

## Failures to Accommodate: GTA Preparation as a Site for a Transformative Culture of Access

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### ABSTRACT

*This article introduces interview-based data in order to complicate our disciplinary narratives about early-career graduate students as identified primarily by the remediation of their teaching. Instead, we explore the place of disability in the lives of five MA/MFA graduate student teaching assistants (GTAs) teaching first-year writing to argue for more attention to accessibility in teacher preparation programs. We seek to begin conversations about redesigning our physical and pedagogical spaces and practices in service to a “transformative culture of access,” defined by its goal of “question[ing] and rethink[ing] the very construct of allow[ance]” (Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau 153-54). We conclude by arguing for more attention to a flexible, adaptive administrative design for GTA preparation that takes into account principles of universal design to ensure that we strive to address the needs of all GTAs and contingent faculty.*

In Fall 2015 at Southeastern State University, only 81 graduate students (across all programs at the university, master’s through doctorate) sought accommodations through the Disability Services Office, less than one percent of the 9,904 graduate students enrolled. This number cannot account for the many graduate students who qualify for accommodations but do not seek them.

The process of students self-advocating for accessibility creates a novel challenge when it intersects with the culture and processes of graduate study, including graduate teacher preparation. The First-Year Writing Program at Southeastern State works with approximately 45 master’s-level graduate teaching assistants every semester, split between incoming and returning students. The performance-based metrics that we use to evaluate teaching—from in-class mentoring with experienced faculty to class-

room observations—can collide with GTAs’ unexpressed needs, creating a situation whereby these novice teachers feel both disempowered to ask for help and vulnerable that they need it.

Writing program administrators are tasked with addressing accessibility in first-year writing classes, but no research has explored accessibility for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who would benefit from but may not seek accommodations or who may be granted accommodations as students but not as instructors. Likewise, no research has explored the ways in which our GTA teacher preparation practices may be improved for accessibility. In our disciplinary scholarship, GTAs are identified most frequently by their novice teaching status (Bullock); their development as teachers (Dryer; Restaino; Estrem and Reid; Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir); and by their resistance to teacher preparation, including the practicum (Dobrin; Ebest).

Additionally, most extant scholarship contends with doctoral-level GTAs, understandable since these students provide longitudinal data and, the assumption may be, will graduate to join the professoriate.

This article introduces interview-based data in order to complicate our disciplinary narratives about early-career graduate students as identified primarily by the remediation of their teaching. We explore the place of disability in the lives of five MA/MFA graduate student teaching assistants (GTAs) teaching first-year writing to argue for more attention to accessibility in teacher preparation programs. We present these five narratives not to establish any generalizations about GTAs with disabilities. Instead, we seek to begin conversations about redesigning our physical and pedagogical spaces and practices in service to a “transformative culture of access,” defined by its goal of “question[ing] and rethink[ing] the very construct of allow[ance]” (Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau 153–4). To clarify, we argue for writing programs to approach their physical and intellectual spaces of teaching, teacher preparation, and planning in radical ways that encourage user-centered transformations of those spaces.

None of the GTAs in this study advocated for themselves in obvious ways—asking for accommodations, for example—fearful that doing so would make them vulnerable to criticism from colleagues and program administrators. In particular, they worried about how disclosing their disabilities might affect their teaching assistantships, especially since GTAs at Southeastern State teach only in seated, face-to-face (not fully online or hybrid) sections of first-year writing. The culture of graduate school was so pervasively threatening to them that they chose to work off the institutional grid and solve their disability needs themselves, typically without disclosing their struggles to anyone, even peers.

We describe the study before moving to explore the five GTAs' experiences with serving as graduate teaching assistants who self-identify as having a disability. We conclude by proposing a path to taking a disciplinary stance on the role of disability awareness in teacher preparation programs. This piece extends Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau's call to consider "a culture of access [as] a culture of transformation" (151) while also honoring both accessibility and teacher preparation as complex, iterative social processes (Wood, Dolmage, Price, and Lewiecki-Wilson).

We are compelled as writing program administrators by an ethical obligation to bring attention to the many graduate students in our program who may be laboring as instructors without needed accommodations. As Tara Wood, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson describe in "Where We Are: Disability and Accessibility," we are looking toward Disability 2.0. Our "what-now moment" finds exigency in the knowledge that we are preparing future teachers without, in many cases, regards for their individual needs. As such, this article aims to "emphasize a dynamic, recursive, and continual approach to inclusion, rather than mere troubleshooting," to describe GTA preparation as a part of our commitment to "an orientation of inclusion" (147–48).

