The F-Word: Failure in WPA Work

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This essay addresses failure in WPA work, specifically what happens when WPAs experience failure. I analyze WPA scholarship to expose how WPAs often struggle to accept and make sense of failure in their work. I then draw from recent efforts in writing studies to engage failure within the context of teaching to develop a heuristic for failure in WPA work.

WPAs are described as many things in scholarship: agents of change and activists (McLeod; Adler-Kassner); researchers engaged in reflective practice (Rose and Weiser; Brown, Enos, and Chaput); kitchen cooks, plate twirlers, and troubadours (George); theorists (Rose and Weiser); and managers (Bousquet). Rarely, if ever, are WPAs described as failures; yet four years into a tenure-track position, I was a failed WPA.

A brief history. In fall 2010, I started a tenure-track position as the only rhetoric and composition specialist at a small, private, comprehensive, regional college. I was to teach the standard 3/3 with the additional expectation that I would "work with adjuncts, the Director of the Writing Center, and other faculty to promote writing," as outlined in the job description. Essentially, I was the *de facto* WPA with no existing program and no reassignment time. By fall 2011, I negotiated a one-course reassignment on a semester-to-semester basis to develop a writing program focused on faculty development. To fulfill the job description, my idea was to support English department adjuncts while facilitating WAC/WID outreach through one-on-one meetings and workshops with departments and faculty across the disciplines. In spring 2012, I expanded my efforts to pilot a writing enriched curriculum (WEC) initiative (inspired by the WEC model out of the University of Minnesota) with the Department of Graduate Nursing while I continued WAC/WID outreach. This work continued through fall 2012 and spring 2013, and faculty demand was so great that I could not meet it. During this time, the vice president of academic affairs convened

a writing task force composed of faculty and staff. The task force recommended continuation of the faculty and curricular development work that I was doing with even more financial support. In fall 2013, I began a WEC project with the MBA program.

By spring 2014, my one-course reassignment was revoked due to budget concerns. The cut occurred with no consultation, no warning, and no fanfare. The program just ended, and I was no longer a WPA. Larger budget cuts occurred just one semester later. The Center for Teaching Excellence, the only other institutional outlet for faculty development, was eliminated. The Writing Center experienced a budget cut that forced them to reduce their staff. Overall, fifteen faculty and staff positions were eliminated. I may have lost a course reassignment and with it a program, but I retained my position.

Despite its short existence, the WAC program that I worked to develop experienced several successes according to conventional metrics. Faculty support and demand for the program was strong, and the task force recommended its continuation with more funding—no small feat. The curriculum in the graduate nursing program was transformed, and both the faculty and students were experiencing positive results. Additionally, this work led to three publications, two co-authored with nursing faculty, and one conference presentation with nursing faculty. Still, at the end of four years, neither these successes nor I could save the program, and I felt like a failed WPA.

Before proceeding, let me clarify. This article is not a rant against university administration nor is it a cautionary tale about jWPA work. I was promoted and tenured at that institution with no setbacks and am now happily a full-time, nonfaculty WPA at another institution by choice. It also is not a description or defense of my actions or decisions. I could have made other decisions, perhaps better ones that would have saved the program or maybe even worse ones that would have put a swifter end to it. I also want to acknowledge at the outset that my story ultimately is one of personal success, but this does not preclude my story also being one of failure. Success and failure do not have to be either/or experiences that exist in opposition to each other but rather can be both/and experiences that exist simultaneously and independently. My previous institution no longer has a WAC program, and I was part of this failure. My experience and the program at that moment in time will forever remain a failure and, with it, I a failed WPA, but this does not mean that I am not also a successful WPA.

In this article, I explore the complexities of failure in WPA work. I analyze WPA scholarship to examine what happens when WPAs, especially those new to the position, experience failure, large and small. As I hope

to demonstrate, WPAs often struggle to accept and make sense of failure in their work. I then draw from recent efforts in writing studies to engage failure within the context of teaching to develop a heuristic for failure in WPA work. Failure may be an inevitable part of WPA work, but it does not have to be nor should it be an aspect that WPAs internalize, hide, or fear.

