

Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It: A Survey on Writing Programs and Institutional Mission

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This article reports on findings from a survey distributed to writing program administrators to gather data about WPAs' perceived relationships between their writing programs (broadly defined) and institutional missions. The survey results suggest that WPAs hold a diverse array of attitudes about mission statements and other articulations of institutional mission. The results also raise significant questions and challenges for WPAs about the relationship between writing programs and institutional mission.

INTRODUCTION

Before I started my PhD program, I taught as a visiting instructor for several years at a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest United States. The university's mission was widely known and deeply felt in the daily rhythms of campus life: it included a commitment to pacifism, social justice, and understanding oneself as a global citizen. During my time there, I witnessed many activities that demonstrated the embodied ethos of those commitments: guest speakers who addressed peace and conflict issues, service opportunities to promote social equity, and travel study to better understand the world beyond our immediate contexts. Yet on a campus where the institutional mission spoke so loudly and echoed so widely, I barely heard it whispered in the introductory and advanced composition courses I taught. For example, in the required first-year composition course, the reading anthology required for new instructors was Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon's *Signs of Life in the USA*—a popular and perfectly fine choice at the time. However, an anthology of essays on popular culture through the lens of semiotics did not seem a particularly strong fit, given our institutional identity. Additionally, there were no course themes or activities in first-year writing that aligned with our mission, such as opportunities

for service learning or community engagement. When I left to pursue my PhD and began taking coursework in writing program administration, this incongruence became even more apparent as I reflected back on that first job. I began to wonder how common this situation might be.

That question became the “motivating dissatisfaction” (Lauer and Asher, 1988, p. 4) that impelled me to understand better the relationship between institutional missions and writing programs. While my interest in mission-alignment was piqued at a private, religious institution, I believe the topic has implications for all institutions of higher learning. Kristine Johnson (2014) explained that “mission-driven institutions” are usually defined as private and religious, but she contended that “all institutions are guided by a mission” (p. 69). Missions are evident in guiding documents such as mission statements, vision statements, strategic plans, and other explicit articulations of an institution’s core values, identity, and aspirations. If all universities are to some extent mission-informed, then writing program administrators can benefit by thinking critically about how their own programs relate to that institutional mission. On one hand, some WPAs might find chances to strengthen their positions on campus and better serve students if they are able to articulate connections between institutional mission and program development. For example, they might locate opportunities for funding or raising the profile of their department if they link writing program activities to mission-driven initiatives. On the other hand, some WPAs might find their own programmatic values and goals in stark conflict with university mission. For instance, a strong mission focus on STEM might exert pressure on WPAs to shape curricula in ways less beneficial for non-STEM majors; similarly, an institutional initiative to graduate students more quickly might result in reducing general education courses such as first-year writing. In short, institutional mission offers the possibility for both opportunities and challenges to writing programs. By investigating the relationships between writing programs and institutional mission, WPAs can better position themselves to maximize opportunities or mitigate challenges in proactive ways.

Mission statements can be a critical ground of investigation because seeing writing programs in relation to the institution’s mission is one means of understanding writing programs as part of a rhetorical ecology—a constellation of people, programs, initiatives, opportunities, constraints, and cultures that emerge and interact within a specific university context. Understanding a writing program as part of an ecology helps us realize how we fit within the system, the relationship of the part to the whole. Mission statements can help us to see that relationship because their purpose is ostensibly to communicate the core identity of the university as a whole. Kathleen

J. Ryan's development of rhetorical ecological feminist agency is useful for conceptualizing why a writing program's relationship to the university mission might be important to WPAs. Ryan's "Thinking Ecologically: Rhetorical Ecological Feminist Agency and Writing Program Administration" (2012) drew on ecological thinking in feminist theory to develop a theory specific to WPA work. She called for WPAs to bring ecological epistemologies of location and rootedness to bear on the work they do at their respective colleges and universities (p. 75). Through theories of feminist epistemology, Ryan advanced a framework of rhetorical ecological feminist agency to empower WPAs to become "ecological knowers [who] are situated, embodied, interconnected persons whose recognition of the limits of perspectives positions them to be accountable for what they know and do because they are cognizant of politics of location and relation" (pp. 77–78). Ryan put forward a number of concrete strategies for enacting such agency, such as conducting mapping activities to chart the places WPAs most and least often travel on campus (pp. 87–88). This framework compels WPAs to think beyond best practices in the field to enact strategies attuned to the particular work places and spaces they inhabit. The degree to which WPAs think about the particular institutional mission is one specific means to gauge our sense of space and place.

