WPAs Relating to Stakeholders: Narratives of Institutional Change in 40 Years of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*

Lynn Reid

> *The journals of an academic discipline provide a clear reflection of that discipline's past, a synchronic portrait of its current state, and a glimpse of its dreams and plans for the future. As icons, as loci of disciplinary authority, as editorial soapboxes or coxswain's benches, as stepping stones and milestones, journals figure largely in the life of every professional academic*
>
> —Robert J. Connors (1984, p. 348)

Academic disciplines are most often defined by not simply their objects of study, but also by the methods and theories that influence the design of research and the dissemination of the knowledge that the discipline has constructed. It is in a field's journals that, as Connors suggests, the identity of a discipline most clearly comes to fruition; this is perhaps more so when the journal itself served as an early signal of a discipline establishing itself, as is the case with *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. To consider how *WPA* reflects the disciplinary identity of its field raises the question of what exactly writing program administration as a field studies and what forms of knowledge it creates. While scholars of writing program administration might research in specialized areas, including program design, faculty development, curricular development, and placement and assessment processes, our ability to administer our programs often hinges on local context and, more precisely, institutional politics. Yet, the unpredictable and potentially contentious nature of institutional politics makes it nearly impossible for WPAs to engage in any sort of empirical study of this critical aspect of our field's work.

Instead, we tell stories. Stolley (2015) referred to these tales as "WPA narrative, or those "that describe "how we struggle, argue, and bargain with

colleagues and other administrators to protect our programs" (22). Charlton et al. (2011) suggested that these stories represent a dichotomy: the hero's story on one side that demonstrates "that when faced with seemingly impossible institutional constraints, colleagues, or budgets, the hero WPA perseveres" (39) and the victim narrative that describes "the situations of those WPAs who suffered at the hands of institutional whims, vindictive colleagues, tight budgets, or unrepentantly selfish teaching assistants" (40). Surprisingly, given the extent to which disciplinary knowledge in writing program administration is conveyed through storytelling, the function of such narratives as models of disciplinary discourse have historically been undertheorized. Further, these tropes of WPA identity—the victim and the hero—are recognizable to anyone familiar with disciplinary discourse in writing program administration, but to my knowledge, there has been no comprehensive examination of their appearance in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*.

In the sections below, I offer some results of a qualitative analysis of narratives about institutional change across the 40 year history of *WPA*. My purpose here was to examine the evolution of these narratives across the decades, including their popularity and the ways that WPAs are characterized in relation to other institutional stakeholders in an effort to consider the potential limitations of the victim/hero dichotomy that permeates WPA lore.

Methods

To develop a corpus of articles, I reviewed abstracts and editor's introductions where available and skimmed the first four pages of articles that were not summarized in those sections. I focused specifically on feature articles (excluding book reviews, symposia, responses, and conference notes) and selected those that included a clear first-person perspective, significant emphasis on a complicating action related to institutional change, and emphasis on a specific local context.

Of the 400 articles I reviewed from volume 1, issue 1 through volume 40, issue 1 of *WPA*, 72 (18%) met the criteria for inclusion in this study. Narrative selections such as Richard Haswell, Lisa Johnson-Shull, and Susan Wyche-Smith's (1994) "Shooting Niagara: Making Portfolio Assessment Serve Instruction at a State University" that recounted an effort to introduce portfolio assessments into a writing program were included. I distinguished selections like this from others that were more descriptive in nature, such as Pamela Bedore and Deborah F. Rossen-Krill's (2004) "Informed Self-Placement: Is a Choice Offered A Choice Received?", which

described directed self-placement at the University of Rochester. The difference here is that Haswell, Johnson-Shull, and Wyche-Smith emphasized the process through which an institutional change was enacted, whereas Bedore and Rossen-Krill described the benefits of a program that is already in place. Though both are valuable examples of disciplinary knowledge in WPA studies, the latter does not capture the complexities of negotiating institutional change that influence the identities a WPA might perform.

Table 1 illustrates the percentage of articles that met criteria for inclusion in the study.

Table 1
Narratives about Institutional Change in *WPA*

Date Range	Feature Articles	Narratives about Institutional Change
1979–1989	88	5% (4)
1990–2000	137	18% (25)
2001–2011	113	29% (33)
2012–2015	62	6% (10)

Relational Identity and the WPA

Rather than turn to a critical examination of the WPA's self-identifications in the corpus for this study, I instead focused on relationships that were described between the WPA and other institutional stakeholders. Scholarship in the field of management studies has long addressed the formation of relational identity based on interactions between a self and peer, subordinate, or supervisory stakeholders (Sluss and Ashforth, 2008) as a crucial component of a broader social identity relative to an organization (like a college campus). Because the WPA tropes of hero or victim emphasize the relational nature of WPA work, this study focused on the extent to which interactions between the WPA and peer, subordinate, or supervisory stakeholders were described as productive, vexed, or neutral. My hope here was to identify power dynamics that might be associated with the hero/victim trope that has been identified in WPA narratives.