The F-Word

Within the last decade, popular culture, the business world, and Silicon Valley have championed failure as a pathway for success. Popular self-help books with titles like *How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big* (Scott Adams); *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure* (Harford)*; and Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success* (Maxwell) encourage readers to channel their failures into successes. Similarly, popular business magazines including the *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, and *Entrepreneur* regularly feature articles like "Strategies for Learning from Failure" (Edmondson), "5 Ways Fear of Failure Can Ruin your Business" (R. L. Adams); and "8 Ways Smart People Use Failure to Their Advantage" (Bradberry) that tout failure as essential to business success and provide strategies to make failure work for, not against, you.

Despite this newfound (if not faddish) appreciation for failure outside the walls of the academy, academic culture has a complicated relationship with failure. While some universities and colleges have developed student-focused programs that foreground the role of failure in learning (see Bennett), success remains the primary metric for evaluating and valuing faculty and staff whether that be in research, teaching, assessment, or administration. The 2016 viral phenomena of Johannes Haushofer's "CV of Failures" nicely demonstrates this tension. Taking up Melanie Stefan's suggestion to compile an "alternative CV of failures," Haushofer, an assistant professor of Psychology at Princeton, published his "CV of Failures" that lists rejections he received as well as awards, recognitions, and funding he did not get. Haushofer and his CV quickly gained fame as it was picked up by several national and international news organizations. The widespread admiration and recognition his "CV of Failures" garnered—as he writes, "This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work"—suggests just how unusual it is for an academic to admit their own failures, let alone share them publicly and in writing. Faculty may tell students that failure is okay and even necessary for learning, but faculty rarely demonstrate or admit failure in their own work.

Failure occupies a precarious position in academic culture because academe relies on, as Judy Z. Segal calls it, "a professional discourse of success"

(175) in which scholars generally write and talk about their successes rather than their failures. In other words, success primarily drives and underlies academic work and scholarship. Segal points out that this discourse of success poses problems because "when we do not write about failure, we write in the *context* of a rhetoric of success, not associating one response to failure with any other" (175). Segal is particularly interested in failure when one attempts to "decenter" the writing classroom, but her words here highlight the limitation a discourse of success poses to the larger academic culture. Without attention to failure in academic professional discourse, failures are understood as isolated incidents that deviate from the context of success rather than connected experiences that constitute their own context and from which one can learn.

This discourse of success underlies much WPA scholarship with monographs and edited collections providing WPAs with guidance for how to be successful in their positions. Edward M. White's *Developing Successful Writing Programs* outlines theoretical and practical issues for WPAs to consider in order to make "decisions that are appropriate to individual campus situations" (xviii). Linda Myers-Breslin in *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers Scenarios in Effective Program Management* brings together contributors who work through different scenarios to demonstrate WPA decision-making skills; as she writes, "each contributor provides a description of a problematic situation, as well as enough information about the institution and program to resolve the situation" (xv). Irene Ward and William J. Carpenter's *Allyn and Bacon Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators* includes 23 essays to serve as "a resource for finding the right solution for a particular program or institution" (xi). Most recently, Bryna Siegel Finer and Jamie White-Farnham's *Writing Program Architecture: Thirty Cases for Reference and Research* asks contributors to outline the architecture or the "material, logistical, and rhetorical elements" (4) of their programs to provide "models and case studies of how writing programs of all types are structured and sustained" (23).

WPAs specifically interested in WAC programs (as I am) can turn to edited collections and articles to help make their WAC work a success. Susan McLeod and Margot Soven's edited collection *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs* serves as a resource for WPAs to initiate or expand WAC programs and, in the words of Elaine P. Maimon in the preface, "defines terms, presents helpful suggestions, even provides models for useful documents (everything from workshop evaluation forms to contracts for visiting consultants), and in short, makes everyone's work easier" (vii). McLeod's later edited collection *Strengthening Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum* addresses how "second-stage"

WAC programs (programs that have been in existence for three or more years) can overcome common challenges, including Keith A. Tandy's piece on how to redesign a program when funding and support are reduced or run out. *WPA: Writing Program Administration* too features articles like Susan H. McLeod and Margot Soven's "What Do You Need to Start—and Sustain—a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Program?", Jay Carson's "Ways to Connect WAC Programs to their Context," and Martha A. Townsend, Martha D. Patton, and Jo Ann Vogt's "Uncommon Conversations: How Nearly Three Decades of Paying Attention Allows One WAC/WID Program to Thrive" that provide WAC directors with concrete strategies and recommendations for success.

