

Vision and Visibility: A Call to Feminist WPAs

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ABSTRACT:

Grounded in the author's experience as a WPA overseeing GTA preparation during the 2016 Presidential election, this article explores feminist leadership as a methodology capable of fortifying and extending the work of writing program administration. By complicating the scope of WPA authority through various feminist- and leadership-informed strategies, the author proposes strategies intended to highlight the visionary potential feminist WPAs hold.

It is an important and challenging time to explicitly identify as a feminist Writing Program Administrator (WPA) and to envision how feminist principles might be enacted in our programs. Since the fall of 2016, many of us have been enmeshed in a deep personal and professional milieu that affects our teaching, our students' learning, and our program administration. Crude comments by then-presidential-candidate Donald Trump created a space where "locker room talk" objectifying women and supporting sexual assault was both authorized and accepted as typical, and in some circles, as a sign of masculinity. Concurrently, women's experiences have been brought to the fore through national conversations like the #MeToo movement, the Women's March on Washington in January 2017, Christine Blasey Ford's harrowing testimony regarding her sexual assault and the subsequent appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, the rollback of Title IX protections for victims of campus assaults, and ongoing debates regarding the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*.

In many cases, it is difficult to clearly and persuasively connect national discourse with local behaviors. That is, the effect of political rhetoric on public behavior is often too muddied to correlate. However, Trump's "locker room talk" soon became intertwined with the publicity of his campaign and then his new presidency. Merchandise rolled out. One could buy t-shirts with any creative arrangement of his "locker room talk" emblazoned across the front. Overt misogyny became a popular and often-repeated political slogan, one that could be heard and viewed on city streets, in shopping centers, and in our classrooms.¹ As Kirsti Cole and Holly Hassel write, Trump's self-aggrandizing misogyny has left "[w]omen and girls... experiencing fear and strong negative emotions about their self-worth based solely on the Electoral College" (xvi).

It can feel like an insurmountable feat to approach our current moment as feminists, or as people who feel compelled to act in feminist-informed ways. A spring 2019 symposium of rhetoric and composition faculty and graduate students, edited by Michelle LaFrance and Elizabeth Wardle, called on WPAs to help “build a twenty-first-century feminist ethos,” one that is intersectional and attends to radical inclusion (14). The editors summarize our uneasy times, recognizing the challenge in feeling like our feminist work “may . . . appear limited. Temporary. Isolated.” And yet, they note, “[we] are talking about our experiences in ways we have not before” (31). It follows that making our struggles visible—through a social media movement like #MeToo, a disciplinary listserv, or by communicating situations in our individual programs in journal articles and at conferences—holds space for opportunities to foreground the feminist ethics we enact or wish to enact within our constrained administrative roles. To be a woman-identified WPA in 2020 is to keenly feel the pressure of national misogynistic discourse while also being responsible for managing its effects in our programs. WPAs, I contend, occupy a unique position to make this feminist-oriented work visible and valuable in their programs and more broadly on their campuses.

What follows is a discussion of the potential for feminist-informed leadership through writing program administration, framed in what I argue has been a local and national leadership vacuum in the aftermath of the election. While I am choosing to speak specifically about women-identified WPAs, I acknowledge that the practices I discuss are not gender-exclusive; however, the daily affective experiences of women will take the focus here, as I propose a model that considers gender as an organizing concept. In her landmark essay, “Becoming a Warrior,” Louise Wetherbee Phelps reflects on her role as a new WPA, writing,

What I had yet to learn, on the bones, was the circuit of devaluation that runs from women in general to women’s work to composition as a feminized discipline and back to the concrete institutional project—the writing program as an enterprise, and its people. (297)

Currently, this “devaluation” operates in a crucible that includes explicitly protected and nationally authorized public displays of misogyny, which may be affecting the faculty and graduate students teaching in our programs, the students in our classes, and WPAs.

I propose feminist leadership as a methodology capable of informing, enriching, and fortifying Writing Program Administration during our tumultuous political moment. The competing needs of different constituencies create contradictions for feminist administrators, a phenomenon

well traced through scholarship on “FemAdmin” in composition (Miller; Dickson; Jarratt and Worsham; Ratcliffe and Rickly; Reid; Goodburn and Leverenz). This article contributes to current conversations on the role of feminist and academic leadership in rhetoric and composition (Cole and Hassel; Adams Wooten, Babb, and Ray; Maimon) and offers options for approaching difficult situations for WPAs who may feel constrained to speak and act ethically. First, I contextualize my WPA experience through two defining narratives with women GTAs. I then move to discuss how we may extend the work of early FemAdmin scholars to develop strategies for feminist writing program leadership.