The study I describe below is a direct attempt to understand more thoroughly how WPAs view their institutional missions, including the extent to which writing programs draw on institutional mission to shape curricula, or the extent to which WPAs see their programs at odds with the university's mission. Essentially, I sought to learn how often WPAs enact the rhetorical ecological feminist agency that Ryan espoused by rooting writing programs in the local mission of their own places of work. I report on the findings from a survey I designed that invited respondents to provide information about institutional mission and writing programs. My findings suggest that WPAs hold a wide variety of attitudes about and engagement with institutional mission—from conscious and thorough program alignment with the mission to outright dismissal of the mission as a valuable guiding tool for writing program development. Further, the survey results offer specific insights about how WPAs at a variety of institutions do or do not think about their mission in creating or sustaining writing programs. The data offer significant questions for WPAs to consider about the relationship of writing programs to institutional mission, and they suggest that WPAs might benefit from training to help them understand the opportunities, challenges, and complexities of their schools' missions.

 INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND WRITING PROGRAMS: SOME BACKGROUND

Institutional missions, as articulated in mission statements and other public documents, are widespread throughout most colleges and universities. As a genre, institutional mission statements “have the strategic objective of creating allegiance and inspiring commitment within and to a constructed discourse community” (Swales & Rogers, 1995, p. 237). Morphew and Hartley (2006) explained that mission statements became wildly popular in corporate America around thirty years ago and then captured the interest of academia (p. 457). Morphew and Hartley further noted that, despite the ubiquity of mission statements in higher education, there remains much debate about the purpose and efficacy of such documents; while some people perceive them as “strategic expressions of institutional distinctiveness,” others see them as “organizational window dressings that are normative necessities” (p. 459). The authors acknowledged that their study “examined only the surface level of institutional purpose” and conceded, “We do not know to what degree various elements in the statements are expressed programmatically or operationally” (p. 470). In other words, there remains much work to be done in understanding how universities, colleges, and departments attempt to put into practice these stated values and commitments.

Scholars of writing program administration have recently explored the relationships between writing programs and institutional mission, and many have addressed the possible positive connections between the two. Johnson (2014) encouraged writing program administrators to be attentive to institutional mission in designing and implementing writing program assessments. Vander Lei and Pugh (2013) argued that WPAs’ understanding of institutional mission could strengthen writing programs and empower writing programs to shape the ever-evolving institutional mission itself. They offered suggestions for a WPA trying to achieve these goals “by investigating how her or his institution articulates its mission, how it has enacted that mission, and how that WPA can build on an institution’s mission” (p. 106). Janangelo (2016) cited a 2013 blog post from *The Chronicle of Education* advising chairs to be mindful of institutional mission’s importance to both accreditation agencies and boards of trustees (p. xi). Janangelo explained that

mission tells us *why* we do what we do. As the biggest why, mission can guide institutional action by asking everyone to work together for a shared purpose. Mission is also something of a “universal adapter.” It is designed to work comprehensively . . . to direct and serve every unit at the school. (p. xii)

He asserted that institutional mission “can set an institution apart from others, giving it a distinctive identity and competitive edge for recruiting and retaining high-caliber and dedicated students, faculty, and staff” (p. xii), which becomes particularly important in a time when institutions are regularly competing for students’ current enrollment dollars and future alumni donations (p. xii). DelliCarpini (2016) developed a physics metaphor for mission: “Mission, as centripetal force, pulls those individual acts into the orbit of the overall intended ethos of the institution” (p. 5). These scholars endeavor to explain why mission statements can be important grounds for inquiry, and they theorize meaningful connections between writing programs and university missions.

While many writing program administrators have explored the purpose of mission statement and the potential benefits of integrating writing programs with institutional missions, the relationships between writing programs and institutional missions are not without challenges and conflicts. Larger institutional missions and the very nature of current higher education might at times run counter to what we see as the mission of our writing programs. For example, Klausman (2016) claimed that two-year colleges once had an apparent mission to democratize education by increasing access for nontraditional populations. By contrast, contemporary two-year colleges “have now a new mission, whether that is articulated in mission statements or not . . . to serve a neoliberal vision of an economic order in which ideas like democracy and transformation and enrichment have no value . . .” (p. 80). Malencyk and Rosenberg (2016) detailed the difficulties of administering writing programs in a public comprehensive institution where “the specter of efficiency is always present, in apparent contradiction to the values of the liberal arts implied by our institution’s current vision statement” (p. 151). Similarly, Poblete (2014) explained, “As composition scholars our focus is on items traditionally seen as ‘higher order,’ such as rhetorical situations, revision strategies, and writing processes.” She went on to assert that institutions of higher education “are more often oriented towards goals that are more easily assessed,” such as particular skill sets rather than habits of mind. Moreover, Adler-Kassner (2008) laid out principles and strategies for addressing the institutional and public perceptions of writing that run counter to what we see as our own real charge as teachers of writing. Together, these scholars have explored ways in which stated or implicit institutional missions—and the very nature of academia more broadly—may pose challenges, contradictions, and direct dangers to our work as writing program administrators.

