When Too Much Really Is Too Much: On WPAing through the COVID Years

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2020: Preparation, Triage, and Pivoting, Pivoting, Pivoting

First were the rumors, the whispers that maybe campus would shut down after spring break, or maybe somehow everything would move online? It sounded implausible, impossible. WPAs stalked one another's feeds and DMs, seeking insight from other schools. How could we prepare for . . . whatever this was? It was awful, but I was on it.

I met with our full-time writing teachers to discuss options for our standard curricula in case we had to move online. Then I created a Google doc, "University Writing Program Policies and Advice for Teaching in the Time of Coronavirus," which included tips for online interaction and headings like "Keep Everything Human. Be Kind." I shared that evolving document with our 75 writing teachers (80% GTAs; 20% full-time teachers) a week before we got the lockdown and modality change news. When we shifted online, without any practical pedagogical guidance from the university, our writing program teachers were at least somewhat prepared.

As part of that initial pivot, I revised expectations for our existing teaching support teams for new GTAs and created additional teams to support experienced GTAs, including those who had left the writing program to teach creative writing for the semester. We did weekly wellness checks and lesson-plan swaps to keep everyone connected. I couldn't come up with a plan to help the GTA in the ICU on a respirator, but I got her class covered and managed to find funding to pay for that overload and continue her salary (she recovered).

Throughout this initial stage, I sought to "make space for carework and well-being" (CFP for this issue) for others, with some success. But I was burned out as a WPA *before COVID,* and a bit crispy from doing administrative assistant work, too. We'd lost ours four months prior and only replaced her two weeks before the lockdown began. According to my contract, I should have rotated out of the WPA role that summer, but the bureaucratic machine forbade a search for a new WPA. I had agreed to stay on for one more year (one that became three).

In April, the annual search I chaired to re-hire full-time teachers for one-year contracts was abruptly cancelled; I had to tell 13 then-full-time

instructors I couldn't hire them again. Those phone calls, made while sobbing and walking an endless loop in my neighborhood, haunted me for months. Telling people they would lose employment—and its accompanying health insurance—during a global pandemic was by far the most difficult thing I've ever had to do. Then, two days before their insurance ran out at the end of May, two of our three continuing lecturers, both pregnant, were laid off by our interim dean. I'd not been consulted or even told. I tried everything to get them hired back, but my power was nonexistent. Discovering in the fall that more than enough students had enrolled to fill every section all those teachers would have taught, but still not being allowed to hire them back, despite begging in countless emails, phone calls, and meetings, was devastating.

In mid-June our president announced that fall semester would be moved up by two weeks: the thinking was that if the semester ended by Thanksgiving, students could go home then and not return as disease vectors. Suddenly our two-week August orientation for GTAs would start in July, and classes would start the first week of August, not the third. I planned and re-planned that orientation, first as in-person, masked/distanced; then as a hybrid—one week online, another in person. Finally, after being allowed to hire one instructor, I met with her and our remaining lecturer in my garage and over Zoom to re-plan it entirely for Zoom. I went to our university's "hyflex" training, which offered basic online teaching tips, including gems like "learn students' names," but nothing specifically helpful for the Zoom + in-person "flex" teaching we ended up doing throughout 2020–2021.

After the intensity of spring 2020 and the early summer changes, I asked if I could take two weeks of earned vacation that summer. That request was denied: too many time-sensitive decisions being made. Maybe. While it's true that there were near-weekly "emergency" Friday evening Zoom meetings or calls with deans (interim and then new) and provosts that summer (the writing program always seemed to be the last thing on their lists for the week, perhaps for purely alphabetical reasons), with accompanying demands for acres of data from me "before Monday," that data was almost never used and typically no one even responded to anything I prepared. I was exhausted, but not allowed to rest—not for vacation, not even for weekends.

Because of the extra-early start in an already early-starting state, I was the first person I knew anywhere who was training new teachers or running classes fully on Zoom, learning as I went. With a paucity of university guidance, I was creating ad-hoc policies left and right. With publicized plans for in-person classes, yet with no COVID policies or signage in place by July 2020, I went into every writing classroom and taped off desks with

blue painter's tape from home to determine six-foot spacing, per CDC guidance. I had to have answers for questions like: Can students attend via Zoom instead of in person whenever they want? What do I do if a student gets COVID? What can I do if students don't wear masks? Can I get an accommodation to teach on Zoom from home? (The university required us to teach on Zoom, but to do so from the classroom because our classes were all "in person," even if no students, or very few students, showed up in person.)

Preparing teachers for these new permutations required constant puzzle-solving. Upper administration was not available to help, as they were dealing with budget cuts, layoffs, increased class sizes, and sometimes, increased teaching loads for no additional pay. At one memorably awful meeting, a member of the upper administration told English faculty that if we weren't willing to teach additional classes without compensation, we "didn't care about student learning."

