We Can't Be All the Things: Protecting WPA Labor from Mission Creep in Times of Crisis

Scot Barnett and Miranda Yaggi Rodak

In spring 2022, during one of the nightly emergency-response Zoom meetings addressing that day's crisis, we found a moment of levity listing all the roles we as WPAs had somehow—without quite knowing how—become expected to perform since the onset of the COVID–19 pandemic in March 2020. The list grew over a glass of wine: online course designers, 24-hour software/hardware/cloud tech support (for students, grad student instructors, and some fellow faculty), digital accessibility experts, medical specialists versed in virology and public-health communications, PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) authorities, chronic-illness accommodation consultants, therapists, labor lawyers and activists, enrollment forecasters (domestic and international), human resource managers, university call-center operators connecting people to campus resources, crystal ball and mind readers, human AI detection devices, and motivational speakers. We could have responded to every incoming call or email with "911, what's your emergency?" But . . . wait a minute . . . we never professed ourselves experts in any of these skills. We—a tenure-track associate professor in the role of Director of Composition and a non-tenure-track clinical assistant professor in the role of Director of Undergraduate Teaching—found our way into these positions because we're knowledgeable about writing pedagogy, course design, and teaching teachers. So, how did we get here? How did we become *all the things?*

Amid the pandemic, it was difficult for us to fully appreciate how our responsibilities were escalating and the tolls they were taking on us—in many of the same ways Kim Hensley Owens, another contributor to this issue, illustrates so powerfully in "When Too Much Really is Too Much: On WPAing Through the COVID Years." As months turned into years of ever-evolving crisis management, we came to realize the pandemic wasn't a single crisis but a many-headed Hydra from Greek mythology, where every victory added two more (at least) problems for us to battle. During the first waves of the pandemic, one challenge begot another and another, from the pivot to emergency remote teaching to bona fide online course design and hybrid and multimodal instruction and from state and campus-level fights over mask mandates to, eventually, lapsing mask mandates. During the later waves, we found ourselves in the center of a labor dispute between graduate student instructors (GSIs) and Indiana University Bloomington's

(IUB) upper administration, which the pandemic's amplification of social and economic inequities irreparably inflamed. Despite our sympathies and alignment with the GSIs, the picket line necessarily divided us on one side (responsible for thousands of undergraduates enrolled in courses instructors were picketing) and our GSIs and fellow faculty on the other (without the same institutional considerations to complicate their allegiances).

Feeling very much alone and unqualified, we were yet again called upon to be and do more. We advocated for our graduate students while simultaneously responding to both the pandemic's plus now the strike's very real cost and complications borne by our undergraduate students, many of whom were already distressed by two years of remote education and family/healthcare emergencies. How, we asked, could we address this disconnect so that we wouldn't be left to fight the Hydra alone? How could our department more equitably shoulder the prolonged crisis-related labor? How could we resist the mission creep that turned us from WPAs into jacks-of-all-trades? In this piece, we reflect on the dominant challenges the pandemic and strike accentuated for us within our institutional context and the strategies we developed to better integrate our interests as WPAs with those of other faculty and offices within the department and across our campus.

Battling the Hydra

Long before the pandemic, we already understood ourselves as occupying a liminal space, a kind of institutional seam. As WPAs at an R1 university, where Gen Ed composition and intensive writing courses (serving over 5,000 undergraduates annually) are taught primarily by GSIs and postdocs, our jobs exist at the crucial seam where undergraduate education meets graduate student teaching and professionalization. We soon came to realize that this seam becomes a fault line during moments of crisis, particularly when a crisis is not one but many, not discrete and unified but multifarious and spiraling. More troubling still, it's a fault line where WPAs too often stand alone—in our case, as a result of structural imbalances that disconnect composition and GSI training from much of the other work in our department.

Like many research-intensive institutions, our writing program is housed within a large English Department of almost sixty permanent faculty members, with the administration of undergraduate writing courses cordoned off from much of the department's other administrative and intellectual work. Although there is widespread support among faculty for the graduate students *as students* and for the department's graduate programs in literature, creative writing, and rhetoric, there has traditionally been less

active and informed interest in graduate students' teaching of composition and intensive writing since these courses fall outside their areas of research. This has had the effect of exacerbating already existing disciplinary silos by reinforcing the assumption that graduate student teaching is exclusively the domain of the writing program rather than an integrated issue of concern for all faculty in the department.

