

*Plenary Panel*

## **Sustainable Becomings: Women’s Career Trajectories in Writing Program Administration**

Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Sheila Carter-Tod, Jessie L. Moore, Patti Poblete, Casey Reid, and Sarah Elizabeth Snyder

*Adapting talks from a July 2019 CWPA plenary panel on women’s experiences in WPA careers, this article explores the sustainable becomings of five women whose career trajectories have included writing program administration. While these five stories cannot represent all women’s career trajectories, they illustrate the need for attention to sustainability via self-care, deep mentoring, and a call for systemic change.*

LOUISE WETHERBEE PHELPS: CHAIR’S INTRODUCTION

*Over a 40-year career, Louise Wetherbee Phelps has consulted, taught, and written extensively on writing program administration. Her WPA roles include directing a writing center (pre-PhD) and serving as founding director of the Syracuse Writing Program (now Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition). Post-retirement, she is scholar-in-residence in rhetoric and writing at Old Dominion University, working with doctoral students and the profession to support lifespan career development and promote cross-generational relationships.*

This article adapts talks from a panel on women’s experiences in WPA careers presented at the CWPA annual conference in July 2019. CWPA president Mark Blaauw-Hara’s invitation to explore this topic was inspired by a fiery conversation on the WPA-L listserv initiated by Michelle LaFrance’s rebuke of “mansplaining,” in which many participants revealed

experiences of being silenced and disrespected as women faculty and WPAs and eloquently called out these behaviors as systemic discrimination. The authors of this article formed a multigenerational panel of women representing diverse backgrounds, institutions, life experiences, and moments in a career trajectory. Our panel also included as respondents Joe Janangelo, Katherine Daily O'Meara, and Lori Ostergaard, who focused attention on how the social worlds of the discipline, profession, and CWPA collective can proactively help sustain the long-term careers of women WPAs as highly individuated becomings, in all our complex diversity. Our conclusion returns to that question, informed by their insights and audience discussion.

In planning this panel and assembling its speakers and respondents, Mark and I recognized that women's experiences as faculty and leaders are distinctive in the WPA world for many reasons:

- the number of women who take these roles;
- the number of women who serve as WPAs without title, rank, salary, or release time appropriate to their work (e.g., as graduate students, "coordinators," committee chairs, non-tenure-track faculty or staff), especially in institutions other than research universities;
- the nontraditional career patterns and complex relations between personal and professional lives of many women academics; and
- the ways intersectionalities of gender with race and ethnicity, class, ability, age, and other facets of identity affect women WPAs.

Paradoxically, having brought them together based on the commonality of serving as women WPAs, we asked panelists to dramatize their own historical "becoming" in unique life trajectories of work and growth. We invited them to tell a story about an experience—a moment, event, text, person—that was decisive or transformational in shaping their own careers, focusing especially on their agency in these situations—how empowered or constrained their choices were, systemically or through personal circumstances.

The concepts of becoming and a career trajectory in our title are drawn from Paul Prior's work on lifespan literacy and disciplinary enculturation. He imagines each person engaging in a lifelong process of becoming, creating a unique trajectory of participation through multiple activity systems with their associated roles and identities. The idea of trajectory embodies both people's immersion in the social world and the uniqueness and agency of each individual—in this case, as an academic and a WPA: as people "agentively orient to and appropriate cultural resources," they are "also individuated in an on-going trajectory of becoming, as their situated

appropriations historically accumulate to form a particular person-in-process” (Prior).

Why “sustainable” becoming? My work on a cross-generational task force and on late career and post-retirement phases, as well as lifespan literacy, led me to organize a cross-generational workshop on reimagining and navigating our careers from a lifetime perspective. Many academics can expect a career of 40 years or more that will at least include WPA roles and perhaps further administrative roles, but also potentially major life shifts both in and outside the academy. My own academic and WPA career has now extended 46 years from pre-doctorate to post-retirement, and is still continuing. In the workshop we tried to heighten awareness of this lifespan career trajectory and the need for individuals to plan for it and the profession to support all phases of it. We urged participants to take into account how career trajectories and disciplinary belonging, like literacy development, are not separate from all their other laminated identities and activity systems, in ways the traditional tenure-driven notion of academic progress tends to deny and even obstruct.

To frame these reflections, we offered speakers some concepts from that workshop for examining any particular experience from an empowering perspective that integrates past, present, and future. They come from an article by Kelly Myers reinterpreting the Greek concept of *metanoia*, which she puts in dialogue with *kairos* and *pronoia*. *Metanoia* involves looking back at past decisions or turning points to reflect on them and learn from them, including mistakes, regrets, lost opportunities. Each disappointment or setback is also a new opportunity for seizing *kairos*—for moving in new directions.