## THE STUDY

The data presented here come from a larger study on GTAs' perceptions of threat while in graduate school. In Spring 2015, Casie interviewed eight graduate teaching assistants at Southeastern State, a large, land-grant research university in the southeast.<sup>1</sup> Participants were invited by email. Seven of eight participants completed an introductory survey, an exit survey, and three one-hour interviews. (See Appendix A for survey questions and interview protocol.) One participant completed both surveys and one interview. Half of those interviewed, four of eight, identified diagnosed and treated disabilities, including PTSD, dyslexia, anxiety disorders, ADD/ADHD, and physical disabilities related to chronic pain. One GTA described pervasive anxiety and emotional distress associated with teaching, though she did not seek medical intervention.

The research study emerged from Casie's experience as a writing program administrator tasked with preparing large cohorts of master's-level GTAs to teach first-year writing. The initial study did not explicitly identify disability as a threat faced by graduate students. (See Appendix B for the informed consent approved by the Institutional Review Board.) However, because half of the participants identified as having medically-verifiable dis-

abilities and none sought accommodations, we knew that we had to explore this line of inquiry.

### THE PARTICIPANTS

Mario is 26 and studies World Literature. His background is in Comparative Literature and Sexuality Studies. His first teaching experience was with his mentor in first-year writing. He described his first year of graduate work as “painful” and “very difficult,” culminating in a failed suicide attempt. He described struggling with PTSD and medically treated anxiety, stressors compounded by a number of physical ailments, including mobility issues that caused him to walk with a cane.

Susan is 22, studying rhetoric and composition. She held no prior formal teaching experience, but she described experiences with informal teaching, particularly as a volunteer teacher for students with special needs, where she helped with reading interventions. Susan described herself as “not a very good writer” since she struggles with dyslexia. Her dyslexia causes her anxiety as both a novice teacher and a graduate student. She related that she always struggles with telling her professors about her disability because she’s afraid it could “come across as an excuse.” Though she has far more professional development than others in her cohort—service with a national journal, attendance at national disciplinary conferences—she feels like she must work “extra hard to make up for [the] potential errors” caused by dyslexia.

Michaela is 35 and studying British and American literature. She entered the program after leaving a career in law, which she described as “stressful, punishing, and too competitive.” She had no prior teaching experience, formal or informal, but she indicated that she was excited to get into the classroom. She described a history of struggling with ADHD and ADD and was concerned with the reality of teaching 100-minute classes. “I’m such a people pleaser,” she said, “and desperate to do what I’m supposed to do . . . but it’s like I have to work three times as hard as everyone else.”

Jane is 26 and pursuing her MFA. She identified no prior teaching experience, but she did list leading a creative writing workshop under informal teaching experiences. From her description, she acted as a *de facto* teacher of record. Jane did not disclose a formal medical diagnosis, but she did describe a history of abuse that affects her teaching preparation to the extent that she has sought counseling.

Chloe is 22, also working towards an MFA, and tutored for one year at her BA-granting university. On her entrance survey, she disclosed a diagnosis of PTSD, rooted in a history of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse. Her teaching philosophy is grounded in her experiences with

abuse, as she identified one of her goals as helping students who are struggling with hidden (not visible) disabilities. She described graduate school as the “perfect storm” for exacerbating her existing struggles with anxiety: “I think there’s a kind of air where you have to act like you’re smart and you have everything under control, and you don’t. You’re judged at every turn, and it can be difficult. The evaluation part can be difficult, and some people are not very nice. And that can be difficult.”

Before entering their own classrooms as instructors of record, all five GTAs completed Southeastern State’s rigorous teacher preparation program. This program includes shadowing an experienced faculty mentor for one semester, completing two graduate courses—one in composition theory and a teaching practicum—and completing an intensive one-week pedagogy workshop. At the time of interviews, each GTA had taught, as the instructor of record, one section of first-year writing in Fall 2014 and had started their second semester teaching one section of first-year writing in Spring 2015. At Southeastern State, first-year writing is a one-course, four-credit-hour requirement, and each GTA taught seated (not online or hybrid) sections either four days a week for 50 minutes a class or two days a week for 100 minutes a class. In their first semester teaching, Fall 2014, each GTA also attended the pass/fail teaching practicum one day a week.