SETTING THE SCENE: WOMAN WPA, WOMEN GTAS

Like many writing program administrators, I began my career as an untenured WPA mentoring graduate teaching assistants, in charge of “mind[ing] the kids,” while a tenured faculty member filled the more authoritative, and thus masculinized, role of program director (Reid 128). I held this position from August 2011 through July 2017, mentoring just over 150 GTAs to teach English 101: Academic Writing and Research, North Carolina State University’s required first-year writing course. Fall 2016 quickly became a site of intensive “rescue mentoring” (Reid 131, 135), as I balanced preparing GTAs to teach critical thinking, effective communication, ethical use of sources, and information literacy against discussions of hate-speech protections, fake news, and real concerns about safety.

Our university is public, so institutional leaders were bound in their roles as representatives of the university to project political neutrality. This projection came down to the writing program as calls for civil discourse and unity and encouragement to our program faculty—all contingent instructors and GTAs—to help guide undergraduate students through difficult post-election discussions. It was a heavy task to place on the backs of our most insecurely employed and inexperienced faculty. Two experiences with women GTAs help illustrate some of these weedy administrative situations where I felt lost, even after five years in the position.

Early in the Fall 2016 semester, Megan, a 25-year-old GTA with no teaching experience, had disclosed that she recently experienced sexual violence.² She shared this information with me because she was still embroiled in the legal process, and public discourse and institutional conversations had left her feeling re-traumatized and anxious. Donald Trump’s “locker room talk” came up in the teaching practicum, and I checked in with her frequently.

The day after the election, she appeared in my office door, visibly upset. A male student had worn a “Grab Her by the Pussy” shirt to class. Other students noticed and looked to Megan for a response. She explained to me that she was overcome with anxiety at his presence but chose to carry out that day’s lesson without drawing attention to his shirt. After meeting with Megan, I called Student Conduct and our campus legal counsel, both of whom advised me that the student was protected in his choice to wear the shirt.

The undergraduate student’s moment of celebration—which I felt pushed the boundaries of the student code of conduct—rocked Megan’s confidence. In a little over three months into her teaching career, Megan had reached a point where she was so anxious that she became ill. She finished her teaching for the semester, grateful for the winter break.

The following spring, Amy, a 22-year-old GTA, met with me about a disruptive student. This male student had started openly criticizing her teaching and the content of the course, in a way that far surpassed reasonable feedback. It was a moment in class when Amy spoke about pronoun use in terms of trans* identities that this student grew agitated and berated both Amy and another female student. Other students approached Amy to say that this student made them feel uncomfortable speaking in class, as he would lash out with personal attacks. This student then submitted a reflection for a major assignment that only criticized the assignment, calling it, the class, and Amy “useless.”

Of course, belligerent students are sometimes present in our first-year courses. We seat thousands of students, and a number of them express frustration with taking a required writing class, particularly at a STEM-focused institution. This student, however, behaved differently from past cases, both in tone and persistence. We looped in the Student Conduct Office. Amy notified the student that she was asking for help from another campus resource. He was quiet and cooperative in the next class, but this state was short-lived, as Amy returned graded assignments that day. The student failed the assignment. That evening, he sent Amy two more inflammatory emails.

Based on our feedback from Student Conduct, much of this student’s issue with Amy appeared to be gendered and politically motivated. I spoke with Amy to ensure that her classroom discussions were balanced, focusing on the goal to de-escalate the student and the situation. Together, we crafted a plan that satisfied departmental expectations while taking into account the institution’s operational definitions of terms like “disruption” and “harassment.” After much discussion, I was advised that the student could not be placed in a different class unless or until he became physically

disruptive or if his communication with her indicated a physical threat. Amy was bereft. This news meant that she had to continue to see this student multiple times a week and to potentially allow herself and others in the class to be subjected to his unpredictable behavior. Feeling overwhelmed, Amy focused her energy and finished out the semester, and the student passed the course. Amy, however, was emotionally drained. It was her last semester of graduate study. She had simultaneously been working to finish a demanding capstone project for graduation while teaching and planning for her next life choices. The experience caused her to ultimately reject college teaching as a future career.