When *kairos* and *metanoia* are approached as a learning process, *kairos* expands beyond the single, crucial moment of opportunity and into a longer view of human experience [where] *kairos* can be seen as a series of opportunities occurring over time, experienced with a range of exhilaration and regret. . . . *Metanoia* . . . calls for a larger process of re-vision in which a person is constantly revising and revitalizing understanding. (11)

*Pronoia* adds the dimension of foresight, forethought, planning, to support “strategic navigation” through the triumphs, disappointments, and unexpected turns in a career trajectory.

SHEILA CARTER-TOD: WOMANIST CAREER  
IDENTITY INTEGRATION AS WPA

*Sheila Carter-Tod is an associate professor of rhetoric and writing in the department of English at Virginia Tech. She was an associate director of composition for four years (pre-tenure) and director of composition for three years (post-tenure). After being WPA, she directed a college access program at Virginia Tech.*

Early in my career, I wrote an article that used racial identity development theory (Berry; Cross, “Negro-to-Black”; Cross, *Shades of Black*) to explain the ways in which my children began to understand and (more importantly) talk about themselves in relation to others. When asked to think about how the profession of writing program administration has shaped my individual trajectory, of becoming through multiple contexts, experiences, and identities, I was immediately drawn back to reconsider this theoretical framework. As I reflected on the process, and revisited the research, I clearly began to see how the stages of ethnic racial identity models (an expansion of the previous theory) better described/mapped onto my career trajectory and the ways in which I created and recreated my own professional identity(ies). It is important to stop here and interject a little about who I am. I am a first-generation, African-American female, raised in the South, in what would be characterized as a lower socio-economic environment. I jokingly say that I am the product of every governmental educational experiment—from busing to tracking to grade-level merged classrooms. While I wasn’t expected to go to college, I did—attending a PWI for both undergraduate and graduate school. Throughout the process, there was a lot that I did not know, and I encountered very few people that looked like me. I am also headstrong and tenacious enough to believe I could and can enact change. Ultimately, I went into higher education to find a way to change the experience for people like me. I wanted to create access to and through education by demystifying power structures—specifically as they are established and reinforced by barriers based on language usage—reading, writing and speaking.

By explaining the stages of ethnic racial identity theory in respect to my own stories, I will describe how my career trajectory has been a precarious balancing of defining who I am, within the existing structures of the academy, while pushing to expand academic and administrative structures in order to create venues of access.

*Stage One: Assimilation*

In this stage, the individual identifies strictly with the dominant culture and abandons his or her own. I can distinctly remember sitting in a pre-tenure mentoring meeting with my committee (made up of four people—only one of whom had a writing studies background), and after barely being able to speak at all, being told they were concerned that the work that I was doing on “student rights to their own language” was based on a statement that was thirty years old. This concept “concerned” them because it did not reflect well on my proposed research agenda and career trajectory. I also remembered being absolutely panicked—feeling like I needed to take immediate action to create a “real research agenda” that looked like what would make the mentoring committee (and by extension my department and university) happy and make me a “real scholar.”

At that time, I truly believed that my career success and the grounds for a successful career trajectory was based on factors outside of who I was and what I felt was important to study. I strongly believed that the only way to succeed was to assimilate to the expectations of the institutional understanding of what was worth researching in order to be deemed a scholar.

*Stage Two: Marginalization*

In this stage, the individual conjures her own identity separate from the dominant one. After submitting my package to be reviewed for tenure I can remember spending a lot of time embracing my perceived marginalization. This often meant working on initiatives outside of my department and associating with others on campus that shared my values. I chaired our faculty and staff black caucus, worked on the commission of equal opportunity and diversity and created an academic persona that was separate, both from my department and my discipline. It was within these, often perceived, marginalized spaces that I found myself, and my career goals most aligned.

*Stage Three: Separation*

In this stage an individual identifies with those like her with no regard to the dominant culture. This stage was my turn towards the discipline and seeking out colleagues therein. This meant finding like-minded folks in WPA and specific parts of CCCC, as well as setting about creating separate and supported spaces for myself and people associated with the composition program.

### *Stage Four Integration*

This is the stage in which I currently see my career and professional identity. However, I would need to merge this stage to embrace some of my own personal intersectionality as an African American female and would instead call this stage “Womanist Identity Integration.” This more inclusive term has been used before and others have explored womanist identity as the intersectionality of race and gender (e.g., Pope-Davis and Coleman; Heath; Jackson).

