2018

"Always Up Against": A Study of Veteran WPAs and Social Resilience

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This essay reports on an interview-based study of ten veteran WPAs, whose three decades of service spans neoliberalism's growing influence on universities. Our findings trace their enactment of social resilience, a dynamic, relational process that allowed them, even in the face of constraint, to act and to preserve key commitments.

Like most compositionists, and especially WPAs, we feel the restrictive impact of austerity. This sense is reflected in a growing body of research in our field, and most recently in a *CCC* special issue, where Jonathan Alexander reminds us that "one of the things we know about writing and the teaching of writing . . . is that they are shaped by economic forces" (Alexander 7; see also Welch and Scott; Comstock et al.; Stenberg). Historically tight budgets are now tighter. Arguments to fund writing instruction must be couched in terms of initiatives like "the Chancellor's Goals" or "innovation for success" and articulated in the context of tuition revenue, markets, student- (or consumer-) "friendliness." Funding for existing programs that benefit students and teachers alike, such as the writing center, is difficult to secure when it doesn't offer the shine of a new initiative or the potential

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for external grant acquisition. Writing instructors and WPAs must navigate the impact of neoliberal pressures that privilege efficiency and austerity, evident in institutional calls for increased enrollments, accelerated degree-completion rates, ease of transfer, and reduced instructional cost.

While the 2008 economic downturn has led to a unique moment of austerity in institutions across the nation, the neoliberal context that frames it is, by now, well over three decades old. Emerging at least partially from the economic crises of the 1970s, neoliberal ideologies increasingly shape both economic practice and cultural ideology. Put simply, neoliberalism is a form of "market fundamentalism" (Somers qtd. in Hall and Lamont 3). Or as Nancy Welch frames it, "[neoliberalism] is, in part, a reassertion of classical economic liberalism's central tenet that major political and social decisions are best decided by the market" (7). Neoliberalism shifts value from public good to private enterprise; it valorizes entrepreneurialism and individual success; and it downplays social relationships and public services (Hall and Lamont; Slaughter and Rhoades).

In higher education, the public disinvestment of education requires greater reliance on private fundraising and grant acquisition. Deep cuts to state budgets and public education result in austerity measures like program closings, class size increases, wage freezes, and staff reductions. Increasingly, administrative structures are reorganized to reflect the corporate model, and the number of part-time instructors far surpasses that of tenure-line positions. As of 2013, non-tenure-track positions account for more than 75 percent of all instructional appointments (Curtis and Thornton). At many institutions, an undergraduate degree completion agenda drives curricular decisions, with emphasis placed first and foremost on producing quantifiable evidence of success. Within composition, as Welch and Tony Scott observe, the emphasis on quantification ignores or denies the "qualitative consequences for learning and the profession," while the pressure to abide by entrepreneurial, neoliberal values threatens to sever the field from "responsibility for and ideological struggle over writing education" (8).

It can feel, on some days, like these are the "worst of times" in higher education, but a longer view reminds us that while we experience the effects of austerity intensely at the present moment, institutional pressures and constraints are nothing new. Even so, knowing we are part of a long history of, as Adam Banks characterizes, "being broke" (271) doesn't necessarily make the day-to-day experience of institutional frustration easier.

We came to this project out of that frustration, as the two of us struggled with how to negotiate the changing culture at our own institution. Our conversations led us to consider how many of our national colleagues in the discipline of rhetoric and composition have experienced the full stretch of neoliberalism's effects, which are varied and complex, in the university. How did they weather the storms of the past? How did they find ways to sustain their commitments to the field and their programs through times of institutional, economic, and political hardship? We pursued these questions by interviewing colleagues with a long history of WPA work, whose careers spanned a large part of the last three decades, or what Peter A. Hall and Michele Lamont characterize as the "neoliberal era" (3).

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Our subjects are, by any standards, "successful"—they have built programs from writing centers to WAC to first-year composition, published foundational scholarship, and made lasting contributions to the field's organizations. But no one's path is marked only by success. While we did ask our interviewees about conditions that supported their agency (see the appendix), in the end, we became most interested in our subjects' descriptions of navigating arduous terrain, when it became difficult to determine the next viable step. Neoliberalism places primacy on reporting, and accounting for, successes. From merit reviews to tenure processes to annual program reports, we are expected to document and quantify our gains. Moreover, as Laura R. Micciche contends, the pressure WPAs experience to implement initiatives "on the quick" bears out in abundant research on building administrative structures, which often relies on "reassuring narratives about the seemingly impossible—i.e., revising placement procedures, generating funding for computer classrooms, and implementing large-scale program assessment—as not only possible but potentially reproducible" ("For Slow" 77). It is much less common for space, institutionally or in our journals, to be devoted to reflecting on, let alone examining, disappointments and hardships that are, as Micciche argues, simply part of the fabric of WPA work. And the consequence, as Micciche aptly states, is that we are

left "unprepared to navigate our way through the material, including the affective, realities of academic life" ("More" 433–34).

For these reasons, we became interested in resilience. Resilience is, by definition, a responsive act. It is required not when things are going well, but when one is forced to negotiate difficulty or disappointment. We want to emphasize that in featuring resilience, we provide only a *partial* picture of WPA work. Another study could easily document the many successes and supporting conditions of these WPAs. Instead, we include the "shadow" stories, so that we can better understand and harness for our colleagues the practices, habits of mind, and dispositions that helped foster resilience. Before moving to the theoretical terms and findings of our study, we describe the methodology that led us there.

