

Plenary Address

Innovation through Intentional Administration: Or, How to Lead a Writing Program Without Losing Your Soul

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ABSTRACT

Writing program administrators work in a conflicted, liminal space. For example, they sometimes are asked to enforce language norming that they don't support, and they often must facilitate labor practices that they also fight. In spite of the transformations they advocate for, the long histories and stubborn practices of writing programs reflect and enact privilege. WPAs often have little control over the fiscal decision-making that impacts the instructors and students in their programs. Yet that conflicted space is also complex, for even as these issues likely sound familiar to many program directors, they manifest in vastly different ways in the broad range of institutional contexts and job titles that WPAs work in. Our rhetorical training, however, prepares us well for the spaces in which we work, especially when we continually allow clear, consistent principles and values to guide us. When we understand our institutional contexts and remain focused on our guiding principles and values, we can intentionally, strategically move toward change. In this plenary address, I argue for the importance of knowing our guiding principles to shape decision-making in the conflicted spaces where we work, and I describe my approach of compassionate administration.

I know this isn't news to anyone, but writing program administrators work in a conflicted, liminal space. We're (often, but not always) in multiple roles. In my case, I am both administrator and faculty. Some WPAs are both students and administrators, and others are both staff and administrators. Some of us wear more than two hats, and many of us work in more

than one unit. That means that we answer to multiple groups, and those groups often have conflicting goals. When I encounter these kinds of conflicts, sometimes they're minor; at other times, they are so intense that I am left feeling angry, sad, guilty, and confused. I would like to illustrate a few examples of how those conflicts have manifested in my own administrative experience.

Conflict 1. Even though I've explained many times to people across campus that first-year writing is not an inoculation against what many faculty and administrators see as writing "error," I have struggled for over twenty years now with an existential sort of crisis: trying to understand how to reconcile that I spent six and a half years in graduate school studying, writing about, and celebrating the importance of language variation, yet I work in a system that often expects me to enforce language norming. As the director of a writing program, I am now the default figurehead of language norming on my campus, regardless of how nuanced I may try to make the goals of a writing course.

Conflict 2. In one of my WPA positions, we had a potential budget reduction nearly every year. Even if it wasn't certain that we would actually receive a budget reduction, the dean asked us to participate in the "exercise" of coming up with possible scenarios to deal with different percentage decreases in our budgets. Since our writing program budget was 98% personnel, that meant that I was expected to do the unthinkable—go through a list of faculty and determine who would be let go if our funding was reduced by, say, 3%, 5%, or 7%. And nearly every year, I would avoid answering the question of what to cut by coming up with various alternative solutions for saving money without cutting faculty lines. Or, if I had no alternative ideas, I would argue for why we couldn't cut anything. My blood pressure would rise and I would feel indignant as I responded. And as I wrote those emails and made those arguments, I felt the very personal conflict that one of the people who has consistently helped me think through the ethics of labor issues—my husband, Stacey—is also one of the faculty members off the tenure-track. Yet even though I struggled each year to find new, airtight ways to make untenured faculty positions stable, I couldn't escape the fact that the unethical hierarchy of the university had put one person (me) in a position to make decisions that affected so many others. It was unconscionable that colleagues with decades of teaching experience and multiple degrees beside their names (in some cases the exact same degrees I had) were in such precarious positions while I enjoyed security. The guilt and shame that accompanied those moments were intense.

Conflict 3. As a WPA, one of my primary goals is to be as transparent, democratic, and inclusive as I possibly can be with the teachers in our writing program, even with some of the kinds of situations I've just mentioned. Yet there are times when I have to decide how much to share. It is these moments where I feel the internal conflict of being both a faculty member and an administrator most, and I have to decide where my alliances fall and where the lines are drawn between being wise, being compassionate, and being transparent. Most often, the crisis isn't resolved, but I still have to figure out how to move forward.