The discourse of success also pervades WPA narratives. As others have pointed out, scholarship frequently explores WPA work in terms of storytelling or personal narratives (e.g. Enos and Borrowman; George; Stolley). These stories tend to "paint us as the romantic hero who defends the program against administrative whims or the tragic martyr who sacrifices herself for the good of the program or her own ethical principles" (Stolley 22). Edward M. White's "Use it or Lose It: Power and the WPA" is a classic example in which White saves the WAC program from budget cuts by moving the program out of the School of Humanities and into the Office of Undergraduate Studies. Of course, not all narratives follow this storyline, but as Thomas P. Miller suggests, "our scholarship still includes more self-effacing narratives about how canny administrators managed adversity to make the best of a bad situation" (81). WPAs don't fail; they overcome.

To point out that a discourse of success underlies much WPA scholarship is not to say that WPAs do not seriously engage with challenges and problems that they face. In all of the examples cited above, scholars engage with challenging aspects of writing program work or directly address common problems that WPAs encounter. WPA scholarship certainly does not simplify or minimize challenges and problems, and no one would accuse WPAs of presenting a rose-colored view of their work.

Additionally, I am not suggesting that past WPA scholarship is not important, valuable, and needed. Without the guidance of seasoned WPAs, I, like many others, would certainly have been lost in my first position and the outcome could have been far worse. WPAs are fortunate to have such a robust body of scholarship. In fact, it is precisely because of this scholarship and my graduate school preparation that I felt at least somewhat prepared to tackle the many challenges and problems that awaited me as a new jWPA even though I was well aware of the many cautions against non-tenured WPA work (see, for example, Debra Frank Dew and Alice Horning's *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators* or Theresa Enos and

Shane Borrowman's *Promises and Perils of Writing Program Administration*). This is also perhaps why when I was faced with what seemed like a significant failure of losing a program that I was hired to create, I felt especially lost and ashamed.

Scholars already have explored limits of narratives in WPA scholarship, arguing for the inclusion of voices and stories from nonfaculty WPAs (Duffey), early career WPAs (Stolley; Rose), and liminal WPAs (Phillips, Shovlin, and Titus). The need for alternative narratives of WPA work is nicely articulated and demonstrated by Amy Ferdinandt Stolley in her recent *WPA* article in which she examines how WPA narratives "are more restrictive and disciplining than we might imagine" (19). She observes that:

> narratives and collective experiential knowledge can align neatly with certain aspects of our professional identities, but significant truth claims repeated in WPA narratives do not always match the experiences of some WPAs and can be at odds with the values and choices WPAs make. (20)

Stolley is interested in how the mantra of "Don't take an administrative position before tenure" emotionally affects early career WPAs who choose to follow this career path and seeks to open a space for narratives that explore this experience (20).

Extending Stolley's work and her focus on narratives, I am interested here in how the discourse of success that underlies much WPA scholarship and the lack of attention to failure emotionally affects WPAs, especially early career WPAs. The potential emotional impact of failing to address failure in scholarship has been observed by others. Thomas Newkirk, for example, finds that teaching of writing scholarship tends to focus on "upbeat success stories" that reflect ideal situations and circumstances (3). This poses problems, however, because "these ideals, to the extent that they are unrealistic, inflict psychological damage; they induce guilt, envy, and a sense of inadequacy" (Newkirk 3). Similarly, on reflecting on her CV, conference presentations, and scholarship, Melanie Stefan notes that "as scientists we construct a narrative of success that renders our setbacks invisible both to ourselves and to others . . . therefore, whenever we experience an individual failure, we feel alone and dejected." Both Newkirk and Stefan argue for making failure visible, with Newkirk suggesting writing teachers "create forums for telling failure stories" (6) and with Stefan suggesting scientists compose alternative CVs of failure, so that the negative emotional impact of failure is reduced. Without this visibility, negative feelings can flourish.

Recent attention to emotion in WPA work also speaks to the need to address failure in scholarship although it does so less directly than Newkirk and Stefan. Laura R. Micciche adopts Sarah Ahmed's concept of "stickiness" to explore how objects, like narratives, "amass affective associations" that in turn stick to and influence those who read them (27). In terms of WPA scholarship, Micciche examines how disappointment has come to characterize WPA work. She analyzes two WPA narratives to uncover how disappointment is inextricably linked to WPA working conditions, conditions in which WPAs may seem to hold power only to find out that they often have very little. While working conditions certainly contribute to WPA feelings of disappointment, another related source of disappointment might stem from WPA scholarship. In other words, WPA scholarship may contribute to feelings of disappointment by directly addressing them (as Micciche suggests) but also by emphasizing success or overcoming adversity. Disappointment may stick to WPAs as they read scholarship, but, I would argue, so too does success. Micciche argues that WPAs must consider more carefully "how disappointment is woven into the fabric of our work lives and how we can combat destructive disaffection by improving our working conditions" so that WPAs do not simply become accustomed to disappointment (90). I would add that WPAs also need to directly address failure in their work as another way to engage disappointment and combat disaffection.