#### “IT FELT VERY THREATENING TO ME”: TEACHING AS A DANGEROUS ACTIVITY

“Do you think it would be okay if I used my cane in class while teaching?” Mario asked Casie this question as he began preparations to teach his first section of first-year writing in Fall 2014. Of course, Casie advised him to use whatever accommodations he needed to feel comfortable while teaching. In the spring, during formal interviews, Mario went on to narrate some of his fears about teaching, particularly that students would identify his use of a cane as frailty. Though it never emerged in practicum discussions in the fall, in interviews, Mario described situations where students would litter classroom pathways with their bookbags and other personal items. He told Casie, “It didn’t feel intentional at all, but I do think that students chose to overlook my cane . . . [In the spring], I came in on the first day and said, ‘Sometimes I will have to use this, please get used to it.’” He was concerned, he said, with making a “spectacle” of his disability. Mario identified his age as contributing to his hesitance with using his cane in front of his students: “I’m only 26, so it’s not like I can say it’s old age. My students will know it’s because of something else.”

Mario was the only participant to disclose a physical disability, but like two of the other four GTAs, he also identified as having emotional disorders, specifically anxiety and depression, related to the traumatic car accident that led to his mobility issues. Mario's relationship with his faculty teaching mentor was tumultuous, but neither mentor nor GTA contacted Casie to mediate the situation. In Mario's end-of-term teaching evaluation, Mario's mentor formally reported that Mario might struggle with teaching, primarily because his anxiety left him, at times, unfocused and unprepared. Mario came to Casie visibly upset, concerned that the program would choose to terminate his assistantship, a decision held in reserve for only those GTAs who cannot be confidently placed in the classroom.

Mario's stressful situation with his mentor culminated in him attempting suicide during the spring pedagogy workshops. He told Casie that he had not confided in any of his peers or professors, saying,

The day I was late [for the workshops], something had happened. It was a suicide attempt. It's something I don't like to unload on people because I know it's difficult to deal with. It wasn't anything grand, but it was an ideation that resulted in action . . . because I was so overwhelmed.

He assured Casie, as the WPA who oversees GTA preparation,

This isn't a reflection on you, but I didn't know what [my mentor] had told you about how I was working out. I don't blame anyone. I would never say to someone, "You drove me to suicide," but the psychological—it was amped up after talking with [my mentor about my teaching].

Mario had thought his mentor had intended to recommend nonrenewal, which would terminate his funding and end his graduate career.

Mario's experience illustrates the need for our research: he struggled with both physical and emotional disabilities, and the teacher preparation process at Southeastern State exacerbated these challenges. He was caught between his graduate student identity, one which acknowledges vulnerability, and his developing teacher identity, where it is assumed he will be focused and prepared at all times. Casie has pondered the many junctures where this situation could have been better addressed: perhaps with increased communication with his mentor along the way, or if Mario had been offered the opportunity to teach online, negating the need for physical presence in a brick-and-mortar classroom. Mario's admission of his suicide attempt stands as a stark example of what can happen when GTAs' needs outside teaching preparation aren't fully considered.

Chloe and Jane likewise narrated complex experiences with anxiety, depression, and teaching. Chloe described growing up in an extremely conservative, religious household as an experience in dislocation, as in her words, “being stuck” in a bad situation and feeling out of place. She described her experience like “growing up in a cult,” where women were considered subservient and groomed for marriage and motherhood, not higher education. Chloe’s sister committed suicide at age 11. Chloe witnessed the event and still struggles with PTSD. She sees a therapist once a month to “talk through her stress” and gain perspective on the anxiety that attends graduate study. “The program has been supportive,” Chloe assured, “People are not terribly critical, but it is still stressful.” She used the same term, “shell-shocked,” to describe both the aftereffects of her sister’s suicide and her acclimation to graduate school. Though Chloe is completing an MFA, her goal is to work in the medical field. Medical school, she admitted, will add to her stress, but graduate school so far has “taught me how to balance [my work and life],” so “I won’t be shell-shocked when I get there.” Because of her history with PTSD, Chloe identified a pedagogy influenced by invisible challenges. She described a process of teaching that foregrounded student affective need instead of course policies or the like, primarily because she said she “knows how it feels when professors see their own plans for teaching the course as more important than students’ desire to learn.”