While my observation that WPAs work in conflicted, liminal spaces is fairly obvious, it's one of the primary lessons that I've learned as a WPA. Indeed, one of the first lessons I learned about being a WPA might have been when I read Laura Micciche's (2002) article in *College English*, "More than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work." In that article, Micciche wrote that from the outside, "the WPA seems to occupy a powerful location. The truth, however, is that the WPA's authority and power are challenged, belittled, and seriously compromised every step of the way" (p. 434). I've found that often those challenges to power and authority come from the conflicted spaces in which we work, and at least for me, I find I am challenging my own decision-making and positionality. The challenge is not just external—it is also internal. And sometimes those conflicts can hit very close to home—in my own experience, they can be personal, and they can be extraordinarily challenging as I weigh options with aspirations, reality with hope. I've just finished my 11th year of directing a writing program (at two different institutions), and the implications of this lesson are always becoming at the same time clearer and also more complicated. It's how to navigate (and perhaps not only survive but thrive in) this conflicted space that I want to talk about this evening.

I also want to acknowledge that I don't claim to have all of the answers. The title of my talk, which seemed both amusing and an act of administrative desperation at the time that I wrote it, makes the grandiose claim that I am going to give definitive answers. But I am fully aware that my experiences are not identical to anyone else's, and that we all live and work in unique institutional contexts. With that said, and with humility, I want to share some of what I have found that grounds me in the moments when those competing interests and demands seem more than I can handle. How do we innovate in the midst of conflict and move from where we are to something new and better?

INTENTIONALITY

I find that much of the conflict we deal with comes from the fact that WPAs are in unique administrative positions. Our positionality is an intersection of interests and commitments, based on the liminal space in which we live. Yet we are also uniquely prepared for the administrative work that we do. As Doug Hesse (2005) pointed out, “No other administrative position so commingles agency with disciplinary knowledge” (p. 503). Ostensibly, we do our administrative work in programs where we can focus exclusively on the kinds of things that we studied as graduate students and that we research and write about as faculty. But it is also this personal and scholarly investment that we have in our administrative work that can make dealing with the conflicts so challenging. What we decide and how we solve problems can have implications on our scholarly work and our relationship to the work of our colleagues in the discipline. These are, at the same time, some of the reasons why the CWPA conference has always felt like a home to me; it’s the one place where I know other people understand the conflicts and challenges that I’m dealing with. It’s a safe space to vent, seek advice, and understand that you’re not alone. It’s also a space where I can think through how I want to respond to some of the bigger challenges I know I will be facing in the coming academic year.

This brings me to what I see as perhaps the most important word in my title: *intentional*. What does it mean to respond to administrative challenges with intentionality and to engage in what I am calling “intentional administration”?

Let me start with an example of what I mean. In February 2017, I met virtually with Elizabeth Wardle’s WPA graduate seminar at Miami University of Ohio. In preparation for the conversation, Liz sent me some notes about what the class had been reading and what she hoped I would share with the students. Specifically, she asked me to share any guiding principles that inform my decision-making as a WPA. Liz’s prompt was an important one, and it points to one of the most important things I believe a WPA needs to know: What are your guiding principles? This is the key to intentional administration and to navigating the conflicts that we inevitably experience. To determine how to move forward, we have to know our guiding principles.

One of the ways that I encourage the students in my own WPA graduate seminars to identify their guiding principles is to start with a related question: What is your metaphor for administrative work? One of my former colleagues at North Carolina State University, Casie Fedukovich, uses the metaphor question when she teaches pedagogy courses for graduate stu-

dents (Fedukovich, 2013). I learned by adapting her activity that starting with metaphors can help us dig beneath the surface to understand what our own guiding principles are.

Another powerful example of metaphors in composition comes from Jay Dolmage's (2007) chapter "Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door." In that chapter, Dolmage introduces the metaphors of steep steps, the retrofit, and universal design to help readers understand how composition excludes, how it can be redesigned, and how it can be more inclusively conceived from the beginning. Metaphors can help us understand concepts—and ourselves—on deeper levels.

So what is your metaphor for administrative work?

