Building Effective Arguments about Writing Class Size and Workload

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Abstract

Our field has long recognized the value of keeping writing classes small; however, the reality in most institutions does not match these values and WPAs often struggle to successfully advocate around class size and workload. With this struggle in mind, we conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty WPAs from a variety of institution types about their experiences advocating for their programs around class size and workload. Using a Burkean framework, we explore the challenges humanist-oriented WPAs faced while advocating with neoliberal-oriented administrators as well as a variety of rhetorical strategies they harnessed to make progress, such as identifying and building on administrative priorities and partnering with other departments and units.

Class size has long been a point of contention between writing teachers, WPAs, and upper administration. Members of CCCC, CWPA, and other writing organizations have long recognized the value of keeping writing classes small, a value reflected in statements such as the *CCCC Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing* statement. With larger classes and higher teaching loads the norm in many places, many have found that such statements have little sway with upper administrators looking to writing programs to cut costs. As Cassandra Phillips and Greg Ahrenhoerster note, "We knew, however, that there was little hope of meeting these recommendations" in part because they were already well above those thresholds and because the proposed budget cuts were "dramatic" (10). Nonetheless, as Alice Horning pointed out in 2007, there is not "a solid empirical study to demonstrate, once and for all, that smaller classes help students become more effective writers in college" (11). As we will discuss in more detail below, Horning's point is still very much a reality today—whereas there have been a variety of studies on the impact of class size on students and faculty in a variety of fields, there is still not definitive evidence that smaller class sizes boost student success as defined by passing and graduation rates, metrics that administrators often most care about.

The present study does not provide that definitive answer. As we will discuss, a variety of contextual nuances (e.g., institution type, leadership, community values) can make that answer largely elusive. Moreover, it is

evident that administrators are not always swayed by the results of meticulous research. They are often driven more by their own interests, policy goals set at the state level, or budgetary constraints. With these limitations in mind, we set to build on existing work about WPA advocacy to investigate the ways that WPAs have successfully and unsuccessfully advocated for smaller class sizes and how their work has been shaped by various contextual factors. Ultimately, we believe that by learning how our colleagues from around the country have made the case for smaller class sizes, WPAs can more effectively learn to frame our arguments in ways that administrators find convincing (Adler-Kassner, *Activist*).

Research on Class Size

There have been a variety of smaller studies as well as meta-analyses on the impact of class size on teaching and learning in K-12 and higher education contexts over the years—some focused explicitly on writing classes while other work focused more broadly on general education programs or institutions as a whole. These studies have coalesced around a few different areas: impact on grades and retention rates (Ake-Little, von der Embse, and Dawson; Diette and Raghav; Glau; Kokkelenberg, Dillon, and Christy), impact on student satisfaction (Cuseo; Bedard and Kuhn; Queen), and impact on pedagogical choices (e.g., Lee; Roberts-Miller, "Class Size"; "Class Size Another"). Whereas this research hasn't produced consistent and compelling evidence that smaller classes lead to greater student retention, the findings are consistent that students prefer smaller classes.

One finding is clear for writing instructors, however—the larger the class, the less time that teachers have giving students the individualized feedback that is so central to our courses. Richard Haswell calculated that a teacher spending adequate time giving feedback on student work would hit overtime hours if teaching only three writing classes a semester. Horning points to limited evidence that revision and feedback are more likely to happen in smaller classes, explaining how this is in part simple economics: "The more time teachers spend grading and conferencing, the less they are getting paid" (18).

WPA Advocacy

Recognizing that the research on class size has produced mixed results, especially around the impact of small class sizes on student retention, and that this work has been further complicated by a post-pandemic broad increase in drop rates, this study has focused more on WPA advocacy around class size and workload. There has been a rich history of WPAs

exploring the ways they have successfully navigated institutional politics in advocating for their programs. In an oft-cited piece, Edward M. White makes the compelling case that WPAs often have more power than they think, and that powerlessness can be a mindset connected to our field's inherent aversion to the power structure and to wielding power. As White notes, a WPA resignation is often the worst-case threat to administration but often administrators are inclined to avoid that scenario because "A well-run composition program is a power base, since it frees administrators from what they fear most: constant harassment from discontented students and faculty" (11). Despite White's argument, Laura R. Micciche's feeling that the "WPA's authority and power are challenged, belittled, and seriously compromised every step of the way" (434) seems to be a more common feeling. As she and others illustrate, WPAs are often hired in more contingent positions that may not have the power of someone tenured nor the advantageous positionality of being a white male that White described. Moreover, as Andrea Dardello, Collin Lamont Craig, and Staci Perryman-Clark have detailed across various publications, BIPOC WPAs are likely to experience more scrutiny and challenging of their authority, having to do more work than white counterparts to establish their authority.

