Standing Outside Success: A Re-Evaluation of WPA Failure during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This article examines how a heuristic for understanding failure in WPA work exists outside of success and also challenges parts of that heuristic that might reify heteronormative, success-oriented standards that stand in opposition to what the field has learned from recent scholarship on emotional labor and queer theory. We argue that WPAs should continue to normalize failure, and we present three distinct, narrative-style vignettes in which we try to illuminate our failures and use them to complement and complicate Heather Bastian's recent evaluation of failure. We resist the use of failure as a tool for productivity and instead allow our failures to be appreciated on their own terms, specifically as they were experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

As WPAs, we plan for success. Throughout the academic year, we plan pedagogical development sessions aimed at making our instructors more successful in the classroom spaces they inhabit. We plan course curricula that position undergraduate students to successfully achieve course learning outcomes. Then, at the end of the year, we cull up these successes and place them in annual reports or promotion and tenure materials that benefit us professionally. Even from our earliest brushes with administrative preparation in graduate school, we are groomed to be successful by apprenticing with role model WPAs, and increasingly, graduate courses focused on WPA scholarship and practice serving as a kind of finishing school experience for WPA hopefuls. Through all of these success-oriented preparatory steps, we take our first jobs feeling almost immunized against failure—until, that is, WPA work begins and we start to notice opportunities to fail all around us.

In fall 2019, Heather Bastian dropped an F-bomb in our laps with her article, "The F-Word: Failure in WPA Work," and ever since we have listened a bit more closely to the quiet ticking of our failures. While we have found Bastian's heuristic to be a guiding source of support and reference throughout the series of international and domestic crises brought to light through the pandemic, we have found that certain parts of this reconceptualization have proven to be more useful than others, particularly as we move away from our attachment to success. In this article, we argue that WPAs must continue recasting failure outside of success, but we also need to reconsider how and why we value failure for professional and personal gain. For us, as for Allison Carr, failure is a "*deeply felt*, transformative

process that incorporates feelings of anxiety, desperation, confusion, and shame," a process we hope to adopt "as an epistemological choice."

We offer three brief vignettes that represent moments in the pandemic when we grappled with our shared administrative failures. The first vignette narrates what was a tipping point in our work together during the 2020–2021 academic year, a moment when we started to understand success and failure on their own, separate terms. The second vignette grapples with Bastian's claim that "failure causes negatives yet worthwhile emotions" (103), and the third vignette illustrates how in the very writing of this piece we failed many times over while also critiquing the need for failure to be valuable. To be clear, our intention is not to pathologize or operationalize failure as a productive framework from which we will benefit, but rather to normalize failure for failure's sake, as Bastian has called on WPA scholars to do much more publicly than we have in the past. With each vignette, we provide contextual information and candidly explore the nuances of success and failure in these scenarios before concluding with a problematization of failure as a productive, heteronormative framework. In the end, we pose questions, not solutions, to guide future discussions of failure in WPA work.

Failure's Moment in WPA Scholarship

We contend that failure is having something of a heyday within WPA scholarship. In the aforementioned article, Bastian takes special care to unpack the larger systemic structures of power within North American universities and colleges that make failing feel shameful and forbidden. She notes that "Failure occupies a precarious position in academic culture" (Bastian 96) given our success-focused, results-oriented approach to teaching, scholarship, and administration, but eventually she came to accept "the failure of [her] writing program to exist outside of the context of success" (104). Scholars, such as Asao B. Inoue and Allison Carr, are re-theorizing what it means to fail, who fails, and why students are failing in first-year composition classes. Likewise, scholars such as Daniel M. Gross and Jonathan Alexander are bringing to light how the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* should be reconsidered to account for failure as critique of systems that are not working to support all students. As far back as 2002, Laura R. Micciche was nudging WPA scholars to further explore the affective dimensions of disappointment as a haunting hallmark of WPAs' professional realities. In the recent collection *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration,* contributors such as Carrie S. Leverenz share how administrative

responsibilities temporarily derailed their plans to secure tenure and flourish in the academy. Courtney Adams Wooten concludes the same collection by explaining how to be a "bad" WPA, backing up her claim with research and theory to validate our need to occasionally fail or just generally do less. We see in these examples and more a curiosity toward failure, one coming not a moment too soon.