As indicated above, we interviewed ten veteran WPAs from institutions across the nation.[1] Five of our ten participants began WPA work in the 1970s; another three entered program administration in the 1980s; and two began in the early 1990s. Our subjects have spent most of their careers at public institutions with enrollments ranging from 15,000 to 64,000 students, and seven of the ten interviewees served as WPAs at institutions whose land-grant missions figure prominently on the institution's websites. This mix reflects our selection criteria, as we were interested in how interviewees' experiences as WPAs were affected by decreases in state funding and political shifts over the last several decades. Eight of our subjects spent most of their careers as WPAs at doctoral-granting universities, while two were at comprehensive MA-granting institutions. Though we sought racial diversity in our invitations to participate, all ten who accepted are white. Six of our interviewees are women, and four are men. Prior to our interview, we sent subjects both a description of our study and a list of questions (see the appendix). We conducted interviews via Skype or the phone, based on the subject's preference. The interviews, ranging from fifty to ninety minutes, were recorded and professionally transcribed.

Our process of coding the interview data is informed by Johnny Saldaña's two-cycle process. The first cycle of coding is descriptive, allowing researchers to mark "essential elements of the research story" with salient terms (8). The second cycle moves to categorization and deeper analysis. As Saldaña explains, each of these cycles is multistaged and analytical— researchers code and recode, categorize and recategorize throughout the process (10); this certainly proved true for us. In the first cycle of our study,

we coded to attach summative terms to strategies, practices, and dispositions of resilience and agency we noted in the transcripts. In the second cycle, we analyzed the data and our coding terms to locate patterns and categories of resilience. We then placed these categories in conversation with existing scholarship on resilience, which helped us to further contextualize and theorize the kind of social resilience we identified in the research. Of course, the process was not quite this linear; it involved many returns to the data and nuancing of our categories and concepts. Before sharing the results in more detail, we turn to the concept of resilience that occupies the center of our study.

Reconceiving Resilience

While resilience is commonly understood as an individual attribute, our subjects developed ways to sustain their commitments and programs by connecting with others, approaching administration as a dynamic, nonlinear process, and finding ways to act, even amid constraints. That is, they described enacting what we call *social resilience*, a term that emerges in recent scholarship ranging from psychology to ecology. In our own field, social resilience is most prominently forwarded by Elizabeth A. Flynn, Patricia Sotirin, and Ann Brady, whose collection *Feminist Rhetorical Resilience* establishes the concept as dynamic, relational, and contextual. For them, resilience involves "recognizing and seizing opportunities even in the most oppressive situations. A feminist rhetorical resilience mobilizes the power of imagination and reflexive meaning making in order to continually reinvent selves and possibilities to precipitate change" (8). Understood this way, resilience is a practice and process that allows individuals or groups to maintain an ability to act (even if in very local, provisional ways) and to preserve key commitments in the face of challenge and constraint. The imagined "end" of resilience, in this new configuration, is not a restoration of earlier conditions, but alteration, adaptation (or even transformation) on the part of the subject, the conditions in which she or he lives and works, or both.

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Social resilience, then, is different from conceptualizations of perseverance or grit that return an individual (or culture or ecosystem) to equilibrium—though this is how resilience has long been deployed. In ecology, one of the primary sites of resilience scholarship, resilience was historically conceived as a property that allowed a system to recover its prior state (Hall and Lamont 13). In developmental psychology, another key location for resiliency research, resilience was named the outcome of one's return to stability after facing hardship, or as a character trait that is associated with coping skills or self-efficacy (Hall and Lamont 13). Increasingly, however, both fields have shifted to a more socially oriented view, where resilience is not a property or outcome, but a dynamic process that exists in relation to other subjects and factors. This emphasis on the relational nature of resilience is also evident in feminist rhetorical conceptions. Flynn et al., in fact, contend that not only do individuals "learn moral qualities and derive social and material support through 'a web of relationships,' but . . . resilience itself is a form of relationality" (7). This notion of resilience as relationality was certainly evident in our study, as subjects told stories of resilience emerging in the context of relationships and collaborative work. They further described deliberate efforts to cultivate relationships in order to foster resilience during difficult times.

For those of us in composition and rhetoric, the social always implies the rhetorical. Our findings displayed evidence of Flynn et al.'s articulation of resilience as "a process of rhetorically engaging with material circumstances and situational exigencies" (7). Indeed, our subjects' capacity for resilient practice was aided by attention to *kairos*, to audience and power relations, and to historical and institutional contexts—we describe this pattern as *rhetorical responsiveness*. Perhaps above all, resilience emerged through our subjects' demonstrated commitment to revision: to revise a rhetorical strategy when the first, second, or eighth attempt didn't work; to revise ideas or positions that no longer served the situation; to revise their own roles and identities.

Finally, resilience emerged through collectively shared values with the field—sometimes as published in professional statements and at other times as negotiated in scholarship or listservs: "You're on there everyday on the WPA listserv, for example," one interviewee explained, "and you're seeing what people write—seeing what people are concerned about, what they're fighting for, what they really hold as key values" (Interview 3, 16). We

describe this below as a *collective imaginary*, a term we borrow from Hall and Lamont, which encompasses the overarching stories we tell ourselves about who we are, what we value, and what comprises our distinguishing features. As we show, calling upon composition's *collective imaginary* served as a way for many of our subjects to maintain a focus on students, pedagogy, and collaboration amid pressures linked to standardization, accountability, and efficiency.

In what follows, then, we highlight three key themes of social resilience that emerged in our interviews: a commitment to relational work with colleagues; a capacity for rhetorical responsiveness; and a connection to a larger collective imaginary. Each of these is both a disposition and practice that our subjects described as developing and changing over time as their learning and experience deepened.

Resilience and Relationality

While commonplace definitions of resilience treat it as an individual attribute, our findings mesh with recent research that articulates resilience as produced through relational work. As Judith Jordan contends, "resilience resides not in the individual but in the capacity for connection" (qtd. in Gu 510). This notion counters both neoliberal valorization of the individual and institutional pressures to perform as a heroic WPA, who is able to rise above institutional conditions on behalf of one's program, students, and teachers. Micciche refers to this as "big agency," a "possessive and linear model of agency" whereby the WPA's actions "have traceable effects back to *her and her alone*" ("For Slow" 74, our emphasis). In this framework traits like agency and resilience are "owned" by the individual. In contrast, our subjects described resilience as developed with others. They echoed Flynn et al.'s notion that relational webs are the "basis for resilient agency" (7).