Making the similar argument that retaliation against WPAs is often invisible and also commonplace, Rita Malenczyk argues for a stronger alliance with the American Association of University Professors, as "historically it has had a good deal to do with how disciplinary expertise is perceived, honored, and protected" (22). Linda Adler-Kassner's (*Activist*; "Companies") work on advocacy among WPAs has been influential, especially her book *The Activist WPA*, in which she regularly references a Karl Llewellyn quote to argue that "Strategies without ideals is a menace, but ideals without strategies is a mess [sic]" (5). Explaining that WPAs are often up against powerful forces, she discusses a variety of strategies they can use to build alliances and reframe conversations to advocate their programs' interests. Similarly, Bruce Horner considers the importance of keeping our values as a central part of what we do and argues that we have to be strategic in how we invoke these values, lest we invoke values that "effectively undermine" our positions (163). Sticking to our values is all the more important and challenging in an era in which the neoliberalization of higher education has manufactured crises that have stripped programs and departments of their resources and has reduced the possibilities for true shared governance (Scott; Welch).

Throughout the past few decades, we have seen a variety of WPAs describe ways they have been strategic in advancing their programs, sometimes turning top-down state mandates into transformative work.

For instance, Rhonda Grego and Nancy S. Thompson narrate how they responded to their state's higher education commission's rejection of non-credit classes to create the studio model, a model that has become a staple in composition programs throughout the country. Elsewhere Heidi Estrem, Dawn Shepherd, and Samantha Sturman describe the problematic advocacy of Complete College America (CCA) and how they "were able to leverage the CCA 'game changer' into a change that mattered to us and to our students: replacing non-credit-bearing remedial courses with credit-bearing options that provide additional support" (60). Other WPAs discuss how they have drawn on kairotic moments at their own institutions to affect change. Kimberly Gunter narrates how a major revision of her institution's core curriculum, combined with a strong tradition of shared governance, enabled their program to shift away from an overwhelming dependance on adjunct labor to continuing faculty positions, with the latter expected to have greater expertise in rhetoric and composition. Of particular relevance to our study, she explained how advocacy for full-time positions has long been a central focus of her work: "low course caps matter little if faculty teach eight classes across three institutions, and professional development falters if only 20% of faculty attend workshops. Full-time lines, then, seemed to supersede everything" (65).

Methodology

The following research questions guided the collection and analysis of data for this study:

1. How do WPA and administrator orientations shape what arguments around workload and class size tend to be successful and unsuccessful?
2. How do contextual factors shape the ways WPAs make arguments around class size with administration?

Because of our stated interest in advocacy work, which is complex and deeply contextual, we determined that in-depth interviews instead of surveys were the most effective way of addressing our research questions. Analysis of interviews was combined with an analysis of written advocacy documents that participants were willing to share.

We initially recruited participants for this IRB-approved study (Protocol #1718003) through an open call on the Writing Studies listserv, which was followed by some targeted recruitment (through individual contacts as well the Teaching English in the Two-Year College listserv) aimed at

increasing the representation of institution types. We conducted interviews with participants at twenty different institutions, which are listed in table 1.

Table 1
Participant Background]

Participant	Location	Type	Special Designation	Approximate Enrollment
Matthew	MW	regional state university (RSU)		20,000
Steve	MW	RSU		30,000
Andrew	MW	two-year college (TYC)		>50,000
Justin	MW	TYC		5,800
Dana and team (5 total)	MW	TYC		4,500
Lisa	MW	private liberal arts college (PLAC)		2,000
John	MW	Top-tier research university (R1)		40,000
Amy	S	RSU		20,000
Julie	S	RSU		35,000
Larry	S	private university (PU)		8,000
Paul	S	RSU	HBCU	3,000
Ethan	S	R1		33,000
Katherine	S	R1	HSI	>50,000
Kathy	W	TYC	HSI	7,500
Kurt	W	RSU	HSI	4,000
Laura	W	RSU		22,000
Madelyn	W	TYC		10,000
Frank	W	R1	HSI	30,000
Kevin	W	R1		>50,000
Jacob	W	TYC	HSI	20,000