I mention all of this not to put my university on blast, but to illustrate how the context here required the writing program to operate on its own—and we did. I did. Honestly, although it was incredibly stressful, difficult, and scary, it was also okay. I'm good at solving puzzles; I was used to making seemingly impossible situations work. I just kept doing that, and even experienced some small wins. In summer 2020 I convinced two incoming GTAs not to quit before they started, which felt like a win, and my (entirely Zoom-taught) pedagogy class in fall 2020 got its highest evaluations ever.

At 4pm the day before Thanksgiving, I was told to hire instructors off our cancelled April search list for spring-only, 15-credit workloads (not the 12 + mentoring norm). It was made clear that these offers needed to be made *before Monday*. I spent that evening and the Friday of Thanksgiving weekend calling people to offer them (admittedly less-than-desirable) positions. Many said no. One, a friend/colleague of five years, accepted, and then after she was officially hired a week later, called, emailed, and texted me a dozen times between 6 p.m. Sunday and 9 a.m. Monday, demanding various modifications and scheduling changes I could not make, until finally she yelled at me, hung up on me, and later that day, after I'd started researching how best to address the harassment I was experiencing, called back to quit.

I spent 2020 constantly trying to figure out how to keep our students and faculty feeling safe, connected to one another as humans, and reasonably functional at their studies/jobs. What I wasn't always doing, I see now, was making space for my own well-being—largely because of the constraints of the job, and partly because I'd fallen down the identify-as-your-role rabbit hole.

2021: Persistence, Pummeling, and Panic

At 11:30p.m., just before 2021 began, one of the GTAs I'd been so proud of convincing not to quit that summer emailed me a resignation—an unwelcome New Year's gift. The new semester opened with Omicron, renewed COVID fears, and newly revised program policies based on what we'd learned in fall. Not counting absences at all had proved disastrous for students, for example, so I'd modified the attendance policy again—for the third time in three semesters, but who's counting.

Part of persisting in 2021 meant picking up the assessment we'd scrapped for spring 2020: I spent hours on distance logistics and securing funding for participants. Inexplicably, this assessment led to another GTA quitting—the other GTA I'd previously convinced not to quit. I now see my "success" in retaining those hesitant GTAs as a mistake: staffing problems are more easily addressed in mid-summer than in January or March.

I kept pivoting and persisting, trying to do the right things and care for everyone in the chaos. In response to modality changes, I increased teaching support. In response to teacher concerns, I revised policies, held meetings, and extended my Zoom office hours. In response to the unrest and racial reckoning of the summer of 2020, I rewrote the standard curriculum and shifted the entire program to contract grading by fall 2021.

The hits kept coming, though: more modality changes; class caps raised from 19 to 24 the week before classes started (after upper administration had agreed to permanently lower them, and after I'd geared the revised curriculum specifically for the lower caps); GTAs were up in arms, sometimes for good reason, sometimes not; the GTA who lost his father to COVID—I encouraged him to cancel a week of class and sent him a gift card for a grocery store, wishing I could do more. A colleague in my department, but not in our field, whose well-meaning but wildly misplaced concern for GTAs led her to harass me about everything from GTA workloads to GTA hiring standards (as in: having any) to how I taught the practicum. It was a lot.

Hiring that spring was all but impossible: for GTAships, we got less than half the applications we normally would, and many more than usual declined offers, either initially or by the end of the summer. For full-time positions, we had fewer than a dozen applicants, even with national searches, and many who got offers said no. One said yes in May, only to quit two weeks later. I hired everyone I could, planned for an in-person orientation, and started to feel like things were getting back to "normal."

In July 2021, that miraculous month when things seemed safe, my family took a cross-country road trip, a real vacation, entirely sans work email! I would return the week before orientation. A week into vacation, my jaw

had stopped automatically clenching and I was getting enough sleep for the first time in a year and a half. Then my chair called. I inexplicably took that call while literally standing on the edge of a cliff—metaphors don't get much better than that. An instructor—and not just any instructor, but a longtime friend I had mentored for years—had quit. My chair wanted me to hire someone right then. Although I had previously hired people while on personal time—from outside a child's performance, in a Starbucks parking lot, at an airport—this time was different. Before, I'd had ranked lists of vetted people to call: this time there was no one.

I kept a small boundary up by refusing to spend my remaining vacation trying to hire someone, but I couldn't put a boundary up in my mind, which affected the rest of that trip. I was beyond shocked that the instructor/my friend had quit at all, much less so close to orientation and after we'd recently commiserated together about that year's hiring challenges. I was stunned that she had quit as she had, when she knew I was on vacation, without any advance hint about the possibility, despite our being close. As a supervisor in a place with low pay and a high cost of living, I've accepted several inconveniently timed in-person resignations, never with any ill will. I've offered congratulations or condolences, as the circumstances merited, and often a hug. None of those outcomes were possible this time. Further, I could no longer consider this person who dropped such a bombshell, and who didn't reach out with even a text once she knew I was back, my friend.

