

## Different Paths to the Same Goal: A Response to Barbara Cambridge

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Whenever the impulse hits our profession to make a change across the nation, the actual implementation of that impulse must go through Barbara Cambridge's NCTE office in Washington, DC. In her capacity as Director of the DC office, Cambridge works directly with the audiences she advises us to engage. Cambridge's broad call for individual political action in "Research & Policy: Antithetical or Complementary" inaugurates an important agenda for each of us to take up from our own institutions and positions: to become savvy in the political arena and directly involved in public policy discussions.

Cambridge opens her piece by recounting a moment with US Education Secretary Duncan where he asks her, "What do YOU want ME to do?" (135). In response to Secretary Duncan's question, Cambridge "asked that he acknowledge in public statements that education associations are unified in their commitment to literacy as the foundation of all learning and that he consult the Coalition to discuss how to improve teaching and learning in a systemic way" (135). Using this anecdote as her impetus, Cambridge suggests that her WPA readers need to be prepared to respond intelligently to those with the greatest impact on national and state policy.

In addition to being at the ready to offer select samplings of the relevant research, Cambridge argues that WPAs must understand how politicians use the research they encounter (136). To this purpose, Cambridge reviews "research that helps us sort through the current use or lack of use of research by policy makers" and reports some policy makers believe "research can't be trusted, it can be shaped to say anything, and it is not often timely" (136). In fact, she indicates "many other factors currently take precedence over research evidence" (136).

Citing economic, legal, media, and public opinion obstacles among others, Cambridge next asserts that influence rather than research is the pri-

mary course which WPAs individually should chart. To do so, Cambridge offers five recommendations: get to know policy makers in the region; understand emerging policy issues; include writing for the public in all expository writing courses; serve on tenure committees to champion the value of public policy research; and become educated on the functions of research in policy making (139-146).

But we wonder: is individual action the right path to achieve the goal of impacting public policy on writing and literacy education? The individual activities that Cambridge suggests are not superfluous; however, a collective research and public policy agenda seems the path with a greater chance of success.

In this response, we illustrate how Cambridge's suggestions are dependent upon framing our invisibility in public policy debates as a lack of research-inflected individual politicking. We then suggest that framing policy problems as necessitating individual action actually limits action itself. Many WPAs will not encounter decision makers as directly as needs to happen for Cambridge's solution to be enacted successfully. Next, the discussion turns to how, even accepting the individual frame of the problem, Cambridge's solution compromises the solid research that most behooves Rhetoric and Composition generally and replaces it with personal narrative.

Overlooking these concerns, we question in the end whether the body of knowledge accrued by the discipline is sufficient to the task Cambridge proposes for it. In doing so, we may complicate her emphasis on the intermediary and the value of narrative. However, our recognition of the complications for following Cambridge's path to public policy work should not be read as dissuasive of her agenda, merely as identifying hurdles in doing so. For this reason, we offer an alternate path to the same goal.

#### INTERMEDIARIES, PROXIMITY, AND INFORMATION

In the opening anecdote, Cambridge and Secretary Duncan are zero degrees of separation from each other. Given this proximity and the immediateness of Cambridge's request, individual self-mediated action appears a viable opportunity for WPAs in the role of "intermediary" (137). Cambridge's individual framing of the problem/solution occurs here, as she characterizes her WPA audience as individuals, thus identifying the myriad of roles available to them. She provides options to readers of what they "might choose to do in [their] roles as citizens, writers, researchers, teachers, and writing program administrators to promote effective decision making and policy setting" (136), implicitly if they were ever zero degrees of separation from a decision maker.

Cambridge's desired enrollment of potential intermediaries seems indiscriminate. She privileges the individual and suggests that WPAs themselves have the most potential to become intermediaries. WPAs as "trusted sources" could serve "to translate research evidence and connect it to issues at the local and state level" (137). While not wanting to question her experience in the public policy arena, we think Cambridge overestimates the influence of the local WPA. As the almost daily calls on the WPA listserv for convincing data and analysis show us, WPAs struggle to merge research and policy on their own campuses, let alone in the larger arena. This challenge suggests to us that we need several social configurations of solutions, including not only times when professionals are one degree of separation away as an intermediary but also when they are several degrees of separation away as a local change-maker.

Cambridge's framing of the problem as one that is solved by individual mediation may be beneficial in circumstances where one has direct access to decision makers. In other situations, the better service to the cause of composition is participating in more collaborative venues and social configurations intended to inform public policy. Disciplinary initiatives such as the National Conversation on Writing and the Network for Media Action afford composition the opportunity to advocate for broad-based political support of writing related policy collectively and more effectively. Initiatives like these stand a better chance to generate influence, particularly when several degrees of separation exist.

Our suggestion resembles that of Linda Adler-Kassner, who champions and advocates for collective action on writing and writing-related issues (labor, literacy, technology, etc.). In *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*, Adler-Kassner offers a detailed discussion of collective initiatives like the Network for Media Action. She writes of this particular effort, "[W]hen we do join together with WPAs across the country we can be most effective if we can bring our experience, base, and allies from the local level to those national conversations so that there is always a clear ebb-and-flow, a dialogue, around how the national concern is of local relevance" (140). Whereas Adler-Kassner sees the need for attention to both individual/local and national/collective action, Cambridge appears to view collective action as ancillary at best. Therefore, WPAs must assess how they can most effectively contribute to raising the profile of Rhetoric and Composition, as an intermediary as Cambridge recommends, in some of the extant collective initiatives, or in some other social configuration.