As evident in table 1, we obtained decent geographical and institutional representation, interviewing WPAs at large nationally renowned research universities as well as two-year colleges of varying sizes. However, despite repeated attempts to reach out to WPAs at several HBCUs, we were only

able to interview one participant from an HBCU, a point we raise in the discussion; similarly, we were not able to interview anyone at a Native Serving Institution, although Frank came from an institution that had a sizeable Native student population.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, semi-structured, and included nineteen questions centered in three areas: general background, which asked about their experience and status at their particular institutions and general ways they have advocated for their programs; class size background, which solicited information on class sizes and workloads at their institutions and their attitudes towards smaller class sizes in general; and building arguments around class size, which focused on exploring the arguments they've made with administration about class size and what arguments have been more successful than others. Interviews lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes, with an average of sixty-five minutes.

Interviews were initially auto-transcribed by Zoom. We then listened to and edited transcripts for accuracy and identified some themes during this processing phase: kairos, campus culture, leadership norms, labor, departmental contradictions, administrative background, selective receptivity, regional culture, and faculty priorities. This list was developed deductively (by drawing on our aforementioned framework) and inductively (through the review of transcripts). As we re-read the transcripts, we identified passages that spoke to these themes and collated a list of these passages for each interview.

A Burkean Framework

The notion of worldview, or *weltanschauung*, has been a central frame for the analysis and presentation of data in this article. Kenneth Burke understood *weltanschauungen* as primarily linguistic phenomena and describes these distinct worldviews as "orientations." An orientation is a network of symbolic associations which Burke describes as "a bundle of judgements as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be" (*Permanence and Change* 14). For Burke, orientations arise as human beings habitually sort and classify experiences and behaviors by placing them into more general categories based on their resemblance to one another. Different groups will categorize experiences differently based on what each sees as the outstanding features of those experiences.

Burke holds that differences in orientation are primarily rooted in the material realities of sustenance and production. As different social groups and communities engage in different occupational methods of survival, unique, systematic approaches to life and its challenges arise. Burke

describes these differences as "occupational psychoses," a term which describes how habits originally established in the context of specific occupations are "carried over into other aspects of . . . culture" (*Permanence and Change* 38). Thus, orientation displays a unique set of conceptual limitations which Burke dubs "trained incapacity," concerning which he observes that "A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing—a focus upon object A involves a neglect of object B" (*Permanence and Change* 49).

Although each orientation is uniquely fitted with a certain skill set to accomplish particular aims, there lies a temptation to apply that skill set to as many situations as possible. Thus, rival orientations come into conflict in their characterization of problems and their proposals for solutions. In historically remote times, this rivalry was, according to Burke, kept in check by the relatively limited number of different occupations (and consequently, orientations) within traditional societies. The modern period, however, exhibited an explosion of occupational diversity, which, in turn, demanded a universal language of value which could be implemented by societal leaders attempting to organize cooperative endeavors among subjects situated within different orientations. Money, being capable of representing and thus subsuming all other forms of value, has increasingly become the only value by which rival orientations can express ideas, concerns, goals, problems, and solutions to one another.

Although originally intended to serve as a point of mediation between rival orientations, we suggest that the neutralized, pragmatic language of "economic efficiency" which largely dominates institutional discourse today, and which easily justifies economic reductivism, has evolved into an orientation all of its own: neoliberalism. As we have seen, each orientation exhibits a "trained incapacity" in tending to apply its primary skill set to an ever-increasing range of situations, even those situations well beyond the original purview of the orientation's occupational basis (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 49). Neoliberalism, as a unique orientation, exhibits an impressive set of techniques and practices regarding managerial expertise and bureaucratic "efficiency," and yet has become incapable of appreciating rival values such as the humanist concerns for self-expression, civil responsibility, and personal wellbeing.

Findings

Navigating Occupational Psychosis in the Neoliberal University

As we conducted our interviews, it became immediately apparent that many WPAs were concerned about a phenomenon we have dubbed "neoliberal creep": the process by which campus culture and communications

are gradually saturated with neoliberal language and thinking, a theme discussed by Welch and Scott. As a result of neoliberal creep, interactions between administrators, instructors, and students becomes increasingly transactional and businesslike, and administrators display an increased focus on marketing, branding, and the economic bottom line.

