

Preparing to Become a Two-Year College Writing Program Administrator

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WPA work at two year colleges (TYCs) is distinctly different from work in other institutional contexts. Writing program administration has been an institutional necessity at TYCs for some time now, but WPA preparation and other graduate education has yet to catch up with this reality. This article builds on Ostman's (2013) work by synthesizing decades of research with the experiences of a new TYC WPA to address the following research question: What does it mean to know WPA work as a TYC professional? In short, at the TYC, many aspects of the position reflect the unique institutional characteristics of TYCs; the student and faculty population; funding and professional development; varying concepts of academic freedom; research and activism; and more. This article also addresses the current call for graduate education to include preparation for two-year colleges in general (Jensen & Toth, 2017), and it extends the call for more robust preparation of WPAs for work in TYC contexts. This article also serves as a primer that current and aspiring WPAs can use to introduce themselves or their graduate students to this important context for WPA work.

Intersectionality within WPA work creates new ways of knowing and understanding the work that we do as WPAs with new contexts, student populations, lived experiences, and critical perspectives. For example, Jonathan Alexander (2017) shared his research review of queer ways of knowing WPA work. Given the 2020 best book award by the CWPA, Staci Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamont Craig's (2019) "Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration" shares the experiences of WPAs who embark on crucial intersectional race work informed by Afrocentric perspectives in their positions as WPAs. In an effort to show how WPA work is fundamentally different at TYCs than at four-year institutions, Heather Ostman (2013) shared her text, "Writing Program Administration and the Community College." All of these texts are important intersections of WPA work that should be understood and applied by current and aspiring WPAs.

Despite the importance of this type of WPA knowledge, the TYC literature is very clear in its stance that graduate preparation has ignored appropriate inclusion of TYC topics. Our field's traditional notion of graduate education does not prepare scholars in general for work in TYC contexts (e.g., Calhoon-Dillahunt et al., 2017; Jensen & Toth, 2017), and in the same ways, it does not prepare aspiring TYC WPA scholars either—if they

even serendipitously realize that they can aspire to being a TYC WPA. Rather, most WPA coursework, preparation, and research assumes that WPA work occurs at a four-year institution. Furthermore, many remember the figure of a WPA from their graduate education as someone who holds the unilateral responsibility for the curriculum, professional development, and assessment, among others. While these may be realities of some four-year institutions and graduate experiences, these implicit notions of what WPA work is can be detrimental to the understanding of how WPA work functions in TYCs.

To create more understanding of what TYC WPA work is, this article builds on Ostman's (2013) work by synthesizing decades of research, and incorporates the experience of a new TYC WPA to answer this question: What does it mean to know WPA work through the TYC profession? In short, at the TYC, many aspects of the position are shaped by the unique institutional characteristics of TYCs; the student and faculty population; funding and professional development; varying concepts of academic freedom; research and activism; and more. This article also echoes the current call for graduate education to include more preparation for TYCs in general (Jensen & Toth, 2017), and it extends the call for more robust preparation of WPAs for work in TYC contexts. This article also serves as a primer that current and aspiring WPAs can use to introduce themselves or their graduate students to this important context for WPA work.

WHERE ARE TYC WPAS?

Official WPA positions in TYCs are not new but are still relatively scarce. According to the 2013 National Census of Writing for Two-Year Institutions, the majority (51%, $n = 65$) of TYCs report that the Department Chair is the head of the writing program and only 11% ($n = 14$) have a WPA. These ratios are in stark opposition to the Four-Year Institution Census which reported that 51% ($n = 286$) had a WPA, and the chair of the English department ran 17% ($n = 95$) of the writing programs that participated in the census. Since TYCs teach approximately 49% of the undergraduates in the United States (Community College Research Center, 2020), this stark contrast in administrative structure is curious when both systems claim to meet the same goals: teaching first year composition and administering composition programs. When we as a community of WPAs know the necessity of the position for a healthy first-year composition program, how could writing programs exist at TYCs without a dedicated WPA? How different might WPA work be in a TYC? The position of WPA

is being developed and negotiated through TYCs (Holmsten, 2005), as the TYC is full of unique institutional characteristics.