Then came the pandemic, which was followed by the upheaval of racist roots that run deep through American society along with domestic threats to national security. Amid all of the crises faced in 2020–2021, we sit still in our roles as WPAs on the surface, sometimes feeling paralyzed to move, to act. But now we feel like those most clichéd swans: compelled to swim serenely on the surface of our professional work, but beneath the surface we are frantically treading water. We are trying to appear successful and calm despite encountering more failure than we have ever known. In her role as the full-time, tenure-track, Director of Texas Woman's University's First-Year Composition (FYC) Program, Jackie has caught herself wondering many times if other scholars in the field have felt as much failure as she has throughout this pandemic. Justin, as the First-Year Composition Program Assistant, is likewise working on understanding his relationship with failure as someone who is both finishing a dissertation and navigating the job market, arenas where failure seems both commonplace and so entirely damning. The pandemic-specific physical isolation from those we work with and our WPA colleagues meant that we have spent the last year searching deeply for how we might make peace with our failures while also normalizing them for others to see.

Bastian proposes a heuristic to help WPAs, like ourselves, make sense of our failings. She suggests that this heuristic includes four critical elements: "(1) failure exists outside of success, (2) failure is an important term, (3) failure causes negative yet worthwhile emotions, and (4) failure is valuable" (Bastian 103). To wit, as we fail, we should avoid thinking about failure in relation to success but as its own distinct experience, to see failure as separate from success. We can do this by acknowledging the term, normalizing failure by discussing failure openly and authentically as an important term in our field as well as continuing to theorize about failure in our journals and at conferences. However, the third and fourth elements become a bit more complicated than Bastian's heuristic might suggest. By proposing that feelings of failure must always be worthwhile or valuable, we are, as one of the reviewers taught us through their feedback on an earlier version of this article, operationalizing failure in a way that does not disrupt the institutional mechanisms for valuing WPA labor that oppress us and silence discussions of failure in the first place.

We hope that what we offer in the next sections serves as a sort of "narrative about the labor of WPAs after a large-scale crisis" (Clinnin 131) that Kaitlin Clinnin asks for in her 2020 chapter "And So I Respond: The Emotional Labor of Writing Program Administrators in Crisis Response." Though not divulging all of the stories of failure the last academic year brought, we have tried to present key moments in our first months of this pandemic up to as recently as the writing of this piece. Clinnin also explicates the double bind of the WPA position in crisis response, that of representing the university, the department, the writing program, and the instructors that make up that program. She argues "WPAs simultaneously represent the writing program and the larger institution in their crisis response and must therefore respond clearly" (137–38), and what our stories show below is how unclear, opaque, and chocked full of failure our response was.

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> Justin: "Hey, just a heads-up: Jordan asked me why we're holding August orientation via Zoom when the University is opening up for face-to-face instruction in the fall semester. They were wondering why we aren't supporting the University's decision."
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> Jackie: "Thank you for sharing that with me. You know, if they have that question someone else will, too. Thank you for telling me so I can be ready to respond."
>
> Justin: "We do have a lot of people who commute, so that could be useful for them. We also have a few who are immunosuppressed."
>
> Jackie: "Well, we're going to have to keep it virtual for that reason. I just can't see making them come to an in-person orientation during all this when it could easily be done online."

