

## What's in a Name? Editor-Mentor-Administrator-Teacher-Scholar: Christine Hult on Managing Multiple Identities and Issues as a *WPA* Editor

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Christine Hult is professor emeritus at Utah State University, where she also served as WPA, faculty mentor, professor, and associate dean. From 1988 to 1994, Hult was the editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. During her tenure as editor, composition was forming its identity as a field, developing standards for writing teacher professionalization, fighting for equitable labor conditions for non-tenured and contingent writing instructors, and responding to technological advancements that altered the processes and products of writers. As Hult noted in her interview, “we are not dealing with substantively different issues. We’re dealing with the same kinds of things; the contexts change, but the issues stay the same.” We sat down with Hult in April 2019 to talk about her experiences as a pre-tenure journal editor and WPA. This article, based on that conversation, touches on her approach to editorship as a form of mentorship and describes how managing the duties of an editor fed other identities in her career including her work as a WPA, faculty mentor, teacher, and scholar.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMING

Naming is an intentional and rhetorical act. Kenneth Burke (1964) connects identification and naming to the negotiation of our rhetorical realities. Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s (2015) collection, *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, is centered on the act of naming our disciplinary threshold concepts. When we sat down with Christine Hult in April 2019, a few names were already at the forefront of our minds. For instance, the Wyoming Conference Resolution (1988) which was taken up in Hult’s inaugural issue as editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. Later, this would inspire the Portland Resolution,

a statement that Hult called for in her 1990 presentation at the Council of Writing Program Administrators conference (Hult, 1992). Both documents name ethical practices in the labor and working conditions of writing instructors—including non-tenured and contingent writing instructors—and writing program administrators.

In addition to these documents, which constituted important acts of naming for our field, Hult talked openly and often about how she names the job of an editor. She describes the editor as a mentor-administrator-teacher-scholar who relies on a distributed and collaborative approach to decision-making. Finally, she named the conversations that filled the pages of the journal during her time as editor: the professionalization of composition writ large and the writing program administrator in particular, the need to better the lives of disenfranchised writing teachers working under terms of contingency, and the struggle to keep up in a time of ever-changing technologies affecting the teaching and learning processes in addition to the processes and products of writing. These issues were burgeoning conversations during Hult's tenure as editor, and they persist as compelling and ongoing issues in rhetoric and composition and writing program administration.

We organize this profile in three parts. First, we discuss what Hult and many WPAs during the 1980s and 1990s experienced as they worked to name their profession as writing program administrators within isolating local institutional contexts. Second, we unpack how Hult situated her mentor-administrator-teacher-scholar identity as editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. Third, we name what Hult identified as recurring issues in our field and discuss both historicized and current contexts taking up those issues. To conclude, then, we invite a meta-moment of naming, centered on the value of journals like *WPA: Writing Program Administration* in the 21st Century, given our conversation with Hult in celebration of the journal's anniversary.

#### FORGING AN IDENTITY

The life of a WPA 25 years ago was isolating. Then, according to Hult, "If you were a WPA on a campus, you were it. That was the job that you were doing and you had nobody to talk to that knew what in the world you were up against." WPAs expressed this isolation at their 1976 meeting at MLA, which ultimately propelled the CWPA to begin holding their annual conference as a space where, once a year, WPAs could speak to one another about local issues. A recurring issue in these meetings was the field's "status in academia," or "how we were seen and how we were perceived in

English departments.” As one of the many voices shaping the professional identity of our field at this time, Hult pointed to issues of equity and visibility in composition, including which kinds of WPAs were and were not represented in the journal. When she stepped into her editorial role, she wanted to expand the “narrow idea of what a WPA was” and get beyond the R1, graduate degree-granting institution to include the “broader tent” of WPA identities. Hult noted that when she became the editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, she felt a “need to hear the voices of people who are not just in situations like ours. But others.” Largely, she felt during this time the WPA identity had been “siloeed”: “there’s a journal for two-year college folks, a journal for writing center folks, listservs for people in WAC.” She went on to say, “If you look at the journal before I started editing and after, hopefully I made some impact on us thinking more broadly about the profession and talking to other people” and started a bigger conversation about WPA-ness “more broadly and who else had issues and ideas and insights that we should bring into the discussion.”