One can find glimpses of the emotional impact that the lack of attention to failure creates in WPA scholarship. Finer and White-Farnham begin their recent collection *Writing Program Architecture* with an email from Shevaun Watson regarding her chapter revision. She expresses concern about including her chapter in the collection because the changes to the first-year writing program that she discusses in her chapter will most likely be undone by budget cuts and she has since accepted a WPA position at a different institution. After communicating this news, she writes:

> So revising this [chapter] has entailed a very heavy heart. I think there is valuable information in what I was able to accomplish here, but it was fleeting and will go out as quick as it came in. Surely, that cannot be the "lesson" here, which is why I don't know if I want this included in the final publication. (3)

For Finer and White-Farnham, Watson's email highlights the importance of attending to a writing program's architecture—its "material, logistical, and rhetorical elements"—in order to "disentangle [the WPA] role from the program itself" and "to strengthen [WPA] positions in times of turmoil or in the face of dismantling" (4). While Finer and White-Farn-

ham's reading of Watson's email is certainly valid and important, I read something additional in her email, a hesitation (and even concern) to share a change that most likely will fail. As Finer and White-Farnham point out, the fault of the failure wasn't necessarily with Watson herself but rather the result of decisions outside of her control. Still, Watson's search to find a lesson in her experience beyond its fleeting nature and her questioning of whether that alone is a valuable and viable lesson speaks to the limits of the discourse of success. Paul Cook in "Notes from the Margins: WAC, WID, and the Politics of Place(ment)" finds himself in a different situation as a jWPA at a small, rural liberal arts college but with a similar outcome. As he reflects on his experience, he recalls what drew him to the position: "I saw an opportunity to have a lasting, positive impact on an institution, a chance to leave my mark." What he finds, however, is that "ongoing material, pedagogical, and institutional challenges" are too much to overcome so he accepted a position elsewhere as a non-WPA. He sums up this decision as such: "In short, I felt as though *I* had failed" (emphasis added). What strikes me about Cook's rendering of his experience is the impulse I think many WPAs feel, a chance to leave a mark, to affect positive change, and I identify with Cook's subsequent feelings of personal failure when that does not come to fruition. Cook examines his experience to reveal "larger concerns about WAC/WID's vulnerability in rural SLACs, [small liberal arts colleges]" but, importantly, he ultimately seems to understand and position the failure to effect change in that context as his alone.

What Watson's and Cook's words highlight, for me, are the ways in which WPAs struggle to accept and make sense of failure in their work as well as their tendency to internalize failure (and to fear that others will associate it with them). I too struggled to understand my experience and felt uncomfortable and hesitant to share it with others. I worried what the loss of a writing program would say to others about me as a WPA and even as an educator and scholar. When WPAs do not experience success, do not overcome adversity, or do not make the best of a bad situation, where can they turn to help make sense of these experiences?

A Heuristic for Failure

Writing studies scholars have recently turned their attention to failure within the context of teaching writing (Alvarez; Carr; Gross and Alexander; Inoue; Segal). Noting the relative dearth of attention to failure within the field, these scholars argue that failure is valuable for teaching and learning and, as such, warrants a place within the classroom but also within scholarship. While these scholars focus on failure as a pedagogical strategy,

their work provides a basis from which to develop a heuristic for failure in writing program administration.

Failure seems to be useful for at least two reasons: it opens a space for reflection and for critique of structures and norms. John Dewey in *How We Think* argues for the role of failure in reflective thought. For Dewey, reflective thought is an important educational aim, and in his five stage process, he addresses the value of failure in the fifth stage, testing the hypothesis by action. He writes:

> but a great advantage of possession of the habit of reflective activity is that failure is not *mere* failure. It is instructive . . . [failure] either brings to light a new problem or helps to define and clarify the problem on which he has been engaged. (114)

Dewey argues that failure should be part of the educational process, allowing for further reflection in which a person seeks to understand the failure and then make use of this knowledge. While Dewey's emphasis on the role of reflective thought in learning and his rendering of failure within it are certainly valuable, they rely on an understanding of education as "a forward-moving, product-oriented march toward some mark of achievement" (Carr). Within this formulation, failure is positioned as a step or movement toward success, toward resolution, rather than embraced in its own right.