Megan's and Amy's experiences illustrate the kind of complex negotiations WPAs may have encountered after the election. Conversations with WPAs at other institutions suggested that they were feeling likewise dislocated, as they related experiences with DACA students who had gone into hiding, students and faculty from the six "travel ban" countries afraid to leave the United States for fear they wouldn't be able to return, stories from students who had experienced taunts about "Trump's Wall," and a myriad of other identity-motivated attacks.

My experiences and the experiences of the WPA colleagues I backchanneled suggest that writing program administration was not immune from the "Trump Effect," a phenomenon the Southern Poverty Law Center defines as an uptick in bullying, hate crimes, and bias incidents against women, people of color, immigrants, religious minorities, and GLBTQIA people since Trump's election. WPAs may have found themselves caught in the middle, advocating for faculty and students while navigating institutional tangles that slowed resolution or exacerbated already bad situations. It was Laura Micciche's oft-cited "collective nervous condition in relation to WPA agency" come to life (77). As I experienced the election and its aftermath alongside the 21 GTAs I mentored during Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, our formal institutional relationship became inadequate in describing their needs and what I could provide. I could supervise on routine pedagogical processes, but I found myself feeling lost and unsure in this new political context, unable to efficiently or ethically solve their problems or answer their questions. In sending these new, vulnerable faculty into painful, frightening situations ostensibly supported by the university, I began to question my own ethics and fitness to serve as a WPA.

These problems were compounded by vague or non-committal institutional, college-level, and departmental guidance to maintain neutrality. For those of us in classrooms and who were responsible for supporting faculty who directly encountered hostility, messages of neutrality and civility felt inadequate (see Fedukovich and Doe). As each week brought new

concerns, I quickly found the limits of my administrative identity as I had constructed it to that point. Further, I was a pre-tenure WPA at the time, and I had to account for how these overlapping relationships might affect my professional goals at my institution.

LEADERSHIP VACUUMS THROUGH CONSTRAINT

For many WPAs, the aftermath of the election may have created situations that demanded careful ethical navigation and called us to step into unfamiliar roles. However, we may have felt constrained by perceptions of our role as managers of human resources, what other administrators consider our faculty and GTAs, and non-human resources: technology, space, materials. We keep students moving—into and out of our classes—remediate problems, handle complaints, and clean up pedagogical and logistical messes.

In academic settings, various “top leaders,” positions such as provosts, chancellors, and deans, are looked to as visionaries for their institutions. They are often responsible for crafting and promoting important institutional texts like strategic plans and mission statements. These academic “top leaders” operate under different expectations than writing program administrators, yet they are likewise constrained (Mayfield, Mayfield, and Sharbrough). Like WPAs, they, too, answer to many audiences, including students, parents, and faculty, but also stakeholders like donors, local political bodies, and in my case at a state institution, the university system board and the public. The difference is proximity: Top-level leadership does not deal with the same daily realities of on-the-ground teaching, and this gap creates opportunities for communicative misfires such as those we perceived in my program. As Wendy Hesford’s research determines, campus upheaval provides a dynamic, high-stakes environment for these types of communicative misfires to occur.

Hesford’s exploration of a spate of racially-charged graffiti and cross burnings on Oberlin College’s campus in the fall of 1993 provides one analysis of perceived inadequate campus leadership in the face of campus upheaval. She critiques Oberlin’s administration’s “color blind” responses to the events, as the official statement from the university’s president “painted the image of Oberlin as a unified community” (141-42), a rhetorical move that devalued the effects explicit racism may have had on the campus community. Many students, faculty, and staff felt pain and fear in the aftermath of the events. Oberlin’s president’s insistence towards unity—from the safety of his powerful position—diminished these responses. Hesford proposes a view of the campus as a public space and a contact zone where

pedagogical and administrative leadership might emerge to embrace the complexity of these discussions in order to move the community toward greater understanding and to signal support for those who may be afraid.