COMPASSIONATE ADMINISTRATION

My administrative metaphor shifts over time, but the one that I often come back to is a rocking chair. Some of you have heard the story of how I inherited a rocking chair for my first WPA office from Michael Carter at NC State, and I used to joke that I would offer the rocking chair to people when they would come to my office to vent—about a grade, about a classmate, about a teacher, about a policy. Rocking chairs are soothing. But the rocking chair really had meaning to me. Perhaps part of its meaning originated in the fact that it was given to me by one of the kindest, most generous colleagues I've ever worked with. The rocking chair reminded me that one of my biggest responsibilities as an administrator is to listen to others while they share with me their thoughts, ideas, and concerns. When I listen, I understand more. And as I listen, I might see possibilities for convergence that I hadn't seen originally. I grow, change, and innovate by listening. And sometimes I need to just sit with the discomfort that I'm feeling and think through how to respond—quietly, and sometimes slowly—which can be a difficult thing for a generally impulsive extrovert like me to do. Rocking chairs are good for that, too. And that metaphor connects with one of my guiding principles as an administrator: to act with compassion. The only way I can act with compassion is if I am listening to and paying attention to a range of perspectives.

Ultimately, I believe it is important to know your guiding principles and to set strategic plans and make decisions accordingly. Our rhetorical training prepares us well for the conflicted spaces in which we work—we know how to pay attention to context, audience, and to focus on our purpose. And that rhetorical training really pays off if we allow clear, consistent principles to guide us. When you are in the midst of a moment where

competing interests make it difficult to figure out how to move forward, your guiding principles can point the way.

When we understand our context and remain focused on our guiding principles, we can intentionally, strategically, move toward change.

Saying that my guiding principle is compassion isn't really sexy or dramatic. But then again, my favorite movie so far this year has been the documentary about Mr. Rogers (Neville, 2018). I find that compassion provides a compelling way to move forward—to work toward equity and understanding. As a teacher, I have also been drawn recently to instructional approaches that showcase compassion, or what Carson and Johnston (2000), Jansen (2008), Patel (2016), and others call a “pedagogy of compassion.” Compassionate administration also aligns with how Linda Adler-Kassner (2008) described the “activist WPA” as having

a commitment to changing things for the better here and now through consensus-based, systematic, thoughtful processes that take into consideration the material contexts and concerns of all involved . . . and a constant commitment to ongoing, loud, sometimes messy dialogue (p. 33).

Compassionate administration doesn't mean always seeking easy consensus or avoiding conflict. The conflict and discomfort are sometimes essential to figure out how to move forward. And compassionate administration doesn't mean being quiet or taking a back seat. Sometimes it means being the squeaky wheel and making people uncomfortable. It means listening, but it also means acting.

Acting on what is compassionate, fair, and equitable is part of how I address the subtitle of my talk. I invoke the soul, and I imply that doing administrative work can potentially put you at risk of losing yours. Talking about the soul is far more touchy-feely than I usually get in my own scholarly writing, but I'm learning that it is something that is incredibly important for me to address. I have to align what I say I *believe* as a WPA with what I *do* as a WPA. When these are in conflict, I experience cognitive dissonance, and I am uneasy. But when I can align them, I can move forward.

ONE EXAMPLE OF INTENTIONALITY

It might help if I provide an example of the kind of conflicted space I'm talking about. Our writing program is housed in a large department of English, and one of the conflicts that has circulated for a long time—and that is likely unsurprising to many of you—is what the content of the first-year writing course should be and how to prepare graduate students to teach that course when rhet-comp is not their area of interest. I myself was

a graduate student who was assigned to teach first-year writing without ever having taken it, and I came to graduate school to study applied linguistics, not rhet-comp. I empathize with multiple sides in the conflict.