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Like many WPAs around the country, in August 2020 we chose to facilitate our annual pre-semester meeting for our FYC graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and contingent and full-time faculty via Zoom for a host of reasons related to the need for social distancing. The outpouring of gratitude we received from instructors for having converted our pre-semester meeting into a virtual format—as opposed to our face-to-face tradition of meeting in a lecture hall—assured us that we made the best decision for the instructors with whom we work. And yet, when one GTA (whose name has been

changed for confidentiality reasons) challenged our decision, it came as a surprise to us. It was a microcosmic moment of programmatic failure that, on the surface, might not seem like a capital-F failure to some WPAs, but for us it served as a tipping moment in our academic year. The twinge of failure we experienced in this conversation felt like the first of many challenges to our decisions to administrate differently than our program has in the past, much to the dissatisfaction of some instructors and fellow administrators watching our program from afar. This conflict in expectations between the institution and our instructors was how we began to separate failure from success. What seemed like the traditional conception of failure to our administration was in some ways a success to our instructors. We argue later that this was failure, but failure that was meaningful in its own right and standing outside of success.

For context, over the past few years our instructor orientations have taken place inside one of the large, thoroughly modernized computer classrooms available to us on the floor of the building where the GTA offices are located. Our former orientation traditions included providing snacks, coffee, and lunch for instructors enjoying the generally excited bustle of other new teachers running to and fro, collecting their favorite creamers and sugar packets from their shared office space down the hall. So, the decision to go totally online for the orientation was not one we took lightly.

We see this interaction with Jordan to be one rife with failure. As administrators we were advised late in the summer that the campus would be reopening, but we stood firm in our decision to continue as planned with our virtual orientation via Zoom. Jordan's commentary on our decision prompted conversations about the dissonance we often feel as administrators caught between the instructions delivered at the behest of upper administration and the more boots-on-the-ground needs of our instructors. In Jordan's mind, this virtual orientation made little sense compared to the communication we were all receiving from the institution. We could have moved our orientation out of the physical space of the modernized classroom we like to hold orientations in and into one of the large lecture halls located within our building, implemented social distancing measures, and requested instructors to comply with the mask mandate in place in our county. However, knowing well the cohort of instructors we work with, all of whom come from varied backgrounds and a high percentage of whom are immunosuppressed, a virtual orientation made the most sense to us in our new context. In other words, we pressed forward with what felt like a failed-from-the-start strategy as an act of measured resistance to capitalistic pushes to return to normal campus operations as soon as possible.

To us, this microcosm moment of failure emblematizes how we have come to process our failures and successes in different terms. Taken as a success, we were able to deliver an intervention that supported the majority of our instructors as an administrative response strategy, and at the end of the orientation, we felt the pedagogical decisions we made in facilitating this meeting made it quite successful. We established a set of community standards that did not require instructors to keep their cameras on, but did remind them that chat transcripts (even private chats) on Zoom are downloadable by the administrator and that we were recording this for those that could not attend. We also encouraged instructors to utilize the chat feature throughout the meeting but especially while a presenter was talking to give them a space to compile their questions and thoughts as they occurred. We were open and honest about what we were doing with the recording of the meeting; we reminded them of some of the more intrusive issues with Zoom; and we encouraged them to use the software's affordances to everyone's advantage. Lastly, we made the conscious decision to acknowledge the work and home spaces of our colleagues. While perhaps a controversial decision, we wanted to throw ourselves head first into the reality of this programmatic moment. We wanted to acknowledge the awkwardness and tension of this unfamiliar space and do so openly so that we might be better able to cope with them going forward, especially being that this August orientation was our first program-wide meeting since the outbreak of COVID-19 the previous spring. Our instructors were working from home, and we knew how difficult that was for many of them. Therefore, we decided to ask instructors to point out an interesting object in their space (as opposed to the typical telling of something interesting about themselves).

