# Preparing Graduate Students for the Field: A Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic for WPA Professionalization and Institutional Politics

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## Abstract

*This article joins recent scholarly conversations about professionalization practices for graduate students, particularly those preparing for potential careers in WPA work, who are involved in institution-wide initiatives. We argue such experiences are highly beneficial, but can be uncomfortable and challenging if graduate students are unaware of potential obstacles to their contributions, such as embedded institutional cultural restraints, and are then unprepared for tensions likely to arise when they engage as facilitators in WPA-like work. In response, we developed the "Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic," which asks the "project leader" (mentor/WPA), to engage with three areas: (1) establishing project exigence; (2) engaging praxis; and (3) evaluating process. Specific questions within each section are designed to prompt ongoing critical reflection and conversation about expectations, strategies, and goals for both project leaders and graduate students in an effort to mitigate potential sources of tensions over the course of the project.*

> *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.*
>
> —Amy Ferdinandt Stolley,
> "Narratives, Administrative Identity, and
> the Early Career WPA" (29n1)

For graduate students preparing to enter the job market, the opportunity to gain practical experience resulting in publication is certainly an enticing prospect. Most would jump at such an opportunity, as four of us did when offered the chance to facilitate the development of a university-wide writing rubric with an established Writing and Rhetoric faculty member. While the project indeed enabled us to achieve these goals, it also provided us with unexpected lessons about the complexities of writing program administration–like work, what Roxanne Mountford describes as the "institutional politics of this very difficult job" (42). After the project ended, we began drafting this article in an attempt to unpack some of that complexity. In doing so, we found our way to the scholarly conversation about the benefits and challenges of WPA/g(raduate)WPA/WPA-like work, and realized that though our experiences were unique to our specific circumstances, accounts and analyses of similar complications were not uncommon in the WPA community.

We offer our narrative to augment those already circulating, positioning ourselves between John Wittman and Mariana Abuan's article on professionalizing graduate students and Amy Ferdinandt Stolley's call for the expansion and inclusion of alternate WPA narratives in composition scholarship. Wittman and Abuan articulate that scholarship aimed at graduate students "focuses more on socializing students to graduate school rather than to life after graduation," while Stolley argues for a model of scholarship that accounts for many voices including those in "the liminal space(s) of administrative positions that fall outside the traditional senior WPA role" (Wittman and Abuan 62; Stolley 18). As graduate students who ended up completing WPA-related work without an institutional mechanisms of any kind—not even, as we realized in retrospect, under an official WPA, which was nonexistent within our department—we occupied perhaps the most liminal of spaces for WPAs. We discuss our experiences in an effort to build on this conversation and to advocate more specifically for intentional dialogue between project leaders (WPAs/mentors) and graduate students. We echo the call that Suellynn Duffey et al. make for rhetoric and composition to engage gWPAs—and, we argue, any graduate student involved in similar WPA-like work—in "a collaborative administrative structure" that is "more ethically responsible to the need . . . to educate graduate students fully about the politics inherent in our field" (84–85).

We offer a heuristic to guide the kinds of conversations that might better equip graduate students to understand the nature of the still very rhetorical situation in which they find themselves throughout this kind of institutional work. We address the need for conversations about professionalization that emerged throughout our experience and name three areas in particular

for discussion: (1) establishing project exigence; (2) engaging praxis; and (3) evaluating process. We hope to support WPAs/mentors who are interested in involving graduate students meaningfully in similar projects and who wish to acknowledge, address, and carefully work through the tensions that can arise when graduate students engage in work beyond their departmental homes. Further, we recommend that all participants—which may include populations with varying levels of agency in addition to graduate students—engage with these questions regularly throughout the project or mentoring process.