In this environment, WPAs struggle to have their own concerns heard; since their concerns are frequently rooted in a rival humanist orientation, these concerns are often normatively unintelligible to upper administrators. For instance, Andrew from a Midwest two-year college (TYC) recounted the way that upper administrators seemed unable to understand his viewpoint and rapidly translated his ethical appeals into an economic lexicon: "You're asking for fewer students, [and] I think sometimes what they hear is 'I want less work for the same pay' . . . . They want to quantify it that way, as opposed to starting with the position that . . . what we have now is broken." This intelligibility gap between rival paradigms is also a factor when considering pathetic rhetorical strategies. In another interview, John at a Midwest public R1 indicated that attempting to publicly shame his dean for a heartless indifference to quality of education proved fruitless: "[The shaming] button doesn't seem to work . . . it's all about the numbers with him." This minimization of humanist considerations, and a redirecting of attention to 'numbers,' was a theme addressed by multiple interviewees. Kurt, at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) RSU, recounted a similar scenario with his provost: "he goes 'I'm an engineer, I'm a numbers guy.' I've had people kind of mock [him] for it because he says it so much."

From multiple interviews, it seemed that administrators drawn from STEM fields might be particularly vulnerable to, or eager to employ, the neoliberal trope of reducing complex issues to numbers, which connects to Burke's description of the morally neutralized language of efficiency as a language "designed for machines" (*Permanence and Change* 58). This pattern, in turn, seems related to the low status of non-STEM fields generally. As Frank, from a public R1 HSI in the West, noted, "there's a tendency across academia and the rest of the world to mistrust the recommendations and the knowledge of other fields." Frank, like several other interviewees, refers to the resistance upper administrators displayed to the expertise and authority of writing studies scholarship. Hence, disciplinary sequestering, combined with the concentration of cultural capital in STEM fields, appears to further exacerbate the breakdown in communication between rival orientations in the academy. What results is the dominance of a morally impoverished language of valuation marshalled for neoliberal purposes. Utilizing a phrase that surfaced in multiple interviews, Dana and team

from a Midwest TYC summarized the situation succinctly: "[Our administration] is all butts in seats and dollars in the bank."

It is evident that a neoliberal system perpetuates societal divides between the haves and have nots, which is manifested in the marginalization of HBCUs and TYCs and their students, as expressed by some participants. As Paul, from an HBCU in the South, noted, administrators at his institution counted on the fact that their largely first-generation college student population meant that several students would drop in the first part of the semester, reducing their real course sizes closer to twenty (from twenty-four) and ignoring arguments that instructors could possibly retain more students if starting at a lower cap. Paul's limited success in advocacy certainly stems in part from the position of his institution as an HBCU in a system that has traditionally and continues to place a lower value on BIPOC bodies. As he explained, "so we're definitely disadvantaged, I mean you go across town to [another public institution that serves more white students] and they're there at you know twenty-three students in comp to our twenty-six, well now twenty-five, and you have their faculty making ten grand a year less on average, same town you know." He explained the history of this campus across town, noting that it had been converted into a branch campus of a larger state institution, with that particular campus started in the 1940s to serve white students who did not want to attend school with Black students.

Similarly, it was evident that TYCs, which tend to serve higher percentages of first-generation students and BIPOC students, were often in marginalized positions compared to other state institutions. For instance, Jacob, working at a TYC in a reliably Democratic state in the West, noted that while he thought the CCCC recommendations were spot on, he said, "I am not at all confident or believe that they're realistic for my institution." He then detailed how the classes in the state flagship system, which serves the top students in the state, were capped at twenty-one, wondering why "does that top 10% then get like these smaller class sizes" when they are the "people who need it the least." Following Paul's comments above, we were also more likely to see larger class sizes justified at TYCs because students are expected to drop and bring the class sizes down.

Catherine Chaput has described the way branding has become a crucial technique of contemporary neoliberalism. This neoliberal enthusiasm for branding can leave WPAs quite literally disoriented, as recounted by Laura, at a Western RSU: "I was just from another meeting where they talked about the brand of GenED. Like, I guess I haven't really thought about our brand. Maybe I should have." Nonetheless, increasing considerations of branding can at times provide WPAs with opportunities for advocacy.

Elsewhere, Kurt (Western RSU HSI) described a period in which the upper administrators of his university were willing to lower class sizes for the sake of such branding: "They wanted that fodder for some like pamphlet or some web page or some commercial because, because, again with this whole revamping thing there's been a lot of like energy and action in that regard, like branding and creating materials and pointing to things like that." Thus, although the neoliberal focus on branding and advertisement rarely corresponds with the humanist goal of providing an excellent education, it can be important for WPAs to think critically about branding and both the threats and opportunities it poses for advocacy work.