In this stage an individual identifies with her own identity, as well as understands infusion of the identity of the dominant cultural and seeks to create a more integrated holistic identity. Moving from acknowledging and conforming to existing social expectations to creating and defining her own strong, healthy inclusive ones. (This is where I am now and it involves balancing external needs with internal well-being.)

My story is just that, “my story”; however, what I think are possible takeaways are the following:

1. Our journeys, while unique to us, also when explored together often reveal emerging patterns or ranges of re-occurring components
2. Thinking about and through those patterns helps to provide us with some reflective agency over where we are and our trajectory forward
3. All career trajectories involve a constant balancing. Because of the intersectionality of us all, functioning in an institutional setting imposes challenges to individualities. Understanding and accepting this concept—no matter where you are in your career—provides you with time to decide your own personal and professional goals and boundaries.

JESSIE L. MOORE: WHIRLWINDS, (ADMINISTRATIVE)  
PROMOTIONS, AND MENTORING

*Jessie L. Moore is director of the Center for Engaged Learning and professor of English and professional writing and rhetoric at Elon University. She coordinated Elon's first-year writing program for six years and the professional writing and rhetoric concentration (now major) for seven years. She now coordinates international, multi-institutional research seminars on engaged learning topics,*

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*including writing transfer. She co-led the CWPA summer workshop for two years.*

In 2015 and 2016, as an associate professor and associate director of Elon's Center for Engaged Learning, I experienced a personal and professional whirlwind that led to more self-advocacy and to ongoing reflection about the mentored experiences of female administrators. My experiences are not unique, but we typically do not make them visible, so one of my goals is to normalize talking about them as we mentor sustainable careers in administration.

Among seven committee assignments in spring 2015, I served on an implementation and assessment committee for an LGBTQIA inclusion task force and wrapped up my term as chair of the university-wide promotions and tenure committee. I highlight these two contributions to the life of my university because they inform my identity in ongoing ways.

After giving a final exam on a Friday, I passed out and was taken to the ER where the attending physician ordered a CAT scan because I had hit my head but directed me to see my OB-GYN the following Monday to address the underlying cause of why I had passed out: heavy, ongoing bleeding caused by fibroids. According to the National Institutes of Health, "One study found that, by age 50, 70 percent of whites and 80 percent of African Americans had fibroids," but many women do not experience symptoms.

Less than 36 hours after my first ER visit, I hemorrhaged. Normal hemoglobin levels for women tend to be in the range of 12–15 grams per deciliter. My hemoglobin level was 4.9 grams per deciliter. Over the course of the summer, I coordinated two, week-long, multi-institutional research seminar meetings and participated in a multi-day think tank. I also had outpatient surgery; was prescribed an experimental, off-label medicine that caused temporary, premature menopause; and was admitted to the hospital for additional blood transfusions (five in total). (Thank you, blood donors!) Ultimately, in August 2015, I became one of the 200,000 women each year who have a hysterectomy due to fibroids, contributing to more than \$5.89 billion in annual health care costs related to uterine fibroids (Cardozo, et al.). I edited *Critical Transitions* and *Understanding Writing Transfer* from hospital beds. I also sold a house and bought a house closer to campus to make long summer days associated with administering my center more sustainable.

In September 2015, I turned in my application for promotion to full professor. In February 2016, I learned a split committee had not supported my application, and the provost opted not to challenge the committee's recommendation. Seeking feedback through formal channels, I received

contradictory feedback regarding why my application was unsuccessful. One week later, I traveled to conduct a video interview for a book project by my direct report and the university president. Since 2012, I have conducted hundreds of video interviews for my center, but compartmentalizing my hurt and anger so that I could represent the university professionally made conducting and editing that video exceptionally difficult. It didn't help that the interview subject expressed doubt about my ability to collect sufficient interview footage because he thought someone my (undisclosed-to-him) age would not have enough familiarity with related scholarship to ask appropriate questions. To his credit, he had the grace to apologize later. Still, I wonder if he would have expressed similar doubt to a male scholar.

One month later, the North Carolina legislature passed the infamous bathroom bill, leading to calls to boycott the 2016 CWPA conference in Raleigh, for which I was a local host, and the center's own summer conference on mentored undergraduate research. Two months later, the provost directed me—as a former promotions and tenure committee chair—to work with the university's legal counsel on affidavits related to a lawsuit against the university for an unsuccessful promotion and tenure case. I stopped tracking hours after logging 40 hours of summer work in support of the university's defense.