> Our subjects emphasized the act of forging connection as a deliberate and intentional part of their work.

Since most of our research participants began their careers in a moment when they were one of the department's few compositionists, if not the only one, and often worked in a climate that was unfriendly to composition and rhetoric, connection was particularly vital to their professional (and personal) lives. Our subjects emphasized the act of forging connection as a deliberate and intentional part of their work. This began in their own

programs. Three of our subjects, in fact, made explicit mention of their overt efforts to disrupt the idea of their "ownership" over the composition program, a sentiment summarized well in this quotation:

> One thing I never want to say—would never want to say—is, "*my program*." . . . People doing this kind of work, in dealing with all these challenges, really have to look for not only allies, but also—you accumulate allies through listening to people. You respect what other people are doing. Through that respect, you build a sense of a cadre or a group of people who share some parts of the commitment. (Interview 3, 12)

Even as neoliberal logics naturalize and privilege organizational structures with clear hierarchies, those we interviewed sought instead to create collectives and found resources for resilience—relationships—in doing so. "I don't ever want to be 'The Director,'" another subject said, "I always wanna have a team working together" (Interview 4, 12). An important quality of these relationships is that they often crossed institutional roles or ranks. One WPA, a long serving writing center director, explained that it was her relationships with undergraduate peer tutors that most sustained her throughout her administrative work. "Having allies from people who are extremely up close and personal," she said, "was very important" to her sense of agency (Interview 2, 17). Of course, relational work within a writing program doesn't happen without effort. One of our participants described his department's endeavor to build a writing program in the late 1970s. His director made it a priority for the "writing committee" to meet. "The weeks you didn't meet were the exceptions," he remembered. "You just met every week because you were building something" (Interview 10, 5).

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While collaboration is a hallmark of the field's values, the choice to spend time and energy on making and preserving connections—and making collaborative efforts visible—is particularly vital at a time when "survival . . . is an individual responsibility" (Davies 9). As Bronwyn Davies observes, a "crucial element of the neoliberal order" is the "removal of dependence on the social" combined with the goal of acquisition as the ultimate marker of success (9). For our respondents, then, survival, or resilience, was fostered by the collective, and they underscored this responsibility to one another as central to their ethos as WPAs. Said one WPA, "All of the successes that I

could say I have had, they're really not my successes. They're our group, our team all working together" (Interview 4, 12). This WPA made clear that in reporting her successes—from spearheading a writing center and teaching center to building writing curricula to making numerous hires in composition and rhetoric—she underscores the collaborative effort, a strategy that aims to disrupt the idea that there is a single actor who owns achievements.

At the same time, drawing from a collective also proved helpful for one respondent when his program faced departmental pressure in the 1970s to defend a textbook—*Telling Writing* by Ken Macrorie—a selection that the WPA and the teachers supported. Facing derisive comments about the book, the WPA answered, "I've used this text with the teams [of teachers]. They've been using this text for four years, and they find it very successful" (Interview 7, 17). He went on to say that along with being supported by the teachers in his program, he was also supported by national colleagues who believed in, and had research to support, this approach to the teaching of writing. It became more difficult for the department, then, to challenge backing that extended from local to national.

Moreover, as one of our subjects reasoned, a need for professional community is more vital than ever, as faculty relationships to their institutions are changing. "We're not in a reciprocal relationship with our institutions," she said. "They don't care about you. They are demonstrating that they don't care about us faculty. More and more, this is the case" (Interview 8, 8). Indeed, neoliberal pressures have altered university structures in ways that decrease faculty's role as decision makers, while increasing administrators' roles in managing academic work (Slaughter and Rhoades 77). If resilience is facilitated by, and born from, connection, the deepening wedge faculty feel between themselves and their institutions can have a demoralizing effect. This has made the connection to colleagues in composition and rhetoric across the nation all the more vital. As one interviewee said, "If I didn't have it locally, I was able to create networks nationally of people who valued the same things I did, who were interested in the kind of work that I was interested in, and that certainly has been sustaining" (Interview 10, 13). These connections matter in material ways as well, particularly in times of programmatic need or crisis. One subject explained, "Right now we're undergoing a real struggle at [institution] for the future of the [location] Writing Project . . . knowing that there's this huge international

network of writing projects and people really, really helps to sustain the effort" (Interview 3, 16).

This is not to suggest, however, that university administrators, or universities themselves, are monolithic enterprises with no potential for productive relational work. We found, in fact, that WPAs were able to create better connections when they did not view a particular level of administration, or the English department, as monolithic. When we asked one subject to describe a high-stakes moment when her values as a WPA and the institutional values were at odds, she helped us see the limits of our question. "It's complicated to try to ascribe values to an institution. I mean, you can look at institutional behavior, but . . . they're individuals making decisions and enacting things" (Interview 8, 13). Indeed, as Slaughter and Rhoades argue, universities, and the individuals in them, have not simply been absorbed by market pressures; instead, neoliberalism is *enacted* by individuals, making it possible to intervene in those actions, particularly when we connect—even momentarily—with like-minded colleagues.

To this end, several WPAs pointed to the importance of forging relationships with administrators who shared values or goals. One interviewee framed it this way: "If you wanna get things done in a large institution, you gotta know people everywhere. You gotta know who to call. You can't just write a memo. You gotta call somebody, go to lunch. You gotta hang out, catch them in the parking lot, whatever it takes" (Interview 10, 10–11). Another subject described a situation in which he experienced difficulty in working effectively with a dean, so he instead sought a connection with an undergraduate dean. "Then," he said, "I go over to the EOP (Educational Opportunity Program) 'cause I have a long-term relationship with all the people that work there. We work out different changes there" (Interview 6, 11). Even while he finds a key administrator at odds with his progressive goals, he describes finding or forging paths that lead to connections with others who will work collaboratively on possibilities for students.

