

## Narratives, Administrative Identity, and the Early Career WPA

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay argues that narratives of WPA work, read collectively, are restrictive and disciplining for graduate and junior WPAs who read these texts as they are beginning to form their own administrative identities. After examining the complicated lore that shapes WPA advice narratives, I argue that it is important for early career WPAs to resist and speak back to these texts, specifically those arguing against pre-tenure work, in order to create space for counter-narratives that explore the liminal space(s) of administrative positions that fall outside the traditional senior WPA role. Offering counter-narratives not only supports early career WPAs as they shape their professional identities, but it also invites new ways of understanding the nature of WPA work for all WPAs, regardless of rank or experience.*

In “The Postdisciplinary Politics of Lore,” Patricia Harkin argues that the stories we tell about our work can function as a sort of map of the profession, making visible “the intersections and relative configurations between our itinerary and the itineraries of others” (136). Harkin claims that if we read professional narratives over and through each other, much like the “textbook transparencies in which the viewer sees relations among several anatomical systems,” we can better compare our unique institutional experiences to draw more general conclusions about the work we do as writing instructors and program administrators (136). This mapping also illustrates how stories of individual WPAs’ administrative successes and failures have shaped our understanding of best practices in writing program administration. The WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0, which “attempts to both represent and regularize writing programs’ priorities for first-year composition,” demonstrates such a mapping. Each iteration of the WPA Outcomes State-

ment has both synthesized and problematized our assumptions about the purpose of first-year writing courses (“The Outcomes Statement History”) while concretizing the informal knowledge learned from our narrated experiences into benchmark policies and guiding principles enacted in programs across the country.

We can map these narratives in a different way, though, focusing not on how they shape the field but rather on how they chart a course that shapes the identities of early career WPAs. I argue that narratives of WPA work, read collectively, are more restrictive and disciplining than we might imagine, especially for early career WPAs.<sup>1</sup> We must be mindful, especially as we mentor early career WPAs, of how narratives by more experienced WPAs might restrict new WPAs as they develop their professional identities, and we must consider ways that we might reframe our understanding of the relationship between WPA work and the identities of those who choose it. While it is necessary for all WPAs to question, respond to, and resist (if necessary) these narratives to create space for additional perspectives, I argue that this is an especially important task for early career WPAs whose status as newcomers enables them to raise questions about WPA identity not yet fully considered by WPA practitioners and the field of WPA studies.

#### EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE EARLY CAREER WPA

One of the more vexing questions for composition scholars since Stephen North published *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* in 1987 has been the role that experience, which he calls *lore*, plays—or should play—in establishing knowledge within the field. As Richard Fulkerson has explained, North himself expressed “ambivalence” about *lore*’s value as an epistemological tool, arguing for its necessity while questioning the validity of claims established by experience alone (Fulkerson 50–51). North’s choice to include *lore* as part of his taxonomy gives credence to its value alongside other types of inquiry, but the ill-defined or poorly implemented methodologies inherent in *lore*-based epistemologies raise questions about *lore*’s ability to establish “credible truth claims” that influence how we approach our work and think about ourselves as writing teachers and writing program administrators (Fulkerson 50).

These “credible truth claims” create what Melissa Ianetta refers to as “rhetorical commonplaces” within the field—ideas or principles repeated so often in our publications and conference presentations that the repetition itself illustrates “what we value” and how “we organize these values into administrative strategies” (180). For example, amongst WPAs, Edward White’s so-called White’s Law, “Assess thyself, or assessment will be done

unto thee,” has been repeated so often in publications, at WPA conference presentations, and on the WPA-L listserv that not only the phrase, but also the message behind it, has become part of our collective knowledge. We understand the value of assessment because we remember White’s Law, but more to Ianetta’s point, White’s Law helps us see what WPAs value in their professional identity: autonomy and agency for both the writing program and the WPA.

Because White’s Law is informed by both a theoretical understanding of assessment and practical expertise, it has taken on the status of a “credible truth claim” like Fulkerson describes. However, it is not only White’s status as a senior scholar in the field that creates such a credible truth claim; it’s also the fact that his admonition is borne out through others’ experiences—both by those who followed his advice and those who did not—that has elevated his statement to a rhetorical commonplace amongst WPAs.