Throughout my career, including during this whirlwind, I have counted my direct report and a senior administrator among my mentors. They counseled me to wait to seek promotion to director until after I had been promoted to full, worried that the faculty promotions and tenure committee would read me as too much of an administrator. In 2016, though, following this whirlwind, I advocated for my administrative promotion, tired of contending with misconceptions of my role as Associate director, when I led everything from strategic planning to budgeting to assessment. My mentors spearheaded my administrative promotion—never formally announced—from associate director to director of the center. My faculty line and teaching load remained the same. I continued to work a 12-month contract, with no formal vacation policy.

In the years that followed, I persevered and reapplied for promotion to full—successfully this time—and earlier this year, my line was converted to administrative staff with faculty rank, with the same teaching load, but with more flexibility regarding when I teach—and with a formal vacation policy.

I love my job. I also appreciate my mentors. But metanoia's reflectivity prompts questions that I hope will guide my mentoring experiences:



- How might mentors co-advocate for job titles that better represent administrative labor?
- What contextually specific strategies might emerging—or becoming—administrators use to document their dual identities as faculty and administrators in ways that do not compromise promotions in either realm?
- How might mentors use their own encounters with institutional red tape to smooth the road for those who follow?
- How might mentors gauge when mentees need protection versus when they need cheerleaders supporting their leaps and strategic risk-taking?
- How might mentors be attentive to the whole person? My mentors' spouses offered tremendous support during my medical emergency. Mentoring necessitates attention to social and emotional support, in addition to other dimensions (Johnson). As a single administrator, how might I partner with co-mentors and mentoring networks to better attend to the whole person in my own mentoring practices?

The best mentoring relationships are reciprocal (Johnson), so while I continue to appreciate the mentoring I receive, I hope I am pushing my mentors' conceptions – and remaining attentive to how I might mentor those who follow.

#### PATTI POBLETE: TANKS, DPS PLAYERS, AND HEALERS IN WPA WORK

*Patti Poblete (poh-BLEH-teh) is a tenure-track assistant professor of English and writing program administrator at Henderson State University (HSU). Prior to her work at HSU, Patti served as assistant director of Iowa State University's Writing and Media Center. Patti has also acted as the assistant registrar of La Sierra University, where she took a deep dive into the bureaucratic side of university administration. She has been teaching at the college level for fifteen years.*

All four of my grandparents were teachers, three at the university level. A few years back, I found out one of my grandmothers had been the registrar of Philippine Union College (now the Adventist University of the Philippines), in addition to being an English professor. I found this out when I became first a curriculum evaluator, then the Assistant Registrar of La Sierra University, while also collecting my Master's degree in English. If you ask my family, the previous iteration of my career was inevitable. It

was genetics, or maybe fate, depending on the kind of university to which you've subscribed.

But instead, I'm here. The thing that's important to remember is that I started teaching at the same time I was in university administration. I was figuring out what pedagogy was while also negotiating with senior faculty about why, exactly, they couldn't randomly change their course descriptions every semester. (My boss shot down my proposal to have classroom allocation determined by paintball tournament, but that's a whole other thing.) I was on committees where folks debated about articulation and degree requirements, and I had *so many opinions*. But I was there as the records person, not faculty. I couldn't contribute to the discussion about whether a creative writing course could count as a writing-intensive disciplinary course because I was the friendly face in the corner making database notes. (I made a lot of faces, too, but that's harder to put in the minutes.)

After working in the registrar's office for four years, I was having a sit-down with the registrar about auditing seniors for graduation approval when she paused. "You know," she said, "I'm going to retire in a few years." She raised her eyebrows. "You could do this job."

And that is when I knew: I had to get out.

The next two years are a blur: I figured I needed one of those fancy PhDs to achieve faculty status, but the programs closest to me were literature focused, and as much as I loved a deep discussion about how *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* paralleled the work of Kate Chopin, I knew that wasn't for me. I briefly considered moving back to my birthplace, Toronto (#WeTheNorth), and picking up a theatre degree, and as such, establishing myself as a English department utility player. But it turned out I had to know how to act, and well . . . I ended up fleeing the continent. Specifically, to a rural town in Poland, where I taught conversational English to students ranging from age five to age fifty-five. (Also, I lived in a forest that had actual boars living in it.) In my time as an expat, I also looked at pretty much all the doctoral English programs in the Southwest, and somehow stumbled upon a thing called writing program administration.

Bingo. The whole "getting into grad school" was a whole other thing, but suffice it to say, I made it, I got that gosh darn diploma, and now, here I am.