Stakeholder Interactions and the WPA

I identified stakeholders using a grounded-theory approach to data coding to develop the following categories:

- **Supervisors**, including administrators, boards of trustees, chairs, chancellors, deans, legislators, provosts, senates, etc.
- **Peers**, including colleagues, committees, coordinators, departments, faculty, staff, writing centers, directors, etc.
- **Subordinates**, including adjuncts, teaching assistants, tutors, etc.

To consider each stakeholder in relation to the WPA, I catalogued references to stakeholders into these respective categories except in instances where a different relational dynamic was referenced in the article (e.g., a department chair was described as a colleague rather than a supervisor). My interest here was in power dynamics and also characterizations of different stakeholders as allies, enemies, or disinvested actors.

Results: Recasting Victims and Villains

A series of particularly interesting patterns emerged in a number of narratives that emphasized contentious relationships with stakeholders whose power or influence could easily disrupt the work of the WPA. While these could have easily been cast as victim narratives, I discovered that in the vast majority of cases, these potentially negative relationships were reframed in a way that instead reinforced the image of the WPA as heroic.

Literature Faculty

Contentious interactions with literature faculty are described throughout the corpus of articles I examined. Of the four articles that met the criteria for this corpus published during the first ten years of *WPA's* history, three positioned literature faculty/senior scholars as "othered" in relation to the WPA or the writing program. Specifically, literature faculty were characterized as elitist, arrogant, and disengaged with the work of undergraduate teaching. In Alice Brekke's (1980) "The Impact of Testing on One California Campus," for example, literature faculty are described as being "oblivious" to the implications of an institutionally-mandated assessment test. Allan Brick (1980) also went on to criticize literary scholars/senior scholars by describing colleagues who "no one could remember having seen for years" suddenly surfaced to design a writing skills assessment after an administrative mandate was issued.

Given the discipline's conscious effort to divorce itself from literary studies in order to develop its own identity (Hairston, 1985), the presence of such references is not shocking; measuring composition's status in relation to literature is often an essay way to determine what is valued in a given context. What is interesting about these examples is the way that literature

faculty contribute to the construction of the hero identity for the WPA. In each case (and elsewhere in the corpus), WPAs are portrayed as "heroic" for successfully persuading the literature faculty to invest energy into the interests of the writing program. In both cases, the WPA's success was measured, in part, by getting the literature faculty on board with whatever initiative was in the works.

Administration: Friend or Foe?

Aside from literature faculty, one of the most frequent villains in this corpus of articles were upper administrators. Ed White's (1991) "Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA," Wendy Bishop and Gay Lynn Crossley's (1996) "How to Tell a Story of Stopping: The Complexities of Narrating a WPA's Experience," and Rita Malenczyk's (2001) "Fighting Across the Curriculum: The WPA Joins the AAUP" all famously recounted interactions with upper administrators taking drastic steps to usurp or completely eliminate a WPA's power. These are certainly victim narratives in a very real sense, as the damage to not only a program but potentially even the career and/or well-being of the WPA is jeopardized by the purposeful actions of administrators. It is worth noting, however, that examples like these were few and far between. In the selections from 2000 to 2005, for example, 8 out of 28 articles (29%) characterize a dean who was supportive of a WPA and helped to support a successful initiative. The portrayal of a successful collaborative relationship with a superior functions to construct a more nuanced version of the WPA as hero; rather than aligning heroism with overcoming the odds, this heroic WPA is able to establish positive relationships and work well within institutional structures to negotiate for the interests of the writing program.

Legislative Interference

Another common villain in the corpus I analyzed were government bodies who cut funding, eliminated credits, or changed statewide policies about higher education that would impact the writing program. Although government officials were mentioned throughout the corpus, none of those mentions were favorable, and nearly all referenced top-down changes that would require a (usually sudden) institutional change that a WPA would have to oversee. Here again, though, while the WPAs in these cases were certainly powerless in many ways, none of these examples squarely positioned the WPA as a victim in relation to legislators/lawmakers. In most instances, in fact, these top-down mandates were described as opportunities rather than setbacks, allowing the WPA to play the role of a hero by

successfully mediating an external mandate within the context of a local program. This is evident in Rhonda C. Grego and Nancy S. Thompson's (1995) "The Writing Studio Program: Reconfiguring Basic Writing/Freshman Composition," in which the authors noted that:

