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## The Future of WPA Professionalization: A 2007 Survey

Fall 2009 / Focus

by **Jonikka Charlton**, University of Texas-Pan America

### PhD specialization in writing-center and writing-program careers



Jonikka Charlton

My entry into administrative work, as has been the case with many writing program and writing center administrators, was the result of serendipity [1]. I had just graduated with my Master's degree in literature, and I had no immediate plans for what to do. I had spent several years working as a writing tutor and teacher while in my graduate program, and, like many, I found the work meaningful and significant. The stars aligned, it seemed, as the writing center director at my institution retired the very semester I graduated with my master's degree, and the department needed someone to step in while they could convince the upper administration they needed to hire a tenure-track faculty member to fill the position long-term.

The next three years of my life were devoted to running our writing center, and I loved (almost) every minute of it. When the institution finally approved and eventually hired a tenure-track writing center director, my faculty colleagues gave me a gentle shove in the direction of a PhD program, ensuring me this was the path which would get me back where I wanted to be — a writing program administrator (WPA). While I had gained a great deal of significant experience in my time as writing center director, I realized I had had very little time to reflect on the intellectual work of such positions, so I sought out a PhD program with a specialization in writing program administration. It is still rare to find programs with such an emphasis, but it is increasingly evident that more and more new faculty are finding themselves in administrative positions *deliberately*. Not only are they choosing the work rather than just falling into it, but they're also actively studying it in graduate school.

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## **center professionals over the past twenty years which have focused on gathering data about the roles and responsibilities of writing center directors.**

In 1999, Sally Barr Ebest surveyed **Council of Writing Program Administrators** (CWPA) members to find out whether and how graduate students were being prepared to teach, engage in research, and do administrative work; she concluded that “training in the skills and duties required of a WPA is, in most institutions, a matter of chance” (67). “If we want the next generation of WPAs to avoid the problems and prejudices we have encountered,” she argued, “we need to ensure that they learn what we know before they graduate” (Ebest 82). While some are concerned about and object to WPA professionalization — particularly graduate student professionalization in WPA [2] — a strong case has been made for both formal and informal study of writing program administration, with an effort to make good on Ebest’s request that we do everything we can to help future WPAs understand the field they’re entering *before* they’re asked to assume full responsibility for administrative work.

A number of important surveys have been conducted by writing center professionals over the past twenty years (Olson and Ashton-Jones in 1988, Healy in 1995, and Balester and McDonald in 1997) which have focused on gathering data about the roles and responsibilities of writing center directors, their status and working conditions, as well as their education and preparation for administrative work. What we see in that early survey work is an attempt by our field to figure out who we are, how we can best do our work, and what we need to do it. Recent work like Melissa Ianetta et al.’s “Polylog” and Rebecca Jackson, Carrie Leverenz, and Joe Law’s “(Re)Shaping the Profession: Graduate Courses in Writing Center Theory, Practice, and Administration” has contributed to a more disciplined conversation about how we might prepare future writing center administrators and what effects these new avenues of preparation might have on both individual faculty members and the larger field of writing center studies.

I would like to contribute to that conversation here by sharing data that my colleague, Shirley K. Rose, and I collected about the education and preparation of WPAs in our 2007 survey of CWPA members [3], focusing specifically on the responses we received from those actively involved in writing center work. I would like to concentrate on a few key issues — respondents’ education, specialization, and their perceptions of what prepared them to do their work — and place that in the context, when possible, of earlier surveys which provided data about writing center directors [4]. Finally, I hope to explore what these trends (where there are clear trends) might suggest for developing administrative identities.

### **Education**

In 1995, Dave Healy reported the results of his survey of National Writing Center Association (NWCA) members and **Writing Lab Newsletter** subscribers, and found that only 40% of writing center directors had a PhD (though it is important to acknowledge those with EdDs were counted in an “other” category with MEd and MFAs, which accounted for 12% of the sample). In 1997, Valerie Balester and James C. McDonald surveyed both NWCA and CWPA members, as well as participants on the WPA-L and WCENTER listservs and attendees at the 1997 and 1998 NWCA conferences, and found that 53% of

writing center directors had a doctoral degree. Ten years later, in our survey, it appears that many more writing center administrators had doctoral degrees; 88.2% of writing center directors had a doctoral degree (70.6% had a PhD while 17.6% had an EdD).