Interestingly, this connection sometimes even surfaced out of requirements—such as assessment initiatives. One respondent described a determination by the state that the department's mode of assessing students' writing was insufficient. He was under pressure to either design a process that would be acceptable to the state or to impose a state-approved standardized test. In order to dodge the latter, the WPA joined forces with

a group of colleagues and created a campus-wide assessment program. Interestingly, through this assessment work, he found connections with like-minded colleagues who were determined to collectivize around teaching and learning. He said, "When it got down to assessment, and particularly, across campus assessment, I found a lot of people. They were teachers in other departments. They were administrators, deans and such, who were very supportive, and, as it turned out, very knowledgeable. I think I kind of, at that moment, recognized, 'Wow, there is a lot of support that I didn't know I really had or could've had'" (Interview 7, 19). These difficult circumstances, then, led him not only to develop, with interdisciplinary colleagues, a more ethical mode of assessment; it led to rich connections. This notion of finding opportunities for networks outside of English was, in fact, mentioned by several of our interviewees and was especially important for those who felt devalued or disregarded in their own departments.

> Seeking out connection was not a new practice for any of our interviewees—in fact, finding connection was often a way to survive in their early careers; however, in a contemporary context that places increasing emphasis on individual success and adversarial professionalism, we find their emphasis on deliberate relational work and visible collaboration a source not only of resilience but of resistance.

While neoliberal values and practices downplay connection and collaboration, our subjects underscored it as a habit of mind and practice that has fostered their resilience in the past and present. Seeking out connection was not a new practice for any of our interviewees—in fact, finding connection was often a way to survive in their early careers; however, in a contemporary context that places increasing emphasis on individual success and adversarial professionalism, we find their emphasis on deliberate relational work and visible collaboration a source not only of resilience but of resistance.

Rhetorical Responsiveness

WPA work is notorious for requiring much responsibility and granting little authority. Still, we must find ways to act. To understand how our subjects have found pathways to agency over the spans of their careers, we asked them to reflect on what has hindered and facilitated their own sense of agency and resilience. In addition to emphasizing relationality as interwoven with agency, as we discuss above, they articulated a connec-

tion between agency and what we are calling *rhetorical responsiveness*. We use rhetorical responsiveness as an umbrella term for different kinds of work our subjects tied to agency: analyzing the institutional context; being mindful of what, or who, is the priority; and being willing to revise and rethink a plan or position.

For many of our subjects, these practices were learned over time; several described understanding agency in more traditional, individually based ways at the beginning of their careers. For instance, one WPA remembered that right out of graduate school, she thought that "anything was possible if I just worked hard enough" (Interview 5, 6–7); similarly, another subject said he used to assume that problems could be solved with the "right" argument or through "rational discussion" (Interview 6, 6). The institutional histories, interpersonal dynamics, and power relations at play complicated the idea that a WPA could single-handedly, with the right rhetorical acumen or amount of effort, make any change she saw fit. "That's something that I had to learn," one subject said. "It was all about 'I think; I think' at the beginning and so I've had to sort of switch to focusing more on how I can convince the audience. I've had to become more rhetorical" (Interview 5, 6–7). This includes, as one subject explained, "going back [to] rethink—think about what in their position I can embrace and how I can move forward from [there]" (Interview 4, 14).

Being "more rhetorical," several subjects underscored, begins with institutional literacy. We draw this term from Chris Gallagher's *Radical Departures*, where he argues that to be institutionally literate is to "be able to read institutional discourses (and their resultant arrangements and structures) so as to speak and write back to them, thereby participating in their revision" (79). He insists that institutional literacy is not metaphorical. Rather, gaining institutional literacy involves examining the constellation of discourses that make up the institution—including tangible ones like bylaws, handbooks, reappointment guidelines, and so on, as well as the "institutional habits and beliefs that guide its everyday work" (80). One subject explained that efforts toward institutional change at her university were aided by the composition faculty's ability to read "the political and institutional context" and to skillfully negotiate it (Interview 1, 1). This WPA, who also served as chair for part of her career, noted that this kind of rhetorical work—to identify allies, build consensus, revisit the points of contention, and eventually find commonality—were crucial when the com-

position faculty had to advocate for preserving the writing center during a university budget crisis and, later, for sustaining the local Writing Project site when the National Writing Project was cut from the federal budget.

Similarly, another pointed out that while we often consider resilience a psychological state and attribute administrative success to being "savvy," it is largely about "knowing stuff." In other words, institutional literacy is actually a practice we can develop and hone (Interview 8, 14). She argued, "Being able to come up with alternatives is about knowing how things work and knowing . . . how other people did something similar . . . Some of it is savvy, but other parts . . . are things you can study, right? These are things you could figure out, do research, . . . set about to learn in a disciplined way" (Interview 8, 14). One of our subjects described educating himself institutionally and administratively by seeking out mentors he admired and asking them how they built programs, how they strategized to forward new initiatives or curricula. "I used to give [the mentor] rides home, just to ask him," he said with a laugh (Interview 10, 4).

At the same time, institutional literacy is a process; it is not acquired once and for all, as institutions—and our locations within them—are always shifting. One of our interviewees described a high-stakes moment when her institutional literacy failed her. In so doing, she narrated her university's decision, during a budget crisis, to remove the writing center from her direction and attach it to a student success program. This decision occurred despite her efforts over the years to be "strategic and skeptical" and to try to "anticipate changes and to situate the Writing Center as well as I could" (Interview 2, 14). One way she sought to protect the status of the writing center was to ensure it was linked to a disciplinary enterprise, as demonstrated by her own research productivity. "Given the ideologies at play in the academy," she said, "my success as a scholar was one way to preserve my field's commitments that were not valued by the institution" (18).