Research coming out of the 2016 elections echoes Hesford's frustrations with campus leaders making sense of crisis. McNaughtan, et al., analyze statements sent by presidents of 50 flagship public institutions after Trump's election. Using Lloyd Bitzer's definition of rhetorical situation, the researchers identify a complex and high-stakes post-election context for academic top leaders. Most of the university presidents (41 of 50) chose to send a public statement within the first two weeks after the election. Overall, many of these statements sought to "provide an institutional response to help students, faculty, and staff frame the election with regards to the national context of the election and its relationship to the objectives and culture of the university" (544). However, and pertinent to this discussion, 38 of the 41 statements called for unity "in an otherwise divided nation and campus" (539), and 35 called for "civility" and the promotion of "civil dialog" (541). Our experience at North Carolina State University was the rule, not the exception.

Like Hesford, McNaughtan, et al. identify campus leadership as insufficiently responding to crisis events. They write, "[W]hile public flagship institutions are political institutions, this should not prohibit them from responding to external events, even when political ramifications may be imminent" (545-46). Institutional top leaders were unable to communicate the gravity of the post-election situation in a way that reaffirmed their faculty, staff, and students' concerns. These constraints may have been perceived as a lack of clear and ethical leadership or, at the very least, as insensitive and naïve. In our first-year writing classroom, with its small sizes and focus on argument, complex situations arose that could not be addressed with blanket calls for civil discourse.

I am reminded of Amy's and Megan's struggles and of my administrative and ethical responsibility not only to their professional development but also to their personal safety and well-being. In the moment Megan appeared in my office doorway, overcome by anxiety triggered by her male student's sexually aggressive and presidentially endorsed tee-shirt, it did not seem appropriate to encourage her to seek unity with this student. Top leaders may have attempted to communicate in ways that, as the research suggests, upheld the election's "relationship to the objectives and culture of the university" (McNaughtan, et al., 544). WPAs understand this rhetorical move by campus administration as telling: The spaces we inhabit have always been exclusionary and dangerous for many of our students, faculty, and staff. Exclusion and danger *is* the culture of the modern American

university. The 2016 election brought these experiences to us in urgent ways.

THE IDEOLOGICAL PURITY TRAP

Scholarship on “FemAdmin” provides vocabulary and strategies to address these urgent problems, even as it complicates our understanding of what feminist approaches in program administration can achieve post-Trump. As an area of study, FemAdmin experienced increased attention through the 1990s, with foundational texts creating a shared sense for what this approach might look like. Feminist WPAs valued collaboration and eschewed top-down decision-making. Hierarchies were suspicious. The affective and cognitive could co-exist.

In detail, however, this emerging discussion was far more complex than a few named hallmark practices. Contradictions flourished, as feminisms-as-ideology engaged with realities of program administration. The false utopia of a fully feminist writing program complicates this early research, with scholars such as Louise Wetherbee Phelps and Hildy Miller recognizing that feminist approaches are often not the most appropriate or successful strategy in the masculinist institution. Miller encourages WPAs to think “bi-epistemologically,” to “find ways to accommodate both masculinist and feminist models” in order to understand the rhetorical tools they have available and those best suited to the job (59). This assertion refuses ideological purity in favor of practical solutions. Rigidly holding to feminist principles, particularly when it is clear they will not be successful, may only create more problems.

Since the development of FemAdmin work 30 years ago, the research story of feminist writing program administration appears uneven and disconnected as a focus of study. Laura Micciche and Donna Strickland conclude their review of Krista Ratcliffe and Rebecca Rickly’s key collection *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition* with the assertion that the text “give[s] evidence that many within the field still want to think about these possibilities, and still struggle to think beyond the apparent contradictions of such couplings” (175). The collection sought to provide an opportunity to “release the worries about contradictions and move toward new visions of feminist WPAing,” and yet a decade later, we are still challenged to move “beyond oxymorons.” Prior FemAdmin scholarship points out the contradictions inherent in dispensing administrative decisions without either the authority or support to make ethical, feminist-informed choices. Shifting focus to discuss possibilities for feminist leadership potential in writing program administration extends our options.

To be clear, this article cannot fully commit to Micciche and Strickland's call. Because of its limitations, it can provide only a pre-theoretical starting point for future feminist-informed writing program leadership research. This objective feels frustratingly inadequate for the task at hand. Every day seems to bring a new assault on our democratic underpinnings. Political and personal attacks on vulnerable populations continue.

The time is right, I argue, for this discussion to grow louder, more urgent, and more visibly informed by the many diverse voices in our discipline. What I intend to provide next is a discussion about how feminist leadership can extend our understanding of FemAdmin to complicate the WPA role broadly conceived and provide additional strategies WPAs might use in their individual programs.