Embracing failure in its own right provides for a different kind of reflective space, as Allison Carr explores in "In Support of Failure." When people allow themselves to dwell in failure and experience it in its own terms rather than in relation to success, failure, Carr argues, can be a "*deeply felt, transformative process.*" She highlights the value of this understanding of failure and her proposed "pedagogy of failure" by drawing from her own experience of failing to complete a written assignment as a Ph.D. student. In positioning herself as a failure in the weeks following this experience, Carr was able to slow down, to notice, to pay attention, and "to let myself feel the pain of failure and to find a way to make that work for me." It is important to distinguish here that Carr makes failure work for her as a person rather than for the situation. Failure "works" for Carr not as a way to succeed in a specific situation or project but instead as a way to see herself as a person. As a result, Carr embraces and advocates for the transformative power of failure, finding ways to "*do it better,* to stay there longer, to take it on as an epistemological choice" because it allows her to "ask myself how I got to where I am, where I am trying to go, and if there is maybe somewhere else I should be instead. I ask myself how I am feeling and why I am feeling that way." These self-reflective questions differ from the kind of reflection that Dewey encourages as the impetus and goal are not on outward prog-

ress but rather on inward feelings of the moment, questioning where they come from, why did they come from there, and do I even want to be here?

Other scholars find that failure allows insight into structural power dynamics. Daniel M. Gross and Jonathan Alexander advocate for frameworks for failure in their critique of the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. Like Carr, Gross and Alexander encourage educators to consider the value of failure on its own terms rather than placing it in relation to (and lesser than) success. Tracing the roots of the *Framework* to positive psychology, they find the success-oriented nature of the document to be problematic in that by focusing on success in the classroom and the positive emotions associated with it, the *Framework* leaves little room for failure and the negative emotions that often come with it. However, failure and negative emotions, they argue, can and should play a crucial role in education. They draw from queer theory's engagement with failure and negative emotion, especially Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, to argue that "unhappiness, dissatisfaction and even failure might serve as entry points to critique the power structures and normalizing discourses" (288). As they further explain:

> The cost of forgetting negative emotion, even the experience of failure, is high. Success feels good but it does not reorient us against unjust norms. Success, as it trumps personal failure, can also numb us to failures that are structural. (290)

For Gross and Alexander, failure provides a critical lens, shifting the locus of failure (and success) from the individual to the structures and norms in which he or she operates.

Building on Carr and Gross and Alexander's work, I propose here a heuristic to help WPAs make sense of failure. It incorporates the following elements: (1) failure exists outside of success, (2) failure is an important term, (3) failure causes negative yet worthwhile emotions, and (4) failure is valuable. While I address these four elements separately below, I see them as working together as a process and not necessarily experienced in a particular order. I draw on my own firsthand experience to illustrate the value of the heuristic for WPAs, but I believe other WPAs whose experiences of failure or circumstances differ slightly or significantly from my own still will find this heuristic to be valuable. Failure in my case was primarily the result of institutional decisions that were outside of my control rather than decisions that I made regarding the program, and my job security and professional reputation were not on the line and no one was calling into question my personal fitness for my position. My personal circumstances at the time also allowed for much flexibility in terms of career paths and

geographical location. This was, in many ways, an ideal failure situation. The heuristic, however, is intended to be dynamic and responsive, enabling a WPA to make sense of their own experiences of failure within their individualized professional and personal circumstances. Even WPAs who have a similar experience of failure as my own may not respond to the heuristic in the same ways that I did. WPAs will have different responses to the heuristic that will lead them to different places but all who adopt it would take failure as their focal point to find a way to make failure work for them.

One element of the heuristic is that WPAs situate their understanding of failure outside of success. Both Carr and Gross and Alexander stress the importance of understanding failure in its own terms rather than positioning it as a pit stop to success or in opposition to success. As Gross and Alexander remind us, success is not contextless—it is defined in accordance with existing structures and norms, and, as such, success may have positive implications for the individual but may have negative consequences for others. In other words, success is not all good all the time nor is failure all bad all the time. Additionally, success does not have to be the all-consuming goal or resolution for every experience, as failure offers another valid and valuable experience.