Narratives and collective experiential knowledge can align neatly with certain aspects of our professional identities, but significant truth claims repeated in WPA narratives do not always match the experiences of some WPAs and can sometimes be at odds with the values and choices WPAs make. Chief among these is the oft-repeated mantra, “Don’t take an administrative position before tenure.” The difficult experiences of some narrative writers suggest that administering a writing program without the safety net of tenure is a dangerous proposition that should neither be offered by senior administrators nor pursued by hopeful applicants (Horning 48). Krista Ratcliffe and Rebecca Rickly’s afterword to their collection, *Performing Feminist Administration in Rhetoric and Composition*, offers early career WPAs a list of thoughtful, nuanced, and fundamentally hopeful pieces of advice from five well-respected senior WPAs. For example, “Watch people . . . Listen to how they talk to/about others . . . Locate good role models and bad, and know the difference, especially if the good and bad inhabit the same body” (222). Near the end of the list, readers are met with this: “DON’T DO IT WITHOUT TENURE!!!” (224; emphasis original). The all-caps exclamation undercuts the supportive nature of this advice for those who *do* choose administrative positions before tenure, and this admonishment, while well-intentioned and seemingly supported by the knowledge built from the field’s narratives, can have negative emotional ramifications for those who choose to follow this career path.

Take, for example, the contributions to the “Symposium on Mentoring the Work of WPAs” in the Fall 2011 issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. Joyce Olewski Inman explains that despite the advice of a well-meaning mentor, her choice to take a full-time WPA job while still a graduate student isolated her from both her potential mentors and the field itself.

She confesses, “I feel pressured to explain the situation and how it came to be—to apologize for accepting the position of WPA. I suppose part of me is ashamed” (152). Kathryn Johnson Gindlesparger echoes Inman when, as part of the same Symposium, she describes the “intersection between tenure and administration” as a “shame [she has] to choose” (155). It is clear why they position their choices to take a pre-tenure/non-tenure-track WPA position as a disgrace when others argue vehemently against such decisions: The advice of our mentors, whom we respect and admire, often contradicts our training, our professional goals, and our identity as writing program scholars and administrators. When both Inman and Gindlesparger interpret their experiences as WPAs without the possibility of tenure as somehow “shameful,” we see another rhetorical commonplace in our work: Pre-tenure WPA positions are always risky. However, when this commonplace is raised to the level of a truth claim, it functions as a regulating force saturated with emotional ramifications for those who are in the process of constructing their professional identities as WPAs.

Like Inman and Gindlesparger, my best job offer was a full-time WPA position (though mine was pre-tenure, tenure-track), and as I grappled with that decision, I received similar, discouraging advice. Rather than feeling shame, however, I have felt frustration in my colleagues’ dismissal of my choice to take a WPA job without tenure, and through that frustration, I’ve felt as though I’m outside of the field, looking in. These narratives and the advice they promulgate function as regulating forces that subtly position WPAs as the object of critique, and as a result, I have felt the disapproving gaze (perhaps real, perhaps imagined) of others because I chose to take an administrative position before tenure. Yet because the subject of the gaze (in this case, the non-tenured WPA herself) is always able to be watched, her visibility, as Michel Foucault posits, “assures the hold of the power that is exercised over [her]. It is the fact of constantly being seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in [her] subjection” (187). In this example, the narrative *cum* truth claim arguing against pre-tenure WPAs either restrains the subject from making choices that go against conventional wisdom or disciplines those who choose to take on these positions pre-tenure with shame or isolation.

#### NARRATIVES AS COMMUNITY (AND IDENTITY) NORMING

When we listen to stories and tell our own, we begin to understand how we fit within a larger community of WPAs, but when we rely on narratives to structure our understanding of what it means to do the work of a WPA, we run the risk of constructing an identity of ourselves as WPAs that

is based on others' experiences instead of our own. As North noted, lore "form[s] an important part of a Practitioner's identity, the outward signs of community membership: When I do these things in this way, I declare myself a Practitioner" (30). Particularly for early career WPAs, storytelling can offer an opportunity to try on a particular professional identity while simultaneously validating her membership amongst more seasoned WPAs around her.