In our interviews, we observed some WPAs attempting to thread the rhetorical needle by implementing *both* languages of value associated with the humanist and neoliberal orientations respectively. Julie, at a RSU in the South, noted, "I don't say standardization, either. I will say standardization for administration when they asked things. When I'm talking to faculty colleagues, I say consistency." On the other hand, Justin (Midwest TYC) was wary of employing the neoliberal language of valuation because it is a losing battle:

> Like let's say full time faculty have a slightly higher pass rate: it's never going to be high enough to justify the cost, if you look at it purely in terms of economics . . . it will always be cheaper to have an adjunct professor for $5,000 than it is a full-time professor for $75,000. Always, always, always. So, I don't want to I don't want to make it about money . . . because once we enter into the like "what's economically efficient [argument]," nope we've lost.

Thus, while it may be tempting for WPAs to do the work of translating their concerns and goals into the language of the neoliberal orientation, doing so can deprive their arguments of their authenticity and unique moral weightings, a concern expressed by Bruce Horner elsewhere. By relocating their appeals into the language of the neoliberal orientation, such WPAs would risk their arguments (and even their subjectivities) becoming neutralized and co-opted.

Another important factor to consider is when and how WPAs might cunningly force upper administrators to shift orientational lexicons. One example is given by Justin (Midwest TYC) as he describes efforts to lower the cap for remedial FYW courses. Justin recounts how he disingenuously and publicly stated the assumption that upper administrators held student learning as their highest priority, noting that "it's a— it's a way for us to kind of take the moral high ground and try to moralize and shame our administrators into decreasing the class sizes in the name of teaching [and]

learning." Justin later indicated that although this move could be effective, its power might be depleted from overuse. In our estimation, in applying this strategy, WPAs might (if only momentarily) force upper administrators to conceptually inhabit an alternative orientation; and this may counter, or at least stall, the process of neoliberal creep. However, in estimating the broad applicability of this strategy, our optimism is tempered by considering John's earlier assertion that upper administrators have often so deeply internalized the neoliberal orientation so as to be un-shameable.

Unfortunately, this process of 'neoliberal creep' appears to be accelerating. John, at an institution with a president narrowly focused on keeping tuition costs low, described the way that his dean formed an alternative "shadow English department," run out of his own office, which supplied larger, inferior courses which met the requirements for FYW. John likens this process to Costco creating a cheaper Kirkland alternative:

> Walmart, Target, everyone does that, they'll have a competitor brand . . . well that's kind of what this this program is. It's like English department, you don't want to do this? We've got this competitor program over here that you know we're gonna run out of the dean's office so, you know. So they're always like well if you don't want to do it, we'll just add more sections over here. You know the thing is, though, students generally don't want to take a course like the one they're describing; they'd rather take an English course, but if they're mandated to take it, they will take it.

Thus, not only the language but also the managerial strategies of neoliberalism have begun to invade the university, yielding an ever-weakening bargaining position for faculty, and an inferior learning experience for students. It is noteworthy that John's dean employs a social scientist ethos to argue that he is data-focused, but, according to John, it is "clear that he is making arbitrary decisions." In short, administration can be dismissive of data when it works counter to their goals but happily make a claim to data when supporting them.

In sum, it quickly became apparent that WPAs conceived of and recounted their interactions with upper administrators in terms of rival worldviews, not only regarding class size and workloads but, more broadly, regarding the value and purpose of education and the university. WPAs consistently endorsed a humanist conception of education which emphasized the development of voice for the sake of communal and political participation. Contrarily, WPAs described upper administrators as committed to a notion of university success that minimized concerns about students'

intellectual and cultural development, instead exhibiting a focus on bureaucratic and economic "efficiency" (i.e., a neoliberal approach).

WPA Rhetorical Strategies

As evident from the discussion in the previous section, WPAs learn to read the politics of their individual institutions and the values of those in managerial roles, conscious of adapting their discourses as they advocate for the various individuals in their programs. In this section, we would like to highlight some additional strategies that WPAs employed: identifying and building on administrative priorities, building partnerships across campus, recognizing that suffering should be shared, and drawing on community values.