THE UNIQUE INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TYCS

As early as 1990, Helon Raines described the concept of a writing program at a TYC as a varying situation from one college to the next, and even more different from writing programs at universities and small liberal arts colleges (SLAC). The identity of a TYC WPA is different from that of a university or SLAC WPA. Mark Blaauw-Hara and Cheri Lemieux Spiegel (2018) relate their stories of connecting with their communities of practice as young WPAs at their respective community colleges, bringing issues of WPA identity directly to the community college, and demonstrating just how different being a TYC WPA can be from the representation in the mainstream WPA literature. Taylor (2009) compounded this identity issue with his finding in his national survey of WPAs, that TYCs often employ a team approach to WPA work. Moreover, there are issues of identity that impede the participation of many TYC WPAs who do the work of WPAs without the title, or who do not identify with the work (Calhoun-Dillahunt, 2011). Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt (2011) has also observed that the collective and collaborative work done in TYC writing program administration requires political savvy and consensus building, as often the position is unnamed and sometimes unremunerated. Beyond identification, the landscape of the TYC, its administration, faculty, staff, and student body, are especially diverse. This reality of the TYC WPA transcends usual boundaries for teaching, administration, service, and—to the extent possible—research (Andelora, 2005) and advocacy (Sullivan, 2015).

STUDENT POPULATION AND FACULTY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The complex, labor-heavy teaching environment at TYCs necessitates WPAs to provide their faculty with specialized yet flexible support. Community colleges serve a majority of the nation's African American, Indigenous, Latinx, and immigrant students, as well as a large percentage of rural, low-income, and working-class white students (Cohen et al., 2014). In 2018, the American Association of Community Colleges reported that to compound this complex teaching environment, emotional labor is exponentially higher and even expected in community college teaching (Gonzales & Ayers, 2018). With most community colleges being open access, the role of the TYC WPA significantly expands. The writing program is the locus at which students' personal lives intersect with the academy (White, 2020).

The particular needs of students at TYCs require the WPA, who may be the only person responsible for the professional development of the composition faculty, to know about and be able to deploy pedagogical insights from research including multilingual writing, developmental writing, learning and physical disabilities, queer and trans-theory, veterans issues, among many others. This professional development becomes all the more necessary when we realize that, as Jeffrey Klausman (2008) notes, not all community college faculty members have training in composition and rhetoric, engage with the literature, or participate in the national communities that exist to further the practice of teaching English at many types of institutions. To the extent possible, the TYC WPA will be responsible for making those pedagogical insights quickly deliverable and digestible with a low overhead to an overworked full-time faculty and an underpaid part-time faculty (e.g., Ostman, 2013), all perhaps without the label of mandatory attendance (Klausman, 2008). Even if the most engaged faculty do attend, at the end of the faculty development session, or on Monday morning, the reality of a 100+ student workload will weigh heavier than any best practices doctrine.

The TYC faculty situation is different from many four year institutions. WPAs at PhD- or MA-granting institutions most often have a continuous contingent of willing graduate teaching assistants teaching modest course loads to develop professionally, to try new curricula, and to participate in program building as a requirement of their contract. The situation that most WPAs are familiar with is one where teaching assistants are looking for leadership, professional development, and a common goal. However, at the community college, many faculty are experienced professionals in literature, creative writing, journalism, and less commonly, rhetoric and composition (Calhoon-Dillahunt et al., 2017). A tension exists in the TYC WPA position as many TYC WPAs are not supervisors but rather peers to their faculty body, and as Jared Anthony of Spokane Falls Community College said, “everything [in community college writing programs] happens through consensus building” (Calhoon-Dillahunt, 2011, p. 123). By nature of the faculty body, the TYC WPA has to do more politicking and savvy maneuvering (Hassel & Giordano, 2011). Drawing on Klausman’s (2008) idea of what a professional might look like in a TYC composition program, and the responsibilities that the WPA may have, ranging from assessment of the program to evaluation of faculty members, it becomes clear that triaging student grievances, scheduling, hiring and firing, curriculum discussion, and many other situations, may converge in a stalemate (or worse) due to the political nature of the position.

Thomas Amorose (2000) asserted that the community college WPA's main persuasive tool is influence through interactions that work with the previous constraints of the faculty and administration, rather than power with their colleagues (as paraphrased in Holmsten, 2005). This approach to working with colleagues is especially important at a college where the WPA position is rather new. At many TYC institutions, writing programs have been operating for many years without a WPA. The terrain that Klausman started to map in 2008 is very much still being explored among colleagues. This lack of enculturation of the WPA position at the TYC provides the same uphill battle of making the WPA work visible not only to colleagues but also to upper administrators. Arguably, in other types of institutions, colleagues and administrators are already familiar with WPA work and have made the space for it. But perhaps the TYC is a differently complex experience that requires skill, tact, and time when trying to motivate colleagues to reach consensus rather than advising graduate teaching assistants how to keep their TA contracts.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND ASSESSMENT