The National Census of Writing suggests that women make up a majority of WPAs. Feminization, long held as composition's problem area as it indicated our lowly status, can be our strength. That is, women's experiences are, by sheer number, interlaced with composition's history and its current practices. Leveraging those experiences within an established framework of feminist thinking may provide a foothold in our ever-shifting administrative terrain. Women are the leaders writing program administration needs in this critical moment. Next, I broadly discuss ways in which feminist WPAs can begin or continue to develop recognition as visible leaders.

Leadership: Defining Terms, Extending Definitions

Because of perceived institutional leadership vacuums post-election, WPAs may have found themselves stepping into new, risky spaces. From my perspective as a pre-tenure WPA at the time, the feeling far exceeded administrative "plate twirling" (George) or the "manic, awkward dance" (Micciche 75) created by too many demands on a WPA's time. Instead, like many others, I was thrust into situations that implicated the immediate well-being of vulnerable people I was tasked to serve. The responsibility and consequences felt much greater than it had in prior semesters.

The field of composition has a long history of striving to meet ethical imperatives, and yet we still find ourselves mired in preconceptions about what a WPA is and can do. In turn, we may have found ourselves uneasily extending the scope of our roles or feeling conflicted with new problems that demanded leadership responses.

Here, I pause to delineate administration from leadership, two identities that WPAs experientially know to be different. Marlene G. Fine and Patrice Buzzanell, scholars in feminist leadership studies, carefully articulate the differences among and between three locations of practice—administration,

management, and leadership—contending that the naming of these roles not only constrains how those in the role perceive their own authority but how others respond. Fine and Buzzanell write,

Leadership is the process of externally articulating visions that challenge organizational identity and change; management is what translates that vision internally; and administration is the science of developing standardized and routine practices and constructs applicable to all members in every organization. (129)

In short, leaders are proactive and visionary, while administrators are reactive and constrained. Managers may straddle those identities, sometimes exhibiting the type of managerialism described by Donna Strickland and other times exhibiting managerial leadership, a process more closely tied to Fine and Buzzanell's definition of the manager as one responsible for carrying out visionary work in organizations.

Colleagues across campus and sometimes in our home departments often reduce the role of the WPA to its most obvious administrative components: the routine and mundane practices that define, per Fine and Buzzanell, an administrator. And while administrators and managers in this schema are given some influence through actions within their programs, they are often isolated from enacting visionary change. WPAs are thus known by their tasks: handling student complaints, scheduling courses, manipulating ever-decreasing budgets, preparing graduate students, hiring and reviewing faculty, and conducting assessment. These logistical tasks are written into job descriptions and enacted through daily to-do lists, and they comprise much of our scholarship in program administration.

To act as visionaries and leaders, WPAs must be invested with institutional authority. The question of WPA authority has long troubled the field. Shirley K Rose, Lisa S. Mastrangelo, and Barbara E. L'Eplattenier's 2013 update to Olsen and Moxley's earlier study on WPA authority concludes that "some conditions that were present in 1989 still persist and continue to hold writing program directors back from being able to garner sufficient authority to do their work effectively" (45). While Rose, Mastrangelo, and L'Eplattenier's research suggests that WPA agency can now be enacted in more diverse locations, many WPAs still find themselves caught in institutional tangles that foreclose visionary leadership work. Our current political landscape—including the overt demonstration of racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic beliefs—increases the administrative complexity, amplified by the necessity for immediate intervention and long-range planning.

Admittedly, it is unlikely that any approach to program administration would have changed the outcomes with the two women GTAs whose

experiences opened this discussion. Their situations were so tightly bound in institutional logistics, including the university's need to appear politically neutral, that there was little room for alternatives. However, it has become clear in retrospect that their experiences indicate a new landscape for program administration, one that calls us to perform our feminist commitments in the face of the normalization of strong anti-feminist conditions. This landscape binds WPAs to those we serve in new ways that demand we recall, refresh, and amplify our feminist allegiances.

In the four years following Trump's election, public discourse about women's experiences has surged. National conversations such as #MeToo and the Kavanaugh hearings; the disciplinary listserv exchanges that prompted the LaFrance and Wardle symposium; and new texts such as Cole and Hassel's *Surviving Sexism in Academia: Strategies for Feminist Leadership*, Cristyn Elder and Bethany Davila's *Defining, Locating, and Addressing Bullying in the WPA Workplace*, and Shari Stenberg's *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age* sound a clarion call for attention to women's experiences and, in turn, renewed attention to feminist approaches to our work.