In the end, however, a logic of economic streamlining won out. She was moved back to her home discipline of English (where she had been teaching half-time), and the assistant director—on a non-tenure line—was made director. The WPA describes sharing this news on the WC listserv, and receiving warm, kind responses that also expressed dismay: "If this can happen to you, it can happen to anybody!" (Interview 2, 19). In fact, she explained, her scholarly reputation didn't make a difference. "Over the years," she said, "I worried about many things for the Writing Center, but I

never worried about being forced out of my position, and that was what happened' (19). Her story reminded us of the pervasiveness of the "big agency" narrative we describe above, where WPAs are often expected—or expect themselves—to protect their programs through individual accomplishment or feats. Neoliberal values teach us to believe that success is determined by the performance of the individual. As she underscored, however, "We are partly in charge of what happens to us and then we partly are not. It's really good to remember that" (Interview 2, 22). While this might be read as endorsement of a passive stance, we view it as acknowledgment of the limitations of our individual agency. As Marilyn M. Cooper argues in her essay on rhetorical agency, "Rhetors—and audiences—are agents in their actions, and they are responsible for those actions, but they are not the sole cause of what happens" (439).

While she was not able to change the institution's decision, this WPA altered the way she viewed the situation, by reassessing it in relation to her priorities and commitments. This ties to the second characteristic of rhetorical responsiveness—an ability to read a situation for what, or who, is most at stake in order to make a decision about how to respond. This WC director was clear that the decision to remove her position was "heart-breaking" and that it hurt the center in some ways. For instance, the new director is on a year-to-year contract and therefore more precariously positioned in the institution than a director who is also a full professor of English. On the other hand, she notes that there are a number of ways the writing center has improved as a result of the restructuring. For instance, the number of writing assistants has grown from forty to sixty, and the center has hubs in all of the cultural centers and residence halls (13). She maintains that the student success center has, overall, not reduced the effectiveness of the writing center's services—which she deems most important, in the end. "It's very important to me, as deep as my commitment has been to the Center, not to lose my perspective about larger issues" (22). Her response, ultimately, is to frame this as a difficult and complex story, but to foreground that the students did not lose out.

Another interviewee described a process of rhetorical response that ended in his stepping down as WPA, because his priorities and those of his chair could not be reconciled. The WPA described a complex set of circumstances that resulted in losing authority over the program's curriculum (despite its success in boosting achievement for students of color) and losing

all release time to direct the program. "So," he said, "we refused to do the work" (Interview 6, 7). He was able to change his apportionment to work instead for the National Writing Project, which he said was "equity-based" and "another way to do what I believed in" (7). Responding rhetorically is not about winning—or not often, anyway. Instead, it is about determining the best way to respond within serious constraints. For this WPA, he concluded that without curricular control, he wasn't, in fact, coordinating the program, anyway. So he found a way to relocate his work, where he could make a real contribution.

In addition to paying close attention to institutional history and context, and assessing priorities, our subjects also highlighted the necessity of a revisionary view. That is, rather than remaining bound to one view or solution, they found that as with writing, moving an idea forward requires many attempts and approaches. As one subject said, resilience is less about "bouncing back" and more about "redirecting" and "salvaging a difficult situation" (Interview 8, 14). She continued:

> I don't always get to do what I want to do. Part of the work is how to know what are some alternatives. Part of the work is to . . . [ask] what's the heart of this? What has the priority? What's the essential theme here and [to] know, well, what are—what ways are open to me? . . . This might be the thing I think is—really needs to—happen, but it can't. So what can happen? All of that is about being informed, and being able to be creative, and to be able to analyze. (Interview 8, 12)

One subject, for instance, described a process of establishing small class sizes in a writing major. He learned what he called "accounting tricks" from a mentor and paid for writing workshops capped at fifteen students with one required 150-seat, 300-level class (Interview 10, 10). In both this case and that of the WPA who stepped down from his position, rhetorical responsiveness meant claiming the agency that was available and refusing a position of powerlessness.

Another crucial part of being "rhetorical" for our subjects involved a commitment to revision and to considering what others have at stake. This orientation prevents one from becoming "embattled," as one subject said, where it's a "my way or the highway situation" that allows for little movement (Interview 3, 22). "I don't know if I'd go so far as to say I'm a shape-shifter," another subject reflected. "But I certainly appreciate shape-

shifters in a way I did not before. I recognize, well, a shape-shifter can accomplish things that you can't if you just stand your ground" (Interview 8, 13). A kind of unproductive ground-holding works against what Cooper calls "responsible rhetorical agency," which requires "one to be aware that everyone acts out of their own space of meaning and that to affirm one's own meaning as absolute truth is to negate the other person" (442). We can simultaneously argue strongly for our own positions and be open to other positions, Cooper contends (443). We view this approach not as a kind of neoliberal flexibility, but a commitment to movement—to finding ways to interact with others to work toward prioritizing students and writing.

Resilience and the Collective Imaginary

In their book *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*, editors Hall and Lamont contend that social resilience is facilitated both by relationality, as discussed above, and by collective imaginaries. Hall and Lamont use the term *collective imaginary* to describe the "overarching narratives that tell people what their society is about, what its past embodies and its future portends, who belongs to it and what kinds of behavior merit social respect" (4). These imaginaries are constituted by shared narratives of the group's past and present, their collective values and commitments, and their shared sense of identity and social responsibility (17). Collective imaginaries are particularly important because they stand in contrast to neoliberalism's penchant for individual competition and accomplishment, providing us a shared set of goals and values that drive our collective work.