As WPAs, we've written and read so many narratives outlining the perils of graduate and/or pre-tenure administrative work that their collective message creates an oft-repeated commonplace: Writing program administration is disappointing, soul-crushing, and often career-destroying work. When we write about our good days on the job, we explore what we did that worked and how it could be implemented in other programs and different contexts (see, for example, contributions to Irene Ward and William J. Carpenter's *The Longman Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators*). Yet we don't often write about what those good days feel like or how those experiences shape our professional identities. Instead, we write about how we struggle, argue, and bargain with colleagues and other administrators to protect our programs and by extension, ourselves. We resign ourselves to the notion that "WPAs must choose to act in the face of despair and hopelessness" despite our tireless efforts (Micciche, "More" 443). Our jobs can't always be so dangerous, at least not every day, but the narratives, read together, establish a truth claim that suggests the opposite.

Why are these the stories we tell about our professional lives? Why do we paint ourselves as heroes who saved the program or hapless victims unable to withstand institutional forces to protect our programs and ourselves? As Donna Strickland notes in *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*, the complicated nature of the work itself creates the need for WPA narratives. Strickland notes that historically, WPAs have resisted the notion of themselves as managers because, as "traditional humanist intellectuals," we often "distrust management as, at best, non-intellectual, and, at worst, soul-murdering" (10). Situated in this context, our storytelling practices make more sense: If we are ambivalent or resistant to the complicated role we play in the university system as WPAs, a more simplified, reductive means of storytelling can elide the conflict we feel in that role. Thus, we tell stories that paint us as the romantic hero who defends the program against administrative whims or the tragic martyr who sacrifices herself for the good of the program or her own ethical principles.<sup>2</sup> The stories allow us to ignore the fact that as WPAs, we are agents with institutional power in systems we find troubling and instead portray a less complex and arguably less honest portrait of the work of the WPA.

Using stories of suffering or heroism to argue against the work of pre-tenure WPA positions is problematic not only because of the ambiguous way lore is constructed and functions within the field but also because these stories have consequences on how we make meaning of ourselves as we do this work (whether or not we have tenure). When a junior WPA blends the commonplaces of WPA narratives into her own professional identity, she may feel constrained by the hero/victim binaries the WPA narratives demonstrate. She may also feel that martyrdom is inevitable, that she must have to choose between sacrificing herself for the good of the program or walking away to maintain her autonomy and agency. Moreover, when seasoned WPAs tell stories of suffering and victimhood, or power and victory, the early career WPA may consider her own experiences—and tell her own story—in a similar way, not necessarily because that's how she experienced it but because this narrative arc shows that she has earned her WPA stripes and is a vetted member of the community.

Narratives function differently for early career WPAs than they do for more seasoned administrators. In *Doing Emotion*, Laura Micciche cites Sarah Ahmed to explain the “stickiness” of narratives, arguing that the emotions described in and created by professional stories have a tendency to attach to the reader and shape their own perspective and experiences (28). Those just starting in the field have fewer of their own experiences to contextualize or counter-balance others' stories. When narratives are shared by scholars whom we respect and wish to emulate, it's particularly difficult to imagine constructing a WPA identity that isn't colored by the disappointment, discouragement, and (sometimes) despair they describe. Micciche claims that narratives can function like a sticky adhesive, but I would argue that when an early career WPA reads a narrative that has an emotional tenor that does not match her own experiences, that narrative functions more like a solvent, unsticking her from the narrative, the rhetorical commonplace it reifies, and the field itself.