Leadership as a primary WPA role has also recently emerged as an explicit focus of study in our disciplinary scholarship (Cole and Hassel; Adams Wooten, Babb, and Ray; Maimon), as the field works to understand what it could mean to be a WPA leader in our cultural and political context. Over the past 20 years, the landscape for feminist writing program leadership has clarified and been made more critical due to leadership vacuums and the ethical challenges of the moment. Next, I discuss strategic concepts that feminist WPA leaders might consider in their own programs. These concepts, of course, can only be enacted individually and are subject to local constraints. Recalling warnings against ideological purity (Miller; Phelps), I intend them to be scalable and practicable, in whole or part. Some may be enacted under the administrative radar, in small and quiet ways, while others require more secure visibility. They may coexist with masculinist approaches and still constitute a feminist approach to writing program leadership.

Building a Local Theory: The WPA as a Site of Ethical Action

Though feminist scholarship in writing program administration is wide ranging and varied, the concept of feminist responsibility to those we serve emerges as an ideological through-line. Wendy Bishop engages pastoral clericalism in encouraging WPAs to ask themselves three questions: "Whose cry do I hear? Toward whom do I move? Whose interests do I

serve?” (352). In her article, “Theorizing Ethics in Writing Program Administration,” Carrie S. Leverenz advances three areas for WPA focus: ethical awareness, ethical action, and ethical inquiry (111). Visibility is key to Leverenz’s argument, as it forms the foundation on which writing program leadership can be productively and sustainably enacted as a serious ethical endeavor. Leverenz writes, “It seems clear that, as a profession, we have not done a good job of conveying the ethical import of this work to others within our institution or without” (113). In taking an earnest approach to ethics as an iterative social process shared among faculty and administrators, the WPA demonstrates her commitment to the people of the program beyond its logistical management.

A feminist approach to writing program administration first acknowledges program leadership as a site of ethical action; it may then move to include authority as a positive concept. Authority may implicate a WPA who acts alone, who does not seek equitable distribution of power in her program. As tenure lines continue to be replaced with non-tenured positions, the balance of security likewise shifts. Unless a writing program can support multiple protected and adequately compensated administrators, distributed administrative models could saddle insecure faculty with extra labor and risk. A feminist WPA acting as a solo programmatic leader thus becomes an ethical demonstration, in a recognition of other’s precarious employment positions, low pay, and already high workload.

Louise Wetherbee Phelps identified this conundrum in 1995, just as rumblings of the dire-labor-situation-to-come started to emerge: If “as feminists, we are arguing for broadly distributed power and access, we must be prepared to imagine that one can ethically have visions, lead, and wield power, despite the imperfectability of institutions and the tragic limitations of human action” (293). In this way, the WPA-acting-alone can emerge as a steadying force in program leadership, facing institutional changes and constraints with a clear, ethical vision.

Laura Davies updates and extends this thinking to implicate power as a productive, not suspicious, construct in feminist program administration. WPAs, she writes, have an “ethical responsibility to use their expertise and authority proactively toward a particular purpose” (192). Davies’ work comes out of her experience in a military setting, and she notes that leadership can be isolating, lonely work, especially if a sole WPA’s leadership model is considered anti-democratic or too authoritarian by people in their programs or by scholars in the field.

Authority is a heady construct limited by other local power structures. WPAs often don’t have the opportunity to “wield power” (Phelps) and many in insecure positions may not wish to, as it could implicate responsibility

for negative consequences. Regardless of position, though, “the WPA isn’t exactly *free* to do what she believes is the right thing” (Leverenz 104). When agency is curtailed, Carrie S. Leverenz argues, “theorizing ethics is one way for WPAs to respond productively to what may seem an endless stream of irresolvable dilemmas” (106). These ethics may be communicated in a number of institutionally approved ways: Through organizational charts that clearly locate the director as program leader; through programmatic mission and position statements; through targeted professional development that addresses emerging concerns in the program (such as the bounds of free speech in our classrooms, to return to our opening narratives); or through the WPA’s administrative philosophy that may be available to either those in the program or publicly.