In institutions with a large contingent of continuing or tenured faculty, the TYC WPA position is also preoccupied with issues of academic freedom and assessment.¹ Continuing faculty tend to have an interpretation of academic freedom stemming from the specific and full-time nature of faculty employment at such TYCs. The composition of the faculty body affects the ways in which TYC WPAs conduct their important program building work. In the TETYC symposium on Academic Freedom and Labor, Annie Del Principe and Jaqueline Brady (2019) noted that, "In most community college writing programs, the clear labor and power dynamics seen in R1 contexts staffed by TA grad students are made murkier by a teaching labor force that is mostly not nationally credentialed but possesses decades of experience teaching FYC" (p. 353). Although the TYC WPA may be highly trained in best practices and theoretical concepts important to the field of rhetoric and composition, her full-time faculty may value their innovative and diverse approach to their classroom teaching that prioritizes efficiency, or even a different set of goals. Program building, in a sense, becomes a matter of academic compromise between individual practices and program needs.

On the other side of the academic freedom coin is assessment of a writing program, which presents another set of challenges with the variety that is oftentimes found in TYC writing programs. The fundamentals of writing program assessment (and really any principled assessment) require

some sort of coordination, a deep understanding of what the goals of assessment are at the college and how to measure progress towards these goals, and a solid knowledge of writing assessment theory to be able to convince colleagues of the need for this coordination (White, Elliot, & Peckham, 2015). This description sounds similar to the coordination of assessment at four-year institutions; however, complicated notions of academic freedom and the consensus-building nature of TYC WPA work create a gauntlet of sorts to perform any meaningful assessment (see Del Principe's article in this issue). Regardless of the pressure they may face from administration requiring assessment for accreditation, TYC WPAs will be delicate in their requests of colleagues to undergo any assessment, and perhaps may not request at all if the cost could be too great.

THE WRITING REPRESENTATIVE

Another issue is that the TYC WPA may experience a higher-than-usual administrative load through service. Without a strong culture of the WPA position at the TYC, defining the work of the TYC WPA position may be subject to the perceptions of others, and often defined in "unrealistic" ways (McLeod, 2007, p. 9). In this way, the TYC WPA may be disproportionately taking on (or being given) service work to the college on top of the often unseen labor of writing program administration. The TYC WPA position may be following the same path as the university WPA did decades ago, defining and making the work visible through multiple organizational documents such as the Portland Resolution, instigated, written, and adopted at multiple national meetings attended by WPAs (Hult et al., 1992).

One especially perilous aspect of TYC WPA work may be mission creep of the college's need for writing leadership in general, especially as important as writing is to transfer-level coursework. TYC WPAs often quickly become the face of writing at the institution, and as such, can be tasked with the running of the WAC/WID program, creating and implementing a new writing learning initiative, or assessment of a college-wide student learning outcome.² This puts the TYC WPA in situations where the position seems unduly subject to continual expansion given the difference in student body, faculty body, the political overtones, potential for conflict, and the under-defined nature of many TYC WPA positions—especially for institutions without tenure, or for positions of WPA without tenure (see Dew & Horning, 2007). One can only lead a faculty body of peers by consensus, and without a sympathetic administrator or supervisor, many initiatives may be unsuccessful. The potential for conflict and deviation

from the job description due to these concerns can certainly affect the progress towards programmatic goals and therefore the evaluation for hire. Although it is well documented that WPA positions can be described in less-than-honest terms (see Janangelo, 1991), mission creep of this magnitude is less likely to happen at a four-year institution because WPA positions at these institutions have clearer traditions and more defined scope.

TYC WPA PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, SUPPORT, AND RESEARCH

The conditions of TYC WPA work make it imperative for TYC WPAs to seek professional community, support, and guidance through participation in our national organizations, as WPAs are accustomed to do at four-year institutions. Juxtaposed to the overrepresentation of TYC WPAs in institutional and local service, national service (or at the very least participation in national conventions) may be undervalued by the community college budget. As Toth et al. (2014) documented, many colleges do not monetarily value participation in national-level service or [TYC] organizations through funding travel on a regular basis, even though the identity of the two-year college English faculty is both “Distinct and Significant” from their four-year peers (Toth, Griffiths, & Thirolf, 2013, p. 90).