Allowing the failure of the writing program to exist outside of the context of success was hard for me and took time. The only future I had imagined was one with a successful program, perhaps not as successful as I would have liked but certainly not a failure. So when I first received news about my course reassignment being revoked, my first thoughts were "what did I do wrong" and "how did I let this happen?" I was searching for what I did that kept the program from being a success. It was not until the next semester when the other larger budget cuts occurred that I began to consider that a successful writing program may not have been possible regardless of what I did. At the same time, I knew that the program still did a lot of good for faculty and students even as a failure. Reconciling these two seemingly opposed thoughts challenged me to complicate my understanding of failure as bad and success as good. It also allowed me to use and even embrace the word failure to describe the program without the internal judgement that I was a bad WPA despite the fact that I failed to save it.

Another element of the heuristic is that WPAs need to use the term failure. Instead of recasting failure as a challenge, opportunity, or even a problem or disappointment, WPAs, at times, need to resist this impulse and just let experiences or projects be failures and they need to call them that at least internally (they need not always or ever do so privately or publicly with others). While positioning failure outside of success was hard for me, resisting the urge to recast my experience in more optimistic terms was relatively

easy. As I mention above, my course reassignment was revoked suddenly and without warning. I, quite frankly, was caught off guard because from my perspective, the program was going strong: faculty supported it and the task force endorsed it. The extreme disconnects between my understanding of the situation and the budgetary reality coupled with the resulting feelings of anger and hurt allowed me to more easily cast the program as a failure than if I was more prepared for the budget cut or if faculty support was wavering or inconsistent. It also was relatively safe for me to name the program a failure since my own personal qualifications for the job were not under attack.

I found immense power in naming my own experience a failure. Hearing myself say "failure" either with others in private or in my own self talk allowed me to slow down, like Carr describes, and resist the impulse to keep moving forward with this particular program. To be clear, using the term failure did not mean that I was leaving WPA work and my experience entirely behind me but rather that I was letting go of this version of the program at this institution at this point in time. Failure allows for (but does not dictate) a finality that challenge, opportunity, problem, and disappointment do not, and in some situations, a sense of finality can be incredibly freeing. For me, failure gave me permission to discontinue all WPA-related work as I returned to a full teaching load when I lost funding instead of doing more or the same amount of work with less. When faculty contacted me for assistance (and they continued to do so), my message was simple and straightforward: "I'd really like to help you, but the College has discontinued support for my work with faculty." While this was a potentially risky message as a pre-tenure faculty member, it allowed me to retain some power over my workload in a situation where I had very little power otherwise.

Another element of the heuristic is that WPAs need to acknowledge and grapple with the emotions that accompany failure. Both Carr and Gross and Alexander encourage readers to dwell in the negative emotions of failure as those emotions can provide insight—for Carr that insight is into self and for Gross and Alexander that insight is into structures and norms. Negative emotions might not feel good, but they should not be ignored or rushed past as simply unpleasant interruptions. Allowing oneself to feel negative emotions prompts self-reflection and ideological critique that can be used in worthwhile ways.

In my case, losing the program hit me incredibly hard. I was profoundly sad, hurt, and angry and continued to be so for well over a year (and maybe even still a little to this day). While I did not openly express these emotions to colleagues, I felt them deeply every day and especially when faculty would contact me for assistance. Staying with these emotions while

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unpleasant and difficult allowed me to start asking after a few months, "why do I still feel *so* terrible?" rather than "what did I do wrong?" or "what mistakes did I make?" Focusing on my feelings instead of my actions prompted introspection on my own commitments, goals, and values. I discovered that my career and academic interests were shifting from first-year writing to WAC work. When I began this position, much of my WPA work was focused on first-year writing and working with adjuncts in this course, but over time, first-year writing needed little attention because the English department was hiring fewer adjuncts due to declining enrollments and WAC work needed much more attention because disciplinary faculty were requesting more assistance. In my WAC work, I deeply valued the connections I made with faculty and simply enjoyed experiencing other disciplinary ways of knowing, teaching, and communicating. WAC work allowed me to flex my own disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge in new and exciting ways that had the potential for a much wider impact than first-year writing and my own teaching. With these realizations, my commitments to faculty and curricular development across the disciplines rather than solely in first-year writing came into a clear focus for the first time.