Identifying and building on administrative priorities. WPAs have long been aware of their marginalized positioning in the institution and how their program advocacy is often ignored, even when backed with meaningful research and disciplinary recommendations that were included in a number of the documents that interviewees shared with us. As Paul (South HBCU) bluntly stated, "all the advocacy and all the stuff that I thought was very compelling didn't do a damn thing with the old guy." Similarly, Kathy at a TYC in the West explained that their "president is very strong and has made the decision that the financial aspects are what is most salient right now," and never anticipated having any traction on lowering class sizes without a change in leadership: "I think the advocacy is important, but I think, who we have in place administration-wise also makes such a difference." It is perhaps unsurprising then that several of our participants discussed the value of tying their class size and workload advocacy into broader administrative priorities, an approach that aligns with Burke's argument that persuasion happens primarily through identification: "You persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you talk his language . . . *identifying* your ways with his" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 55).

For instance, Lisa at a Midwest private liberal arts college, explained how her institution was launching a new first-year studies program, and that the administration capped these courses at fifteen to incentivize people to teach them. New at the institution, she planned to "ride the coattails" of that initiative to argue for similar caps in all writing intensive courses. Elsewhere, Andrew (Midwest TYC) explained how two statewide task forces on composition success rates had made recommendations around class sizes and workloads but had limited success affecting change across campuses. However, the vice chancellor at his institution was inclined to try the recommended changes, in part because of another initiative happening at the

same time: increasing the number of eight-week courses so students could take more courses in a given semester. As Andrew noted, "When that came out that was just a higher priority than everything else." He continued,

> there was an administrative concession made with our department which was "okay well when we start running these courses in this eight-week format, I will allow you to reduce the cap from twenty-four to eighteen." And then we were also able to squeeze in a reduction from twenty-four to twenty-one in the sixteen-week modality.

As Kurt noted in a different case, negotiations like these allow institutional leaders to take credit to other constituencies as they are able to trumpet the success of their initiatives: "the provost ended up bragging about the idea at the Board of Governors meeting." In a similar vein, some participants noted how administrators could be motivated by the boost to a *US News & World Report* ranking that comes with more classes at nineteen or fewer students or winning a particular award for innovation in education. Interest in these ratings or awards varied by institutional type, with WPAs from two-year colleges or regional colleges noting that their administrations tended to care little about national rankings.

Building partnerships across campus. Another strategy that several participants mentioned was building partnerships across campus. Matthew explained how their program worked with a variety of offices across campus, including the General Education Program, Office of Assessment, Institutional Research, and the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. These partnerships gave him more resources to demonstrate the impact of well-delivered small classes on student success, an argument that was successful when made in conjunction with others:

> Partnering with a number of other offices has really been crucial in saying well it's not just me and it's not just my discipline, the NCTE guidelines etc., CCCC. It's other units on campus all working actively to provide a framework that's institution-wide for what we do that shows that we're not in isolation and we're not just one hungry baby bird begging for resources.

Elsewhere, Andrew (Midwest RSU) explained how partnering with other programs could provide joint leverage in advocating for change. He explained how they formed an alliance with the Communications department as they lowered their course caps from thirty to twenty-one based on the argument that the need for so many students to deliver speeches really cut into instructional time. He focused in on student conferences in writing classes in making a similar argument. He furthered this argument by

tying into administrative concerns over student success, noting that "forging those relationships between the instructor and the student was critical to ensuring that student success."

Another partnership that some people found valuable was with faculty unions, although these partnerships could go both ways, as some faculty defined equity narrowly. At one institution, Steve explained how the union was an asset in negotiating multi-year contracts for contingent faculty. However, both Madelyn and Justin, working at two-year colleges in different parts of the country, found that their unions failed to account for the nuance in workloads across disciplines. Madelyn explained,

> the union tries its best to say "all for one and one for all," but when you have a faculty teaching five classes or more, and the faculty member does not lecture nor does the faculty member read anything students write versus an English department faculty member who has to read some writing, there are great disparities.

Justin made a similar point when noting that the union was conscious about making smaller class sizes a constant part of negotiations (in part because he was on the negotiating team), but explained that the membership at large had limited concern about class sizes, often relegating this to a secondary priority: "How much are we going to fight about this and how much are we going to get hung up on it, especially when the membership at large doesn't seem to care as much."

Recognizing that suffering should be shared. Although writing teachers and administrators have a long history of placing concern for students at the center of their value systems, there was some recognition among WPAs that this has its limits and that our programs and faculty should not be the only ones bearing the impacts of unsustainable workloads. At a Midwest TYC, Dana and team noted that some of the advisors tended to exploit our field's student-centered values, sending students to the department to beg for seats in full sections with reasons such as they needed the course to stay on track for graduation. While they found it hard, the WPAs at that institution generally held firm in saying no. At a Midwest RSU, Matthew said his department chair was an ally in writing "amazingly perceptive emails to the dean" arguing how "We will push caps a bit, but we will not push them to irresponsible levels." In short, while their program may make some sacrifices to ensure students get into the classes they need, they will hold the ground at some point for both instructor wellness and quality of student learning.

