"But This Is Bullshit": Enforcing Boundaries as a Pregnant WPA

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In March 2020, I was seven months into my first WPA position at a small Catholic university and already feeling stretched thin. Although my title was director of writing across the curriculum (WAC), reflecting my dean's attempt to represent my work as that of directing a single program, in reality, I directed two: a first-year writing sequence and a fledgling WAC program that was founded the same semester I arrived on campus. The WAC program had been created under the auspices of a Title III federal grant, and with the grant reporting period already underway, administration was keen to document immediate progress in building the program. (This, for example, led to asking me to facilitate a summer faculty development workshop "on transforming writing intensive syllabi" one week before my start date.) Due to this administrative load and sky-high expectations to "hit the ground running," I'd had trepidations about taking the position, but trailing spouses must make do under emergent conditions. Less than a year earlier, my husband had matched into a gastroenterology fellowship across the country, and this was the only full-time job offer I'd received in our new city.

On top of this administrative context, I carried an untenable 3/3 teaching load. Class caps were low (18), but our student population was largely at-risk and majority first-gen. And although I was nominally appointed as an assistant professor, my institution lacked a system of tenure. I felt the chilling effect of this fulltime-yet-contingent position keenly, particularly as my administrative work made me directly answerable to a micromanaging, bullying dean who was himself answerable to a toxic, directive vice president for academic affairs. It was under these already unsustainable conditions—which later led to my leaving the institution after two and a half years on the job—that COVID hit.

I had always thought of my physician husband as the person in our household that had to be mindful of bodies. But now, I could think of little else as I warily continued to commute to campus in early March, listening to NPR reports of Italy's cataclysmic conditions. The bodies of our students, whom I implored to wash their hands, two of whom soon disclosed that they had chronic conditions and were afraid to keep coming to campus. The bodies of the first-year writing (FYW) adjuncts, many of whom were over 65, some of whom also disclosed medical conditions or their

roles as caregivers to at-risk family members. That of my husband, who was potentially going to be redeployed from his gastroenterology inpatient service to the emergency department or the COVID ICU. My own newly pregnant body. I was still in my first year on the job, trying to figure out how to even be a WPA, and now I felt newly responsible for everyone connected to FYW in a whole new and overwhelming way.

When campus shut down on March 16, I was relieved for everyone's bodily safety but now found our program in a newly vulnerable position. Faculty were asked to pivot online on four days' notice without any days off from instruction, and I knew many of the adjuncts staffing FYW were completely ill at ease with technology. Meanwhile, some of our students did not have laptops at home, spaces conducive to work, or even internet connections. One of my students video-conferenced with me with a TV blaring, seated between a toddler and her grandmother. Another was commuting to a cousin's house to use Wi-Fi, and still another couldn't stream video on his slow connection, speaking with me over the phone instead. The very bodies I was so keenly aware of were now worryingly isolated from one another via faulty connections and uneven access. If I was so disconnected from my own students, how were the rest of the FYW faculty and students faring?

WPAs are accustomed to playing a role of hyper-competency, and so amid the relief-then-scramble of lockdown, I started asking myself what, as a WPA, I was "supposed" to be doing. How should I be actively directing the program? I should have realized every WPA likely felt as lost as I did in this genuinely unprecedented moment, as other reflections in this issue suggest. But still I felt an internal pressure, fueled equally by imposter syndrome and an internal drive to be a helper, to offer my instructors unflappable guidance so they wouldn't feel adrift in the absence of leadership from the top. I'd seen WPA friends post to social media copies of emails they'd sent to their own programs, full of reassurance and pragmatic points of advice. So, I composed my own email, compiling resources (links to Facebook groups like "Pandemic Pedagogy"), tidbits on best practices for teaching online scraped from viral academic Twitter threads, and advice like "be kind" and "keep it simple." With the pressures mounting from every direction, for every one of us, I worked to hold a stiff upper lip, holding myself to a higher standard than I expected from my instructors or experienced from my upper administration.

Somehow, we muddled through the spring semester and moved into both summer and my second trimester. We were no longer in emergency lifeboat territory (Krause); now we needed to build more seaworthy vessels for the fall semester. But even in "normal" times, my position provided no

summer compensation for work that was required to keep the FYW program running: interviewing and then onboarding adjunct faculty hires, watching enrollment and adjusting the FYW schedule, updating FYW syllabus templates and Blackboard shells, and creating curricular materials. Now on top of this labor I also needed to help faculty—many of whom had never touched Blackboard in previous semesters except to upload their syllabi—learn how to teach online for real in the fall. I also continued to worry about their bodily safety: administration was pushing for in-person sections in the fall but gave instructors the option to request online sections if they or a family member were at risk. My own request to teach virtually was immediately approved due to my pregnancy, but I knew the adjuncts who staffed just about every one of our FYW sections were feeling pressure not to make requests of their own. Like Teresa Grettano (this issue), I encouraged and facilitated the request process for them. However, unlike Grettano, I had virtually no resources to support those faculty professionally.

