What's Next? Writing Program Administration During and After the Pandemic

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In February 2023, we participated in a panel discussion at CCCC on WPA responses to COVID-19, presenting some of our ongoing interview-based research on how WPAs have shifted their administrative approaches over the past three years. During the question and answer portion of the session, an audience member noted that the findings presented that day were depressing, that our research had exposed much of the hardship faced by WPAs and writing faculty since the beginning of the quarantine in March 2020.

The comment reminded us of what several research participants said once we had completed our interviews with them: The interviews served as almost a form of therapy, a cathartic moment to remember and talk through some of the huge challenges we all faced as our programs' course offerings shifted first to online scenarios for the remainder of that spring 2020 semester, often with faculty members who were ill-equipped to teach online, and then to a wide range of modalities as colleges and universities struggled to find a balance between public health and keeping the proverbial doors open.

As more time gathers between us and the beginning of the quarantine in spring 2020, it sometimes feels tempting to describe ourselves as being in the aftermath of the pandemic. Certainly, it's an understandable temptation. The days when we all locked ourselves in our homes, wiping down packages with Clorox wipes and figuring out the safest ways to buy food and toilet paper or make our own hand sanitizer as public supplies dwindled, were genuinely terrifying. They were also surreal, with the boundaries between home and work fully breaking down, exposing the lack of boundaries many WPAs had already been conditioned to accept as "normal." The quarantine was simultaneously dull and frightening, mind-numbing and anxiety-inducing. 2020 was also a year filled with social and political upheaval, as the state-sponsored murder of BIPOC became a focal point for protest and as the presidential election cycle continued reaching new levels of disruption and dysfunction, culminating in an attempted coup in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021, just days into the new year. There was no sign of normal anywhere. Not in the news. Not at work. Not at home.

During all this time, those of us working in higher education struggled to teach our students, to support our programs, to provide professional

development opportunities. WPAs all over the world faced truly monumental challenges as they worked with faculty members who had little-to-no experience teaching online and who were now expected to do so. WPAs had to advocate for faculty and staff as institutions began looking at ways to cut spending and as those same institutions determined through unknown algorithms whose lives were worth risking in in-person environments. WPAs engaged in the intense emotional labor of comforting instructors who were worried about their jobs, who felt they weren't teaching well in the midst of the pandemic, or who were suffering under the pressures of the pandemic.

Wanting to be in the aftermath of the pandemic makes perfect sense. In April 2023, President Joe Biden signed a bipartisan resolution ending the national emergency. The following month, the World Health Organization's Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared that COVID-19 was no longer a global health emergency. Yet as we write the introduction to this special issue in August 2023, the number of COVID cases in the United States has climbed to the highest rate since November 2021. We may want to be done with COVID, but COVID is not done with us. It may not be a global emergency any longer, but we must still contend with it. And so must our programs.

All of which leads us to wonder: what now? Or to borrow from *The West Wing*'s Jed Bartlet, the greatest fictional president the United States has ever had, what's next? What will writing program administration look like from this point forward? What lessons have we learned from a time of significant crises and disruptions? How can WPAs reshape and redefine our work to be more humane and sustainable for ourselves, our instructors, and our students? These are the kinds of questions that we hope this issue begins to address.

When we were developing the call for proposals for this special issue, we wanted to provide scholar-administrators with the opportunity to reflect on what they learned during the pandemic and how their programs changed and continue to change as we move forward. We wanted to present a forum for authors to comment on the complex landscape that has developed over the past three years and to consider what the work of a WPA looks like now. As we noted in the call, "WPAs have always worked within complicated contexts, but our new normal requires an even greater material and interpersonal dexterity to successfully navigate the needs of our programs alongside the (sometimes competing) priorities of our institutions."

We also wanted to emphasize the need to attend to the very real conditions of burnout, exhaustion, and low morale that impact our work. Most of us have engaged in extensive carework over the past three years in our

personal and professional lives. When do we reach the point where we can no longer engage in WPA work because we have exhausted our reserves? Or the fumes of the reserves that we exhausted a couple of years back? Put more optimistically, how can we begin restoring our energy and our enthusiasm for the complex but always hopeful work of writing program administration?

To that audience member who stated that our research findings were depressing: We hear you. As we all reflect on the effects of the pandemic on our work as WPAs, there's plenty to find discouraging and demoralizing. The maxim that our institutions will never love us back never felt more accurate than it did during the pandemic. But we also believe there is plenty of room for hope and optimism as we explore what we have learned about writing program administration during the pandemic and what's next for WPAs as we build on that knowledge. We hope that all of you reading the excellent work published in this issue will find validation for what you have been through as well as hope and optimism for what's next.

In This Issue

The authors whose work is featured in this issue offer many crucial perspectives on what we learned about writing program administration in the time of COVID. The articles in this issue fall into one of two categories: reflections and research articles. The reflections are short pieces that explore the experiences of WPAs or groups of WPAs that describe how WPAs have addressed specific changes to policies, practices, and philosophies in response to the pandemic. The research articles examine and analyze trends in how WPA work has shifted in response to the pandemic. Additionally, we have included one book review that we think resonates with the overall theme of the issue.