Yet as the director of the writing program, I have fairly well-formed (and what I believe are well-*in*formed) ideas about what the content of the class should include, what the goals of the course should be, and how to prepare new teachers of writing. We have a large administrative team and faculty in the writing program with a wealth of experience in teaching and studying writing, and I'm following in the footsteps of a line of writing program administrators in the same program who have been active in the field of rhet-comp. Yet one of the first conflicts I dealt with on campus was the question of whether graduate students could teach literature in their classes (in other words, teaching what they had come to the University of Arizona to study) and why they had to read composition theory when this was not what they were interested in. Part of what puzzled me was that I had not banned literature from writing classes; rather, we had begun to move toward a much more open approach in the curriculum that focused on outcomes and allowed instructors to use a multitude of ways to reach those outcomes. Yet while I firmly believe that a range of different kinds of literature can be used to teach students principles of writing and meet the outcomes of our courses, I would have protested a class that had essentially turned into an introduction to literature.

The conflict came to a climax in the spring of 2017, when I and one of our associate directors were called to a meeting with the literature faculty in the department to discuss the writing program. At first I refused to attend the meeting, but I was convinced by my department head that it would be in the best interests of resolving the conflict if we were willing to respond to questions and explain our perspective.

When we arrived at the meeting, we found a standing-room only crowd of faculty and graduate students. We were given seats at a conference table in the middle of the room, surrounded on all sides in what felt—to me—like an antagonistic space. The director of the program began the meeting by saying that the literature and writing programs had long enjoyed a good relationship under the direction of the four former WPAs (whom he named), but for the past two years (which incidentally coincided with my arrival on campus) GTAs were reporting more distress in their work with the writing program and that faculty find their distress understandable and justifiable.

I was, to put it mildly, caught off guard.

We had just conducted a CWPA consultant-evaluator visit the semester before, and we had made a point of having a time when GTAs could

meet with the consultant-evaluators to share their perspectives. I had to work very hard not to be reactionary and defensive in that moment. Instead, after very briefly highlighting some of the things we had accomplished to support teachers in the program, I responded that the associate director and I would listen carefully and take notes.

Among other things, we were told at the meeting that:

- We should fire any faculty mentoring GTAs who seemed to be anti-literature.
- The writing program should be designing its curriculum to recruit students into the major.
- The writing program needs to get back to basics, to include more of an emphasis on grammar and on literary texts.
- Graduate students shouldn't have to take a rhet-comp theory course when their workload is already too high.
- The writing program requires too much work in the annual self-assessment and review of GTAs.
- Any change in the writing program's curriculum must be approved by the Department Council (which at the time had no mandatory representation from the writing program, but did from the four graduate programs).
- And ultimately, administrators in the writing program were anti-literature.

After an hour and a half of listening to complaints and being asked almost no questions, the meeting was dismissed. I felt as if we had just survived an ambush. I was angry following that meeting. Indignant. My emotional response was intense. But how was I going to respond?

I can't say I was 100% consistent, but compassion compelled me to try—as best I could—to understand the perspectives of my colleagues and their students. Granted, the compassionate response wasn't my first impulse, and my fellow administrators in the program can certainly attest to that. But when I tried to look at the issues through the lens of empathy, I could see that:

1. the numbers in the major were dwindling;
2. the faculty who were retiring in their program weren't consistently being replaced;
3. the workload for GTAs was far too high; and
4. the department wasn't offering literature courses for GTAs to teach (for a range of complicated reasons) and they desperately wanted some experience teaching what they were studying.

To be fair, I was very clear with my department head and upper administration that the way the concerns were brought to me and the associate director was inappropriate and unproductive. But ultimately, what could we do to respond to the actual issues?

Personally, I had to figure out how to resolve how I felt about what had happened and what I could learn from it. So in an effort to experience more alignment between what I believe and what I do—in essence, to be mindful and pay attention to my soul—I made a set of “Academic New Year’s Resolutions as a WPA” at the beginning of the following school year (2017–18). I wanted to set specific intentions for my administrative work. They were to:

1. Practice radical transparency.
2. Demonstrate strategic incompetence. You really can’t do more with less, and sometimes that needs to be visible.
3. Practice self-care.
4. Be proactive, not reactive.
5. Listen more than I speak because I’ve got a lot to learn.