In addition to such tensions between the disciplinary concerns of the department and the institutional mission’s focus on what should be taught

and how, writing programs may also find a wide disparity between their concern for promoting critical social consciousness in students and the unethical conditions that institutions create for those teaching in the writing program, such as those described by Kahn (2013). While institutions generally do not put forth an overt agenda to exploit instructors, the ongoing corporatization of higher education as a whole results in such exploitation becoming a tacit aspect of the mission in order to maximize cost-effectiveness and prioritize, above all else, the bottom line. In a variety of ways, then, writing program administrators might find their own mission for writing instruction at odds with both stated and unstated missions of the university.

Collectively, existing literature in writing program administration scholarship attempts to theorize and provide concrete examples of how WPAs and composition teachers can bring institutional mission to bear in shaping writing programs, as well as how institutional missions can pose challenges for writing program administrators and teachers. While there is a burgeoning body of scholarship on writing programs and institutional mission, I have yet to find cross-institutional empirical studies on the relationships between writing programs and institutional mission. In addition to individual theorizations and program profiles, I became interested in gaining statistical data about writing program administrators' attitudes about and uses for the missions of their universities and colleges. That is, I sought information from WPAs beyond the small percentage who perform scholarship about institutional mission and its relationship to writing programs. Specifically, I wondered to what extent WPAs in programs across the spectrum envision their writing programs as imbricated with the institutional mission in a rhetorical ecology of place.

METHODS

In order to better understand how WPAs feel that their writing programs both fit within and, at times, exist in tension with institutional missions, I distributed a survey to WPAs at a variety of institutions. For this study, I designed an IRB-approved, 17-question Qualtrics survey to gather data from practicing WPAs about their perceptions of the relationship between writing programs and institutional mission at their respective universities.¹ I chose a survey instrument to gather data as broadly as possible from writing programs of various kinds at accredited colleges and universities throughout the country. I defined "writing programs" capaciously to include introductory composition, writing centers, WAC/WID programs, professional and technical communication programs, basic/developmental writing, and

writing majors. I also created an “other” category so that respondents could write in categories of writing programs I might have overlooked in creating possible responses. I distributed the survey link and informed consent information to several listservs, including WPA-L, the Philadelphia WPA Affiliate listserv, WAC-L, the Writing Center Listserv, and the ATTW listserv to solicit a broad range of respondents. Respondents were given approximately one month to reply, with three emails sent to each listserv to initially inform and then remind potential respondents about the survey deadline.

In total, 109 respondents began the survey; however, after the first question, which asked if respondents were current writing program administrators (broadly defined) at a higher-education institution, the number of respondents dropped to 80. (Those who answered “no” to question one were directed out of the survey and could not answer additional questions, as I sought data only from current program administrators.) The 80 respondents who continued to question two completed all 17 questions. Once all data were collected at the end of the month-long collection period (April–May 2016), the survey was closed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of all respondents ($n = 80$), 38% self-identified as writing center directors or coordinators; 16% self-identified as introductory or first-year writing program directors or coordinators; 16% identified as writing-across-the-curriculum directors or coordinators; and 10% identified as directors of university writing (a position that often oversees a number of writing programs throughout an institution). Altogether, then, the majority of respondents were from writing centers, introductory composition programs, and WAC programs. In total, 44% of respondents work at doctorate-granting institutions, 25% work at a master’s college or university, 20% come from baccalaureate colleges, 1% are at baccalaureate/associate’s colleges, 8% from associate’s colleges, 2% from special focus institutions, and 0% from tribal colleges. Nearly half of respondents (49%) placed their program in an English department, followed by some kind of academic support services division or academic affairs (21%). Only 5% identified as being part of a writing and/or rhetoric department.