This tension, as we came to see more clearly during the pandemic and strike, was not merely disciplinary in nature but structural, baked into numerous institutional levels including our department where, traditionally, a bright red light separated the office of the director of graduate students (DGS), charged with overseeing graduate students' courses of study, and us, the WPAs who look after the teaching side of their careers. Even as graduate students rose up during the strike to remind the campus that they are both students *and* employees, our department culture and administrative structures continued to operate as if separating their scholarly and teaching pursuits were either sustainable or desirable.

Even in the best of times, this separation not only fragments graduate students' experience of their MFA or PhD programs, but it also exploits the structural inequities that uniquely burden those of us responsible for supervising their teaching and working conditions. In trying to manage the Hydra of crises during the pandemic and strike, this became toxic as we found ourselves at every critical juncture having to craft health, pandemic, and strike policies based only on vague announcements scattered across campus newsletters, town halls, Facebook discussions, and podcasts— emotionally exhausting work that often resulted in us becoming the face of confusing and unpopular policies for department colleagues and GSIs.

With minimal guidance from upper administrators, for example, we had to quickly draft new policies and processes for managing loosening mask mandates and covering classes if/when GSIs or their children became sick with Covid, including when to allow instructors to switch to Zoom at a time when the campus publicly insisted it was fully open for in-person business. Virtually overnight and without administrative assurance or support, we found ourselves in the impossible position of having to cobble together far-reaching instructional *and* public health policies for thousands of people. While many of the tenure-track faculty who preferred not to return to the classroom were able to continue teaching remotely, we and the GSIs had no such luxury. Given that our Gen Ed foundation courses serve as prerequisites for other courses and majors, the campus was especially watchful over our enrollments and on-campus presence, meaning we had little choice but to craft what we hoped were reasonable and humane policies that accounted for everything from potentially sick instructors to

students who ran afoul of the most recent mask or social-distancing mandates. Some GSIs and fellow faculty accused us at the time of putting students and instructors in harm's way. By being all the things, we inevitably fell short of almost everyone's expectations as our administrative responsibilities were constantly torn between the interests of our instructors and those of our undergraduates.

Looking back, we realize the isolation and mission creep we experienced was not unique to the pandemic. It was simply another turn of the screw wherein, as Adams Wooten et al.'s *The Things We Carry* documents, WPAs are innately positioned to absorb often-invisible burdens that, more and more, encompass forms of emotional labor and crisis response that exact a toll on exhausted faculty. Furthermore, as Kaitlin Clinnin reminds us, crisis response has become "an increasingly critical, albeit under-recognized, occupational responsibility of educators" (129). This is never truer than for WPAs who become, particularly during a long pandemic and strike, "programmatic crisis responders" acting "before, during, and after a crisis on behalf of the larger institution and the writing program" (132). For over two years, we created policies, triaged emergencies, and stood in the void to provide leadership to 100+ graduate students and postdocs teaching thousands of undergraduates, and we navigated the daily tensions and contradictions of the strike that often made us vulnerable to criticism from every side (the classic "damned if we do, damned if we don't"). Even as the GSIs justifiably (and with our support) advocated for the dignity of their labor, our labor was frequently taken for granted—assumed by the campus, department, and even by the GSIs to be limitless, boundaryless.

While such assumptions of WPA labor are not new, what the pandemic revealed was how the silos in our department fed the beast. Our fellow faculty were not ungrateful or uncaring; they were mostly unaware. What we needed was a way to better unify and leverage the various entities already committed to graduate student teaching and education. In other words, we needed more hands on deck—more colleagues and allies who could help us break down or work across long-standing silos and effectively integrate GSI teaching and labor into the department's structures and philosophy. In our own way, we came to much the same conclusion Sara Webb-Sunderhaus, another contributor to this issue, identifies in "Building Accessibility, Disabling Labor: Sustainable Models of WPA Work During a Pandemic," namely that supervising a massive body of GSIs during the pandemic forced us, "to [contest] the notion of the hyper-abled WPA (Yergeau) and disabling WPA work (Vidali) by distributing labor among various stakeholders in the composition program in ways that are equitable, interdependent, and diffuse." In our context, the major problem we needed to address

was both inwardly and outwardly directed: first, defining for ourselves and others where our responsibilities as WPAs begin and end, and then, building and equipping a coalition that incorporates more voices and expertise from stakeholders who share responsibility for graduate student training and education.