Outside of these successes, we recognized the ways in which we failed, too. We began the day's orientation already feeling like we had failed at least one instructor who was questioning our administrative judgment, but we also found ourselves attuned to the many little unknown failures lurking around every corner. We found ourselves thinking, "Do the other instructors feel the same way that Jordan feels? Will the content we are covering in this session be enough? Should we have hosted two days' worth of virtual orientations? Or is this one-day, four-hour orientation going to cause Zoom fatigue?" We oscillated somewhere between adding another day entirely and reducing the whole orientation to an email. Several weeks later, more questions would arise, but this time those questions came from the instructors themselves. Our economizing of time for this orientation meant that we found ourselves delegating assessment guidelines to email communications, which inevitably some of them overlooked. Our semi-annual review of syllabi showed that some of our instructors teaching in a

hybrid format did not clearly grasp exactly how or when certain students would be meeting on certain days of the week. Other instructors expressed disapproval of our new programmatic policy that all instructors must continue to hold a set number of virtual office hours online each week and to share that login information with program leadership in case we needed to drop by and ask them a question. The trials and errors of this first semester back to teaching in a pandemic had us massaging our temples for personal reassurance more than once, but Bastian's message carried us through these most challenging moments. We came to process our failures as separate from our successes to the greatest extent we were able to and with what little we had left in our emotional reserves.

Our analysis in this section should not be read as pure success or pure failure, but the ways in which we succeeded and failed are ones we have compartmentalized for our own reflective thinking. We sit with these failures still because we see them as stepping stones towards a more critical understanding of failure and what it looks like for all stakeholders in our program. This moment allowed us to better understand the optics of our decisions, particularly in times of crisis. On the contrary and as Bastian has shown us, failure does not have to be dependent on success or vice versa. We can have both/and, and this cycle will repeat itself going forward. We found success. We found failure. We moved on.

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> Jackie: "I think Noel makes a good point about the observation form. The changes we've made to improve that form as an assessment of our instructors' teaching might be holding them to an unattainable standard right now."
>
> Justin: "Yes, I could see that. But we also have brand new GTAs who have never taught before this semester and who have done a phenomenal job checking each box we've added to the form."

* * *

One of the first pandemic response actions taken by our leadership was to revise our existing observation form to more accurately assess the work of online and hybrid learning as opposed to the traditional face-to-face teaching these forms were originally intended to assess. In our program, contingent faculty members and GTAs are observed at least once each academic year. Although we approach the mentoring and teaching work of these observations as a peer-to-peer review process, we would be remiss if

we did not acknowledge that anytime a supervisor observes an instructor's class, feelings of insecurity may abound. For our contingent faculty, many of whom make their livelihoods on offensively small stipends alone, receiving a "Needs Work" rating on their observation form can trigger a sense of desperation and isolation.

To fully grasp what a shift our changes in instructional delivery format entailed, before the pandemic our program offered approximately five fully online and asynchronous sections of English 1013 or 1023, and these sections were a privilege to teach, one reserved for senior instructors with previous online pedagogical training. Our institution was responsive to the needs of our instructors by asking rather than mandating who wanted to teach face-to-face, hybrid, or online. In fall 2020, the majority of our nineteen instructors (54%) requested to teach fully asynchronous, (32%) expressed interest in teaching fully online with a synchronous component, and (32%) expressed interest in teaching in a hybrid format.

To effectively undertake our revision of the pre-pandemic observation forms, we spent a great deal of our summer reading, researching, and participating in training programs that might make us stronger online teachers and administrators of a fully online writing program. We individually enrolled in a two-week intensive Quality Matters certification program for reviewing online courses. We decided that the Quality Matters rubric was not holistically the best fit for our program, but Jackie also gleaned insights from a summer micro-credential program on effective online teaching practices facilitated by the Association for College and University Educators. Through these trainings, we did add to our existing, mostly narrative-style reporting form a checklist of best practices in online and hybrid learning to guide instructors through our expectations, which we also outlined in our pre-semester orientation. By making this revised observation form available to instructors well in advance of their actual observations, our hope was that this assessment would help them build their courses based on best practices for online learning. What we found, though, was that the additions to our form confounded our instructors. We had to pause at several points in fall 2020 to reflect on why the form we hoped would serve as a helpful guide, one that clearly communicated expectations and new ideas for improved teaching practices, actually ended up inducing more stress than we'd previously anticipated. In other words, our good intentions for encouraging instructors to explore and then implement best practices in online learning might have been well intentioned, but we failed in our interest of supporting instructors because we did not pace the introduction of this new pedagogical content more effectively.