The “philosophical job description,” in particular, has been taken up in prior research as a genre primed for feminist inflection. E. Shelley Reid recommends that WPAs craft and share these types of documents to move their work beyond a strict focus on daily, mundane, and reactive tasks. Reid proposes a philosophical job description to ground her “all-terrain mentoring,” which work together to provide a “multipurpose, good enough feminist administrative vehicle for the various kinds of caring, agency, and activism WPAs are capable of doing” (133). Further, WPAs would be well served to situate this philosophy within local institutional values. As Joseph Janangelo articulates, institutional mission is a “motor for action” that “connotes vision and purpose” and “ask[s] everyone to work together for a shared purpose” (xii). Identifying values shared between the institution and the writing program helps close the gap between WPAs’ expected roles and their potential as visionary leaders. The writing program may thus connect its charge with larger goals, visibly demonstrating that writing instruction is a valuable part of the motor for action at the university. According to Jennifer Heinert and Cassandra Phillips, in order to enact systematic change, writing teachers—here, extended to include WPAs—must make their disciplinary expertise “both visible and valued” (128). Heinert and Phillips set a tall order. The value of a writing program, or of classes that teach required writing courses without a formal programmatic structure, remains bound in its perception as a service course. Philosophical job descriptions or administrative philosophies may articulate visionary goals and offer a way to front disciplinary expertise as a method of informed leadership. That is, the visibility of the WPA’s ethical commitments (to goals like student success, retention, learning, and collaboration) and engagement in the discipline of writing studies can counterpoint more shallow concepts of what it means to head a writing program.

Situating one's feminist approaches in an ethically oriented theoretical frame allows WPAs to communicate their commitments, even if conditions prevent action. By situating their ethical goals within those of the institution, WPAs create a space where shared values are visible and clearly situate the writing program as a serious ethical endeavor.

Coalition Building Beyond Collaboration

As noted, distributed administrative models may seek to employ a feminist method in demonstrating a decentered location of power, but this decentering may come at a price. Likewise, collaboration can be risky, especially as so many WPAs work in insecure positions and because institutional values still often place "individual (or presented as such)" work above that of engaged groups (Heinert and Phillips 128). Heinert and Phillips recommend coalition building to supplement collaborative methods, as a coalition "has common goals, works purposely toward them, and shares credit and responsibility through the work" (129). A coalition is "collaboration in support of a strategic purpose" (Heinert and Phillips 128) and can work in tandem with feminist leadership models to create networks of caring, focused scholars committed to visionary change.

WPAs have many coalition partners across campus, disciplinary and otherwise. In the days immediately following the election, program administrators may have found themselves asking legal questions about the bounds of free speech; connecting students with campus resources like the Counseling Center, student legal aid, or the Women's Center; and interfacing with other units on campus responsible for student affairs. The philosophical job description could articulate these shared commitments among campus units, situating the writing program as one among many supportive resources on campus.

WPAs likely already do this important connective labor, if our meeting schedules are any indication. The shift in focus, I believe, is visibly reframing this work as interpersonal and interprofessional relationships based on a core set of ethical, feminist-informed considerations and focused on specific outcomes.

The Exhausted Visionary

But, truly, what practical use is a leadership vision if the WPA is too exhausted, too drawn in multiple directions, and too constrained by local power systems to enact it? Many WPAs experience the pressure of moving quickly from one project to another, feeling, as Laura Micciche so aptly describes, "physically and mentally overtaken by the enormity of the job"

(73). Under typical circumstances, the job of the WPA can feel like endless firefighting, and we understand our current circumstances to be atypical.

Micciche's slow agency grounds its approach in FemAdmin, emphasizing the relationship between agency and the drive for WPA efficiency. In their rush for an institutionally-approved resolution, WPAs may find themselves caught out, responsible for decision-making, yet often powerless against the institution's mandates. This approach "suggests that the speed of getting things done, along with the enormity of tasks involved, creates ideologies and practices that disrespect and dehumanize programs and people" (Micciche 79). In the days after the election, which soon stretched into weeks and now years, I found myself pushed to demonstrate the institution's practical values: efficiency, correctness, authority, objectivity, and promptness. The writing program and its faculty were abstractions I negotiated with other units on campus. Discussions about upholding mandates were about protecting the institution from bad publicity or legal scrutiny, not about Megan's devastating sexual assault and re-traumatization or Amy's anxiety about her unpredictable and aggressive student. Disrespect and dehumanization rightly describe these experiences from a program administrator's perspective.