> during the late 1980s, South Carolina's Commission on Higher Education (CHE), without communicating with those of us who taught basic writing, revoked the three hours of elective credit for English 100. It is likely that we would still be teaching in a separate English 100 system had it not been for the CHE's action. Anger-which at first paralyzed us-eventually pushed us to solve the problem of a now uncredited course, a change that undermined its integrity, "welcoming" students by placing them behind before they had even begun their college careers. (p. 67)

The resulting program—the Writing Studio—has since been widely adopted at institutions across the country. In this instance, the authors clearly rejected the victim identity and instead turned their administrative energy toward fostering a change that would adhere to the spirit of the new mandate, while also staying true to the values of their discipline. In so doing, they are able to recast the hero trope by not simply overcoming an obstacle, but rather by taking full advantage of the opportunities provided by that obstacle to further the interests of their program and its students.

Conclusion

Sharon James McGee (2004) highlighted the ubiquity of negativity in stories about WPA experiences as a result of the disappointment that can easily be the direct result of hierarchical organizations. This disappointment, however, can easily feed into what becomes a dichotomous understanding of the work of a WPA as hero or victim, but that does not quite seem to be the case in the pages of *WPA*. While it stands to reason that positive images of writing program administrators would be present in a journal devoted to their work, the data from this study have implications for the future of WPA studies and the ways that WPA identities are constructed in the pages of *WPA Journal*. What would happen if we turned our gaze from the efforts of the WPA to the relationships that are described in these selections? What factors influence those relationships? How can our field discursively re-position WPAs along axes of power?

WPA has contributed to a long history of "WPA narratives," and taken as a whole, those narratives recounting WPA's efforts at negotiating institutional change send a powerful message to readers about the role of a WPA within any given local context. According to the results of this study, WPAs

argue for their work up and down the institutional hierarchy, while more frequently establishing productive and agentive relationships with peers. Nearly 15 years ago in "Decentering the WPA," Jeanne Gunner (2004) argued that professionalization of the field has had the perhaps unintended effect of alienating WPAs from the larger structures within which they are required to work. Describing relations with other institutional stakeholders is also a step toward professionalization and a sense of "best practices" for the field, but characterizing those relations in terms of power and agency can provide a new blueprint for a future WPA, one who can align disciplinary principles and institutional-specifics on behalf of the writing program.

Works Cited

Bedore, P., & Rossen-Knill, D. F. (2004). Informed self-placement: Is a choice offered a choice received? *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 28*(1–2), 55–78.

Bishop, W., & Crossley, G. L. (1996). How to tell a story of stopping: The complexities of narrating WPA experience. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *19*(3), 70–79.

Brekke, A. (1980). The impact of testing on one California university campus: What EPT has done to us and for us. *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 3*(3), 23–26.

Brick, A. (1980). The CUNY writing assessment test and the teaching of writing. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *4*(1), 28–34.

Charlton, C., Charlton, J., Graban, T. S., Ryan, K., & Stolley, A. F. (2011). *Gen/Admin: Theorizing WPA identities in the twenty-first century*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.

Connors, R. J. (1984). Journals in composition studies. *College English,* 46(4), 348–365.

Grego, R. C., & Thompson, N. S. (1995). The writing studio program: Reconfiguring basic writing/freshman composition. *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 19*(1–2), 66–79.

Gunner, J. (1994). Decentering the WPA. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *18*(1), 8–15.

Hairston, M. (1985). Breaking our bonds and reaffirming our connections. *College Composition and Communication, 36*(3), 272–82. doi:10.2307/357971

Haswell, R., Johnson-Shall, L., & Wyche-Smith, S. (1994). Shooting Niagara: Making portfolio assessment serve instruction at a state university. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *18*(1), 44–55.

Malenczyk, R. (2001). Fighting across the curriculum: The WPA joins the AAUP. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *24*(3), 11–24.

McGee, S. J. (2005). Overcoming disappointment: Constructing writing program identity through postmodern mapping. In *Discord and Direction: The Postmodern WPA*, 59–71.

Sluss, D. M., & Ashforth, B. (2008). How relational and organizational identification converge: Processes and conditions. *Organizational Science 19*(6).

Stolley, A. F. (2015). Narratives, administrative identity, and the early career WPA. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *39*(1), 1–18.

White, E. (1991). Use it or lose it: Power and the WPA. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *15*(1–2), 3–12.

Lynn Reid is assistant professor of rhetoric and composition and director of basic writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University's Florham campus. She is immediate past co-chair of the Council on Basic Writing at CCCC and the associate editor for production for the *Basic Writing e-Journal*. Lynn holds a PhD in composition and applied linguistics from Indiana University of Pennsylvania.