That dual loss, of an instructor and a friendship, was quickly followed by the news that Delta was rapidly and dramatically changing the COVID landscape again, threatening the optimistic plans I'd made for an in-person, masks-optional orientation. Suddenly everything was a question mark again, and I had to figure out how to prepare and pivot again. Only I couldn't.

Fresh from vacation, walking from my car to work for the first day of orientation prep meetings, I found myself in the throes of a full-blown panic attack, suddenly sobbing and gasping on my hands and knees on the sidewalk. I got myself together enough to reach my office, grateful I'd arrived early enough that no one saw me, collapsed again, and eventually backed myself into a ball between a filing cabinet and the wall and called counseling services.

I needed help, in every sense.

In addition to regular therapy, when told again there would be no search for a new WPA and that none of my tenured colleagues would take a turn, I started working in earnest on a shared-administration plan, with an associate director. I spent acres of time in 2021 and the first half of 2022 working out possible details, crafting multiple versions of one-page proposals.

I also continued to have panic attacks. I submitted research on other programs and peer institutions and met repeatedly with my chair and deans, even with a vice provost, to discuss, negotiate, and re-negotiate how it could all work. I argued the program's leadership would be more sustainable if it wasn't just one person writing a standard curriculum for 4000+ students and training and hiring every GTA and every faculty member and responsible for every question from every area of campus.

2022: Burnout is Institutional, Not Individual: Finally Passing the Baton

In fall 2022, I unexpectedly got my wish; I will no longer direct the program as of July 2023, and from then on there will be a director and an associate director, instead of a sole WPA. I won't benefit from any of the work I put in to making the program's administration a shared endeavor, but I'm glad the people who next run the program will have an easier time. I suppose I'm gratified that two people will replace one me, but it's hard not to take that as a bit of a slap in the face when I'd been asking for help and/or to be allowed to step aside for several years, with no relief.

Burnout is a real and growing problem in all of academia, not just in WPA roles, but WPAs are uniquely situated and therefore uniquely vulnerable. To be clear, burnout is not an individual failing. Instead, it is baked right into some jobs and contexts. Rebecca Pope-Ruark, a former English professor who wrote the most recent academic work on the phenomenon, explains in an *Inside Higher Ed* interview that burnout is, "a workplace problem that impacts individuals, not an individual-person problem that impacts institutions" (qtd. in Flannery). This perspective is helpful, especially for WPAs who tend to think they can solve any problem if they just work hard enough or in the right way.

Pope-Ruark also says, "we have to start looking at the culture" to change it, which, sure, but we also must use the options that already are/should be available (qtd. in Flannery). Although WPAs often hear "Once a WPA, always a WPA," that mantra doesn't mean we have to literally work as WPAs forever. Time-delimited contracts should be respected and honored on time; rotating out of WPA roles needs to be the norm. Regular rotation is a sanity-saving measure, one with benefits for outgoing as well as incoming WPAs. Regular rotation is also ultimately beneficial for programs, too, even if—maybe especially if—the prevailing mood is that a particular WPA is somehow indispensable.

I did good work as a WPA. I constantly advocated for those in less privileged positions. I crafted policies and curriculum carefully. I revised

curriculum and policies annually in response to feedback and assessments and to keep up with changes at the university and in the world. I trained and supported GTAs professionally as well as personally. Among my final accomplishments as WPA, I secured significant raises for our GTAs and got five previously term-limited instructors converted to more stable, much better-paying roles. I will never not feel proud of that work.

Although there are good outcomes and memories, too, a sentence I came across in a novel about witches readily maps onto my experience as a WPA at this institution: "to be a [WPA] is to be exploited when it's convenient and turned against when it isn't" (Manganna 22). Extricating myself from this role has been mentally exhausting and emotionally excruciating, largely because I held it for so long—and for three years after my term was over, against my wishes—that I melted into the identity. Pope-Ruark writes that after her breakdown, she, "eventually recognized that [she] was mourning … grieving for the [person] [she] used to be but would never be again" (55). I, too, am mourning that version of myself, that identity, even as I revel in the prospect of feeling free of the constant demands, misplaced blame, and oppressive responsibility. It is (past) time to pass the baton, and to hope that it's passed more easily and more often in the future, not only in my specific institutional context, but in everyone's.

WPA jobs looks different everywhere, but WPA roles are notoriously misunderstood, notoriously outsized, notoriously boundary-less (whether by design, demand, or [over]devotion), and notoriously Sisyphean. In a context where almost any choice can elicit outcries from students, writing faculty, GTAs, other colleagues, upper administration, parents, and/or the public, and where every hard-won success is at best temporary, eventual burnout is all but inevitable. Normalizing regular rotation is one way to help WPAs let go and protect them from burnout.

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