Twenty years ago, Sharon Crowley represented composition in what are now familiar terms:

> Composition scholarship typically focuses on the processes of learning rather than on the acquisition of knowledge. . . . Composition studies encourages collaboration. It emphasizes the historical, political and social contexts associated with composing rather than concentrating on texts as isolated artifacts. (3)

This widely circulating version of the field provides an example of how composition's collective imaginary has been defined and claimed. Many of these terms echo in our interviewees' representations of the field's values and are identified as sources of strength and resilience in difficult times. Notable for us, too, are the ways in which these values stand in contrast to

the neoliberalist orientations shaping most campuses today. Where neo-liberal pressures result in a valuing of competition and individual success, for example, the field's collective imaginary privileges collaboration (see, for instance, Lunsford and Ede). Where neoliberal forces press toward the commodification of learning and configure students as consumers, whose key sources of activity are mostly economic (paying for college; getting jobs), Crowley's notion of the collective imaginary emphasizes "composing" and "processes of learning" (3). Similarly, our respondents tended to identify their commitments to students and teachers, to robust conceptions of writing, and to conceptions of pedagogy and literacy that have potential for social change as central values to the field of composition. These values served as a source of resilience for them; they strove to persist in order to see their efforts realized, even in small or local ways.

As part of forwarding this collective imaginary, our respondents seemed to accept as a given that they would be working against normative conceptions of writing, teaching, and students. They described conflict as an inevitable part of working toward process-oriented, learner-centered, and equitable conditions for writing instruction. One respondent described the perpetual disposition of the field this way: "We're compositionists. We are used to working within an environment where we have felt

> **"We're compositionists. We are used to working within an environment where we have felt marginalized … always up against, right? We always feel that we have to mount a revolution."**

marginalized . . . always up against, right? We always feel that we have to mount a revolution" (Interview 3, 10). We heard this comment, though, not as an indication of resignation; he seemed instead to view being "up against" as a source of both angst and energy. At the same time that compositionists found their collective imaginary as "up against" larger institutional values, these experiences did not leave them entrenched in a reactionary position. Rather, the collective imaginary—as *counter*-imaginary to the neoliberal institution—served as a source for mobilization, for acting based on a set of alternative values.

One barrier our interviewees repeatedly felt "up against" is skill-based conceptions of writing, which surfaced in administrative pressure to employ standardized placement tests, colleagues' complaints about student writing abilities, and claims of literacy crises issued by mainstream media. The field's contrastingly nuanced and political conceptions of writing served as

a key source of resilience as they navigated these challenges and sought to educate their colleagues and administrators. As one interviewee remarked, "[While] most people saw writing only as a method of communication . . . I saw my mission as showing writing to be a method of inquiring and thinking and learning" (Interview 5, 5). Another respondent explained: "Composition held a strong connection between enabling students to gain control over the discourses around them, to use those terms and to find the ways in which reading and writing were powerful. . . . Composition became a richer area because it drew on a lot of theoretical and political ideas. For me, that was crucial" (Interview 1, 11). Many respondents also relied on rhetorical theory to represent the range of social, intellectual, and political work at stake in writing. Challenging skill-based notions of writing, they sought to help students see writing as a vehicle for change and to enable them to discover their own purposes and exigencies for writing in ways that make a difference in their world. As one interviewee contended, "[R]hetorical principles help you not just to think better but to live better and to

For both the field and the participants in our study, robust conceptualizations of composing are a logical outgrowth of a deep respect for the challenging work of teaching and learning.

share better and to be with other people better. My work in composition, and especially in composition administration is always grounded in that rhetorical view" (Interview 4, 4).

For both the field and the participants in our study, robust conceptualizations of composing are a logical outgrowth of a deep respect for the challenging work of teaching and learning. Our data reflect this commitment to the rich, intellectual work of teaching. Several of our respondents emphasized that their interactions with students became a source of resilience—a reminder of why their work mattered. "I taught in high school and then at the community college," one interviewee responded, "and I just fell in love with teaching—well, I fell in love with students. That's what has sustained me throughout my career is my commitment to the young people" (Interview 4, 4). Another shared a similar sentiment: "Always what sustained me was the students. I always insisted on teaching composition, at least one course for the semester, so I always had these students [who I worked on] getting to know individually" (Interview 7, 18).

Others contrasted this view of teaching as intellectual, creative work and a source of resilience with notions of teaching as a natural extension of

research, or as a skill one picks up in a few training sessions. In a moment when standardized (or "teacher-proofed") curricula tighten their hold on educational discourse, arguments for teaching as intellectual and creative work remain particularly important. Said one respondent, "The idea of creativity was very important in my sense of working with students and also of WPA work. The notion of not only creativity of student writers or individual writers but also creativity of teaching" (Interview 3, 3). And even as interviewees described being "up against" environments that privilege research and "output" above teaching and learning, they nevertheless expressed a strong commitment to the interplay of teaching and research as intellectual, reciprocal processes. As one articulated, "[Compositionists] are simultaneously interested in pedagogy and in research. [They put] both at the center saying there is a central kind of intellectual work, and obviously teaching is central" (Interview 9, 2).

Another characteristic of the field's collective imaginary, as named by our subjects, is social justice and equity as an end-in-view, even as the field participates in institutional structures that reproduce inequity (like reliance on contingent labor). In *Introducing English*, James F. Slevin aptly describes this situation and commitment: "For good or ill, composition has always been at the center of the reproduction of social inequality or of the resistance to that process" (6). Many of our interviewees described their efforts to make explicit and alter practices that contribute to the reproduction of social inequality. As one respondent explained, "I have tried to enact commitments to social justice in ways that I can see, happening in everything from the teaching load that instructors have, to instructor pay. . . . Not that I could come in and wave a magic wand" (Interview 2, 20).