When asked if their university has a mission statement, an overwhelming majority (96%) said yes, while 1% said no and 2% were unsure. Respondents were also asked about the specific characteristics or goals referenced in their mission statements or other articulations of their institutional mission. Respondents could choose multiple selections from a list of

possible words or phrases appearing in their mission statement (see table 1). To develop this list, I used the most prevalent categories found and coded by Morphew and Hartley (2006). Respondents were also given the option to select “other” and write in salient words or phrases from their mission statements if they felt they were not represented in the list I provided. The results show a wide variety of institutional goals and commitments:

Table 1
Reported Content of Mission Statements

Characteristic or goal	Respondents reporting (<i>n</i> = 80)
Student development	64%
Academic excellence/rigor	61%
Preparation for world	60%
Civic duty/service	55%
Commitment to diversity	49%
Global citizenship	49%
Leadership	46%
Liberal Arts	44%
Serves local area	44%
Preparation for career	39%
Values	39%
Research	36%
Teaching centered	33%
Campus community	29%
Access (to faculty, resources, etc.)	28%
Public	26%
Religious affiliation	16%
Private	16%
Other	28%

In analyzing the responses to the questions about WPAs’ relationships to the institutional mission, I found six relevant themes emerging from the data: (1) divergent perceptions about institutional mission, (2) perceived conflicts between institutional mission and writing program mission, (3) main uses of the institutional mission, (4) reasons for not using the institutional mission, (5) challenges to attempts at mission alignment, and (6) knowledge about mission use throughout the institution. I explain each of these results in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Theme 1: Divergent Perceptions about Institutional Mission

One obvious theme that emerges in responses to several of the questions is the deep divide between those writing program/center administrators who feel institutional mission statements are a valuable and meaningful document that they use explicitly and those who do not rely on them at all. Significantly, 54% of respondents believe they do utilize the mission in decision-making, while 41% of respondents said they do not incorporate the mission, and 5% of respondents replied they are unsure. These data point to a deep fissure between those who do and do not incorporate the mission. While many WPAs who took the survey reported a strong identification with the institutional mission and a sense of duty to coordinate their writing programs with that mission, a high percentage indicated that they do not consciously incorporate the mission or consider the mission when making decisions about their writing programs.

Answers to the final open-ended question (“Is there anything else about the relationship between your institutional mission and the writing program you administer that you believe is important to explain?”) support the quantitative data reported above: there exists a wide gulf between how WPAs perceive and draw upon institutional mission. The following four answers from different respondents convey quite positive attitudes about institutional mission and alignment of WPAs’ writing program goals with that mission:

Our program has developed mission, vision, and values statements to align with institutional and divisional mission, vision, and values statements. All are published on our course proposals/programmatic syllabi, and all are disseminated to and discussed with writing faculty at program meetings.

The relationship is a direct one for two different reasons: (1) I believe in the mission of the university and am not only obligated to but enthusiastic about incorporating the university mission into the first-year writing program; and (2) aligning program goals and practices with the mission statement ensures that my program will be well respected and valued.

I have completed explicit “formation” related to the institutional mission (both on-campus and as part of the international network of which our university is a part), which has both helped me envision the ways in which the university mission connects to my program

AND has helped me develop mission-aligned curricular and pedagogical insights and innovations that we have used to shape the program over the past five years.

I teach at a faith-based institution, but I am not a faith-based person or professional. As a result, I am always looking for ways I can teach at the intersection of our discipline and my institution's mission in order to ensure everyone can engage genuinely in teaching and learning.

In contrast with the previous answers, the following answer illustrates the polar opposite perspective on mission statements and mission alignment:

The idea that a mission statement is anything other than a statement of an institutional cliché for outside consumption seems naive. Mission statements are designed to be general statements that no one could disagree with. They provide no guidance whatever unless it's a revelation to you that students should be encouraged to learn.

This response is openly dismissive of mission statements due to the respondent's belief that they are never meaningful documents.

Another respondent took a more moderate position than the previous answers, stating that certain aspects of the mission are useful and important while others are not:

Some of our institutional mission seems to me a genuine engagement with the faith-based tradition of the university, drawing explicitly on the long histories of both that tradition and the university itself; some of it seems like the worst, most vacuous Eduspeak and English . . . imaginable . . .

This respondent demonstrates that WPAs may be able to draw on the aspects of the mission they find to be most meaningful, but still acknowledge that other aspects may be irrelevant.

