as administrators at future universities—while also offering a theoretical stance on administrative work that could help WPAs make stronger arguments during tenure decisions.

Responses were mixed among the graduate students in regards to the level of exposure they received while serving as administrators. Some argued that they learned more from their GSA experience than they would through simple “textbook learning” while also receiving the opportunity to understand the larger university structure. One wrote that his/her time offered the opportunity to “learn what happens behind the scenes—the politics, the negotiations that have to occur before decisions that seem simple can be made.” A few recent graduates, who were now in tenure-track positions, argued that their time as a GSA allowed them another perspective on administrative work that they could compare to their current position; as one respondent wrote, “I understand that not all writing programs work the same; this helps me to question some of my assumptions and pay attention to the exigencies presented in other contexts.”

Others questioned whether they really received enough perspective on WPA work, having to “ask for and at times insist on” gaining these behind-the-scenes perspectives. Others began to second-guess if they really wanted access to this side of their work:

In all of these [GSA] positions, I saw the challenges I was up against, whether it be teachers who don't care about their students (or more likely don't have the time between two or three

classes and a family), or faculty members who don't understand what composition is about, or the marketing side of publishing.

Only two of the surveys mentioned a specific WPA-related graduate course as preparation; a few others spoke of being prepared through "their coursework" but did not specify which courses were most beneficial. Other forms of preparation included workshops prior to the semester; shadowing and being mentored by other GSAs; relying upon previous teaching or work-related experiences; and the most oft mentioned: trial and error or learning on the job. The following response is indicative of many of these comments:

I prepared myself for the most part—learning on the fly and writing/reflecting about my experiences with my WPA and presenting my work at conferences like 4Cs. There simply were no formal mechanisms in place to teach us how to do this kind of work. It was true on the job training.

Micciche asserts that WPAs must learn more "about the way work is organized in the university and ... provide administrative mentoring and professional development to graduate students and junior faculty" (453). More formal opportunities to learn how the institution of higher learning works and how to negotiate administration within it would be useful.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

As the research above shows, the use of graduate students in administrative positions will continue to be a visible part of composition programs, and, with the increase in graduate programs offering doctoral degrees in rhetoric and composition, it is possible that the number of GSA positions will also rise. Likewise, it is apparent that as universities and colleges continue to face budget crises and see greater need for streamlining university faculty and staff, more faculty will be asked to take on administrative positions. Since composition researchers and teachers are already deeply engrossed in administrative work, one can surmise that more and more composition teachers and scholars will be adding administrative positions to their workloads and CVs. All of this may occur in environments fraught with job exploitation and instability. With this in mind, we offer the following suggestions for both WPAs and GSAs based upon the research findings:

First, there need to be more support networks created to help the graduate student administrator. As the responses show, it is far too often that GSAs learn the intricacies of their position through trial and error because of the lack of professional development and mentoring prior to taking over

the position. We suggest that composition programs put into place more extensive and rewarding preparation programs for GSAs, including chances to observe and/or shadow previous GSAs, the creation of GSA handbooks, and coursework in administration. In addition, more opportunities for mentoring during the assistantship need to be provided; this mentoring can come from either faculty in the composition program or graduate students who previously held administration positions. Finally, GSAs should be more visible in the program and department, sitting in on committee and faculty meetings so that they will be more noticeable to all faculty and be able to gain a deeper perspective on the work of an administrator.

Second, GSAs should have the opportunity to receive more behind-the-scenes work during their tenure in the position. Some of this work can be discussed through previously mentioned graduate courses on writing program administration. But, GSAs should also be invited to participate in hiring and firing decisions, allowed to work with the WPA on budgetary issues, and made aware of the political and social forces that define their work. The opportunity to work with faculty outside of composition on committees and in ad hoc groups can provide further experience that will prove valuable once the GSA moves into their future positions. In addition, as seen in the responses to our inquiry, many GSAs have difficulty understanding how their work differs from what the WPA is often required to do, with many respondents arguing that they are already prepared for WPA work based upon their GSA experiences. WPAs would be wise to devote a portion of their time with the GSA to discussing the ethical dilemmas program administrators face on a daily basis along with an extensive discussion of the differences between what a WPA is asked to do in relation to the work of the GSA.