#### REWRITING NARRATIVES IN THE MARGINS

As a field and as individuals who are always in the process of building and refining our professional identities, we must interrogate our assumption that pre-tenure administration is always dangerous. Pre-tenure and non-tenure-track WPA work has become—for better or worse—a material reality. In their 2007 survey of WPAs, Jonikka Charlton and Shirley K Rose report that the number of WPAs at the Associate rank fell from 44% to 28% between 1986 and 2007 while the number of pre-tenure, non-tenure-track, and graduate WPAs rose from 30% to 42% in that same time period

(123). We must not assume that colleagues are being forced to take on these positions; instead, we might listen to those who actively choose WPA work as part of their graduate study and early professional lives to understand their choices more fully. As Jonikka Charlton notes in *GenAdmin: Theorizing WPA Identities in the Twenty-First Century*, “The fact that I *choose* to be a WPA, that I *am* a WPA . . . defines a large part of who I am” (Charlton et al. 26). When WPAs actively choose WPA work and claim administration as part of their professional and scholarly identities, they embody a different kind of agency than the WPA who has the work foisted on her. As more people make similar choices, the field would do well to reconsider its advice about pre-tenure work and focus instead on mentoring early career faculty to find ways to thrive in their positions rather than second-guessing the choice itself.

This mentoring could begin first by unpacking and, when necessary, critiquing the narratives themselves, paying attention to how “disciplinary narratives and tropes produce affects and feeling subjects” (Micciche, *Doing Emotion* 26). When we actively critique and discuss narratives within our academic communities, we accomplish several things. First, and perhaps most importantly, we shift the disciplining gaze so the object of study is not the early career WPA herself; instead, the early career WPA’s gaze (and the gaze of her senior and peer mentors) is directed back to the texts, allowing her the opportunity to resist the narratives, if desired, as she constructs her own identity. Additionally, when early career WPAs speak back to the narratives, they have a chance to envision their place in the field based on their experiences, circumstances, and choices rather than others’ narratives.

When we critique narratives, we also open up our mentoring relationships to move beyond the problematic yet common expert-apprentice model that often silences the mentee. Instead, we can create the opportunity for an “interdependent model of mentoring” that “provide[s] benefits for mentors and mentees” (Ratcliffe and Schuster 248). An interdependent model of mentoring allows early career WPAs to push back against commonplaces that do not match their own experiences, and it invites more experienced WPAs to participate in an important mentoring strategy Krista Ratcliffe and Donna Decker Schuster discuss: listening that “facilitate[s] genuine communication” and understanding (251). If Winifred Bryan Horner is right and the mentoring relationship requires both questions and those willing to answer them (17), we might expand our notion of mentoring to create space for the questions more experienced WPAs might have of early career WPAs: “What made you choose this? What can your experiences teach me about newer generations of WPAs? What can I learn about my own experiences from listening to you?”

## CONSIDERING COUNTER-NARRATIVES

By fostering a type of mentoring that moves beyond the expert-apprentice model, we create space for counter-narratives to emerge that, as Linda Adler-Kassner encourages, tell stories rooted in our principles that explain “*why* we do the work that we do and motivate us to persist in it” (10). Rather than reiterating narratives’ tropes, counter-narratives may invite us to “consider how to construct metaphors for composition in renewed language that resists positioning ourselves as principals of our own subjection” (Micciche, *Doing Emotion* 41). One word that is being used increasingly by WPAs to describe their work is *liminal*. Julie Nelson Christoph, Rebecca S. Nowacek, Mary Lou Odom, and Bonnie Kathryn Smith explain that gWPAs occupy a “difficult and liminal position” as graduate students and administrators simultaneously (94); Talinn Phillips, Paul Shovlin, and Megan Titus argue that *liminal* most accurately describes those who “engage in the high-stakes work of j- or sWPAs but typically have an untenurable institutional rank: graduate student, contingent faculty, support staff, etc.” (44). Finally, Tara Pauliny applies the term to the untenured WPA who “finds herself in an inherently queer position: She is an administrator who is both authorized and de-authorized; she is an integral part of the institution and a potential means of disruption” (1).

When we listen to those who occupy these liminal spaces, we begin to see a counter-narrative emerging that more fully examines the lived experiences of early career WPAs and generates new knowledge about WPA work. To hear these stories, though, it helps to reframe how we think of *liminal* by looking for what is valuable on the margins of rank and tenure. While we might at first understand Pauliny’s terms *de-authorized* and *disruption* as negatively constructed notions of our identities, there is rhetorical potential in that space. Below I offer my own counter-narrative, a beginning perhaps, that illustrates the rhetorical opportunities I’ve found in administration before tenure.