Jane likewise described a history with abuse that influences her relationships with students: “A lot of [my interaction with students] comes from growing up in an abusive household and being the oldest child of three, being the person who was put in charge of managing and protecting other people.” These early childhood experiences were followed by an abusive romantic relationship that proved difficult to leave. However, she said these relationships gave her a grounding perspective: “I’ve been through a lot worse with less, and I can get through [graduate school]. [When I am down,] I am able to turn myself up, and that’s very helpful.” It is important to note that Jane did not self-identify as having a medically-verifiable disability; however, her anxiety affected how she perceived her role as the teacher on record, and she chose to foreground these experiences with abuse as foundational to her development as a teacher.

During her first year in graduate study, Jane experienced some scary and expensive health issues. She described a few weeks where she thought she would lose her apartment because she couldn’t afford rent. During this time, she visited the on-campus food pantry for groceries and found piecework to supplement her income. Jane identifies her difficult past and struggles with anxiety related to abuse as giving her both the strength and

determination to push through: “I care about my life, and I want it to look like what I want it to look like. I don’t want other people to have power over that.”

Jane also expressed that she had experienced unwanted advances from male students, which triggered some of her anxiety about interactions with men. Jane described her pedagogies as “very decentered, the typical writing workshop circle where the teacher wants to hear from everyone.” These practices were thrown into question after a tense exchange with a male student during a class discussion, where the student described Jane as “sexy” and “distracting.” As a creative writer, she held the power of the open writing workshop as sacrosanct, “but there are those natural moments where me as a small woman who has grown up in her life being intimidated and abused by men, those moments I don’t feel safe in the situation.” Jane was forced to rethink her pedagogies, concluding that she needed to clearly and calmly express how inappropriate these comments were for the benefit of the entire class and even if it shut down discussion for that day. Being authoritative, she determined, did not run counter to her desire to decenter her classroom; instead, it helped her manage the classroom environment for everyone’s comfort and safety. Jane concluded one interview by stating that she knows that some students will transgress boundaries but that it is her responsibility as the teacher on record to maintain them.

Mario disclosed both emotional and physical disabilities; Jane and Chole disclosed emotional disabilities and challenges, specifically PTSD and anxiety. Michaela and Susan, in contrast, disclosed learning disabilities. These disabilities—ADD/ADHD in Michaela’s case and dyslexia in Susan’s—affected the novice teachers’ sense of security and confidence in graduate school and during their teacher preparation. Michaela mentored in a 100-minute section of first-year writing, an experience that forced her to consider her own learning needs within the frame of her developing pedagogies: “I have ADD, and I would have trouble getting back on track [in class],” she said of her experience as student. As a novice teacher, she worked with her faculty mentor to plan ways of supporting her teaching needs while also supporting students’ learning needs. As the teacher of record, Michaela said that she disclosed her disorder to her students to build community and encourage those who need accommodations to ask for them. Michaela’s experiences with ADD and ADHD also encouraged her to rethink what engagement looks like in her classroom, and she framed her teaching with students with learning disabilities in mind. For example, she would diversify the classroom modalities, incorporating written and aural instruction, kinesthetic learning, and collaborative learning. She was

aware of environmental features like noise and light and their potential effects on students.

During her first semester as instructor of record, one student, Michaela said, “self-identified as having ADHD, and he said he realized that taking the 100-minute class was not the best choice for him. We talked about how he might consider taking shorter classes.” Michaela could recognize her own struggles in this student’s experience, and she honored his effort, saying, “[I can see] he’s trying, he’s fighting.” Our interviews were the first time Michaela had mentioned her struggle with ADD and ADHD. She was placed in a 100-minute section for her mentoring semester and then in a 100-minute section for her first teaching semester. She had requested 50-minute classes in the fall, but indicated that 100-minute sections would be acceptable but not preferred. Because of the many intricacies in scheduling over 90 sections of first-year writing a semester, we ask all faculty to give us a range of available teaching times. Our scheduling process tends to value seniority first, with long-time faculty granted their first choices. Graduate students, because they teach only one section and have the least seniority, are generally considered last and typically in the context of their coursework schedules over their preferences. As a result, we unintentionally placed Michaela in a teaching situation that exacerbated her disability.