The disparity between these responses empirically demonstrates that there is a wide variation in WPAs' beliefs about the importance of institutional mission and mission statements, a finding that supports Morphew and Hartley's (2006) assertion that academic perceptions about mission statements run the gamut from emphatically positive to blatantly disparaging. It appears that WPAs, like others in academia, have widely divergent attitudes toward mission statements and institutional mission. The survey results show that many WPAs find the mission statement integral to their program administration "by asking everyone to work together for a shared purpose" (Janangelo xii). However, many WPAs give it barely a thought; others still are openly disdainful of it. As such, many WPAs might not con-

sciously accept Ryan's (2012) notion that "knowing our place and developing a responsibility to it" can be an instrumental aspect of WPA work (p. 89). This finding suggests that WPAs might benefit from more opportunities to learn about differing relationships to the mission, including graduate courses and workshops for new WPAs to understand the variety of relationships to mission that they may face in future positions.

Theme 2: Perceived Conflicts between Institutional Mission and Writing Program Mission

Another finding was that very few respondents reported that their institutional mission hindered or was in direct opposition to the work that they do in the writing program. When asked, "Are there ways that you feel the institutional mission is in opposition to the work that you do in your writing program?" 86% of respondents said no, which is an indication that few WPAs find stated goals of the institutional mission to impede their program goals or initiatives. A small proportion of respondents (5%) were unsure, while 9% wrote that the mission is in opposition to the work of their writing programs.

These findings suggest that most WPAs do not believe their programs are constrained or thwarted by the institutional mission—at least the mission as overtly mentioned in documents such as mission statements. That so few people saw an explicit conflict between their institutional mission and writing program is a positive sign, indicating that many WPAs do not feel embattled by the stated college or university mission. If the mission statement is not in direct contradiction with most writing programs, then WPAs who do not currently draw on the mission might be willing to consider how they could begin to work toward mission integration. These WPAs might be open to the kind of attunement to place that Ryan (2012) advocated, but might not know how to undertake that attunement or why it could be beneficial. However, it is still possible that some WPAs find unstated and implicit aspects of the mission to be problematic, such as those expressed above by Adler-Kassner (2008), Kahn (2013) and Poblete (2014).

Theme 3: Main Uses of the Institutional Mission

Of those WPAs who believe they do use the university mission to make decisions about their writing programs ($n = 47$), the survey asked participants to respond to a multiple-choice question, "In what ways do you explicitly incorporate the mission into the writing programs you administer?" The most common responses were "Pedagogical methods that instructors or tutors are expected to use in the teaching or tutoring of writing"

(81%), followed by “Particular skills, knowledge, competencies students are expected to learn and demonstrate in writing courses” (77%), “Assessment methods of program success” (66%), “Faculty development topics for teachers or tutors” (60%), “Use of service learning and/or community engagement opportunities” (51%), and “Course topics, themes, and/or concepts that students are required to read and write about” (49%). Altogether, the responses show a wide array of ways that WPAs use the mission and plan to use the mission to inform decisions, initiatives, and activities for their writing programs. Table 2 shows the complete range of responses to the question about WPAs’ specific uses of the mission.

Table 2

Responses to the Question “In What Ways Do You Explicitly Incorporate the Mission Into the Writing Programs You Administer?” ($n = 47$)

Pedagogical methods that instructors or tutors are expected to use in the teaching or tutoring of writing	81%
Particular skills, knowledge, competencies students are expected to learn and demonstrate in writing courses	77%
Assessment methods of program success	66%
Faculty development topics and/or format for teachers or tutors	60%
Use of service learning and/or community engagement opportunities	51%
Course topics, themes, and/or concepts that students are required to read and write about	49%
Hiring decisions for new instructors or tutors	45%
Genres of texts that students are required to write/compose	36%
Types of guest speakers or presenters invited	34%
Assessment methods of individual student achievement	32%
Selection of curriculum materials such as particular textbooks or course packs assigned to students	26%
Types of internships, co-ops, or field placements offered	19%
Budgetary decisions	19%
Other	13%
None of the above—I realized I don't incorporate the university mission into the writing program I administer	2%

Given that pedagogical methods, skills/competencies of students, and assessment practices were the most often cited applications of the mission, WPAs could potentially learn much from others who have successfully used the mission to shape their instruction, curricula, and assessment strategies, such as the contributors to Janangelo's 2016 edited collection. Workshops offered at regional and national conferences about how to bring the mission to bear on pedagogy, student learning, and assessment practices might prove extremely beneficial for WPAs. Beyond these most common uses of the mission, we might ask ourselves what other ways we could integrate our programs with the mission to the mutual benefit of our program goals and the mission itself. This question could be answered through activities such as the campus pathways mapping exercises that Ryan (2012) discussed as a means to become more aware of our institutional ecology and the place of our programs within that ecology.