Discussions about academic status also placed a spotlight on issues of labor within composition—a struggle we continue to grapple with today. “We knew this situation was not good, especially for those that we called ‘freeway flyers,’ the people going from one school to another just trying to put a job together.” In particular, Hult recalled one institution she visited as a consultant with the WPA Consultant Evaluator Service where “the writing teachers were hired under a letter of appointment and those teachers were known as ‘the letters.’” She said that as WPAs and leaders in the WPA community, “we needed to try to make some differences in these peoples’ professional lives.” The Wyoming Conference Resolution was one result of these collective frustrations and efforts; Trimbur and Cambridge (1988) describe the Wyoming Conference Resolution as “a collective decision that we do not have to accept second class status because we are interested in the study and teaching of writing and that together we can determine our own fate as a profession and pursue our hopes as writing teachers, scholars, and program administrators” (p. 13). Hult connects this focus on visibility, equity, and labor back to the act of naming: “We really thought a lot about WPA: do we want to change this name?” Ultimately, they decided to keep WPA because of its connection to the “Works Progress Administration” during the depression era which reflected their commitment to “the workers and the organizers.” For Hult, this working and organizing meant performing multiple roles: administrating, teaching, mentoring, editing.

## AN EDITOR AND HER MANY HATS

“We think of editors as being the judge—the one who’s going to make the judgement calls and forget about the more important teacher-mentor role of an editor.” For Hult, editorial work is far more than celebrity and judgement, although she did admit that “when you are the editor of a journal, you get instant notoriety at conferences” as people want to pitch ideas and see if you feel they are a good fit for the journal. Instead, Hult pointed to the “teacher-mentor role of an editor,” which she said is “undervalued.” “It’s a teaching role,” she went on to say, “and I think I didn’t really realize how much of a teaching role it was. You are working with very bright, very insightful, very smart people, and you learn a lot yourself, but you do have an opportunity to help them shape what they are saying to what you perceive as the audience of the journal.” Admittedly, she believes she “got better over the six years that I edited figuring out that intersection.” However, working with people is not always easy; after all, “we’re all ego-bound and like our own words—it’s a lot of sensitivity for an editor to negotiate.” When authors are particularly protective of their prose, an editor can find herself in a “tricky negotiation.”

Rejection is another difficult situation to navigate for new editors, especially when an editor and editorial board disagree about an article being a good fit for a journal.<sup>1</sup> In these instances, the editorial board is an invaluable collaborator for any successful editor. Hult said, “I always listened to what [the board] said, and I can’t remember any instance when they gave two nos and I accepted it or whatever. I never did that. I always trusted them. They were very good at what they did, and gave their true efforts. That’s a really important part of being an editor—having a good board.” Negotiating rejection and feedback with sensitivity and compassion is another “underrated quality” in editors according to Hult. Not only is a good editor “intellectually engaged in the field” and talented with forwarding a vision for a journal’s issues, but she is also “compassion-sensitive” and good at working collaboratively with a range of different personalities. Having a strong and supportive community—of experienced editorial board members and mentors—helped Hult learn about editorial work as a pre-tenure editor.

When it comes to taking on an editorial role pre-tenure, Hult said “I would never advise someone to do that today.” In describing her experiences, she admitted, “I absolutely learned by the seat of my pants. I had never been in the editorial system; I had never done anything in editing.” While she did find her editorial work to be “very important” for her internal professional development, being an editor was not a large factor in her tenure and

promotion. Instead, her institution pushed for publications. Put differently, while her editorial work was “something that was considered,” “it was not something that was a 1:1 reward” during advancement. Her advice to those considering an editor position pre-tenure: “be cautious about assuming that because you are editor of a journal that makes your professional standing secured.” Outside of tenure and promotion, Hult found her experiences as an editor to be very rewarding: as a faculty-mentor in Utah State University’s Dean’s Office, as a scholar and writer, and in her work with producing textbooks. “I can now see it from all sides: the author, editor, and publisher. And I learned what editorial assistance helped me the most as an author and I tried to be that editor for other people.” She encourages those interested in editorial work to write and submit things to gain exposure to the editorial process and “working with editors” but also to “get on committees.” Hult went on to say, “the most common way that people get on editorial boards is because someone knows what they are doing and wants them to be more involved.” In part, editorial work is a networking game.