My colleagues have bogarted all the smart-sounding stuff, so I will use that as an excuse to talk about video games. Specifically, *World of Warcraft*. Specifically, dungeon crawls, which happen when five players team up to accomplish a specific task in a contained location (hence, dungeon). That team is composed of one tank, three DPS (meaning damage per second)

players, and one healer. And that's where I return to WPAs because we love our metaphors, don't we?

I would argue that, to have a successful writing program, you need to know how to fill all three of those roles—either switching from type to type yourself or by pulling together a crack team of specialists.

1. **Tank.** The tank is the leader of the group. They're meant to do two things: lead the way and draw enemy fire. While the team might have a good sense of what they'll be doing, the tank is responsible for guiding them efficiently through the maze and helping avoid major obstacles and mobs. And, in the event that an enemy mob can't be avoided, the tank makes sure to stand in front and take the damage to protect the rest of the team. (Think *Wonder Woman's* battlefield scene, when Diana gets all the enemy soldiers to fire at her so the rest of the unit can make it to the village.)
2. **DPS.** The players that do damage are the fighters—while the tank pulls most of the attention, DPS players slip in and do the specialized precision work. They get dirty and get the work done.
3. **Healer.** The title is self-explanatory, but the task is complicated. The healer isn't just there to repair wounds when the other players fall back—the healer is expected to keep her attention on all the players, the entire time, to make sure nobody's health or energy is flagging too much. That is, essentially, keeping her eyes in four different places at once, plus trying to avoid getting into trouble herself. Without the healer, the team doesn't get past the first blockade.

(I will note the inherent problem of using a battle metaphor to describe our work, but think of us as fighting, like, illiteracy and injustice.) Tank, DPS, and healer. We have to do all those things, all the time, for all the people, and that's pretty tiring, isn't it? So how do we sustain ourselves, long-term, if these are the roles we have to play?

It's five players. It's a team. Get yourself a team, on campus, off campus, here at this conference, and at home. The thing I have loved most about this community is how much we want to support each other.

So here we are: reaching out. We're on your team.

CASEY REID: MID-CAREER DATA, KAIROTIC  
PRESENTATIONS, AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

*Casey Reid is pursuing her PhD in English at Old Dominion University while directing academic and tutoring services and the writing center at Lane Community College. Previously, she was English faculty, college orientation coordinator, and director of academic success at Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City; director of developmental education programs at East Central College; and supplemental instruction coordinator at the University of Central Missouri.*

As I have started to experience the reverberations of being identified as middle-aged and started to identify as mid-career, I've taken a data-informed approach to my process of metanoia. Here is some of that data: over 6,000 students with whom I have directly connected; twenty years since I first stepped into a writing center; seventeen years teaching with fifteen in community colleges; nine years of administrative work; 300–350 people supervised; six institutions where I've worked with four being in the last five years; gallons of bad orange juice at conferences; three female supervisors early in my career and several others scattered throughout who have been fantastic mentors—two of whom were removed or forced to resign from their positions; one female supervisor who I thought had ruined my career and my professional sense of self-efficacy and agency; eight moves in the last five years with and without three significant others; two times someone almost ended my life in one week with one being by a former partner of eleven years; one family that disowned me eighteen years ago as I traversed my last year as an undergraduate as a first-generation, low-income, rural-raised college student; one dissertation chair and one PhD bestie and one partner who are helping me get through my third attempt at doctoral study; two surrogate moms, one best friend, and one sister who get me through everything.

I bring this cherry-picked data and associated experiences to my work teaching and directing student support programs. When I began working at my current institution three years ago, I quickly recognized that I was entering yet another traumatized higher education environment with students and colleagues who had been traumatized by events in their personal and professional lives; various facets of institutional culture; and the systemic social, cultural, and economic forces that traumatize different groups within society. As my personal and professional traumas have accumulated and as I have read the accumulating publications about bullying, toxic work

environments, and the rapid pace of change in higher education (see Lester; Adams Wooten, Babb, and Ray; and Elder and Davila for examples), I have sought scholarship to cope.