Worth noting here is that there were variables at play that prevented this contingent faculty member from acclimating to fully online instruction at a leisurely pace. For one, Noel was brought on to teach sections for us the week before the semester started, a problem of administration that breeds disappointment or even despair, as Micciche and others have pointed to in the past (433; Kahn, Lalicker, and Biniek). Due to a summer spent watching enrollments climb steadily and then surge just before the semester began, we were unable to offer this instructor a section until after our orientation had passed, leaving them little time to develop a course shell as thoroughly as they might have liked otherwise. They were observed in the eighth week of the semester because we wanted to allow them enough time to get their courses up and running. However, when a student complaint arrived in our inbox just shortly after an associate WPA we work with expressed considerable concern about the quality of instruction occurring in their classes, a meeting was scheduled to discuss areas of improvement. The contingent instructor met with our leadership team to co-author a professional development plan for continued improvement so that they might continue to grow pedagogically and continue teaching in our program. Once the plan was put into writing, the instructor expressed their resistance to all parts of the plan. They stated that they could reasonably enact some of the suggested changes but probably could not implement all of the changes by the semester's end, when their mentor from the leadership team would step back into the course to see if they had been able to make some of the suggested changes.

We also want to acknowledge the contingency and inequitable compensation received by part-time faculty at our institution and institutions across the country, which makes resisting mastery more difficult. While we were asking this instructor to retrofit their course with practices that would increase accessibility, student-to-student engagement, and supportive feedback on student papers, we were also asking the instructor to engage in much more labor than they had previously expected and for which we wouldn't be able to compensate them. We also want to recognize that a power dynamic shifted and intensified as the pandemic progressed, particularly in terms of the contingent faculty-WPA relationship. As fewer sections became available to give to our contingent instructors, they seemed to do more work to improve their courses for no more pay than they were already receiving in hopes that future sections would continue to be made available to them.

These conditions make failure more bitter to taste, and yet, we were moved by the fact that this one instructor felt so overwhelmed as to speak out about what they realistically could and could not do, thus showing us

the potential of failure as an administrative technique. As a result, their resistance provided a critical opportunity for us to reflect on how, in our rush to prepare our instructors to be better online teachers, we overlooked how much we could ask of them or how much we could expect them to change without careful scaffolding and time. In the same way we would not throw an assignment rubric at a student and tell them to figure it out, it was a failure on our part to not recognize that the pressure we faced from upper administration to have our instructors become better online teachers was not a pressure that our instructors needed to face relatively unsupported. As seen in Justin's response, the fact that one of our new GTAs had fully adopted all of our suggestions for building an online learning environment made us question whether this scenario was a failure on the part of the contingent faculty member or on us. Who here had failed whom? Given our positions of power relative to this faculty member, we think it is safe to take the blame for this failure. But, again, that was failure as defined by the context of success. We failed this instructor and questioning that meant that we were still working within the boundaries of a "framework of failure" (to borrow Jonathan Alexander and Daniel Gross's title phrase) that still set itself in opposition to success. We were not there yet.

The dialogue introducing this section is demonstrative of the fact that our instructors come to us at different levels of pedagogical preparedness and ability, and these differences can lead to moments of miscommunication that leave us feeling like we failed our instructors. The instructor may have failed to meet many (if not most) of the new best practices for online learning clearly outlined in the form we created, but we also failed to create an observation form that would account for the steep learning curve many of our instructors faced in pivoting from mostly face-to-face instruction to fully online, asynchronous instruction. This contingent faculty member, who has been teaching at our institution for over five years, expressed their frustration after receiving one of the lowest ratings possible on our newly revised form. To their credit, their fully asynchronous classes clearly demonstrated that they had implemented some best practices for effective online learning. By being in their course shell to witness a lack of interest in accessibility, student-to-student engagement, and in providing any students with positive feedback on their assignments, the member of our leadership team who was assigned to be their mentor (a third administrator who did not partake in the authoring of this piece) and observe their class this year had grave concerns.