We have chosen to arrange the articles alphabetically within the reflection and research article categories, primarily because we want to invite readers to find common threads among these articles and read in the order that resonates the most. Certainly, there are numerous such threads, such as setting boundaries, prioritizing accessibility, building and maintaining communities, protecting NTT faculty and program labor policies, and providing care for others and ourselves.

The contents of this special issue remind us that much of the work of processing what we all have been going through during the pandemic, on both an individual and collective level, remains to be done. As we have read the reflections and research articles produced by the twenty-eight authors who have contributed to this issue, we see WPAs who are trying to

understand their own experiences and who are aiming to determine what writing program administration looks like after a series of incredible disruptions. We see the kind of reflection and care found in this issue as a vital step in seeing how we have administered writing programs in the time of COVID and even in the years before, which prepared us to be crisis administrators but also led many of us to head into that crisis on a low battery—and perhaps in seeing how writing program administration can change for the better in its aftermath.

Reflections

The thirteen reflections published here cover a broad range of topics. Courtney Adams Wooten reflects on how a familial health crisis led her to rethink her professional boundaries. In their reflection on building new "hubs" of support, Scot Barnett and Miranda Yaggi Rodak assert the need to protect WPAs from mission creep. Sara N. Beam and Mark S. Rideout present community pacing as praxis as a means of making space for those who participate in the work of writing programs to hold space for themselves. Elisabeth Buck calls on us to consider what accessibility means, not just for students but for program administrators as well. Paige Ellisor-Catoe draws on her experience as a caregiver for her spouse to offer caregiving as a metaphor for writing program administration.

Drawing on a study of postdoctoral fellows in his program, Andy Frazee offers strategies for building communities of care in writing programs. Teresa Grettano provides a timeline-based reflection on her efforts as a WPA to advocate for and support adjunct instructors. Stephanie Hedge's reflection examines the relentless connectivity that means we are "always on," always available as WPAs, ultimately arguing that sometimes we need to turn off and make space to watch the pandas play. Kim Hensley Owens reflects on her time as a WPA and argues that the work inevitably leads to burnout, making routine rotation of that role important for the well-being of programs and those who lead them.

Christina M. LaVecchia considers how the pandemic taught her that WPA work is embodied labor, particularly as she worked as a pregnant WPA. In her reflection on her time as a new writing center director, Mary Lutze argues that providing connection, care, and support for others can also serve as a form of self-care. Bradley Smith considers how writing groups, both with colleagues and with his daughter, helped to sustain him as his enthusiasm for WPA work waned during the pandemic. In the last reflection, Sara Webb-Sunderhaus offers a model for disabling WPA labor

to make her WPA role sustainable and to involve others in meaningful mentorship work.

Research Articles

Like the reflections, the five research articles published here demonstrate a lot of thematic overlap, even as the authors present different methods, findings, and arguments in their work. Several of the authors argue for new approaches to WPA work based in theories that push against the status quo, such as feminist theories of coalitioning or antiracist and disability approaches. Careful considerations of the role of emotional labor and care-work likewise run through these articles. Amy Cicchino, Sarah Elizabeth Snyder, and Natalie Szymanski argue that WPAs should take advantage of how COVID-19 has disrupted the way we do things rather than reverting to the status quo. Drawing on interviews with GenAdmin WPAs, they suggest that coalitional community structures to WPA work can make it more sustainable. Kaitlin M. Clinnin writes about trauma-informed writing program administration, presenting a framework to combine trauma-informed principles with disability justice activism. Her aim is to offer an approach to WPA work that makes writing programs more equitable and inclusive.

In an article that can function as a companion to Cicchino, Snyder, and Szymanski's piece, Kristi Murray Costello presents her findings from an interview-based project that distinguishes between long-term WPAs and new WPAs, the latter group being those who started in their positions immediately prior to or during the pandemic. Costello speculates that interviews with new WPAs gesture toward long-term changes in the field, with individuals aiming to establish boundaries and practice self-care in more intentional ways. Denae Dibrell, Andrew Hollinger, and Maggie Shelledy introduce the concept of fugitive administrative rhetorics, a "practice of administering a shadow program within the official one." They argue that fugitivity provides a perspective on and approach to resisting the racial capitalist underpinnings of universities.

In the fifth and final research article, writing center administrators Amanda Fields, Elizabeth Leahy, Celeste Del Russo, and Erica Cirillo-McCarthy draw on Sara Ahmed's principle of the snap, a break or disruption in the status quo that can be generative. Building on their individual experiences in writing centers during the pandemic, the authors present strategies for program administrators to snap: roadblocking, changing the narrative, and coalitioning.

Book Review

The issue concludes with a review of Lydia Wilkes, Lilian W. Mina, and Patti Poblete's edited collection, *Toward More Sustainable Metaphors of Writing Program Administration*, published by Utah State University Press this year. We find the book review to be particularly timely and appropriate for this issue, and we are grateful to Megan Boeshart Burelle and Kristi Murray Costello for their thoughtful review.