I remember looking on in jealousy at friends and colleagues at other institutions who had access to summer development programming to meet the demands of online education. We had no support for online pedagogy, only instrumentalist tutorial sessions from IT (e.g., how to use MS Teams), but even those sessions didn't meet my adjuncts' needs with learning the technology. Once again, I saw this gap between resources and need as my responsibility to fill with my unpaid time and energy. In between daily walks around our Philadelphia neighborhood and prenatal appointments, I scheduled extra meetings. I recorded and uploaded video tutorials. I individually walked instructors through things like designing their Blackboard course and, both memorably and unsuccessfully in one MS Teams call, how to use the mute/unmute function. I continually clarified ever-shifting mandates from administration for my "freeway flyers." I sent out scores of emails about free workshops and resources offered by GSOLE (Global Society of Online Literacy Educators). As I wrote in an email to a mentor, "I've tried to fill in gaps as best as I could, but it's all an individual battle against a systemic issue."

Indeed, the pandemic was lifting the veil on my institution's many years of under-investment in both its instructors and its previous FYW coordinators, whose insufficient release time had hampered their ability to keep a close eye on what was happening in classrooms. Coming into my position, I had thought I had an established FYW program that could run smoothly on its own while I concentrated on building the WAC program. Now the pandemic was both revealing and exacerbating many long-standing needs in FYW: the curriculum, itself in need of a refresh to better meet student

needs, was being delivered unevenly across sections. Although many instructors were incredibly competent, I observed two class meetings that were entirely lecture-based (one only actively engaging students in a multiple-choice grammar quiz). Placeholder language (like "introduce yourself here") I had built into the Blackboard course template was visible to students in several published course shells. These needs felt difficult to ignore and yet unsustainable to address alone (see also Wilkes, Mina, and Poblete).

We WPAs routinely normalize our individual efforts to compensate for lack of leadership from the top (see also Kim Hensley Owens, this issue). Perhaps this is because writing program administration can, at baseline, resemble the work of managing crises, as many stories attest in *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration* (Adams Wooten et al.). Often, our pragmatic response to reflecting on crises is to consider strategies for better preparing ourselves and our programs for the next crisis to come. But I want to ask a different question: instead of only considering what we can *do*, what is our ethical limit for doing? As Laura R. Micciche writes in her foreword to *The Things We Carry*, "What's important to say is that we need to take better care of each other and of ourselves *when* (not *if*) something terrible happens" (xi). How might we better account for our own well-being?

The only option available to me before ultimately joining the Great Resignation the following year was to change my philosophical approach to my work: to think in terms of limits, rather than needs. We WPAs tend to be "fix-it" type people, but in the face of such unfixable realities and in the additional embodied context of my pregnancy, I found surprising strength to clarify for myself what I would and would not give to the job.

My pregnancy was a constant physical and emotional reminder of limits. It made me incredibly fatigued because of all the internal changes my body was enduring as well as the insomnia (a very common pregnancy symptom). When I overexerted myself physically—by walking too far or simply not drinking enough water sitting at my desk—I experienced Braxton Hicks contractions (pains that mimic the feeling of labor). Before pregnancy, I might sometimes push past the point of comfort to meet a goal: perhaps sitting too long at a desk without moving and stretching because I'm "just about" to finish what I'm working on. But in pregnancy my body had become a shared space, and my limits were being reset in ways that I was constantly having to relearn.

Sometimes I needed to take time for prenatal yoga in my living room to find relief for my aching hips; oftentimes I needed to nap during work hours to recover from overnight insomnia. I had to attend scores of medical appointments. I had to find time and energy to research cribs and bassinets

and buy onesies and diapers. I needed to devote mental and emotional space and energy to the upcoming and radical shift in our family life that our first child would bring. Hormonal changes heightened my desire to distance myself from stressful situations—a well-founded protective instinct in hindsight, given the biomedical evidence associating maternal stress with poor outcomes for birth, fetal development, and even childhood health (e.g., Hobel, Goldstein, and Barrett; Mulder et al.; van den Bergh et al.). My awareness of the new life growing within me drove a deep want, even need, to hold space for *joy* in my day-to-day life. Beyond my deeply felt responsibility for the teaching and learning happening in the writing programs, as well as the well-being of the faculty and students who comprised them, I needed to attend to my own life, too.

I soon became grateful for the work-life balance these new limits imposed on me (see also Kate Pantelides on the value of personal interruptions like parenting in WPA work). They gave me the perspective I needed to step back from what was happening and whisper to myself, "but this is bullshit." To understand that one more workshop, meeting, handout, or email wasn't going to address the problems I faced. To realize that I had been handed a garden hose to tend to an institution and world on fire—fires that had been perpetuated at my institution by the persistent de-valuing of a program that has an outsized effect on the retention and persistence of our first-year students.

WPAs don't exist in isolation from larger ecosystems, yet this mindset is pernicious. As Courtney Adams Wooten reminds us, we often "naturaliz[e] sacrifice of our selves to the greater cause of the writing program as a part of our happiness scripts that is obviously potentially destructive" (275). It has become commonplace for WPAs to do what we know we can't sustain: placing the program before our own selves. My pregnancy helped me to recognize that I couldn't be a lone hero figure holding outside forces at bay (Charlton et al.; Hancock and Reid; Reid; Vidali; see also Cicchino, Snyder, and Szymanski, this issue). I couldn't individually propel our writing programs from institutional neglect and lack of resources any more than I could will away Braxton Hicks contractions. Through my pregnancy and the subsequent birth of my son, I acknowledged the unfixable, set limits and boundaries, and, eventually, found the strength to walk away.

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