Indeed, many of our subjects were clear about the fact that WPAs, in making arguments for teacher equity, are up against systems that benefit from an exploitation of labor and a saturated market. As one respondent described, "I've always tried to make this effort to try to improve working conditions of the people in the writing program as much as possible, but I have to tell you, in an [economy] like that, and in [state], that is a non-union state, you're continually knocking your head against a wall" (Interview 3, 6). Another subject further crystallized the context, asking, "What does it really mean to work for equity in an institution that really doesn't want it? Even with my National Writing Project experience . . . schools reproduce inequality, that's what they do" (Interview 6, 11).

Interestingly, acknowledging these conditions did not lead our subjects to throw up their hands. The conditions may have disabused them of any notion of fast or revolutionary change, but they refused to surrender a view of equitable, democratic conditions for education—for teachers and learners—even in a system that benefits from inequity. Many of them described finding sustenance in small, local moments where change, however provisional, occurred, where "good work" felt possible. As one subject explained:

> When I assess what good work is, I think I'm grateful for anything . . . in a way that would have disappointed me earlier. . . . Anything you can do to be helpful is a good thing. Some of it is temporary. Some of it is not sustainable. Some of it imagines systemic changes down the road so far that I'm gonna be dead. I say those words but they don't even sound depressing to me.. . . I'm energetic and believe in the work, maybe even more than ever. (Interview 6, 11)

Though making swift, sweeping change is unlikely—"I would join a revolution if I saw one coming," this subject laughed (11)—our respondents emphasized local changes as both possible and meaningful.

This discovery of possibility, even in a plodding and nonlinear process, is reminiscent of Micciche's notion of slow agency. Rather than ascribing to a neoliberal valorization of speed and agency as "stable, assumed, fixed goods," she advocates for the affordances of focusing on "gradual arrival as our goal," which allows time to involve more stakeholders, to reflect and move deliberately, and use our energy and resources sustainably ("For Slow" 83–84). The respondent above emphasized small successes as part of the path toward gradual arrival, fueled by the energy that the collective imaginary—and counter-imaginary—provides.

Stephen J. Ball has recently observed that for many in higher education, neoliberalism has brought about a "growing sense of ontological insecurity; both a loss of a sense of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do" (20). Commitment, he argues, is replaced by "contract" (20). While our subjects offered sharp critique of institutional structures and practices, and while they described moments of despair and frustration, none of them described these conditions as reducing their sense of commitment to a larger good, to the field's collective imaginary. Rather, they positioned their struggles and disappointments—writing centers administratively relocated, innovative curriculum dismantled or shelved, standardized tests externally imposed—as a feature of what it means to work in the

field of composition. We are always "up against." And this work becomes meaningful not because it is always successful, but because it coheres with an important set of values that are shared with others, past and present. Perhaps this respondent says it best: "It's great work because it matters beyond just the research for its own sake, beyond us as individuals to the wider world. . . . Certainly that sense gets beaten down by the demands of the institution. . . . Our own sense that what we're doing is absolutely vital —it has to sustain us" (Interview 1, 19).

Conclusion: Sponsoring Social Resilience

The two of us have spent a lot of time living in the transcripts of these interviews, both of us finding that the insights of our senior colleagues matter to us, sustain us, as we go about our daily work. They provide us a way to imagine resilience that is not something we do or do not possess, but something we can practice and cultivate, and something we hope to foster in our graduate students just entering the field. We know, after all, that they enter at a vexed moment. As one subject observed, new faculty have been "born into" neoliberalism. "They can't imagine how [the university] might have been different" (Interview 7, 13). This very concept is examined in Louise Archer's compelling study of new faculty's construction of professional identity in a neoliberal age. Archer's findings align with our respondent's point that neoliberalism is constitutive and productive of both values and identities (272). While Archer's subjects were strongly critical of neoliberal managerialism and its emphasis on speed and productivity, she observes, "they also accepted the current context as inevitable" (272). Even so, they did find spaces of resistance at the micro-level (282). "That these younger academic are indeed invested in producing critiques, resiliences, and resistances is surely a hopeful sign," Archer writes (282).

Like Archer, we are interested in how to help our field's members uphold and extend our collective imaginaries—centered on students, collaboration, and equity—by teaching and supporting the habits of mind and practices that fostered resilience in our subjects. In work with graduate students, we see this as an alternative mode of professionalization—one that moves beyond aiding students to prepare for academic jobs (though this work remains important) to help them develop dispositions that sponsor social resilience. One element of this proposal involves finding ways to illuminate and value collaboration and relational work. As we help our

students develop as individual teachers and scholars, we can also frame teaching, writing, and service as necessarily collaborative and make visible the reasons the field has sought to privilege collaboration even as institutions become increasingly focused on individual successes.

Similarly, we contend that students would be served by examining the terms of institutional evaluation, say, for merit review or tenure and promotion to consider the extent to which collaboration is valued (or permitted). We might read those materials next to documents such as the CCCC statement on "Scholarship in Composition," which includes a section on collaboration as a tradition in the field. How is collaboration enacted on our campuses and in our professional organizations and networks? What tensions (or alignments) exist between our field's conception of collaboration and our institution's evaluation of it? When collaboration is not valued, what are ways faculty might advocate for its importance? What cases have been made for collaboration at the local level? What made them successful, or not?

Here, at the same time we advocate for a greater visibility of collaboration and its conditions, we are also arguing for enacting, and developing, institutional literacy and rhetorical responsiveness.

Here, at the same time we advocate for a greater visibility of collaboration and its conditions, we are also arguing for enacting, and developing, institutional literacy and rhetorical responsiveness. Our respondents underscored that this knowledge can be studied and learned. One way into this literacy, we believe, is working with students to engage the field not only through published scholarship, but also through dynamic local (and sometimes national) work. We have found it useful at our institution to include our graduate associate directors of composition and the writing center in the process of thinking through, drafting, and revising proposals related to curricula, funding, and programming. Doing so gives them a way to understand the tensions, constraints, and possibilities of this work, as well as exposure to the outcomes as often requiring compromise, and sometimes involving disappointment. Just as we teach writing as a process that involves many stops and starts, that is as recursive as it is forward-moving, and that is a path of both failure and success, we can also help our graduate students—and ourselves, in so doing—understand that WPA work follows a similar process.