Our heuristic offers a practical way to prepare graduate students (and others) for the WPA-like work they will engage in during or after graduate school as well as new faculty or university administrators. Though this tool has grown out of our experiences as graduate students and, as such, names graduate students and their mentors as the primary actors in this article, we believe these kinds of questions would also be helpful to a larger population. As Talinn Phillips, Paul Shovlin, and Megan Titus remind us, graduate students only remain graduate students for limited amounts of time and move on to professional positions, while the liminal positions filled by such students remain in the realm of the liminal no matter who is filling them (50). In this way, our heuristic can also be used for others in liminal positions in the university, including but certainly not limited to new faculty, untenured/non-tenure track positions, and mentors of junior faculty. We developed this heuristic for the use that Chris W. Gallagher suggests, as "a method for invention and problem-solving" that is "intended to be generic enough to suggest some typical moves and conventions but flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of local (program) values" (12).

In offering our "Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic" (figure 1), we are advocating for WPAs to partake in what Catherine Latterell describes as a "postmodern ethics of action [that] allows us to conceptualize [WPA] roles for graduate students in ways that are sensitive to shifting dynamics of power" (38). This heuristic is intended to enable more active engagement with inevitable changes in contexts and cultures during the course of a project. We hope that by sharing what we learned from this project, we might enable WPAs/mentors, graduate students, and others to move more effectively and easily through writing assessment projects, institution-wide initiatives, and other collaborative WPA-like work.

The Assessment Project

We entered the assessment initiative as graduate students often do—as a direct outgrowth of our coursework. This research emerged from a Univer-

sity of Rhode Island graduate seminar in Writing Assessment and Curriculum Design as a project investigating best practices for developing writing assessment rubrics appropriate to local culture and deployment needs. We were all completing graduate coursework at the time—three concentrating in rhetoric and composition, one in literature—at a land-grant university with a freestanding department of writing and rhetoric. Each of us had professional experience both inside the classroom and outside of academia; however, we had little experience working at the institutional level and no experience with WPA-like initiatives. We completed the seminar in which we read scholarship and studied writing assessment best practices and then brought that knowledge to a WPA-like project led by our professor.

The writing and rhetoric faculty member teaching the course, Libby Miles, had been asked to design and pilot a writing rubric that could be used across disciplines at our university. We drafted the initial rubric in class and continued revisions during a faculty workshop. At the conclusion of the semester, the four of us transitioned into an independent study with the same professor to facilitate the pilot program and finalize the rubric. Throughout the project, we worked with tenured, mixed-discipline faculty who taught general education courses with a strong writing component; the faculty who continued beyond the initial workshop to pilot the rubric were interested in further developing their writing pedagogy. Following the conclusion of the pilot, we analyzed data in the form of artifacts and faculty feedback and ultimately produced a final rubric and supporting documents: a glossary, a list of recommendations for easy course integration, and a number of recommendations for writing support workshops.

In this final stage, our professor began transitioning to a full-time faculty position at another university. Though she met with us briefly, we mostly finished the project on our own. Our now former professor expressed confidence in our work as she remotely submitted the final rubric and supplemental documents to the university assessment office. We later learned that the newly formed general education committee would be using our (formative) rubric to develop their own (summative) version. Without our professor's presence on campus, we were the ones consulted when the general education committee had questions about the rubric, and this new responsibility, both an honor and onus without a faculty member to act on our behalf, challenged everyone involved as it came up against the existing culture of limited graduate student institutional contributions. Our sense of ownership was tested, especially when the new general education writing rubric continued evolving even after our input was no longer solicited. Though the four of us were consulted by our department chair to respond to the initial follow-up questions, her suggestion that the graduate students who helped make the rubric join the general education committee was rejected.

We would ideally end this narrative summary with the conclusion of what happened to or with the rubric, but we are unable to do so. We cannot share what happened in part because we do not know: those conversations happened behind doors closed to us, so any further storytelling would be speculation and hearsay. But some of us are also uncomfortable sharing what we believe happened because some of us will not graduate for another year, and we imagine *WPA* readers will understand and appreciate our desire to minimize the potential pressures on the complex relationships and power dynamics embedded in a graduate student's launch from her program. We are pleased, however, to share our efforts to theorize our experiences with institutional culture and assessment initiatives from our vantage point as graduate students so that others might gain the specialist expertise which has been the biggest takeaway from this endeavor.

## Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic

As we have sought out literature to make sense of our experience, we have been heartened to discover that others are engaging in this conversation, both in describing their experiences (Duffey et al.; Edgington and Gallaher; Elder et al.; Latterell; Phillips et al.) and advocating for more professionalization practices for graduate students engaged in or pursuing WPA or WPA-like work (Christoph et al.; Obermark et al.; Stolley). Many of these voices, however, come from student-turned-scholars who have had time to reflect on their experiences and then productively share those experiences with the field as publishing obstacles and timelines limit the potential for graduate students to offer productive feedback or tools in relative real time. We have published the "Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic" described here to contribute to the filling of this gap but we created it so that we might, on a personal-professional level, have an immediate mechanism through which to understand our struggles with power and agency throughout this process.

Our heuristic is built on the three tenets of (1) establishing project exigence; (2) engaging praxis; and (3) evaluating process. It embeds a recursive practice similar to the assessment loop into interactions between mentors and graduate students engaging in all WPA-like work (Rutz and Lauer-Glebov). Such discussions encourage critical, continued reflection in practical ways to ensure that all participants have agency when possible and are aware of the limitations when full agency is not possible. Graduate students working beyond Latterell's prescribed roles (as the liaison or go-between, the administrative assistant, or the co-policymaker) will likely encounter resistance from various stakeholders within the institution and perhaps even from within the department (24). Such resistance will never

be pleasant, but it is likely and can be productive with appropriate framing. By engaging with this "Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic," we hope that graduate students can be truly professionalized by their experience and feel more prepared to engage in the whole of the position of writing program administrator than coursework or scholarship alone may have accomplished.

Eve Proper, a scholar of leadership and policy in higher education, has argued that faculty mentors and departments that host graduate programs should develop codes of conduct. She writes:

> The relationships between faculty and students should be important to any scholarly society whose members are drawn from academia, and the relationship with graduate students ought to be of particular interest. This is not only because the relationship is more intense than at the undergraduate level. Graduate students also learn from their mentors how to be the future of the profession . . . Scholarly societies have a vested interest in passing on best ethical practices to the next generation of scholars. (49)

We argue, by extension, that any member of the scholarly society in which a graduate student works and is trained has a vested interest in engaging in ethical mentoring practices, including faculty, department chairs, university administrators, and staff. We have come to see that mentorship and training need to extend beyond the walls of the classroom context with mentors outlining clear expectations of both their own and students' roles in the larger project. While discussions of university politics may be uncomfortable, having these conversations with graduate students will not only help collaborative projects run more smoothly, but will also help students as they later transition into productive, competent faculty or staff members themselves.

The "Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic" is divided into three parts intended to cover the entire temporal scope of any project—from pre-activity to post-completion. The establishing project exigence section offers directives to help establish the background and impetus for the project as well as questions designed to help project leaders and graduate students discuss contributions as understood by both sides. Engaging praxis covers the actual engagement in the project with questions to be considered as the context of the project develops and changes, and evaluating process provides guided reflection to help consider the end result. In the remainder of this article, we offer scholarship, narrative, and discussion to illustrate how we arrived at these particular groupings of questions and to demonstrate how such frank discussions could be generative sites of professionalization.

GRADUATE STUDENT PRAXIS HEURISTIC

*Establishing Project Exigence (as appropriate)*

- Do the graduate students involved understand the project, departmental and institutional exigencies, goals, and/or desired outcomes for the project?
- Are the graduate students aware of the key stakeholders (faculty, department chairs, program administrators, university officers, etc.) in the project, and what ideological agendas and practical considerations (e.g. budget) drive their involvement?
- What roles, responsibilities, and time commitments are expected of graduate students in the project?
- Are any related professionalization opportunities (e.g. funding, training, publishing) available for graduate students involved in the project?
- What are the various personal and professional identities and skills of the involved students? How will experiences and credentials be acknowledged and utilized?