During the following academic year, following that spring 2017 meeting, our administrative team tried to focus on what we saw as the causes of the problems instead of the symptoms (which seemed to be primarily the things being voiced at the meeting). We worked on streamlining the GTA self-evaluation process and reducing teacher workload (both for GTAs and our faculty). We reduced GTA teaching loads during their first semester, and we reduced course caps across the board to 19. We also tried to communicate more clearly the ways that disciplinary and scholarly interests could be incorporated into the curriculum, and we paid a small group of graduate students (with equal representation from each program in the department) over the summer of 2017 to develop curricular outlines using all of the textbooks on our lists that provided examples of how to meet the outcomes through a range of approaches. I conducted a workshop with those graduate students at the beginning of that effort to talk to them about constructive alignment and reinforce that we wanted to provide them the space to innovate in the classroom. The undergraduate program director has also worked to find ways to provide teaching opportunities for GTAs outside of the writing program, so it has certainly been a team effort.

I wish I could report that we all lived happily ever after, but that is never reality. What I can say is that there have been no conflict-driven follow-up meetings about these issues, and the new graduate literature program director has reached out to me with specific ideas about how she would like to work together in the coming year to help graduate students see the value of

the work they are doing in the writing program. In that last example, she is also extending compassion, and I honor that.

There have certainly been other conflicts that have come up over the past year, primarily dealing with issues of labor in the writing program and the rights of faculty off the tenure-track. In many ways, 2017 and the spring of 2018 were the most challenging, heart-wrenching semesters I've ever experienced professionally. Did identifying my intentions through those resolutions make the year easier? No. Did it matter that I set intentions ahead of time? Absolutely. I am convinced that, as I had named in my resolutions, being intentional in administration means being proactive, rather than just reactive.

INNOVATION THROUGH COMPASSIONATE ADMINISTRATION

But what might (in my case) being an intentional, compassionate administrator look like on a day-to-day basis? If I pay attention to the research in our field and listen wholeheartedly to voices such as Sharon Crowley, Seth Kahn, Tony Scott, and others about the problematic and often unethical hiring practices in writing programs; to Asao Inoue, Collin L. Craig and Staci M. Perryman-Clark, and others about racism in writing programs, curricula, and CWPA itself; and to Melanie Yergeau, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, and Amy Vidali about ableism in WPA work, then how do I respond in my day-to-day decision-making as a WPA?

In my experience, I have identified three broad approaches to administrative work that are grounded in compassion and that are intentional and proactive. I have found that they can help shift the atmosphere of a writing program to be intentionally inclusive and open, laying the groundwork for solving some of the big challenges we face.

First, I advocate letting instructors and students lead and guide as much as possible, facilitating their leadership and supporting their ideas. In a publication I co-authored with Maria Conti and Rachel LaMance (2017), we called such initiatives “grassroots efforts,” specifically in the context of developing an assessment plan. Most recently, we have tried to provide more autonomy to instructors in our curriculum at the University of Arizona, and we have taken a hard look at the opportunities that we provide for instructors at different ranks (both faculty and graduate students) to participate in decision making. We have included an undergraduate student on our writing program advisory and policy-making committee. These kinds of initiatives aren't necessarily efficient; it's much more expedient to just make decisions in a hierarchical manner, following the authoritative WPA model. But the payoff of a grassroots approach is incalculable. The

ideas circulating around the program are better because more perspectives are included, and instructors and students are naturally more invested in the work that they do when they know their voices and experience matter.

A second strategy that I rely on is related to the first, and that is following a model of collaborative, distributed administration. Many scholars have both advocated for and critiqued a range of collaborative administrative models, perhaps most notably Jeanne Gunner (1994; 2002). Eileen E. Schell (1998) also complicates the responsibilities and roles in a collaborative administrative structure for untenured faculty and graduate students in her article about the “possibilities and pitfalls” of collaborative administrative structures. These critiques offer important guidelines for embarking on collaborative administration, and I remain convinced that a truly collaborative model that distributes authority instead of merely flattening a hierarchy or rotating the “boss compositionist” (Sledd, 2000) can be a compassionate move. Similar to grassroots initiatives, collaborative administration incorporates a range of perspectives, histories, and experiences, leading to more informed decision making and leadership. And if we think about self-care, the collaborative structure also gives everyone the opportunity to take space to breathe and recharge, something that is impossible to do if you are always the one on call.