In fact, as we consider what it might mean to make visible and teach

these dispositions and practices of resilience, we are struck by how much the characteristics our subjects described share in common with what the field has found to be true of fruitful writing practices and processes. Writing is aided by relational work, contextual knowledge, and rhetorical reflexivity. It is nonlinear, often frustrating, and involves many drafts. But when the writer, or the WPA, works from a sense of why the work is significant, to him or her, and to the field, it gives the writer reason to return, again, to the project, with the idea that in the long view, the work will make a difference.

Of course, also like writing, these habits and practices of resilience can only be partially established in advance of professorial and WPA work. For our subjects, this learning often occurred in situ, developed in context, over time, and with others. We would argue, then, that opportunities to hone social resilience must also happen in our day-to-day work with colleagues. Following the advice of our subjects, we found one of the most important ways to support resilience is by building collaborative networks. At our own institution, we have found great strength in biweekly meetings with our composition colleagues. This not only gives us a place to problem-solve and think creatively about our work as compositionists, but it also provides space for engaging the inevitable disappointment and frustration that comes with our work (and for celebrating, on occasion, as well!). While time spent acknowledging the affective dimensions of our work—how discouraging it is to have writing center budget after budget turned down, for instance—may not be an "efficient" use of time, it is one way we can acknowledge the inseparability of affective and intellectual work. The aim, here, is not to "manage" the emotion, but to help one another move out of disappointment. As Micciche argues, "the personal and professional danger of disappointment is that it may become a 'fixed' stance, eventually hardening into disillusionment, resignation, passivity in the face of new, ever changing situations" ("More" 446). Moreover, she argues that disappointment breeds loneliness, which can result in isolation and paralysis: "An academic politics of loneliness . . . fails to admit changing realities that circumscribe our work and the new ways of thinking that these changes require" (447). For these reasons, she emphasizes the importance of seeing ourselves in connection to others, who can acknowledge and help us investigate the conditions of disappointment and imagine possibilities outside of them.

We are aware that many of our colleagues in composition and rhetoric

are still the only or one of a couple members of the field in their departments. We also recommend, as our subjects underscored, seeking out connections beyond the department. One way this can occur is by choosing service commitments that align with the "collective imaginary"; committees focused on teaching and student learning can be useful avenues to find like-minded colleagues. One of our subjects described coming out of a moment of feeling angry and burned-out, and he decided, despite (or as a result of) that, to sign up for a university-sponsored seminar designed to support faculty as leaders. In writing his application, he was asked to articulate his motivation for participation. "[I said] it really makes me angry, this treatment of writing" and he described wanting to do something about it before retirement (Interview 10, 15). In the seminar he found allies, from across units and ranks, and began to develop a plan for a new writing program, which was, after many years, realized. Important in this story for our purposes, however, is that affect and connection were sources of resilience for

In this age when we are increasingly treated as competitive, individual subjects, national sources of connection are perhaps more important than ever.

this subject. And from this connection came more connections and invitations—like being asked to chair the task force on general education—that helped him advance a new model of first-year writing.

In this age when we are increasingly treated as competitive, individual subjects, national sources of connection are perhaps more important than ever. From the American Association of University Professors to coalitions to conferences, these groups give us a chance to organize with colleagues around shared values and commitments—a collective imaginary. These connections bring to the forefront the notions of education, success, and equity that may be ignored or devalued in our day-to-day institutional lives. The two of us have noted how energized we often feel after returning from the CCCC Convention, having been reminded that we are part of a large group of people who are working toward similar goals, and at the same time, analyzing and reflecting on how those goals need to evolve with changing times, conditions, and students.

Welch and Scott have recently argued that professional work in composition has always meant "arguing for more resources, continually recalibrating to make do with less and pursuing scholarly legitimacy that perpetually seems just over the next hill" (5). They contend that this par-

ticular moment is different "in part because of the scale and pace of the changes and in part because it has become clear that these changes are not temporary but permanent" (5). Under these conditions, cultivating social resilience will be all the more important as the field presses to ensure that all students have access to writing instruction that, as one respondent reminds us, helps students "not just to think better but to live better and to share better and be with other people better" (Interview 4, 4).

Appendix: Interview Questions

Historical Perspective:

1. How did you conceive of WPA work early in your career?
2. What did you perceive as the values of the field at the time?
3. What were your personal commitments and values?
4. Tell us about the kind of institution you entered and the history of your WPA work. When did you assume a WPA role? Describe the administrative work you did.
5. How did your perception of what was possible in this administrative work change across the time of your tenure of WPA?
6. What commitments were most difficult to sustain as you gained more and more administrative experience?
7. What commitments seemed easier to sustain as you moved into administration?

Changing Institutions

1. How would you describe the most significant economic, political, and cultural changes that occurred across your career? How have institutional values changed over this period?
2. Did your commitments shift as you saw these changes occur? How so?
3. How did your WPA work and related scholarship shift in relationship to the changes you saw in institutional values and commitments?
4. How did you perceive your sense of professional agency at different historical moments in your career? What most hindered and facilitated that sense of agency?

Sustaining Ourselves and Our Work

1. Could you provide an account of a high-stakes moment where your values as a WPA and the institutional values were at odds?
2. What sustained you in that moment? What/who do you see as particularly important resources for resilience in this moment?

3. How have you found ways to preserve your own (or the field's) commitments when they were not valued by the institution?

4. Is there anything you'd like to share that we haven't touched on?

Acknowledgments

Note

1. Our study was determined by our institution's IRB to be exempt.

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