Connecting Silos, Crafting Hubs

Since that evening of gallows humor on Zoom, we have challenged ourselves to reimagine the siloed model in which we work that was so instrumental (and detrimental) to shaping our pandemic and strike experience. To better battle the multi-headed Hydra, we realized we needed to connect, to network, the silos with spokes and hubs. Silos exist, in part, because the information within a community isn't visible or accessible to those outside it. The Teaching Hub became one way to address this opacity and resulting isolation. Using our institution's Learning Management System (LMS), we built a robust platform to which all faculty and graduate students have access. The Teaching Hub centralizes our large and varied program's teaching infrastructure, making it open and intelligible. By bringing together things like course administration org charts, routine scheduling forms, eligibility criteria and course overviews, and modules for handling plagiarism cases, connecting students to support resources, and developing course proposals, The Teaching Hub serves as a single point of entry that visually and philosophically translates institutional complexity into something coherent and approachable. Better yet, it makes visible previously invisible aspects of our labor to non-WPA colleagues and GSIs, not to mention reduces GSIs' anxiety by giving them agency to find the answers they need.

The second hub we created is a standing committee of faculty directly responsible for graduate education and multi-course administration. This includes directors of our department's various graduate programs, such as the Director of Graduate Studies, Director of Creative Writing, and Director of Rhetoric alongside the faculty and staff responsible for GSI support. While we recognized the valid reasons our department historically delegated leadership along a line dividing those responsible for graduate students *as students* from those responsible for them *as instructors*, we felt these areas should be interlinked and sought our chair's support in establishing a committee that would support graduate students as whole people. Our committee's mission statement is simple: to foster a vibrant teaching community for graduate students by dismantling unproductive silos and working more efficiently and collectively to advocate within and outside the department for what our grads and multi-section courses need.

We will admit: initially, the organizational efforts of chartering and co-chairing this committee was more labor—yet another trade for our tired Jack. But in very short order, the committee has become a hub where we join together to inform, create, and move things forward. We meet monthly to address timely topics that cut across disciplinary lines and crowdsource not only our knowledge but influence. The DGS, for instance, can now more fully represent our collective concerns through their participation in the monthly DGS meetings hosted by the Dean's Office in the College of Arts & Sciences. Moreover, together, we craft (often modest) proposals for programming, policies, or resources that we take to the chair.

As another example, the committee recently took up the difficult topic of attendance in a post-pandemic landscape, where learning and retention languish. During our final meeting in spring 2023, this collaborative discussion became messy, even heated at times. In the end, however, the new committee structure helped us unearth important challenges and assumptions about policy language and different disciplinary applications and, most importantly, enabled us to build consensus around a new policy that would move the program away from penalizing absences to incentivizing the kind of active learning that not only supports writing development but also makes visible to students the efficacy of regularly participating in an engaged community of writers. Whereas during the pandemic and strike we would have been left alone to craft, implement, and enforce a new policy, with the committee we were now able to involve a range of voices to help us think through—and, yes, also explain and defend to audiences beyond our committee—the new policy and its rationale.

Our two "hubs" are modest but robust strategies that have begun addressing the isolation and curtailing (some of) the mission creep that accompanies WPA work in large R1 universities, which the pandemic only exacerbated. While these strategies by no means work in all contexts or address the many challenges WPAs face throughout the field, we offer them in the belief that understanding institutional structures and constraints is something all WPAs share regardless of where they teach and work. For many WPAs, the pandemic and its aftermath were stressful and exhausting, especially when we were called upon to be all things for everyone. And yet, at the same time, it also helped many of us—in this issue and throughout the field—to see our work from different angles and to realize we could innovate (sometimes modest) responses to challenges long entrenched within our department cultures. A silver lining to be sure, but one that has helped rejuvenate our two spirits after three long years of going it alone in the midst of so much chaos, uncertainty, and heartbreak.

Works Cited

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