Like Michaela, Susan disclosed a history with a learning disability, specifically dyslexia. She described her graduate school experience thus far as rewarding but challenging, since she felt as if she had to work doubly hard to produce (and, with teaching, assess) written products. “I’m dyslexic,” she said, “and I have a really hard time with grammar and mechanics and that can be paralyzing in a lot of ways.” Her dyslexia was co-morbid with anxiety and bi-polar disorder, a “sort of perfect storm,” she said, when it came to the challenges of graduate study. Living away from home for the first time amplified her experiences, as she noted, “I was really nervous living by myself in this very unfamiliar place. The first thing I had to do when I got here was find a doctor.” After acclimating to her new living arrangements and schedule, Susan said that she could better focus on her coursework and preparation to teach. Writing for evaluation “can be a difficult thing for [her] to do,” and she admitted that she has a

hard time taking criticism for [her] writing because it’s so much easier to believe the bad stuff because of how I think of myself as a writer. I’m not very good at absorbing the good things when I write because I’m so focused on the ways I could improve.

This anxiety with sharing her work with her graduate-school peers influences the way she conducts her own classroom, as she always worked to alle-

viate anxiety for all of her students. Susan never identified the practicum as an uncomfortable space, however students are required to conduct peer teaching observations and to peer review a number of course documents, including their evolving teaching philosophies. Though the modality for peer reviews was left open to individual pairs, so students could review paper copies or use a digital sharing service like Google Docs, each student was required to participate as a part of the course. With the new knowledge of Susan's dyslexia and the anxiety it creates with peer review, Casie began to rethink this element of the teaching practicum.

#### “THANKFUL FOR THE PERSPECTIVE”: LESSONS FROM GTAs

Sibylle Gruber reminds us that GTAs often feel like “[t]here is nothing we can do about it” in regards to their low status in the program and their felt needs (35–37). As with teaching, those responsible for teacher preparation cannot possibly account for every need of every student in class. As a number of critics of Universal Design point out (Dolmage “Disability Studies Pedagogy”; Vidali; Yergeau et al.), the idea that we can ever design a classroom, or a preparation process, for all students overstates the flexibility of even the most flexible designs. In “Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door,” Jay Dolmage reminds us that “UD is not tailoring of the environment to marginal groups; it is a form of hope, a manner of trying” (24). A single best-practice approach to GTA preparation is not successful; there is not a universally designed teacher preparation program we can pick up and use from place to place or with group to group. What we have learned from the GTAs in this study is that we can use principles of Universal Design to help us engage in a process that transforms our preparation of and support for GTAs. These principles extend to our administrative work with all faculty teaching in our writing programs, and particularly contingent faculty who may not feel empowered to self-advocate. After all, “Universal Design is a process, a means rather than an end” (Yergeau et al.) The framework of Universal Design often neglects continued feedback from users, but if we reinforce Universal Design as a process, we can create spaces and practices where all individuals have a part in recreating those spaces and practices (Dolmage “Disability Studies Pedagogy”).

These GTAs, much like the students in our first-year writing classes, are adept at navigating difficult situations, often without our assistance. They can pass without us as administrators noticing the barriers we have constructed in our preparation practices (see Brueggemann’s “On (Almost) Passing” for more on the complexities of identity often experienced by academics with disabilities). We may think in terms of accommodations, espe-

cially those familiar to us as teachers of students with disabilities. While being aware of accommodations may be a step in the right direction, in practice it is a problematic framework to use. Yergeau et al. explain that “accommodations are usually discussed in terms of individuals’ needs; thus, they tend to locate a disabled individual as a problem, even when this is not the intention” (n.p.). To extend this thought further, it is our approach to teacher preparation and supporting GTAs that has identified participants by the visible and invisible barriers we have constructed. We can learn from their perspectives and argue for a recursive preparation practice that is flexibly designed. Our GTAs are not problems to be solved, nor is our accepted language on accommodation the solution.

All five participants identified a sort of self-reliance that came out of their histories with disabilities and a desire to push through the rigors of graduate study, even—and especially—when their coursework or teaching duties exacerbated their struggle. What we have learned from these GTAs, and others, is that the work of passing can become the detrimental main focus with wide ranging results:

When I get to feeling this way—trapped, nailed, stuck in between overwhelming options—I tend to become frantic, nervously energized, even mean. And my will to pass, to get through and beyond at all costs, kicks in ferociously. Some animals freeze in fear, shut down in fright; I run-harder, faster, longer. I run until I pass—until I pass on, or out. (Brueggemann “On (Almost) Passing” 655)

While Bruggemann is focusing on her own experiences feeling displaced in Deaf and Hearing cultures, the participants in this study faced their own emotions when it came to passing or disclosing their disabilities to the students they taught. The GTAs faced this decision during a time in their careers when they are also balancing the rigors of graduate-level expectations.