As a graduate student, I served as a gWPA in my institution’s program, and like Phillips, Shovlin, and Titus, I recognized that among my peers, no one else seemed to want the job of graduate WPA work (55). But I did. I saw myself as the link between the WPA and my fellow graduate students, and I liked getting to see the nuts and bolts of how a writing program worked. I felt confident in my role, assured that I was both contributing to and learning from the program work I was doing. Midway through my first semester as gWPA, I could see that my fellow grad students assumed I was suffering, in part because of the narratives of gWPA work they were reading as part of their coursework. One classmate tried to commiserate with me, saying,



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“We talked in class today about how graduate WPA work is so difficult. You must hate your job.”

I was surprised that my classmates associated me with these gWPAs’ stories—I didn’t hate my job; in fact, like Irvin Peckham, I enjoyed it and had to “[wonder] about the angst . . . I have heard expressed . . . in conferences or read about in rhetoric and composition journals about the difficulties of WPAing” (190). For me, the demands of program administration interested and engaged me, and, like Doug Hesse described: “I [liked] being busy on this stuff” (408). I found that I was better at my own research because my gWPA role offered a chance to leave the isolation of the dissertation process to work with and learn from others, and it actually gave me something more to say once I sat back down to write. Yet because I was new to the role and my administrative identity was in its infancy, my classmates’ comments were unsettling. Was I doing the work badly because I didn’t experience the emotions and conflict the narratives predicted I would? Although their response illustrates the stickiness of narratives that I described earlier, those moments of dissonance, for a time, were destabilizing. As I tried to reconcile my experiences with the narratives, I started conversations with classmates about what my *real* experience was like, hoping to show them that I didn’t, in fact, hate my job and that, while it was challenging, I felt that I was learning through my contributions to the program. For me, the dissonance between my experience and the narratives created an opportunity for conversation about the nature of our program, graduate WPA work, and myself as an early career WPA.

As I continued in my gWPA role through my last two years of graduate school, I was overwhelmed by the possibility and uncertainty of the job search. Not unlike my peers, I faced a competitive job market while juggling my own professional goals and desires, the advice of my mentors, the warnings of the narratives, and my own material and family needs. Like Charlton, I saw (and continue to see) administration as part of my professional identity, so it was not a stretch for me to take an administrative position early in my career. I did so eagerly but cautiously.

As a graduate student and job-seeker, I was trained to read and understand administrative structures, and as I moved through the interview process, I saw that there are environments (often at smaller colleges or universities) where administrative work is valued structurally within the university. When I interviewed for my current position, I learned that the university offered one course release per semester for WPA work, and each composition course counts as 1.5 courses toward the 3/4 teaching load, effectively offering a 2/2 teaching schedule that would afford time for both administrative work and scholarly projects. Perhaps even more valuable than release

time, I was assured that the work I would do as WPA would be understood as fundamentally scholarly in nature, and curricular and assessment work that would be categorized as service at some institutions would count toward my scholarly production.

The assurances made during the interview process have borne out, but had I followed the narratives' advice alone, I never would have taken the job. By reading the institutional structure carefully, I was able to see a different structure that might make pre-tenure administrative work possible and even desirable, rather than dangerous. At a research-intensive university where administrative work is deemed to be service alone, accepting a WPA position may have been a more dangerous choice with long-term professional consequences for the WPA. However, when I framed the narratives' warnings against pre-tenure work not as monolithic, but rather as institution- and program-specific, I had more room to interpret both the narratives and the job offers I received.