Building on the unique situation provided by the COVID pandemic and the additional burdens it placed on faculty, Julie (RSU in the South)

explained how she reduced the number of major writing assignments to help with faculty workload: "we want lower course caps and they say, well, we can't do lower course caps and then I said . . . let's pilot this at three assignments . . . that way, we have we have lower [number of] papers so it's a difference of . . . 130 papers." In selling this shift as a "pilot," she banked on the expectation that the administration would soon move onto other priorities: "they're not even looking at it anymore, they just wanted to know in the moment, so we will probably be able to keep that at three indefinitely." At the end of the day, she realized "they really didn't care about assignments—it was just a negotiating point for them."

Drawing on community values. Thus far we have conceptualized contentions between upper administrators and WPAs as taking place at intersection of two rival orientations: the neoliberal and humanist paradigms. In their advocacy, many WPAs spoke of difficulty in framing their arguments in a language of value which would not be simply co-opted by or mistranslated into the dominant language of the neoliberal orientation. From our interviews, we gathered that this effort is too much for any single rhetor. Interviewees spoke of the importance of grounding their appeals in reference to broader community values—it seems that situating such appeals within localized (non-neoliberal) orientations might lend WPAs added rhetorical ethos, buttressing what would otherwise be less formidable arguments.

Larry, at a private university in the South, emphasized making his own department a space wherein commitment to humanist values was the norm. To this end, Larry lauded hiring as a powerful advocacy strategy in that it allows WPAs to build intra-departmental consensus before moving on to upper admins: "When you can bring in people that are your sort of, that share your vision, advocacy gets easier and easier and easier because you're building up, building a consensus. When the . . . faculty were all together on something, then I knew I could move to the department and . . . gain consensus there and then move it up the chain."

The civic communities surrounding educational institutions were also considered crucial. Such communities are inevitably characterized by distinct moral and cultural norms. For example, the Midwest TYC where Justin worked was enmeshed within a region historically dominated by unionized labor and thus highly pro-union. This fact forced his administrators to tread carefully during union negotiations:

> it's just kind of taken for granted that there's going to be educational unions and they're just part of the landscape. Like our school our board of trustees is elected locally, and I'm sure it helps us that the

> steel mills used to be big and there's generally . . . a fairly pro-union environment. I'm sure that helps because it means that the board doesn't even have to think about it, they don't have to think about union busting because they couldn't get away with it from their constituents, not only would they have to fight with us, but they would it would look bad.

In cases such as this, if administrators are perceived as going against a strongly held community value, then they could face serious resistance to their goals and consequently may tread more lightly than they would in a place where the community values align more closely with the administration's.

Discussion and Conclusion

In our analysis of these interviews, we have explored how WPA advocacy on class size often takes place at the intersection between two rival Burkean orientations: humanism and neoliberalism. Each orientation, in turn, expresses itself and makes claims to its preeminence in the university by way of its own characteristic language of valuation. Where the humanist orientation makes arguments concerning excellence in education and preparation for civic participation, the neoliberal orientation grounds its appeals in considerations of bureaucratic and economic "efficiency." Our participants illustrated how difficult it can be for WPAs to make effective arguments grounded in the humanist orientation and to drive upper administrators back from the neoliberal ruts they often find themselves in.

We saw how WPAs have generally avoided indiscriminately framing their arguments according to neoliberal principles, lest their arguments be co-opted and interpreted according to the neoliberal standards of valuation (and, as Justin pointed out, arguments for reasonable workloads and class sizes will never win in this frame). While some WPAs have either carefully threaded the rhetorical needle to employ each language of value when appropriate or have sought out crucial moments in which upper administrators could be forced to adopt the humanist language of value, other WPAs were able to position their own goals in relation to their administration's priorities, effectively employing embodied analogy to ride the coattails of prior initiatives. As Grego and Thompson illustrated with the creation of their studio model or Estrem, Shepherd, and Sturman illustrated with their placement system, sometimes building on the momentum of existing initiatives that we may in part find problematic can lead to innovative new approaches that align with our values.