*Engaging Praxis*

- How are the goals of the project leader and graduate students in the assessment project being achieved?
- What kinds of institutional structures, power dynamics, and embedded cultures are graduate students experiencing at play in the project? If significant changes to these elements are taking place, and if they are relevant to graduate students, how might they be addressed?
- How might these tensions be gracefully, ethically, and conscientiously handled by graduate students?
- Are professionalization opportunities and activities being offered, implemented, and supported?
- How are student identities and skills being leveraged? Are contributions being acknowledged?

*Evaluating Process*

- Have goals and/or desired outcomes for the project been met for the project leader and graduate students?
- How well did graduate students perform the functions asked of them? Is further training/mentoring needed in certain areas?
- Do all parties feel they communicated and collaborated effectively at all stages of the project? Are there any methods or tips collaborators have for future teams?

Figure 1. Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic

Establishing Project Exigence: Who, What, and Why

We continue to believe that inviting graduate students to participate in assessment work can have far-reaching benefits for all involved: students gain "real experience" to describe while on the job market, writing faculty and WPAs benefit from the work of many hands, and administrators (hopefully) encounter a stronger product or program resulting from collaborative work. Those undertaking these initiatives, however, and perhaps graduate students in particular, must be cognizant of complexities which accompany such work. Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill write about the challenges of collaborative work in assessment, specifically articulating the need to pay "careful attention to the values and passions of all involved, through a process that provides access to all" (108). Though they are talking specifically about choosing the appropriate means for disseminating the results of an assessment, this call for careful attention highlights the significance of power dynamics for the institutional stakeholders involved in assessment (104–07). Faculty mentors often take this into account when planning institutional projects, but graduate students would benefit from a reminder about the inherently liminal position they hold within the university, particularly if they come (as we did) from a department where their work is valued beyond that of mere apprentices.

We developed the establishing project exigence category in part because, although acknowledging the reach of embedded cultural and power dynamics has become more prevalent in recent WPA scholarship involving graduate students, such scholarship often focuses more on the experiences of the authorized gWPA than on the experiences of those engaged in more marginal or unauthorized WPA roles, like the ones in which we found ourselves. Duffey et al. describe their attempts (as gWPAs) to resist a hierarchical, authoritative approach to leading teaching assistant workshops in their recent 2016 article. Though they encountered difficulties with the approach—self-disclosing that the process was complicated in part by their own anxiety regarding their authority—they found collaborative engagement an effective act of resistance against the entrenched hierarchical culture at work in their university (Duffey et al. 81). This category attempts to confront the conflicts that can accompany labor issues in (g)WPA-type work so that both graduate students and those around them can benefit from the resulting discussions of authority, power, and politics between the discipline, institution, and stakeholder populations.

We would have benefited from the understanding that as practitioners of WPA-like work, and as graduate student practitioners in particular, the tensions that can arise around issues of ownership, authorship, agency, and

exigence are far more complicated than even the most illustrative accounts can fully document. For example, when we felt like the rubric had been taken away from us, critical reflection prompted by the questions in the establishing project exigence section could have helped us understand it was never really ours to begin with. We also had not fully appreciated that what might be understood as best practice within our field, as espoused by Neil Pagano et al., would not translate into institutional praxis, and that other stakeholders, ideological agendas, and practical constraints were inextricably linked to the project before we even began our work. The "Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic" is our attempt to provide a framework to encourage dialogue at key stages with the establishing project exigence category functioning primarily as an instrument to appropriately manage expectations.

## Engaging Praxis: When Scholarship and Practice Collide

Julie Nelson Christoph et al. describe how, as graduate students involved in aspects of WPA work, they "were expected to lead—but [their] authority often was tempered by issues of gender, institutional position, and experience" (94). We experienced similar tensions related to our efficacy and agency throughout our WPA-like work, that, in in retrospect, could have been mitigated had we devoted time to such issues as well as the development and deployment of the rubric itself. The engaging praxis category was developed to create space for these discussions, hopefully at regular intervals throughout the project, so that these tensions become moments for engagement rather than disillusionment.