To counter this exacerbation, WPAs can transform the culture of their writing programs and GTA preparation structure to become a culture of access. What is necessary in this transformation is the clarity of the participants that they are indeed participants—they should be encouraged to provide feedback, to be co-creators of the culture of access. We need to promote the “*disabling* of writing program work” that Amy Vidali argues for in “Disabling Writing Program Administration” (33; emphasis original). Doing so, we will make our work accessible and inclusive, authentically including “how disability can inform all writing program work by drawing attention to the bodies that do such work” (Vidali 33). WPAs must create a

culture that affords all participants in that program invited perspectives to constantly recreate the culture.

#### TRANSFORMING GTA PREPARATION, TROUBLING ACCOMMODATIONS

Disability scholarship in first-year writing has focused primarily on the ways teachers might be more responsive to student need and, more recently and pertinent to this study, the intersection of contingency and disability. The preliminary findings presented here not only implicate new discussions in teacher preparation; they also, because many of these GTAs will become our non-tenured colleagues, force us to continue to consider the role of disability in the lives of those who are insecurely employed. This discussion necessarily implicates discussions of contingency and calls for increased attention to how instructors off the tenure track navigate disability.

Sushil K. Oswal reminds us in “Ableism” that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) promises to remove barriers for people with disabilities. We often see the work of the ADA in retrofits—ramps, Braille signage, sign language interpreters. Oswal points out that the work of the ADA at institutions of higher education is nominal at best:

exclusionary practices at various institutional and interpersonal levels continue to flourish even at colleges where significant resources have been invested in developing disability-related administrative policies and guides. How often do faculty using wheelchairs need to remind their colleagues that a meeting in a less distant part of the campus would enable them to participate without losing precious time maneuvering through circuitous paths and barely accessible buildings? How many times do visually impaired faculty members have to hear that the presenter forgot to email them the handouts in advance, but that they will make sure to email them as soon as possible? How often does it occur to the presenter that a disabled faculty member cannot fully participate in the meeting without the resources everyone else can readily access in real time? (n.p.)

The dependence of many of our WPA peers and colleagues on the ADA to do the work of creating access for all program participants is not enough. We argue that WPA work needs to be interdependent (much like the participatory design and interdependence that comes from an ethical infrastructure that Margaret Price argues for in “Space”). The GTAs we train and support in their early teaching should be encouraged as contingent faculty to participate in the collaborative work of a writing program. Their participation should impact the culture of access of that program.

We know that what we are calling for is a significant change to ways of thinking and ways of administering. We know that WPAs are often overworked and underappreciated, and many may respond to this call for transformation with “Oh, no, not one more thing.” However, it is from the role of the WPA where change can emerge. We are not arguing for WPAs to anticipate individualized solutions for specific types of disabilities. We want WPAs to be flexible and adaptable in the intellectual and physical spaces they engage in with faculty (all instructors—GTAs, contingent, tenure-track, tenured). We must also state that we are not arguing for WPAs to become therapists. We want WPAs to use more inclusive language that purposefully does not exclude faculty with physical or psychiatric disabilities. What message might we send when we refer to something being lame or insane? In “Community,” Elizabeth Brewer points to the invaluable support peer-run communities are providing psychiatrically disabled people. We may want to borrow from this discussion the framework of “safer spaces” Price explains in *Mad at School*:

Safer *kairotic* spaces could take many forms, including gatherings of friends, sessions of private writing, or—as is suggested by Jane Thierfeld-Brown, who works with students with Asperger’s syndrome—‘safe rooms’ on her college’s campus for students to visit if they need a break from the constant stimulation of more public space. (100)

If WPAs encouraged safer spaces among their faculty and GTAs, then a transformation of the culture moves to more accessibility and inclusivity.