Elaine Maimon's leadership narrative from WPA to college president contends with this maddening push for efficiency and its role in ethical decision-making. She describes the differences between "speed" and "haste" in leadership decisions as differences in readiness (12). Decisions made with speed move forward when the WPA (or any campus leader) has thoughtfully considered her options. Haste, on the other hand, moves decisions forward with incomplete understanding, and it often leads to regret.

Many WPA decisions must be made quickly, as deferring those actions can have negative consequences for those we serve. While speed cannot be avoided, Maimon argues, hastiness can. Vision is key to avoiding hasty decision making, with vision defined as "undeterred attention to mission and goals. But . . . it also requires peripheral vision" (11). Maimon articulates her leadership journey as one entangled with her identification as a woman. Her "double vision," of focus and periphery, emanates from anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson's recognition of the demands placed on "women who spend years with one ear open for the cry of an awakened child, the knock of someone making a delivery, the smell of burning that warns that a soup left to simmer slowly has somehow boiled dry" (qtd. Maimon 11). Historically, women's life experiences have demanded they juggle macro and micro concerns; that is, women's lives "offer special preparation in keeping eyes on the prize, while simultaneously observing the process involved in winning the prize" (12). Biological essentialism notwithstanding, Maimon's

point is well taken. Women in academic leadership positions are aware of their gender performance within the profession and its possible effects. These effects multiply intersectionally; race, class, sexual orientation, age, ability status, and other factors interact with gender to affect women's leadership access and experiences in academia. Importantly, Maimon acknowledges the intense emotional and cognitive demand placed on women in leadership positions who feel a deep responsibility for the well-being of those in their programs and who strive to frame their work as ethical sites of action. Vision and visibility become the concepts that emerge to thwart the institution's relentless push to efficiency. Exhaustion and top-down pressure are part of the WPA story, but so can be vision and visibility.

As I have argued, women-identified WPAs are especially situated to emerge as the leaders poised to effect change in their programs and more broadly. Louise Wetherbee Phelps recognizes composition's potential to dramatically influence undergraduate education. She envisions a future where first-year writing is not merely "tolerated and contained but becomes a positive force in higher education" (291). WPAs broker this change, as they step into new leadership roles and exert their rich experience.

I wish to conclude not with a proposal for what a feminist writing program leader might look like, act like, or do, understanding that many of us work under the radar for fear of professional consequences for ourselves or our faculty. Instead, I summarize and clarify some of the characteristics of feminist leadership discussed in the previous paragraphs. A feminist leadership model in writing program administration might:

- Take up program leadership as an ethical endeavor and make these ethics visible.
- Embrace power as a positive construct where the WPA practices careful and deliberate authority.
- Focus on coalition building instead of or in addition to collaboration.
- Work to refuse ideological purity, understanding the danger of rigid approaches to problem solving.
- Make commitments and values visible through visionary structures valued at the university, such as administrative philosophies and philosophical job descriptions, curricula, courses, professional development, and mission and position statements.
- Work to understand the differences between speed and haste, focusing on ethical decision making over efficiency.
- Practice intersectional administration that acknowledges the complex relationships individuals may have to the institution.

Phelps concludes her landmark piece, “Becoming a Warrior”—a metaphor from which many WPAs still draw strength—with this thought: “[E]thical conduct lies, at least for a time, in seriously trying” (317). Early scholarship on FemAdmin could not have anticipated the political crisis in which we find ourselves. Feminist writing program administration must now contend with the encroachment of real authoritarianism as vulnerable students and faculty express growing fears. We cannot halt many of the daily challenges we encounter as WPAs and as thoughtful, ethical citizens; however, we can build out from our positions to make our personal and programmatic commitments clear, even if those actions are incremental or quiet. It is incumbent on feminist writing program administrators to consider the ways in which they might be called to step into new leadership roles that demand ethical visions and visibility.

NOTES

1. It bears noting that counter-protest merchandise, such as “Pink Pussy Hats” connected to the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, D.C., were soon made available for purchase.

2. All identifying information has been changed. This project was cleared from IRB requirements as “not human subjects research,” North Carolina State University, Sponsored Programs and Regulatory Compliance, IRB protocol number 12137. Both GTAs gave the author written permission to share their experiences in this format.

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