We participated in this rubric-building initiative in a number of roles: as students within a composition seminar, a graduate program, and a larger institution; as writing instructors with varying degrees of experience; as representatives of a writing department undergoing its own programmatic metamorphosis and staffing changes; and as first-time qualitative researchers invested in generating a positive culture of assessment at our university. We shifted between and regularly moved beyond Latterell's categories when we acted as writing specialists, assessment and rubric consultants, researchers in the field, workshop facilitators, administrative liaisons, mentees accepting guidance, and scholars engaged in praxis. Much of this work was well received in the earlier stages, though many of our later contributions were not valued, and the situation was further complicated by changes in the administration that had originally engaged our mentor in this project. We designed the engaging praxis questions regarding changes in institutional structures, power dynamics, and embedded cultures to highlight the

magnitude of the potential implications of these types of change for the mentor, graduate students, or even the work itself.

Though obvious to most faculty, we were not initially conscious of the ineffectual role that graduate students generally play in institutions. Our voices were valued both within our department and the sheltered conversations of faculty workshops, and we were—quite naively—unprepared when the tone of later dialogues at the institutional level shifted significantly. The faculty who were directly involved in the rubric development project treated us with collegial respect, and we realize now that questions such as those in the engaging praxis category would have helped us to recognize the unique value of those personal-professional relationships to better understand our true position as we moved from our department to the larger institution. As a result, one of our greatest learning moments was recognizing our own liminal status.

We felt the shift to liminal space so keenly because our faculty mentor had supported and respected our work consistently throughout the project. We experienced the effective mentoring that Stolley describes as "interdependent" and not just "expert-apprentice that often silences the mentee" (24). Our faculty mentor's approach allowed us to complete the rubric creation and pilot program with more agency than we could have anticipated, and we encourage all project leaders to carefully consider their roles in order to provide the kind of guidance and mentorship that can lead to the most positive outcome. She operated in a "mentor as guide" role, which Christoph et al. describe as "The mentor who guides [that] does not direct or dictate, but facilitates, shows, and encourages. Rather than administering in a top-down fashion, the mentor-as-guide model suggests a side-by-side relationship" (98). While this person "does lead . . . she leads while also making the journey with those depending on her" (98). Even the interdependent nature of this relationship, however, could not change our intrinsic roles within the university as our mentor often shielded us from the institutional tensions we became aware of only after her departure.

Evaluating Process: The (Self-)Assessment Loop

In reflecting at the time, and particularly in retrospect, we have come to realize the extent to which various cultures and contexts at work, often hidden under the surface, affected the development of this project in ways we did not anticipate. While scholars often situate their own studies in a general sense ("at a midsized, land-grant, research institution," for example), assessment articles and studies—the scholarship we read to prepare for the project—tend not to articulate the contexts working in the background.

We struggled with many transitions throughout this project, but we were ultimately able to benefit from the experience by documenting changes in our positions within the project and our understanding of rubric ownership in the "Navigating Murky Waters" article, which won the 2015 CWPA Graduate Student Writing Award (Foley et al.). We appreciate the many roles we filled over the course of the project because they allowed us to understand agency, power, and influence from a variety of perspectives, but at the time, we often felt adrift in navigating our circumstances. We had prepared for how we might support and encourage faculty from other disciplines as they participated in the creation of a writing rubric, but we had not thought to consult literature about the difficult transition we were making from students to interdisciplinary facilitators. As a result, we developed the final section of the heuristic, evaluating process, to guide reflection after the conclusion of a project to echo the elements examined in the first two categories with the benefit of experience and hindsight and to help all involved be better prepared for those factors in their next undertaking.

While reflecting on this project, Eric Turley and Chris Gallagher's law of distal diminishment resonated with us for a variety of reasons, especially when we felt our own agency and influence shrinking as we moved further from the origins of our involvement with the project. Turley and Gallagher maintain that "any educational tool becomes less instructionally useful—and more potentially damaging to educational integrity—the farther away from the classroom it originates or travels" (88). In applying this to our experience, the further away the tool traveled from the context of our classroom or initial faculty discussions, the less positive the culture of assessment surrounding it became. The resulting tensions with power and identity were by no means unique to our situation, but we were, nonetheless, unprepared for this kind of professional challenge and growth. Our hope is to provide critical awareness through open dialogue and contextual awareness to, at the very least, make students aware of the dynamics into which they are entering and have realistic expectations about limitations of their agency in all resulting interactions, but this awareness is not limited to a single encounter. This article has named mentors and graduate students specifically, but it applies to any circumstances in which an individual attempts to effect change in an institutional ecology.