In processing the contingent faculty member's negative reaction to the observation, we have tried to keep in mind what feminist scholar Sara Ahmed recommends for noticing how different emotions interact with one

another. According to Ahmed, "rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (119). We tried to do this, to see how emotions were at play within ourselves, observe what we could of the emotions this instructor was feeling, and even consider how emotions were coming between us in a social sense in hopes that we could avoid negative emotions widening the divide between administration and faculty. All of this made the rush of negative emotions that come with failure feel, as Bastian describes, all the more worthwhile. We were learning from feelings of failure and inadequacy that challenged us. "Failure is an affect-bearing concept," Carr argues, and we were feeling the many ways that affect marks us just as the faculty member was feeling the way they'd been marked.

Additionally, Robert McRuer's simple yet searing definition of composition reminds us that the very nature of our discipline and pedagogy was born out of the desired reduction of difference into a singular whole, but it is experienced as quite the opposite. The result, he argues, is the "desirability of the loss of composure" (McRuer 50) and his words return our attention to the heart of queer and crip rhetorics. The work of the WPA, particularly in times of crisis, is seen as the reduction of friction or difference so that a cohesive program withstands when chaos abounds. The new observation form was our attempt to be responsive to necessary changes in terms of instruction, but by its very nature as a genre the observation form was aiming toward a reduction of difference through a set of best online pedagogical practices. We even, perhaps naively, believed that the new set of standards in our observation form would more accurately assess the new work of online and hybrid teaching that many of our instructors would engage in, but we did not adequately account for the learning curve that would come with such a transition.

With McRuer standing at our theoretical helm, we are reconsidering Bastian's fourth element, which we see as being at odds with theories of queer failure we have contemplated while developing this article. Undoubtedly, we think that failure can stir up worthwhile emotions and that failure can be pedagogical in its own right; we are not convinced that failure must be valuable. In fact, we would argue that our administrative indoctrination that predisposes us to turning every failure into a success could be toxic. Alexander and Gross argue that, despite the excellent work being done on emotions in our field, "negative emotions do not find their own recognizable framework in our professional literature and principles" (274). This "professional disorientation," as they call it, is less about redefining historically negative emotions such as failure and more about accepting them as

an inevitable part of the process of doing the work we do in this field (274). Because at what point, we might ask, does searching for the value that comes from a moment of failure move us further away from our failures and closer to the successes we vainly strive for?

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> Justin: "Jackie, I am so sorry that your name was attached to this. I feel truly terrible. I guess my understanding of queer theory isn't what it used to be."
>
> Jackie: "We're just learning. We're learning together and I'm honored to learn with you. . . . I'm imagining this like a conference proposal. Imagine we went to CWPA to present this. We have the gift of this really authentic feedback so that we can have these conversations with our colleagues who may have spent more time with WPA and queer theory literature. . . . And they are able to articulate in really smart ways things that we are talking about: the resistance, the heteronormativity, how they interact with each other. . . . It just sounds like the WPA scholars that are occupying both [positions] have something to teach us about that."

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Failure, perhaps ironically, even had its place in the writing of this piece, and we did not see our failure until an earlier draft of this article was submitted to the editors for external review. Our initial draft leaned heavily into queer theory and relied almost entirely on it to provide the backbone of our conception of failure. However, after some very useful feedback, we realized a few important lessons.