As indicated above, we tried to interview participants across a variety of institution types in order to evaluate how advocacy varied across institutions. Whether in a progressive state in the West or a conservative state in the South, we saw funding disparities across institutional types that impacted advocacy work. As noted earlier, Paul (South HBCU RSU) clearly identified funding and class size disparities between his institution and a neighboring public institution that served more white students. This resonates with the realities that HBCUs continue to be marginalized within their systems, even compared to other public institutions in the same city (Adams and Tucker). We tried to interview more WPAs from HBCUs, but our emails went un-returned or, in one case, we had a signed consent form but failed to conduct an interview after almost three months of trying because the faculty were always overwhelmed with work. We feel this speaks to the likelihood that WPAs at HBCUs may be less supported than their counterparts at other institutions.

Similarly, as other work has documented, WPA roles at TYCs often have limited support—it is typically done by an informal committee of faculty, or the department chair, or even a dean (Snyder; Taylor), which was the case for our interviewees. In the case of the FYW committee we interviewed, they had the most protected person (i.e., a senior tenured faculty) take the group's recommendations forward to administration. Similarly, the course caps at TYCs were often higher than at more prestigious institutions, which came down in large part to funding disparities. As Jacob (West HSI TYC) noted, it is important to continue asking why the top students, arguably those who need the least amount of support, tend to have access to the smallest writing classes.

The results of advocacy, however, cannot be determined solely on institutional type, at least in a small-scale study such as this. Regardless of institutional type, campus leadership and their guiding values appeared to play a central role. For instance, John was at a major R1 university with a large amount of grant revenue where one of the president's main priorities was to keep tuition as low as possible. It is likely that no amount of rhetorical dexterity would have been able to prevent the dean from creating a cheaper product in lieu of their traditional FYW classes. As quoted earlier, Kathy (West HSI TYC) noted that their president emphasized budget cutting and never expected to make progress on lowering course caps without a change in leadership.

Despite some thorny ethical questions, we argue that the pain of high workloads and large classes imposed by states and institutions must be shared. Neoliberal administrators depend on our humanist orientations and disciplinary allegiances to press on with holding student conferences

and giving extensive feedback on writing to best serve our students, even if it is unjust to and unsustainable for writing program faculty, many of whom are in contingent positions. We saw how Dana and team's refusal to admit extra students to course sections beyond course caps was seen as an act of solidarity with other instructors. In response to workload demands, Julie reduced the number of major writing assignments in their program. These strategies certainly come with ethical implications, especially since we have seen that class sizes and workloads at institutions that serve more marginalized student populations tend to be worse than their counterparts. Lowering the quality of instruction for these students helps perpetuate the divides wrought by neoliberalism. Nonetheless, the struggles to attract and retain faculty at such institutions is also an important consideration, not to mention that faculty at such institutions are more likely to come from marginalized groups themselves (Gasman; Smith, Tovar, and García).

Time and again, our participants expressed outrage at the fundamentally unethical way in which economic considerations were simply assumed to trump other metrics of value; at the same time, they consistently felt unheard and disempowered, unable to muster the institutional and cultural force necessary to dispute the primacy of the neoliberal orientation. As White notes, the threat of resignation or actual resignation is the ultimate weapon in a WPA's toolbox. Administrations might justly fear the collapse of a well-run composition program and may make concessions to avoid such an outcome. For instance, WPAs at institutions that have seen a lot of turnover in WPA roles may have more leverage to make demands and threats because administrators may be aware of how challenging it can be to maintain stability in the writing program. However, this strategy comes with some risk, as we saw at John's institution where the dean decided to dramatically shrink the program and pull it out of the English Department.

Overall, our participants broadly agreed that advocacy for FYW is not merely a matter of weighing the effectiveness of different administrative goals and methods, but rather is a contestation of normative ethics. John asserted that

> it's the ethics, you know . . . and I think that's your best move is to say this just on ethical [grounds] what you're doing here is you're loading more work on the TAs, more work on the lecturers, the quality of education is going to suffer.

It is evident that contesting the neoliberal orientation's domination of higher education tends to be too great a task for any one FYW program, and that other programs, institutions, and broader communities should be tapped as rhetorical resources and ethotic buttresses against the totalizing

language of neoliberal valuation. As Scott and Welch remind us, budgetary crises are manufactured in the neoliberal system, so it is important to create spaces for genuine exchange and solidarity in order to collectively resist the oppressive nature of these systems. Through rhetorical dexterity, alliance building, and a patent refusal to continually increase workloads, we as WPAs can send the message to austerity-minded administrators that writing faculty will not continue to do more with less.

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