Once hired, I worried that my inexperience or perceived lack of power might be a disadvantage, but in my first years as an untenured WPA, I found my limited knowledge about the institution to be a starting point for conversation and change. When a colleague resisted the curricular revisions I proposed because "we tried that before and it didn't work," I found an opportunity to ask questions to better understand the historical context. Through our conversation, we were able to consider ways in which my proposal could succeed. I could have viewed my inexperience as a liability, but instead I embraced the disruption of my identity as a junior administrator as Pauliny describes.<sup>3</sup> By leveraging my newness, I was able to foster discussions that would have been impossible for someone not situated on the margins. Moreover, my role as an untenured administrator in the university system complicated the notion that institutional power is directly tied to tenure. Without tenure, my goal was not (and could not be) to secure traditional notions of power. Instead, I aimed to build my capacity to influence others through *ethos*-based authority built on the margins.

I recognize that by framing my experiences as a g- and jWPA as a counter-narrative, I run the risk of over-simplifying the nature of untenured WPA work, particularly for those more marginalized than I have been. Worse, I could fall into the trap of positioning myself as the hero of my own story, which I most certainly am not. I do not mean to say that untenured administrative work is without its risks; my early career has had many political, intellectual, and emotional challenges, but I consciously do not interpret these experiences as a consequence of my junior administrator status. I have been challenged in my early career because academic work is itself challenging, regardless of my administrative responsibilities or rank. WPA

work has become more familiar the longer I've done it, but its political, intellectual, or emotional challenges haven't gone away because my rank has changed.

It could be said that too much emphasis on identity—either for graduate students preparing for WPA work or those early career WPAs acclimating to the role—promotes a solipsistic view that distracts us from the ethical questions we as WPAs have a responsibility to address. By focusing on our own identity as WPAs, we run the risk of ignoring fundamental questions of fairness raised by the ongoing challenges of contingent labor, economics, and institutional politics. As Strickland notes, writing programs can be seen as sites of class struggle, so when a WPA has to tell an adjunct his class is cancelled a week before the semester starts or when budget cuts decimate graduate student funding, we bristle at the perceived injustice of the system. If we focus on how these situations impact our administrative identity alone, if we consider only how *we* are victimized by these situations, we miss an opportunity to theorize, organize, and problem solve to build a system that doesn't create victims of those with less power than we. Yet we cannot divorce identity—or ourselves as feeling subjects—from the conversation. The uncomfortable emotion we experience when faced with the difficult responsibilities of WPA work can (and should) motivate us to work for change, not so that we feel better, but so that we *do* better. If we leverage a more nuanced, complex understanding of our marginalized (yet still, at times, privileged) WPA identities, we might work toward creating a more just writing program for all those who labor in it. We cannot do that, however, without acknowledging, reflecting on, and complicating the emotional nature of our professional identities through the narratives we write.

If early career WPAs are indeed on the margins looking in on our institutions and the larger field of WPA studies, we might listen to liminal WPAs' stories to create more detailed maps that complicate and advance theories of WPAs and their work. Those of us who feel as though we populate the margins of our field for whatever reason—age, race, class, sexual orientation, or geography—must embrace the opportunity to tell our stories, to expand our understanding of how to best work for the good of our programs, and to do so in a way that is congruent with our personal and professional identities. Rhetoric and composition, and WPA studies specifically, is built on a culture of collegial support, collaboration, and individual agency. If these are our values, if these are the defining commonplaces of our field, then we would do well to tell narratives that are aligned accordingly.

## NOTES

1. For the purposes of this argument, I'm using the term *early career WPA* to describe those who are in the beginning of their administrative careers, particularly graduate WPAs (gWPAs) and pre-tenure WPAs. As Christoph et al. note, gWPAs often find themselves in an admittedly "difficult and liminal position" because they must negotiate their identities as graduate students and administrators without being fully one or the other (94). I would argue that pre-tenure WPAs occupy similar space because they are perceived by their colleagues (and themselves, in some cases) to be both powerful (because they have an administrative position) and vulnerable (because they are untenured).

2. See also Banks and Alexander, as well as Charlton et al., for further complications of the hero/victim binary.

3. Part of Pauliny's disruption came from her embodied queerness, too, calling us to further interrogate the ways that other elements of our identity, like sexual orientation, race, class, and gender, intersect with, complicate, and (in some cases) amplify our liminal administrative identities (Craig and Perryman-Clark, Dew).

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