At the 2019 national TYCA Conference, I found solace when I attended Claudia Moreno Parsons, Elissa Carrot, Jose Maldonado, and Renee Scariano Willers's presentation about infusing trauma-informed practices into first-year writing classes. My attendance was an accident of space: nervous that I would have problems with my video conferencing software, I went to my presentation room two hours early, where I met Parsons, Carrot, Maldonado, and Willers as part of a group of presentations labeled "Emotional Labor and Teaching College Writing." There, I learned over half of people in the U.S. report experiencing a minimum of one traumatic event in their lives (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 8). Practitioners and scholars of trauma also talk more broadly about collective traumas, including racial trauma, trauma from experiencing wars and natural disasters, and more (267–69). The college years, especially the first year, represent a time when individuals are highly likely to experience what are known as "potentially traumatizing events (PTEs)" (Davidson 5). As part of this burgeoning understanding of the widespread impact of trauma, a growing array of researchers and practitioners are studying and educating people about trauma-informed care and trauma-informed practices across various domains (3).

This kairotic conference experience resulted in me bringing information about trauma-informed practice back to my staff, who started researching, took a class about trauma-informed work, and began educating the writing center staff about trauma-informed care (TIC):

a strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. (Hopper, Bassuk, and Olivet 133)

We are using TIC to engage the campus community, reframe academic support, and re-envision our work to be a trauma-informed program. Learning to think and respond using the lens of TIC is helping me reconceptualize my work within myself as a person and also as a teacher-scholar and administrator; it has become essential to my trajectory of sustainable becoming—regardless of my professional roles.

## SARAH ELIZABETH SNYDER: ON SUSTAINABLY BECOMING A WPA

*Sarah Elizabeth Snyder is a non-tenure-track professor of English and writing program administrator of FYC and WAC/WID at Arizona Western College. She also serves as Institute Director for the Symposium on Second Language Writing and chair of the CWPA Conference Siting Committee. Sarah created the “Break-fast Buddies” mentoring program for WPA-GO in 2013 and served the graduate organization from 2012 to 2018.*

I cannot yet say that I have fully established a sustainable career as a cis female WPA; however, I am currently in the “becoming” stage. I can say that I hope to have a sustainable career, and the following are the kairotic pronoia moments I have capitalized on and reflection in metanoia to do so. Despite my best intentions, I’m not sure how things will end up because we all know that life has a way of saying, “Hold my beer.” This acceptance of the acute reality in life and in WPA that “the only constant is change” comes from my experiences as a GenAdmin WPA (Charlton et al.), a millennial, and a first-generation college graduate. The moment of “becoming” that I want to share is when I took a non-tenure-track WPA position at Arizona Western College last year.

To get to this moment, and true to the definition of “GenAdmin WPA” as my first lens, I created the identity of being a WPA as my career goal. Perhaps this was because my closest mentors described WPA work as challenging, satisfying, and pragmatic, but most importantly, they actively included and encouraged me. These defining mentoring moments showed me WPA work as a privilege and I sought a PhD program that allowed me to study both second language writing and writing program administration.

As Louise Wetherbee Phelps observes, many identities of WPAs before me have been shaped by the necessary acts of defining and legitimizing the field (“Identity Work”). Although many would argue this work is not yet (or might never be) finished, the product of this identity work has affected me and my career positively. In my PhD program, I had the opportunities to take WPA coursework, go to CWPA from 2012 to the present, hold multiple leadership and mentoring positions within WPA-GO, serve as a junior WPA with strong support and guidance for four years, and ultimately write my dissertation in the vein of a WPA-as-researcher project.

On the job market, I assured myself that if I didn’t get a WPA job immediately, it was probably for the better, as cautionary tales about the political traps that are inherent in the work as an untenured WPA are plentiful (e.g., Enos and Borrowman; Horning and Dew). But, for better or for

worse, I took a WPA position directly out of my PhD. Of course, I didn't make this decision alone or lightly—I depended on my mentors. In my mind, this depth of mentorship is the most important and valued characteristic of our field for the sustainability of our community and its members.

The second lens that I see my “sustainable becoming” through is that of my generation. Although I grew up without the internet or cell phones, I am still considered an old millennial, or a Xennial. I have made a few choices that could be said to embody this generation: having fuzzy babies, an extended work/travel experience to Japan teaching English, getting married later in life, structuring a life around paying student debt, and loving avocado toast.

I also have a different sense of career security as a millennial. Against the expectations of many PhD programs, I conceived pragmatic goals for employment. The MLA-sponsored Alternative Academic (Alt-Ac) program helped PhD students at my institution explore careers outside of academia and opened my eyes to the opportunities within community colleges for research and administration.

During the economic recession, I saw too many people who had invested and trusted in academia be forced to painfully reinvent themselves because of variables beyond their control. As such, the importance of flexibility in my career was central to my thinking and working toward tenure and the sacrifices that I would have to make to achieve it seemed to counter other goals that I had at the time. I always had plans B, C, D, and Z in mind, but because the conditions seemed right, I agentively chose to be a WPA and professor at a non-tenure-track institution.