WPAs need to acknowledge the discriminatory, at worst, and problematic, at best, GTA preparation practices that have held court for so long and, instead, encourage a transformation for a culture of access. By being transparent about expectations and flexible and adaptive to ways of meeting expectations, by encouraging participatory reciprocity, and by using inclusive language, we may pick up momentum for significant change that will better address the needs of *all* GTAs and contingent faculty.

## NOTES

1. This study was granted IRB clearance by the NC State IRB board, Protocol Number 5213. All names and places (except NC State) are coded.

## APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION PROTOCOL

### **TA recruitment email**

Dear TAs:

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project I am conducting.

This project is tentatively titled “Perceptions of Threat: GTAs and Material, Psychological, and Physical Harm.” The purpose of this study is to explore the many different kinds of threats that GTAs encounter during their time in graduate school, from intellectual threats from peers and professors to the looming threat of what comes next and the potential threats accompanying teaching for the first time. By gathering individual narratives, I hope to be able to better address GTAs’ needs in the future.

Participants’ narratives will be kept confidential, and all identifying features will be coded. Participants may also elect to drop out of the study at any point without consequence.

I will be scheduling private introductory meetings between 1 November and 30 November. At this meeting, I will review our research process and answer any questions you might have. Please reply to me at [cjfeduko@sesu.edu](mailto:cjfeduko@sesu.edu) or stop by my office at XXXX if you are interested in learning more about the project or if you would like to attend an introductory meeting. Attendance at this meeting does not assume that you will participate in the study.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and not participating will have no influence on your standing in the First-Year Writing Program or the English Department. Participation is limited between November 2014 and May 2015, and includes surveys, three one-hour interviews, and one optional focus group.

As always, you can stop by my office (XXXX) or email with questions.

Best,  
Casie

**Text for introductory survey (Dec. 2014)**

Perceptions of Threat: GTAs and Material, Psychological, and Physical Harm

*Introductory Survey*

Participant Copy

Name:

Coded name (please choose a pseudonym to use throughout the study):

Age:

Cohort membership:                      1<sup>st</sup> year                      2<sup>nd</sup> year

Area of study:

Prior degrees awarded:

Years teaching before participation in this project. (Teaching is here defined as acting as the instructor of record in a formalized educational environment: K12, higher ed., etc.):

Do you have additional informal teaching experience that may inform your participation in this project (tutoring, leading discussion groups, etc.)? Briefly describe these experiences and their duration:

Use the remainder of this space to include any additional information you feel is pertinent to your participation in this study:

**Protocol for first individual interview (Jan. 2015)**

What made you interested in participating in this project?

Tell me a little about your decision making process when it comes to continuing into graduate study. What, if any, options did you consider before making your decision?

Can you describe for me a little bit about your experience in graduate school so far? What have been some of the most rewarding aspects? What about the most challenging?

**Protocol for second individual interviews (Feb. 2015)**

For these spring discussions, we're going to use a process that the business world calls a SWOT matrix—an exploration of the complex interaction of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

For today's interview, we're going to use the following diagram to talk about the SWOT protocol in two areas: your identity as a graduate student and your performance/identity as a teacher or soon-to-be teacher.

First, what would you describe as your strengths in graduate study, as a student?

Your weaknesses?

Your opportunities?

Your threats?

What would you describe as your strengths as a teacher/soon-to-be teacher?

Your weaknesses?

Your opportunities?

Your threats?

**External Influences**

	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<b>Internal Responses</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	How do you leverage your strengths to benefit from opportunities?  How do you use your strengths to mitigate threats?
	<b>Weaknesses</b>	How do you ensure your weaknesses will not stop you from opportunities?  How do you address your weaknesses to mitigate threats?

**Protocol for third individual interviews (April 2015)**

For this final interview, we're going to revisit the SWOT protocol, using it to talk about your plans for what comes next, after you graduate. Describe your plans after graduation, even if they're tenuous or nebulous. Then we'll fit these plans in the SWOT matrix, using the prompts below:

**External Influences**

	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<b>Internal Responses</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	How do you leverage your strengths to benefit from opportunities?  How do you use your strengths to mitigate threats?
	<b>Weaknesses</b>	How do you ensure your weaknesses will not stop you from opportunities?  How do you address your weaknesses to mitigate threats?

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**Text for Exit Survey (May 2015)**

Coded name:

Cohort membership:                      1<sup>st</sup> year                      2<sup>nd</sup> year

Briefly define the word “threat,” in the context of your professional experiences:  
Rate the following areas on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being “most confident”  
and 1 being “least confident.”