A final strategy that is essential to compassionate administration is having clear boundaries. Compassion does not mean an absence of boundaries; rather, it involves at least two kinds of clear boundaries: boundaries that preserve time and energy for the things that are important instead of always bowing to “the tyranny of the urgent” (a phrase I first heard from David Schwalm) and boundaries that maintain integrity by standing up to practices that are unreasonable and unethical. Sometimes it means setting protective boundaries necessary for the program itself, for the curriculum, for the teachers, or for the students. And at other times the boundaries need to be for the WPA, to self-preserve and continue on. Sometimes I have to verbally remind myself not to jump into an issue or initiative and not to take responsibility for problems, initiatives, or challenges that are not mine.

I am convinced that we can work toward innovative approaches that can transform our programmatic spaces. But compassionate administration also means that the conflict that I mentioned at the beginning of my talk doesn’t necessarily go away just by listening, or by being inclusive and collaborative, or by setting boundaries. Even though you may work toward equity, social justice, and well-being, being a compassionate administrator also means that you will recognize—vividly and clearly—the moments when those values are *not* realized, especially when it seems there is nothing you can do to change the circumstances. Those realizations are painful,

and they can be disheartening. I have found, though, that they can also be galvanizing.

SETTING YOUR ADMINISTRATIVE INTENTION

So perhaps my own answers to Dominic DelliCarpini's engaging conference theme are these:

- What if we tried leading not just with our heads, but also with our hearts?
- What if we were guided not just by our research but also by compassion?
- What if we could find ways to bring research and compassion together to come up with answers to questions that we have not yet been able to answer in writing program administration?
- In other words, what if we engaged in compassionate administration?

Administering with compassion and intentionality is not simple, though. What does it mean, for example, to be a compassionate administrator in a context where so many faculty are treated as second-class citizens? Where students are subjected to deficit-based models of instruction, even when we teach with the best of intentions? When faculty and student well-being come second to an administrative bottom line, especially when those faculty and students are people of color; or have physical, mental, or neurological differences; or speak varieties of English that have been marginalized; or are faculty who have not been offered the security of being on the tenure track? Although I certainly don't have all of the answers to these questions, I am convinced that a focus on compassion can help us do better than we have been. And being a compassionate WPA also means recognizing that, while our power and authority may be compromised in the kinds of ways that I referenced from Micciche (2002) at the beginning of this talk, we also have a position of influence that compels us to speak out for equity, even when it is uncomfortable and painful.

This past week, I was taking a hike in the Colorado mountains with my husband, Stacey. I kept rewriting parts of this plenary in my head and talking through ideas with him to seek his feedback. During that hike, I came across a cluster of wildflowers in the middle of the trail somewhere above 12,000 feet of elevation (see figure 1).



Figure 1. A cluster of Colorado wildflowers. (Courtesy of the author)

I was struck by them—by how they are at the same time vulnerable and fragile yet also tough survivors. People who are compassionate are sometimes mistaken for being weak or fragile, but the opposite is often true of them: they possess a quiet, enduring strength that comes from a clear sense

of who they are and what they value. Opening yourself up to compassion, and to compassionate administration, requires equal parts vulnerability and resilience. What I am calling for is at odds with a system of academic capitalism that does not generally reward selflessness and service.

Some of the most effective examples I have seen of academic leadership, though, have reinforced this guiding principle for me. I can't help but wonder what kind of a difference it could make if our programs, departments, universities, and professional organizations were consistently guided by compassion and by a concern for the well-being of others. In our current political climate, and given the current state of higher education, it seems downright revolutionary. How might compassionate administration help us think through solutions to some of the big, persistent challenges we face in writing programs? Continuing to work through this question has been my way to continue to do administrative work without losing my soul.

For me, intentional administration is compassionate administration. So, I invite you to set your intention as you think about and listen to innovative approaches at the conference over the next few days. What matters most to you? And what does intentional administration look like for you?

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