This move signals some important choices that I made. I can still have administrative responsibilities, do research, and teach without having a tenure-track job. This is how I have created boundaries that are healthy for me between my place of employment and my identity. It is also in my home state of Arizona, a few hours away from my family, which allows me to support a sustainable family culture. All of these choices will hopefully allow me to continue the kinds of self-care that are needed for the difficult realities of our field described most recently in the *Composition Studies* mundane six-word poem “Where We Are”:

Email avalanche: committees, conferences, compositions, complaints. [ . . . ]

Reviewer two: “Write a different article.” [ . . . ]

Mansplaining isn't really mansplaining, he mansplained. [ . . . ]

Decision fatigue + cognitive overload = WPA life. [ . . . ]

Classroom: refuge; grading: requisite; service: torture. [ . . . ]

Self-care doesn't fix systemic contingent strife. [ . . . ]

Doctorate degree = over educated, under employed. (Knoblauch et al. 175–77)

Until we can create a working environment that is sustainable in itself, self-care is vital to the reality we live in.

The third lens, being a first-generation college graduate, also plays a role in my understanding of my sustainable career trajectory and the student body that I serve. Perhaps that is why I found a calling in the community college system, especially one designated over 75% Hispanic-serving Institution, where two- and four-year degrees are financially attainable to a community whose median household combined income is less than \$30,000 a year, and where students have the opportunity to stay close to their families while also pursuing their education. These students sustain my energy for teaching a 2/2 load, while also being responsible for the myriad writing initiatives at our institution.

I hope that through the intentionality of these moves, I can create my own version of a sustainable career trajectory as a cis female WPA. I consider myself at the beginning of my administrative career because we learn how to do the work by doing the work. Every day I prepare, learn, invent, and reinvent my own identity, which I think is the key to sustainability as a WPA.

## CONCLUSION

One emerging theme in our narratives is that a sustainable career trajectory involves coming to realize, define, and enact personal and professional values in WPA work. The work WPAs do is so varied (by institution) and broad ranging (by situational need) that to do so without such values-based grounding is unsustainable.

Another crucial facet of sustainable becoming that emerged from the narratives involves caring for ourselves, or what has come to be called “self-care.” As the role of bullying, burnout, compassion fatigue, emotional labor and other, formerly invisible facets of WPA labor has gained recognition (see Jacobs and Micciche; Elder and Davila; Emerson and Thomas), so, too, has scholarship providing insights and frameworks for taking care of ourselves throughout our career and life trajectory. As Sarah points out, “Until we can create a working environment that is sustainable in itself, self-care is vital to the reality we live in.” One research-supported self-care strategy is to engage in mindfulness and meditative activities that can help develop the “reflective agency” Sheila mentions (Davidson 21). Boundary setting, another concept Sheila and Sarah touch upon, is another necessary



self-care strategy in part because of what Sheila calls the “constant balancing . . . [required of] functioning in an institutional setting” that includes the traumas and traumatized individuals that Casey mentions (Otto). Self-care often means making difficult decisions about how and what to prioritize while navigating inequitable systems under inequitable conditions. It may mean adding a stressor temporarily—like moving, as Jessie did—to decrease other stressors over a longer period. It also may mean making decisions with potentially long-term career implications—like Sarah did—in the hopes of being able to prioritize self-care, knowing these decisions may not always play out as we hope and may require the kind of U-turns and pivots that Patti and Casey have undertaken and that Peggy O’Neill describes as part of mid-career and midlife (177—78). As many scholars note, self-care is essential not only for the sustainability of educational practitioners as individuals but also for the students with whom they work: “by taking care of themselves first, they are in a better position to help their students” (Davidson 21). In short, prioritizing self-care allows WPAs to take on the healer role Patti describes because “It gives . . . more space to do the emotional labor of helping students . . . [and] to continue to do the work of advocating for students” (Otto).

Mentoring was also a theme in many of our career trajectories, albeit in different ways. In Sarah’s narrative, her mentors inspired her to aim towards WPA as a career and support her through what are arguably the most challenging first years of becoming as a non-tenure track faculty member. In Jessie’s narrative, her mentors played both gatekeeping and cheerleading functions during her tenure and promotion case, reducing her agency, and creating conflict between her scholarly examination of salient practices of mentoring and her own lived experiences with mentoring. Similarly, Sheila experienced a more insidious “mentoring” throughout her career, exposing the variable interpretations and actions of mentoring. Ironically similar to the refutation of the *Students’ Right to Their Own Language* itself, this mentoring meant doing something for the good of someone else (e.g., teaching a dominant discourse to the neglect or devaluation of a non-dominant discourse), or protecting individuals from themselves by trying to encourage assimilation. As Sarah also mentioned, mentors in the form of edited collections (Enos and Borrowman; Horning and Dew) have brought to the surface the ugliness, the political strife, the danger, and the reward of WPA positions, and now there is considerable research on bullying in these positions as well (see Elder and Davila; Emerson and Thomas).