My performance as a student in a graduate classroom

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

What experiences have led you to assign your student performance  
this ranking?

My performance as a teacher of record

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

What experiences have led you to assign your teacher performance this ranking?  
Given that the focus of this study is on perceptions of threat, what topics  
do you feel are most relevant to address with graduate teaching assistants?  
Why these topics?

**Protocol for *optional* Focus Group (May 2015)**

Describe one day, in composite, that you feel is illustrative of your  
spring semester.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT SOUTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

*Perceptions of Threat: GTAs and Material, Psychological, and Physical Harm*

Dr. Casie Fedukovich, Principle Investigator

**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation  
in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to  
choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without pen-  
alty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a  
certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from  
being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that partici-  
pate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research  
in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand some-

thing in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

### **What is the purpose of this study?**

This study seeks to explore the types of “threats”—physical, psychological, intellectual, and emotional—Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) in the First-Year Writing Program (FYWP) at SE State may perceive as they enter the classrooms for the first time. As novice teachers and scholars, GTAs find themselves immersed in a range of new and emotional experiences, from teaching to participation in high-pressure graduate courses and considerations of future employability. Extant research on graduate students looks at their identity negotiations (Restaino) and their relationships to students as writers (Dryer). As Jessica Restaino points out, much that has been written about graduate TA training focuses on how these students effectively assimilate the mores of academia and their home program. No studies have yet looked at the constellation of perceived threats GTAs may experience, which the PI argues is an important factor for keying GTA training to unspoken needs. This study in which you are invited to participate is important because it extends this line of inquiry to look at the constellations of anxieties particular to this population in the hopes of improving graduate TA training by accounting for perceived threats.

### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

Participation is limited between November 2014 and May 2015. This research process includes attendance at three individual interviews in Spring 2015; attendance at one optional focus group in Spring 2015; and completion of two surveys (an introductory survey and an exit survey). between January 2015 and May 2015; approximately 1 hour of mixed-methods data completion, including the two surveys (introductory and exit).

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete the following steps, in chronological order:

**1 Nov.–30 Nov. 2014:** Attend a private meeting to review IRB, Informed Consent, and the research process. Meetings will be held in XXXX 232, a private faculty office.

**Dec. 2014:** Complete the introductory survey.

**Jan. 2015:** Attend first individual interview, held in XXXX 232.

**Feb. 2015:** Attend second individual interview, held in XXXX 232.

**April: 2015:** Attend third individual interview, held in XXXX 232.

On or around **1 May 2015:** Attend *optional* focus group and complete exit survey.

### **Risks**

There are two notable risks associated with participation in this study. First, the PI also serves as your direct teaching supervisor. Participation may create undue stress on this relationship. Participation is strictly voluntary, and you may stop participating at any time. Your participation will not affect your teaching review or your potential consideration for teaching award nominations or other opportunities. If you feel that you have experienced unfair judgment in these areas as a result of your participation in this project, you may contact the Director of First-Year Writing, [removed name], at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Second, participation in this study may elicit discussions about specific kinds of threats, which may trigger past traumas or create anxiety. The PI will not ask direct questions about specific past threats. All discussions of these experiences will be participant driven. You will receive all individual and focus group interview questions in advance and may notify the PI if you feel uncomfortable discussing any question or if you feel that discussion would negatively impact your standing in the program. In the event that you do wish to seek additional psychological or psychiatric support, you may visit SE State Counseling Center at XXX XXXX Avenue. You may reach the Counseling Center by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX or on the web at <http://. . . /counseling-center/>.

### **Benefits**

There is no direct benefit to your participation in this project. However, by better understanding the range and types of threats GTAs experience, we can better adjust our graduate student training to account for these threats and thus provide more grounded and better contextualized preparation.

### **Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in a locked faculty office, with digital records kept password protected. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. All names and other identifying materials will be coded.

## Compensation

You will not receive anything for participating.

### What if you are a SESU student?

Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades at SE State.

### What if you are a SESU employee?

Participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment as a GTA at SE, and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your job.

### What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Casie Fedukovich at XXX-XXX-XXXX (cell), by email at [cjfeduko@sesu.edu](mailto:cjfeduko@sesu.edu), or on campus in XXXX 232.

### What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact XXXX).

## Consent to Participate

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.

Subject's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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