Namely, we realized that our application of queer theory was almost counterintuitive to the work of WPAs we laid out. This critique came as both a surprise and a relief. As we were writing this piece, we had multiple conversations about the origins of queer theory as running counter to all that WPA work entails, and yet we so deeply admired the work of queer scholars—such as Jack Halberstam, Harry Denny, and Jonathan Alexander—that we wanted to find novel ways to bring these two fields together. We wanted to think about what queer failure could teach us that could guide us as young administrators, and we wanted to heed the call that Denny and more recently Banks et al. had put forth within our professional circles and even this publication. Therefore, without fear of failure, we went for it. We wrote a 7,500-word manuscript that brought Halberstam's three

theoretical concepts of queer failure to our administrative table, but these competing theories were not going to settle for polite dinner conversation. We asked ourselves many times if this arranged union between WPA scholarship and queer theory was or would ever be truly compatible, and it was not until a reliable reviewer let us know quite directly that our application of Halberstam's theory was at odds with our argument that we stopped seeing what we wanted to see and started seeing another failure.

Our conception and implementation of failure was flawed in that it did not account for what is the very heart of queer failure: survival. We used it as an administrative heuristic whereas Halberstam conceived of it as a way to do the very opposite, to disrupt administrative proclivities for order and sense-making. We recognized that in our isolation and desperation we went running to queer failure as a theoretical lens that might guide us through the crises and resultant failures of the past academic year, only to realize that queer failure is not meant to teach us or help us move into the safe structures we sought shelter in. Queer failure is meant to help us tear those structures down. Queer and indigenous rhetorics scholar Joseph Pierce reminds us that "queer breath is a revolutionary act" (132), but we weren't using failure to revolutionize. In a sense, we failed to fail.

We also realized that while we certainly wanted to pay our respects to the queer lineage of failure in our literature review, what we were actually talking about in this article was the more face-value conception of failure. So, that meant we had to extract some of the queer work we were leaning on and replace it with more appropriate theory describing what we actually do as opposed to what we like to think we do. What we want to do is to operate as change agents at our university, particularly in times of crisis when solutions are needed. What we actually do is keep the systems running, the cogs of administration rotating, and sometimes in small, stealthy ways we make meaningful changes through our curricular development and the renewal and revision of our existing pedagogies. We do not intend for this description to sound as nihilistic as it likely does. We simply want to acknowledge the existing structures we must work within in our role as WPAs.

Failure, as conceptualized by WPA scholars, is a system by which we learn to work better, to do our jobs more efficiently or ethically. These are admirable goals, but they are not queer goals in so much as Justin understands them. While failure certainly exists outside of success in much of WPA scholarship on the topic, it still remains within "the context of a rhetoric of success, not associating one response to failure with another" (Segal qtd. in Bastian 97). This conflation of queer failure with other responses to failure is what we hope to avoid in this new draft. It is also why we have

captured our growth as WPAs in these pages while also imagining a future where failure can exist not as a static heuristic but rather as a dynamic and highly situational experience. Perhaps what the field needs next is not a heuristic defining failure's purpose but one for exploring failure.

While we have claimed in this piece not to fully accept the productivity aspect inherent in Bastian's third and fourth elements, we want to challenge the idea that these emotions must always perform an action. Feelings of failure work on us and within us to mark differences as much as they do to reduce them. In other words, the intensity of attachment to success both brings people together, as in the case of shared joy, but also can separate them, as in the case of perceived failure. These are the concrete ways Ahmed explains the psychic (individual) and the social (collective). Emotions do the work of composition, as seen in McRuer's dual definition. Emotions bring us together, reducing our differences, and yet can also exacerbate our differences. This tension is at the heart of not only our work as WPAs but also how we view the work of failure as emotional labor. It is so often experienced as increasing differences, the differences between "good" and "bad" or between "successful" and "unsuccessful," but we hope that what we have written here is an example of how we can normalize failure and begin understanding it outside a rhetoric of success. We bring our story to you not only to praise the value of peer review within this scholarly community but also to implement in the final pages of this work the value of failure. We believe that the substantive revisions we have made to this piece made it all the stronger and that was in large part due to our reviewers and editors.