Andelora, Giordano, and Smith (2019) described the importance of the first national TYCA conference to the field of TYC. They identified

several issues affecting [TYC] scholarship and the collection of evidence to support the work of engaging in teacher-scholar activism, including misconceptions in the profession that two-year college instructors aren't qualified to do research, scholars from other institution types talking at (rather than with) two-year college teacher-scholars, a lack of resources and funding, and teaching loads that limit time for research. (pp. 13–14)

Although they are not yet widely known for their research capabilities, Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt (2011) rightly stated that “community colleges are fruitful places in which to do research and have many model programs and effective practices to share, particularly for working with developmental writers” (p. 132). Brett Griffiths (2017) encouraged TYC faculty (and by association TYC WPAs) to engage in scholarly disciplinary discussions around pedagogy and practice not only to enhance the profession, but also to create cultural capital within their own departments and assert their expertise.

Many TYC WPAs and faculty have participated in the scholarly discussions in journals in our field. For example, Peter Adams and colleagues at the Community College of Baltimore County are credited for their innova-

tion of and research on the Accelerated Learning Program, which has been one of the most influential developments in restructuring developmental education (Adams et al., 2009). Holly Hassel and Joann Bard Giordano (2011) were a part of the body of research surrounding Multiple Measures in placement, and many colleges, even if the results are unpublished, have done original work in directed self-placement and a lucky few have presented their work at national TYCA conferences. Mark Reynolds (2005) called for an appreciation of classroom-based research, of which TYC faculty and WPAs would be best positioned to do with their wealth of pedagogical experience. For the typical TYC WPA, the release time and administrative imperative may never allow for the time to engage in research, but as wily WPAs normally do, they find impetus within the needs of the college and combine both administrative function and research into one.

Community colleges should be known for their applied, pedagogical research. The community college is especially well-suited to research, as the difference between what might theoretically be a best practice and what the majority of teaching faculty across the United States actually have the time and expertise to do with such heavy teaching loads will obviously differ. Research and publication in the case of the TYC WPA might be envisioned as “staying current with the field” as it is currently stated in some job descriptions and contracts.³

TEACHER-SCHOLAR-ACTIVIST

Activism is highly, if covertly, embedded in the TYC WPA position. Both the WPA literature (Adler-Kassner, 2008) and the TYC literature have called upon WPAs and faculty to include in their mission the spirit of the activist. There is an entire legacy of work colloquially known as “Teacher/Scholar/Activist” (e.g., Andelora, 2013; Sullivan, 2015) and the scholarly blog of the same name founded by Patrick Sullivan, Darin Jensen, and Christie Toth. TYC WPA is “democracy at work” as Nell Ann Pickett helped us see in her 1997 chair’s address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Patrick Sullivan (2015) reminds us that as we continue to democratize higher education,

the conditions that led to the creation of open admissions institutions are still very much with us, and the need for institutions that work for the public good and promote equity and social justice are perhaps more important now than they have ever been. (p. 327)

By virtue of our underprivileged student populations and, many would say, our exploited faculty populations, the TYC WPA, through research, teaching, and service, is responsible for advocating not only for better writing

programs, but for more ethical writing programs, degree programs, colleges, and ultimately institutions of higher learning. As our colleges face restructuring due to loss of state funding (e.g., Andelora, 2013), or government mandates such as Guided Pathways (Bailey, 2015; Hassel & Giordano, 2020), the TYC WPA engages in the type of teacher-scholar-activist work that will serve students beyond their classrooms, and generations into the future like only TYC faculty and WPAs can.

PREPARATION TO BECOME A TYC WPA

So then, how does one become a TYC WPA? The “TYCA Guidelines for Preparing Teachers of English in the Two-Year College,” published in 2017 by a formidable TYCA task force (Calhoun-Dillahunt et al.), identified many methods by which our profession could be better preparing graduates for a TYC position, including four major guidelines (presented verbatim from the original):

- Make two-year colleges visible to graduate students;
 - Collaborate with two-year college colleagues;
 - Develop curricula relevant to two-year college teaching;
 - Prepare future two-year college faculty to be engaged professionals.
- (p. 2)

The task force recommended multiple avenues by which these guidelines could be achieved, including selecting TYC scholarship for discussion in graduate coursework, inviting qualified TYC faculty to teach graduate courses and participate in dissertation committees, supporting projects of inquiry related to two-year colleges, and encouraging participation in TYC organizations and conferences, among many others.

Sarah Z. Johnson (2017) warned against a “‘narrative of replication’ in graduate programs, where mentors only prepare and professionalize their students for positions just like their own” calling for graduate programs to include “meaningful coursework, professionalization, and mentoring for students interested in pursuing careers at two-year colleges” (p. 26). Faculty can and should make these opportunities visible and available to students. In the absence of faculty support, students must take their agency in stride to prepare themselves for this challenging intersection of a WPA career. In the penultimate section of this article, I describe the opportunities that were afforded to me through my graduate program, as well as the opportunities that I made and took for myself.