Theme 4: Reasons for Not Using the Institutional Mission

In addition to collecting data on how WPAs use institutional mission to shape writing programs, the survey also collected data from WPAs who do not believe they explicitly utilize the mission to ascertain why they do not draw on institutional mission. In response to the multiple-choice question "If the university's mission is not incorporated explicitly into your writing program, please explain why," the highest portion of respondents (49%) selected "Not applicable: The writing program is aligned with the mission." Among those who answered that the program is not aligned with the mission, the largest response (18%) was that they had never thought about how to incorporate the mission into their writing program, indicating that a significant number of WPAs do not give mission alignment much conscious thought when designing, implementing, and revising writing programs.

An open-ended option of this question offered respondents the opportunity to write in other categories in addition to those I had supplied as possible reasons for why the university mission is not incorporated explicitly into writing programs. Many respondents' answers coalesced around a sense that the institutional mission is too capacious to mean much, noting that the mission statement is "extremely broad," "so vague," "filled with bland jargon," and that "the language of the mission has very little practical purpose." In fact, the word "broad" appeared in four different responses to the open-ended question option and the word "vague" appeared in six. Due to this perceived breadth and vagueness of their mission statements, several respondents conveyed that there was alignment between their writing programs and institutional mission, but only by chance rather than by

choice. That is, because the mission statement could be interpreted to mean so many things, these WPAs felt like they could say their programs aligned with the mission if pressed to do so, but not because they pursued specific measures to foster that alignment. For example, one respondent noted, “The writing program is aligned with some of [the mission], but only coincidentally, like throwing a baseball to try to hit the side of a barn.” Another respondent said about the mission, “I can make it mean anything I want to . . . And so can everyone else.” Thus, the perceived vagueness of the mission rendered it useless, or at least useful in only a very superficial sense, for these WPAs.

Respondents offered a few additional reasons for lack of program-mission statement alignment. Several people stated that other articulations or demonstrations of the institutional mission, besides the mission statement itself, were more important in shaping their writing programs—such as university strategic plans, vision statements, values statements, particular policies, and specific university initiatives. Respondents often saw these as more concrete and operational embodiments of their universities’ missions. For these respondents, institutional mission is important and visible on campus, but the mission statement itself is not the only or most important representation of that mission. Still others stated that they deem it more important to align their writing programs with missions either more local (e.g., their specific writing center’s mission statement, or their specific college’s mission statement within the university) or more global (e.g., position statements and best practices in the field of writing studies) than their university’s mission.

One person wrote that their program’s initiatives aligned with aspects of the mission that seemed implicit rather than explicit:

Something NOT included in the institution’s mission statement is the valuing of diversity, which is surprising for a Hispanic-Serving [sic] Institution. Perhaps this is addressed more indirectly when the emphasis is placed on “actively support social, cultural, and economic development in our communities to enhance the quality of life for all New Mexicans.” While valuing diversity is not stated explicitly in our university’s mission, it is a central tenet that guides our design and implementation of the Stretch/Studio Composition Program and how we prepare our English TAs to teach in the program.

In reflecting on the mission, this WPA found it strange that one of the guiding values of the university (diversity) was not explicitly referenced in the mission statement, suggesting that sometimes the most important perceived aspects of mission do not show up in the mission statement itself.

Mission statements ostensibly encapsulate the major values of a university, but this response indicates how such statements sometimes fail to account for significant aspects of an institution's lived ethos.

In sum, the survey indicates that many WPAs who eschew the mission do so primarily because they do not give institutional mission much thought. Others believe that the mission is essentially meaningless, while some find the most meaningful aspects of the university mission outside of the mission statement itself. Survey respondents who expressed that they have not given much thought to the mission might be missing opportunities to pull "those individual acts [of the writing program] into the orbit of the overall intended ethos of the institution" (DelliCarpini, 2016, p. 5). Those WPAs who do not rely on the mission statement because of its perceived vagueness might find opportunities to align the writing program mission with other articulations of the institution's purpose and distinctive characteristics. We can ask ourselves questions such as, "Where do we state who and what we are as an institution?," "Where do these core identity characteristic show up on campus?," and "How does the institution bespeak and enact our particular ethos?." Such questions might allow us to identify clearer, more explicit statements of the actual, lived mission of the college or university on which to map our program goals. In this way, WPAs can be "embracing rootedness and location as epistemic" (Ryan, 2012, p. 92) in order to learn about effective writing program development.