This reflective look inward was paired with a critical look outward at the "power structures and normalizing discourses" in which I was working (Gross and Alexander, 288). Despite my best efforts and at that point in time, the program's "architecture," in Siegel and White-Farnham's words, could not support or sustain the kind of work I was doing and wanted to do. The institution had other priorities that did not align with my own commitments, and I did not see those priorities aligning with my own in the near future. This understanding allowed me to shift the failure from one that I "owned" as mine alone to one that was the result of the confluence of complex factors, both personal and contextual. It also brought me to a personal decision—stay at an institution whose values and priorities did not currently match my own but may in the future or find another institution whose priorities and values were more closely aligned with my own in the present.

My critical gaze outward extended beyond the physical institution to the larger academic context in which I worked. The lure of tenure required me to split my time between teaching, research, administration, and service yet perform in each area at levels in ways that were simply unsustainable for me, and I resented the "the grin and bear it" pre-tenure attitude I adopted out of fear of reprisal. I began to question what success and failure looks like and requires of people in tenure positions especially those that also carry administrative duties. This questioning continued as I looked for positions in other institutions. I was drawn to non-tenure track, full-time administrative positions in WAC programs, as they aligned most clearly

with my commitments and allowed me to exit a tenure system that I was beginning to question and in which I no longer wanted to participate. While I am still working through many of the issues I raise here and do not pretend to have the answers to what I see as larger systemic concerns, embracing the emotions of failure provided me with a clarity of purpose and focus that I had not yet experienced at that point in my career.

The final element of the heuristic is that WPAs need to value failure. Admittedly, valuing failure is difficult and even feels counterintuitive given larger cultural and academic emphases on success, but, as I hope to have demonstrated above, failure can be a "*deeply felt*, transformative process" (Carr) that exists outside the context of success. By embracing failure as a process, I came to see its value not only for me as a person and WPA but also for a program. Failure allowed me as a person to clarify my own values, commitments, and goals and identify the ways in which they were or were not aligned with the program, its institutional context, and the larger academic contexts. Failure allowed me as a WPA to resist internalizing failure and seeing it as solely bad by providing me with another lens through which to analyze and understand the contexts in which I work and writing programs operate. And failure allowed the program to stop existing and to stop trying to get by with less. Failure, just as much as success, allows WPAs to prioritize and make decisions about a program, which, at times, means not taking on more, cutting back instead of adding, failing instead of succeeding. Failure in this light is not just an inevitable aspect of WPA work but also a necessary one.

I recount my experience above not to dictate how others should use the heuristic or how others should respond to failure but rather to illustrate how the heuristic worked for me in my particular situation. I encourage other WPAs to adopt this heuristic for private use in their own individual practice to help them make sense of their own experiences with failure. A WPA who is faced with a failure similar to my own but does not have the option or flexibility to leave the institution or position can still benefit from the heuristic as it allows insight into how they want to move forward within the current constraints. Or a WPA in a situation similar to mine may experience and respond to the emotions of failure differently than me to discover a deep commitment to the institution or community and work toward incremental change. Or a WPA who is facing criticisms because of professional decisions they made can benefit from slowing down and engaging with the emotions of failure, as Carr does, to explore how they got there, where they want to go, and where they do not want to go. By adopting failure as an important and valuable term, allowing failure to exist outside the context of success, and dwelling in the emotions of failure, WPAs can

make failure work for them regardless of why the failure occurred or the circumstances surrounding it.

I also encourage WPAs to adopt more public uses of this heuristic in scholarship. In doing so, I recognize that not all (and perhaps not most) WPAs can openly and publicly admit failure without facing significant consequences, including denial of tenure and loss of employment or other career opportunities. But when those who have less to risk make failure public, they are helping to break its stigma and normalize it so that WPAs do not inwardly suffer when success does not await them. This is, in part, why I am sharing my story of failure and proposing a heuristic for failure for WPAs. I now am in a full-time nonfaculty administrative position where I am evaluated based on my work at this institution, not my past work at another institution. This position is situated within an office in academic affairs, not a department, where I work with other administrators engaged in similar tasks. I may experience some professional consequences for sharing my story of failure, but the risk is relatively small because, as I acknowledge above, my story is also one of success. I hope others who can share their stories of failure will do so too; but if not, I hope my story of failure and this heuristic can provide other WPAs, especially those who are new to the position, nonfaculty, or pre-tenure, with some comfort and guidance when they encounter failure. The failure in my story was significant, but WPAs encounter little failures (and successes) every day. In many ways, WPAs are masters of failure, and they should embrace this role.

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