PREPARING MYSELF

I am a product of a traditional WPA education for the most part. My personal story is one that might sound familiar, as I shared parts of it in my portion of the CWPA 2019 Saturday lunch panel, “Sustainable Becoming: Women’s Career Trajectories in Writing Program Administration” or in print in *WPA* (Whetherbee-Phelps et al., 2020). I identify strongly as a “Gen Admin” WPA, or a person looking to do WPA work early on in her career (Charlton et al., 2011). As I was preparing myself for a WPA position, I did everything I could to specialize in this profession: I wrote a WPA-as-researcher (Weiser & Rose, 1999) dissertation and took as much WPA coursework and as many jWPA positions as I could at my institution. I had been to the CWPA annual conference almost every year since 2012, and I was active in WPA-GO. It was exciting to be offered a position as a WPA right away, and I happily took it—but you already know the twist: this WPA position was at a two-year college.

Of the four major guidelines put forth by the TYCA task force, I was lucky to be able to take advantage of one through my graduate program. Until I started my TYC WPA position, the only interaction with the community college system that I had was adjuncting for composition and ESL classes and a short summer internship concerned with faculty onboarding.⁴ The internship was made possible by the alternative-academic or “alt-ac” movement at my doctoral institution. Although I was adjuncting at three community colleges, more than anything, the internship was the most transformative experience that helped prepare me for life as a TYC WPA. That’s not to say that it was enough. The (paid) internship allowed me to see the inner workings of a large two-year college and introduce me to the unique political situations inherent in the job. As I shared at the 2019 CWPA Saturday lunch panel, these seemingly fleeting and peripheral experiences in my PhD program changed my life in ways that I never expected, including broadening my WPA preparation to the context of the community college and eventually inspiring me to apply to a TYC WPA position that I accepted later that year.

This sharp, serendipitous turn in my career trajectory amplifies the necessity of TYC inclusion in graduate programs that Calhoon-Dillahunt et al. (2017) called for. With the volatile (and sometimes nonexistent) academic job market, graduates may find themselves with an enticing offer from a community college, and they should be familiar enough with the TYC mission and reality to confidently take it. Perhaps I shouldn’t be so surprised after looking at the data shown by the TYC portion of the National Writing Census that shows 64% of the respondents (nine out of

14) who identified as current TYC WPAs were not hired for the position of WPA, thus the need to prepare students for the possibility of this position is so essential. Many graduate students have the potential to become excellent and productive faculty and WPAs at TYCs, and preparation would only increase their value on the job market. Perhaps if graduate students were better versed in the TYC WPA scholarship and prepared for their positions, the following transitions into the identity and practice of a TYC WPA might be easier.

Since I arrived, the TYC setting has inspired my teaching, as well as my scholarship and activism. I have deepened my understanding of what I think it means to teach composition, and experienced the heavy workloads that are endemic to TYCs. I have found intersections between college assessment, activism, and research that has made an opportunity for a forthcoming publication on the success and persistence of first-generation students at our high-HSI college context (Snyder & Lee, in press). I am now an elected member of the CWPA executive board, helping many others to represent TYC WPA issues in our field. As we battle unforeseen situations, like COVID19, I am more encouraged every day that the TYC WPA route was the best decision I could have made, and that if I leave, I will do so taking invaluable experience that will only deepen my respect for TYC WPA and WPA work.

CONCLUSION

The work of TYC WPAs is dynamic and rewarding. Anyone who might be interested in this work should prepare for it as early and as often as possible. Researchers at TYCs can embrace nontraditional career trajectories through TYC WPA positions and show the world that “two-year access institutions are rich and rewarding sites of teaching and learning” (Gordano, Hassel, Heinert, & Phillips, 2017, p. 77; see also Calhoon-Dillahunt, 2011) as well as excellent places to research and advocate. There are so many rewarding avenues to address social justice through the curricular administration and research with an exceptional student body. TYC WPA is teaching, administration, service, research, and activism, all with and for our most underserved and deserving student populations.

NOTES

1. Many such faculty interpret the concept of academic freedom to mean that they do not have to follow program guidelines or goals. To understand the complex political and historical importance of the concept of academic freedom, please refer to the original AAUP statement on academic freedom.

2. It is all too common for a writing center director at a TYC to become the *de facto* WPA as well (e.g., Griffiths, 2017).

3. As I say this, I realize with irony that I am currently accessing the TYC body of scholarship through my alma mater's library rather than my college's library.

4. I am grateful to Dr. Craig Jacobsen for reaching out to my doctoral institution and supervising the MLA-sponsored alternative academic internship at Mesa Community College.

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