All these arrows point to something that everyone can know whether they have held a WPA position or not—these positions are incredibly challenging, and the need to commune and reinvigorate with others who are

familiar with the WPA situation is essential. This is where the CWPA community offers much in the way of support through the organization, the conference, the summer workshop, and mentoring programs such as “Breakfast Buddies” and “Mentors at Cs”; through WPA-Graduate Organization and the CWPA Executive Board; and through countless other opportunities. Borrowing a term from religious leadership literature, we know that “good leaders are developed in and through slow, deep mentoring. To think otherwise is to embrace the myth of the quick fix” (Reese and Loane). Echoing the refrain from much of our literature about the downsides of the “one-shot” nature of teaching assistant practica, scholarship on mentoring reiterates the value of multiple contact points for slow, deep mentoring—the forming of strong bonds, lighthearted cross-institutional mentoring, professional development, etc. (Johnson). These points can serve as self-care, reinvigoration, and sustainability, but sustainability connotes that reinvention and moving on can also be necessary, including moves out of WPA work or into broader administrative roles.

While the members of our mentoring constellations might change over time, as long as our careers continue to evolve, we benefit from (and can offer others) meaningful, deep mentoring across career stages. Cross-generational mentoring can become reciprocal over time, as our relationships with continuing members of our mentoring constellations evolve and our own career trajectories develop. At an organizational level, deep mentoring opportunities for mid-career professionals, like a CWPA Workshop 2.0, could support sustainability and self-care for individual members, our programs, and our field. At both institutional and organizational levels, women need agency in selecting their mentors; while assigned mentors may offer helpful guidance in discrete, task-specific contexts, mentoring relationships are more likely to evolve as reciprocal relationships with characteristics of deep mentoring when both mentor and mentee opt-in.

We call on the field to recognize that women’s career trajectories include potentially recursive phases—as illustrated by Sheila’s experiences—and that sustainability goals and mentoring needs vary at different points along the trajectory. As a result, we cannot offer an uncomplicated set of implications for WPAs and their mentors that perfectly fits every career stage and situation.

Across these phases, though, we argue that women’s WPA careers are most sustainable when they have agency and support to construct a team, and team members likely will provide different types of support at different times, both in reverence to the WPA’s “becoming” identity and in response to other team members’ evolving strengths. As Patti illuminated, at times, female WPAs might take the role of healer; other times, they are the tank,

relying on others to assume the role of healer. Regardless, as scholarship about trauma-informed care reminds us, sustainable WPA trajectories should prioritize self-care.

Ultimately, what we can do for ourselves through self-care and mentoring is limited by institutional structures and cultures that don't afford sustainable becomings for individual WPAs and their program communities. Giving special attention here to those features of the academy that affect women WPAs, we call for individuals and collectives to advocate systemic changes that proactively foster sustainability, both on our campuses and in the profession. That means, for example, seeking changes in academic culture and structures to offer social support and flexibility for individuals to follow diverse, sometimes nontraditional career paths without penalty, including balancing personal and professional commitments. For individuals or groups who encounter obstacles, like health issues, bullying, or exploitation, it means pressing for systems and policies that ensure institutional responses are fair, compassionate, flexible, and equitable.

However diverse, the experiences within our small group can't begin to represent or speak for the range of women who identify and work as WPAs, so we end with these questions for the field:

- How do we make room for/include/discuss the women who have been excluded from or thrust into WPA roles and careers who may feel very little agency or who may be struggling to have agency within the confines of a trajectory that they did not choose or desire?
- How do we make space for/include individuals who do WPA work in non-WPA/othered roles, like two-year college faculty, contingent faculty, writing center practitioners, and other higher education personnel who are often doing invisible WPA labor?
- How do we provide some connecting threads across narratives in the most inclusive manner possible, given the range of experiences women may have as they do the work of helping administer a writing program for however long they may fulfill these responsibilities?
- How do we make sure that we honor what several of us did with the panel: make visible the varied facets of our lives as women which tend to remain hidden or obscured and that impact our work?

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