#### COMING FULL CIRCLE: A WPA’S WORK

Whether we were discussing this networking game or other issues that came up in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* during Hult’s editorial reign, one thing became increasingly clear: despite time and distance, the work WPAs do—the issues we write about and care about in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*—often remain the same. “We are coming full circle,” Hult said. “I think that the issues will always be there—the same issues. The issues like how to do better with technology and teaching, how to do better with the professionalization of the field.” While Hult was editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, these “how to do better” conversations resulted in impactful statements like the Wyoming Conference Resolution and the Statement of Principles and Standards, which Hult said centered on questions about WPAs’ “status in academia.” Statements were “our way of talking through these issues and reflecting on what we were all feeling when we weren’t sure what we could do about it.” She went on to say, “Looking back, those discussions and the results of those discussions—even though we are still struggling with many of the same issues—gave us a chance in our own settings to have something to work towards.”

Hult described how the conversation surrounding WPA professionalization provided an impetus for her to work for change at her own institution. “We were trying very hard to make our profession be one that is perceived as not only important but vital to the university, not just an add-on, but an intellectual field which should be funded as any program in the univer-

sity is.” As such, “with the kind of support we had from the national organization, we could make the argument that these [composition courses] are college-level courses, regularly funded courses, and should be funded on a regular line with professional teachers.” Backed by the support that came from naming the professional issues within the organization, Hult was able to create 12–15 permanent lecturer positions with the potential for advancement at Utah State University, “making a stable arrangement for the teaching staff” to have “real professional lives teaching writing.” Of course, Hult noted that we still struggle with this today. “But we’ve made some improvements,” she said. “That was huge.”

This naming of issues, in part through the scholarship published in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* and the conversations fostered through the CWPA, has been recurrent in fostering local change since Hult’s time as editor. However, she also described change within the field as slow-going, “glacial.” “The world changes much more quickly than academia,” Hult said. “That’s the quandary that we find ourselves in: how to turn the work of naming our professional issues into responsive action within our local contexts. “The contexts change,” she went on to say, “but the issues stay the same. We have to figure out how to approach these issues in different contexts: our students change, our learning changes, and the tools of our trade change—and that’s the hard thing.” In her scholarly work and her editorial role at *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, Hult saw technology as one of the greatest changes the field was (and still is) undergoing. “There’s no doubt that it had a profound effect on what we were doing as WPAs,” she said. “When computers came in, it happened so fast that it caught many of the teachers by surprise. So we spent a lot of our time as administrators helping experienced writing teachers figure out how to use the new tools of writers. A lot of intellectual energy went toward that.” These acts—naming, professionalizing, laboring—are the work of WPAs. And though, as Hult repeated throughout our conversation, “the issues stay the same,” she sees the journal as remaining committed to the profession, as it always has been. “I won’t presume to tell you what the issues are,” she said when we asked her opinion on the journal’s future, “but you’ll know what to do.”

## CONCLUSION

We conclude this article in the same way that we ended our interview with Christine: discussing the value of the academic journal in a post-truth society. As mentioned in the first section of this interview, part of the journal’s original intent was to connect WPAs, and we are currently living in a world

where connection is possible without academic journals via websites, social media, email, listservs, etc. Despite the other avenues for potential connections, journals and their process of peer review continue to be a valuable place for thoughtfully naming and articulating knowledge. According to Hult, *WPA: Writing Program Administration* creates a space to reflect “the consensus of the field”: “We have one place where we can go, where our peers have said, ‘this is important.’ And they have listened to the voice of that author and said, ‘this is something that we think other people need to hear because it will advance our understanding and increase our knowledge of the field and of our jobs.’” It’s a place that hosts “considered discourse” and prompts us as a community to “step back, to consider, to think.” In a time of “tweets and soundbites,” as Hult put it, “comprehensive research and thoughtful discourse is needed more now than ever before.”

#### NOTE

1. Hult writes about such a split in her (1994) article “Over the Edge: When Reviewers Collide.”

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