Even accepting Cambridge's frame that centers the intermediary, we pause to question if WPAs are primed to take on yet another new identity. To this point Cambridge writes, "Composition teachers and writing

administrators have special abilities to communicate. They must use their rhetorical prowess to educate students and colleagues about the potential, system-changing possibilities of the use of research in policy making” (146). We are not in agreement that the “special abilities” WPAs possess—whether communicative prowess, plain gamesmanship or some combination—are so rhetorical as to transcend the context. In fact, what WPAs do on a daily basis couldn’t be more unlike what Cambridge asks. To be blunt, the areas where WPAs excel are not easily transferable to the public policy arena.

Cambridge exhorts WPAs to work harder visiting representatives and making presentations to them on their turf, and becoming experts on a single policy. We certainly do not question the motives behind these recommendations, but her focus on the individual WPA—often the lone advocate for writing on campus—will turn overwork into exhaustion. With many of them likely not even knowing where to start, this approach is not going to create the large pool of intermediaries Cambridge envisions.

Even with said frame and accepting the assumed communicative prowess of WPAs in the public policy arena, the research component of Cambridge’s solution remains a problem. She is asking WPAs to present quality research to policy makers,<sup>1</sup> but the overall emphasis is less on engaging in this type of inquiry and more on situating oneself to grease the wheels of public policy (138). We believe Cambridge does not provide enough emphasis on the need for *replicable, aggregable, and data-supported* (RAD) research (see Haswell) to put WPAs in a position to be successful in the policy arena.

Instead, Cambridge argues for localizing the interpretations of national research as “the strongest need,” suggesting in a way that conducting sound quantitative research is much less important. We see this as perpetuating the vaunted state of narrative, and of the local in the field. Throughout her discussion, including her recommendations, Cambridge allows WPAs to see their storehouses of stories to be, more or less, the only ammunition they need in influencing policy both locally and nationally. Stories, not numbers, carry the day, as do influence and character over data and analysis.

Rhetoric and Composition professionals already suffer from a lack of widely collected data and reinforcing narrative. As she cautions WPAs, “If you are known by your policy makers and they turn to you, if you are unable to provide the information they need, your credibility decreases immediately” (142). Before building relationships, saving narrative, or educating others, WPAs must have the information, the research, ready. Rhetoric and Composition scholars must gather and interpret comprehensive and meaningful information before combining it with storehouses of stories and

experiences to influence public policy. If we don't, we risk entering into relationships with policy makers that do more harm than good.

Accepting the individual framing of the problem and the intermediary role Cambridge lays out for WPAs, the recurrence of "information" as a stand-in for research in comments from policy makers selected by Cambridge concerns us. For example, one quote she uses from Bogenschneider and Corbett's interview with one long-term incumbent reads, "[We] are hungry for *information*. I mean, you can't have enough *information*. . . . You do research and need *information*. . . .to make you feel that you feel that you are doing the right thing" (27 qtd. in Cambridge 137; emphasis added). A paragraph later, Cambridge includes a quote from another legislator, "Good information, no matter what side of the issue, is important, but the most valuable [information] is the kind that saves you from yourself" (29 qtd. in Cambridge 138). "Information" seems cheap in these references, and reputable data and analysis need to be the standard here.

Cambridge herself asks of her readers, for example, "Do you have *information* about the success rate in second semester composition classes of students who entered with dual enrollment credits versus AP credits?" (140; emphasis added). We ask here: what information do WPAs currently have to put into the hands of policy makers on this topic (or most any other) beyond our stories? Although information is, in a sense, important to Cambridge and others she cites, learning how to get information to the right people based on what they value is far more important. This attitude is backwards to what will make composition more successful as a discipline.

Despite her stance that "[b]arriers to the use of research abound" (137), Cambridge herself believes that research can indeed be trusted, really only if and when it comes from trusted sources. To this end, a unified, comprehensive yet distributed and easily distributable research agenda, as Cambridge suggests in passing, is the step that must be taken first. RAD research organized by the Council of Writing Program Administrators must not only be undertaken, but also move out from the professional venues where it typically resides (conferences, journals, CompPile, etc.) into forums easily accessible for policy makers and their staffers and in formats and language easily digestible by them.

#### DIFFERENT PATHS

Where WPAs find themselves amongst policy decisions at any one time is anyone's guess. Each incident of policy creates a unique kairos. Consequently, a one-size-fits-all solution seems impractical. Therefore, the question of how research may be used to affect policy is best answered by creat-

ing easily networkable resources. Bearing this in mind, we suggest an effort to “YouTube Writing Research.”<sup>2</sup> In this effort, the WPA Council would coordinate efforts to publish short videos (less than three minutes) referencing data and analysis critical to policy issues on topics important to the organization. These videos, rich with illustration and explanation, would serve in ways that Cambridge asks of individual WPAs. Since the WPA Council already provides research support,<sup>3</sup> perhaps future research grant competitions could focus on a concentrated public policy effort.

Overall, the plan for the future should not be a focus on building up each WPA with the hope that the few intermediaries will become the many. We are concerned that WPAs are just not ready for the work of influence Cambridge suggests, and we encourage instead a more collective approach, one steeped in RAD research and designed for policy makers to consume through a myriad of social configurations.

## NOTES

1. Cambridge uses Bogenschneider and Corbett’s definition that high quality research is high in scientific merit, unbiased, readily available, organized efficiently, and easy to read (138-139).

2. These “writing research” videos could take the same informative approach as the video produced in 2009 introducing the WPA Council (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB68sKQbWpk>). As of this writing, the video has been viewed more than 450 times.

3. The WPA offers grants to facilitate research. More information may be found at <http://wpacouncil.org/grants/research-grant-2012>.

## WORKS CITED

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