Standing Outside Success

In this piece, we have picked up several threads of conversation in the field that we see colliding in generative ways. We are picking up Bastian's argument for failure, sweeping it off to Wooten, Babb, Costello, and Navickas, who add a layer of emotional labor to this, and then heading over to McRuer and other queer scholars for reflecting on what it even means to compose. Our original draft of this article complicated queer theory with these WPA scholars in an attempt to measure and understand our unique moment but later found that the issue was much deeper than we originally assumed. We hope that you will help us and those who have endeavored before us by writing up your failures, sending them to major journals, and contributing to this normalization process that is so important in times like these.

In the first vignette, we offered a story to both contextualize our later experiences and to illustrate how we came to understand failure as separate

from success, as standing outside of it on its own. This is Bastian's first critical element of her framework and as such is what we consider the first stepping-stone towards understanding failure on its own terms. The second vignette speaks to the emotional element of failure. Here we diverge somewhat from Bastian in that we agree failure often causes negative yet worthwhile emotions, but do not agree that these emotions must act as a heuristic by which we must learn. Our interaction with the instructor reminded us not only that failure is accompanied by big emotions, but also that it is important to experience failure for failure's sake sometimes. At the same time, we should try to protect our most vulnerable and overworked instructors (our contingent faculty) from failures that were not wholly their fault. We take ownership of our responsibility to evaluate contingent faculty as justly as possible. Our final vignette tries to make sense of our own failures not through the lens of success but rather as an exploration technique for understanding the competing and interactive needs of a writing program and WPAs. As two people who have seen the incredibly damaging effects of an uncritical assessment of failure, we included this final reflection because the normalization of failure is what we would have liked to have discussed in our graduate training experiences as we learned about writing program administration. We believe that, as young and untenured WPAs, there is a great deal more we can do to normalize failure.

Instead of offering recommendations, which might suggest that we possess all the right answers, we thought it better to pose questions rather than solutions. While there are many questions we have asked ourselves through writing and revising this piece, those we have returned to most frequently include:

- How does the rigor and tradition of academia eliminate failure as a safe option for learning?
- How does academic hyper-focus on demonstrating only where and how we have been effective as administrators sometimes prevent us from seeing our failures as an opportunity to reevaluate our usual approach to programmatic protocol?
- How might we as WPAs begin to appreciate failure as something other than a learning experience?
- Does valuing failure in that way alleviate some of the emotional labor of WPA work? If so, how can we effect that change on a larger scale in order to help our WPA colleagues?
- Might other scholars avoid engaging with theories of failure for fear of tarnishing their success-oriented academic profiles?
- What if failure is the point?

Carr asks and answers that final question, but it deserves repeating. Carr argues that in moments of failure "we can see each thing anew, how it functions on its own and how it connects to the rest; we can figure out how to fix it; or, with this new knowledge, we can build something else altogether." While we are not creating here a pedagogy or heuristic or framework of failure, what we want to foreground is the interconnectedness of failure and its affective quality on both WPAs and the instructors they work alongside. We want to make our failures apparent so that other WPAs and the larger field can take comfort in knowing that failure is neither good nor bad. Failure is just part of the process.

Carr's rhizomatic metaphor is also important at the conclusion of this piece. She argues that "failure fills the borders of our emotional capacities, or may disregard them altogether . . . [in an] individual-yet-social expression of meaning" (Carr). As the rhizome does, failure and emotions grow in unpredictable and uneven ways, affecting both the individual and the collective, or Ahmed's psychic and social. The rhizome's cohesive yet chaotic growth in all directions without order is precisely what we hope we privileged here in this piece. We have often called it failure for failure's sake, but what we mean is a failure that can grow and expand by itself without the confining boundaries of success, a failure allowed to stand outside of success. Carr remarks on failure that "wandering is its function, its method of sustaining life" and we could not agree more.

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