Third, WPAs should take more time to prepare GSAs for the job market. Stories of graduate students taking on a first job with overwhelming administrative responsibilities abound in our literature and at our major conferences. Better preparation and more dialogue on the job search can help alleviate these problems. Along with the aforementioned frank discussions about the work of the WPA, this preparation can include helping the GSA read job ads (including assistance in understanding what level of administration is being asked for in the ad and what are going to be the hidden responsibilities), learn how to discuss administrative work on a curriculum vitae, and prepare for interviewing, with a nod to how GSAs can use their administration experience productively during job interviews, possibly through the use of mock interviews and creating relationships between former and current GSAs. Part of this preparation can include

dialogues about the potential problems underlying taking on too much (or any) administrative work prior to receiving tenure.

Fourth, it is the responsibility of the program to continually assess GSA positions. Not only will this assessment validate the work of the GSA, but it also ensures that GSAs are not being exploited in terms of time, benefits, and money. As a field, we have spent considerable energy toward alleviating the problems faced on a daily basis by contingent faculty (Schell). However, the possible exploitation GSAs face also needs to be addressed. If graduate students are finding it difficult to complete coursework and/or dissertations because of the constraints placed upon them due to administrative work, there is a problem. If GSAs are not receiving benefits from the university even though they are completing work that is often completed by faculty members, there is a problem. Programs would be wise to continually monitor GSA positions for these problems. Possible assessment can include continual dialogue, exit interviews, and surveys with past graduate administrators. Programs should also consider developing more formal job descriptions to ensure that graduate students are aware of what they are being asked to do prior to accepting the position and as a way of guiding what students are required to accomplish during the time they hold the position.

Finally, our field needs to spend more time making the work of writing program administration more valued and recognizable. Of course, this is not a new concern for those reading this article. For years, researchers and writers, along with organizations like WPA, have made arguments and developed guidelines as a way of persuading others to understand not only the level of work needed to be a WPA, but also to illustrate the intellectual and scholarly work of WPAs. However, what these responses suggest is that the often negative view of writing program administration leads to a trickle-down effect; it is not just WPAs who are damaged by these views, but also our graduate students—especially graduate student administrators. As a field and profession, we owe it to future administrators to continually push those in other disciplines and in upper administration to see the value in the work of the WPA and to create environments where this work can be done as productively, intellectually, and humanely as possible.

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## APPENDIX A

### Survey for Writing Program Administrators

1. On average, how many graduate students hold administrative positions in your department? What is the average length of these positions? If applicable, what type of compensation do graduate students receive as part of these positions (i.e. release time, higher pay, etc)?
2. What administrative positions do graduate students hold in your department? Check all that apply:
  - a. Assistant in the Composition program or similar position:
  - b. Assistant in the Writing Center or similar position:
  - c. Assistant in Writing Across the Curriculum or similar position:
  - d. Assistant in Technology or similar position:
  - e. Assistant in Creative Writing Program or similar position:
  - f. Editorial positions (i.e. journals):
  - g. Other position(s) not listed above:
3. Do graduate student administrators in your program typically move on to administrative positions at other universities? On average how many? What type(s) of positions do they move into?
4. In your specific department, what have been and/or are the reasons for involving graduate students in administrative positions?
5. Did you hold any administrative positions during your graduate school experience? If so, did this (or these) experience(s) prepare you for the administrative work you do today? Why or why not?

## APPENDIX B

### Survey for Graduate Student Administrators

1. What graduate student administrative positions do you currently hold or have you held in the past ten years?
  - a. Assistant in the Composition program or similar position:
  - b. Assistant in the Writing Center or similar position:
  - c. Assistant in Writing Across the Curriculum or similar position:
  - d. Assistant in Technology or similar position:
  - e. Assistant in Creative Writing Program or similar position:

f. Editorial positions (i.e. journals):

g. Other position(s) not listed above:

How long are these positions (i.e. term limits)? If applicable, what type of benefits did you receive from accepting this positions (release time, higher pay rate, etc)?

2. Briefly, what are or were your duties/roles in these administrative positions? Were you prepared to carry out these duties/roles? Why or why not?
3. Looking back upon these current and past administrative experiences, what are the positive aspects to graduate students serving in administrative positions? What are the negative aspects?
4. Do you want to or plan on serving in administrative positions in higher education after graduate school? Why or why not?
5. Did your (or does your) administrative work affect other areas of your graduate work (such as scholarship/publications, teaching, involvement with on-campus organizations, volunteer work, etc)? How so?