We focus on graduate students most specifically because although Phillips, Shovlin, and Titus's assertion that "Negotiating power successfully among upper administrators while still categorized as a student is a Herculean task" rings true for many graduate students in our position, we suspect it holds true for a variety of other position within higher education as well (53). Both self-assessment as well as summative external assessment, as we

know, help foster growth and learning, ultimately solidifying the professionalization experience for the graduate students. The recap and reflection provided in the evaluating process section of our heuristic will hopefully serve the students as they continue through their program and eventually transition into faculty, staff, administrative, or other positions—like the WPA—they may hold in the future.

Conclusion

While we recognize the discomfort that may come from having frank discussions with graduate students, we hope that this heuristic offers an impartial way to at least open these conversations. Working with a common set of questions can help build a base level of shared information that may help all parties when navigating institutional issues that will likely arise. If this tool were to become an established part of researchers' and mentors' repertoire when involving graduate students in projects beyond the classroom, the field as a whole would benefit from having more informed, self-reflective professionals entering its ranks.

The overwhelming call for attention to the professionalization of graduate students, by Cristyn L. Elder, Megan Schoen, and Ryan Skinnell and others previously mentioned, has helped us locate ourselves within an ongoing conversation while also helping us to realize how our experience differed from the existing narratives of so many others engaged in WPA-like work. While assessment is only one facet of WPA work, we have attempted here to connect our assessment experiences with WPA work and graduate student professionalization in a meaningful way. Much of the scholarship described expressed similar feelings of disillusionment with, or misgivings about, WPA work, particularly with accounts written from the perspective of the liminal (g)WPA. As Elder, Schoen, and Skinnell point out in their 2014 assessment of the systems of training available to graduate students interested in WPA work, "persistent statements of graduate student interest in writing program administration" illustrate that the "narrative about WPA work is changing" (21). Where it was once "often characterized as work foisted upon reluctant rhetoric and composition scholars," many burgeoning scholars look to this work as desirable earlier in their careers (21). Like others, however, they recognize the need "for a more robust system of WPA preparation for these graduate students" who are interested in pursuing writing administration work (13).

We pursued this opportunity for a variety of reasons and benefited greatly, but we ultimately hope to contribute to the field with the "Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic" in order to make the process more transparent for

those who may engage in similar work. As Stolley suggests, "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" (28). While we do not count ourselves in the "victim" category, the process was confusing and uncomfortable at points. We recognize that departmental and university service are crucial elements of the socialization and professionalization of all those seeking to become full-time faculty or WPAs, and we have developed this heuristic with Stolley's message in mind. We offer this narrative and heuristic not as another example that suggests that graduate student WPA-related work is thankless and difficult, but to continue to further the existing narratives about the kinds of work that can be done with careful planning and open conversation.

Our initial experiences with this project occasionally left us feeling isolated, but our subsequent forays into scholarship helped us understand that these issues are being addressed and discussed in meaningful ways. Our project mentor often talked about the wedge as the simplest tool and most effective means of opening doors, both literally and figuratively. We hope the "Graduate Student Praxis Heuristic" serves as such a tool, propping wide the already open door and productively pushing at those that are closed. Acquiring professional experience is never an easy task, but we firmly believe that scaffolding expectations into initiatives such as these benefits all those involved, especially the graduate students now who will be all the better prepared for their own work as mentors and WPAs in the future. Assessment best practices encourage recursive critical reflection for a good reason: to ensure course corrections are made, praxis is current, and tools remain effective to the goals of this particular assessment cycle. We as a field would do well to incorporate such practice into our own WPA-like work, particularly when involving graduate students, confirming at key stages that mentors and graduate students alike share and understand specifics goals, roles, and strategies so that everyone involved might complete the process with the greatest agency and efficacy available to them within their local circumstances.

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