Theme 5: Challenges to Attempts at Mission Alignment

While some respondents said they did not use the institutional mission for a variety of reasons, others claimed that they did attempt to use the mission, but they identified challenges and conflicts in the process of doing so. Some respondents noted that their university mission statements themselves are sites of fierce debate on campus about the roles and directions of these universities. For example, one person wrote:

We are currently in the midst of some deep disagreements about the nature of our mission statement—particularly its language pertaining to the balance of the liberal arts and professional education. I see writing as a bridge between these two frameworks for understanding our mission, and as such, see the program as well positioned in this regard. At the same time, the kinds of arguments and fissures created by these discussions must be carefully navigated for the sake of the writing program. At times, this can be a challenge.

This WPA identifies writing and the writing program as a means of connecting two seemingly competing aspects of the institutional mission,

while also acknowledging the potential political perils for the writing program in attempting to facilitate this connection. Thus, WPAs who try to integrate the writing program with institutional mission might find themselves embroiled in controversies surrounding the very nature of the mission itself.

While some responses cited institutional disagreements about the mission as a challenge to mission integration, others cited the inherent complexity of the mission statement and the campus community as impediments to connecting the writing program to the mission. One person noted the challenge of addressing the many stated goals of the university mission: “there are so many commitments that it is hard to attend to everything in the FYW course.” Another answered, “We could do more to develop the service to the region component that is a part of the institutional mission, but we’ve been directed to focus our efforts to the campus community.” As this respondent notes, institutions sometimes give explicit directions about which aspects of the institutional mission administrators should attend to at the expense of other aspects. One person offered, “There’s a specific clause about training students for health-related service professions, which doesn’t extensively concern students at my immediate campus but is the driving concern at some of the satellite campuses.” This comment highlights a challenge faced by WPAs and other faculty working at branch campuses where the mission of the main campus might be quite different from local goals and concerns. In all, these responses indicate that even when there is general institutional agreement about the mission, and even when WPAs are willing to integrate their writing programs with the mission, the very complexity of missions and institutions can sometimes produce great difficulty with mission alignment.

Other respondents noted challenges of mission integration based on changing relationships between the universities and their various stakeholders. Specifically, one respondent noted an important disconnection between their university mission statement’s commitment to serve the state and the state’s reciprocal obligation to the university:

I think it’s kind of important that the state has all but stopped investing in higher education. The mission statement, last revised in 2009, seems to reflect a relationship between the state and the university that no longer exists. That’s not to say that we shouldn’t still focus on serving the public, just that that social contract is not there in the same way it once was. We should feel more autonomy to define our mission as a result.

This survey response raises an important question: If state funding continues to dry up for public institutions, how will that affect the obligation of those institutions charged in their mission statements to serve the state? The respondent's answer suggests that future iterations of public universities' mission statements might include less language about serving the state, since many states are showing less financial commitment to public institutions of higher learning.

Another noteworthy response related to university stakeholders was a perceived difference between full-time and adjunct faculty commitment to the mission. One respondent said:

At my institution, the mission is referenced often by administrators and highly regarded among staff . . . my understanding is that the mission is also highly regarded among full-time faculty but less so (understandably) among adjunct faculty, which I see as a pretty significant problem of alignment, cohesion, and investment.

Here, the respondent reflects on what they see as a reasonable but unfortunate lack of commitment to and understanding of the institutional commitment by part-time faculty. WPAs know well that adjunct faculty members are often employed by multiple universities; these part-time faculty cobble together a number of classes and scramble between campuses to make ends meet. Not only do they have commitments to multiple universities, but also they may quite legitimately feel exploited by the low pay and lack of benefits extended to them by many of these universities (Kahn, 2013), which might further erode a sense of commitment to the institution or its mission. So, a salient question lurking behind such an observation is this: how will the ever-increasing use of part-time labor to staff writing classes and writing programs affect our understanding of and commitment to institutional mission?

Taken together, many WPA respondents expressed that disagreements surrounding the mission statement itself, the complexity of the mission statement, and differing relationships of various campus constituents to that mission statement all challenged mission alignment. The survey results indicate that some WPAs who attempt to integrate writing programs and mission might have to navigate dissension about the mission itself. Others might need to make difficult choices about what aspects of a complex mission they should emphasize. Responses to the survey also offer tough questions about the future relationships between writing programs and institutional mission in light of the trends toward decreased public funding and increased reliance on contingent labor. Moreover, these challenges affect not just writing programs, but institutions as a whole. Becoming more

aware of these challenges and where they come from might help WPAs address them more effectively. As Ryan (2012) asserted, “Sharing a life place can help people who disagree over campus issues uncover some mutual values . . . to aid dialogue and campus work” (p. 89). By seeing ourselves as imbricated in an ecology of institutional place, WPAs can work toward proactive discussions of these difficulties with others throughout the university.

Theme 6: Knowledge about Mission Use throughout the Institution

A final notable finding of my study is that a significant percentage of survey respondents believe the mission is not often utilized across the institution or else these respondents are not certain how their mission statement gets used on campus outside of their own department or program. While most respondents (93%) replied that the university’s mission statement is posted on the university website, there was little consensus about how or if mission statements are used beyond the university website. For example, when asked if the mission statement is used in student recruitment, 10% said no and 39% were unsure. When asked if mission is referenced in new faculty orientation, 21% said no and 41% were unsure. When asked if the mission is referenced in ongoing faculty professional development workshops, 25% said no while 35% were unsure. When asked if the mission is invoked regularly during faculty/staff meetings, 36% said no and 23% were unsure. When asked if instructors throughout the institution were expected to incorporate aspects of the mission in their instruction of students, 40% said no while 14% were unsure. For each of these questions, around half of respondents said either that the mission was not integrated into these institutional activities or that they were unsure, indicating that many WPAs believe either that their institutions are not promoting the mission or else they do not know how the mission is used on campus.

This finding suggests that many WPAs could benefit from a more conscious and concentrated effort at understanding how mission becomes or does not become articulated throughout the university in order to enact the rhetorical ecological feminist agency that Ryan (2012) advocated. By learning more about how mission is or is not publicized on and around campus, WPAs could better realize how the mission shows up for various stakeholders, or how it could be brought to light in cases where it is hidden. Such understanding could enable some WPAs to map onto existing or potential mission-driven initiatives in meaningful ways. On the other hand, WPAs who find conflict between their writing program and the mission might find allies with similar struggles on campus if they better understood the use of mission across the institution.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have sought to show the perceptions WPAs have about the relationships between their writing programs and institutional missions. A few respondents mentioned in the final open-ended survey question that the act of taking the survey helped them to reflect on this relationship. One respondent wrote, "I want to use this relationship as part of the rationale for the writing program at my institution to have a budget. This survey has reinvigorated my efforts to do so. Thanks!" Another said, "This survey actually gave me an opportunity to realize just how thoroughly the university's mission is part of all our decision making." Thus, it was clear that the survey served to prompt understanding for at least a few respondents about connections between their writing programs and their institutional missions, including how they could use or how they already use the mission.

This study was limited by certain factors. For one, the survey questions focused mostly on mission statements themselves as articulations of institutional mission. Because the data revealed that WPAs often rely on other documents or sources of understanding the mission, future research might investigate these documents and how WPAs use them. Moreover, these findings could have been augmented with interviews to get more detailed qualitative data about individual WPAs' relationships to their specific institutional mission. Future studies into mission statements and writing programs might seek to incorporate this additional data collection method.

The survey data show the wide range of WPA attitudes toward institutional mission. Once they are hired into faculty positions, graduate students on the job market who hope to do WPA work should be aware that institutional mission could be essential, peripheral, or antithetical to their writing programs, depending on their particular institutional context. Knowledge of this reality might assist these graduate students as they prepare for interviews and as they make decisions about which positions to accept if multiple job offers are on the table. The results further suggest that some WPAs might need or want more resources for determining how best to forge connections between their writing programs and institutional missions. Moreover, other WPAs could be aided by training that helps them navigate instances when the mission, whether explicit or implicit, might run counter to the work they do in their writing programs. Graduate programs as well as national and regional organizations like CWPA and its affiliates might productively offer courses and workshops in these areas.

A more place-based understanding of the system in which our writing programs exist can help WPAs see how the writing program and the university's mission intersect or where they might be at odds; such under-

standing can enable WPAs to bring forth the rhetorical ecological feminist agency that Ryan (2012) has challenged us to perform. In doing so, perhaps we can make introductory writing programs, writing centers, WAC/WID programs, professional and technical writing programs, writing majors, and other programs into sites of mission embodiment where even a “window dressing” mission statement can transform into a purposeful and essential part of our institutional structures. It is my hope that writing instructors and WPAs do not find themselves—as I once did—with textbooks, curricula, and approaches that seem ill-suited to the important and distinctive missions of their institutions. Rather, I hope they find themselves within programs that connect, when possible, to meaningful guiding visions of the universities and colleges where they are rooted.

NOTE

1. This study was approved by La Salle University’s Institutional Review Board on February 1, 2016, under protocol #16-01-001x.

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