Balester and McDonald suggested that hiring practices were “important indicators of an institution’s view of a WPA position and the qualifications it values” and explained that most writing center directors were selected after an internal search (64). National searches, they wrote, “often indicate a desire to find someone highly qualified rather than simply to find someone willing to fill a slot” (64). Their data “strongly suggest[ed] that institutions tend to grant writing program directors more status than writing center directors” and “require their writing program director to have a doctorate and to specialize in composition studies” while they “do not expect the same from their writing center director” (Balester and McDonald 70). While it can be argued that writing center directors often have *more* freedom to act if they can remain outside the traditional academic hierarchy, it is also true that the status afforded us by our degrees significantly goes a long way towards helping us achieve our goals as administrators and advocates for students and writing on our campuses.

### **Specialization**

Balester and McDonald also asked their respondents about their area of specialization, which broke down in the following ways:

- 57% Rhetoric, Composition, or Composition with Literature
- 39% Literature
- 4% English Education or Law

### **There were markedly few (25%) writing center directors from our survey sample who had focused on composition and rhetoric in their graduate work while double that number focused on literature.**

We also asked our survey respondents about their specializations, but we asked a more specific question about the focus of their coursework for their highest degree. We offered a wider range of options, but our respondents fell mainly in two categories: 25% of our writing center directors specialized in Rhet/Comp, 50% in Literature. 25% chose an “Other” response, while none picked English Ed, Speech/Communication, Linguistics, or Creative Writing. In 1988, when Olson and Ashton-Jones surveyed first-year writing program directors to elicit information about their perceptions of writing center directors, they noted that 25% of their respondents felt it wasn’t necessary or didn’t matter that writing center directors be trained composition specialists (22), yet Olson and Ashton-Jones argue that the “writing center director should be *required* to be a rhetoric and composition specialist, a person well-versed in theory of and research in both composition and writing centers” (24, my emphasis). Balester & McDonald’s 1997 survey showed that writing center administrators were moving more in that direction, but Healy’s 1995 survey still suggested that the “emerging portrait” of writing center directors revealed they were not “typically trained in composition/rhetoric” (30).

There were markedly few (25%) writing center directors from our survey sample who had focused on composition and rhetoric in their graduate work while double that number focused on literature. Given the trend towards increasing specialization in the academy at large and in “English” specifically in

the past twenty years, it is reasonable to expect that if we sorted our 2007 data according to age, we might find that writing center directors who began their careers 10-20+ years ago may account for the higher numbers of respondents who focused in areas other than rhetoric and composition. At that time, studying “English” often meant studying literature. We suspect this has been changing gradually over time and will continue to as more and more of us choose to study WPA as a focus of our graduate preparation.

Melissa Ianetta et al. identify three positions on a “spectrum of opinions” about administrative expertise — the “Universal Professional,” the “Local Professional,” and the “Administrative Iconoclast” (14-15). Their “Universal Professional,” which most accurately reflects a dominant trend I see in WPA professionalization, “defines WPAs by credentials clearly recognized in the academic universe, that is, Composition PhDs with relevant coursework, experience, and mentoring in administrative matters” as well as “an additional subset of specialized knowledge about writing centers or other curriculum-based writing programs” (Ianetta et al. 14). And, most interesting to those of us who advocate “serious and rigorous study of WPA,” Ianetta et al. argue that this “new generation of writing professionals [...] will move beyond lore by applying research methods to our experiential knowledge of writing centers and help us see the writing center through new lenses” (Ianetta et al. 14). A focus, not only on the practical matters of administration, but on the scholarly, research-driven aspects of our work, is an important marker of an emerging generation of WPAs who are not only specializing in rhetoric and composition, but taking WPA-related courses, holding administrative internships, and engaging in WPA scholarship.

## **Preparation**

An important finding of recent research in our field suggests that there are more WPAs out there “who have specifically prepared for this work” (Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos 19) [5], and there is an impressive range of activities — both formal and informal, both in and out of school — which serve our ongoing professional development as administrators. In these next sections, I provide a breakdown of the types of activities our writing center respondents said contributed to their preparation for writing center administration.

### *Conferences/Workshops/Institutes*

We offered several choices that involved attendance at CWPA-sponsored conferences, workshops, and institutes, as well as WPA-related conference and workshops, and we saw that writing center administrators attribute a fair amount of their preparation to their ongoing professional development, particularly from the WPA conference (60%) and the CWPA-sponsored summer workshop (40%). Not surprisingly, 65% of writing center directors identified “other workshops” as a contributor to their preparation; no doubt many writing center directors in our sample are also members of the **International Writing Centers Association** (IWCA) and have attended those summer institutes and annual conferences as well.

### *Mentoring*

Mentoring, for most of us, has had a profound effect on our abilities to do our jobs, and our survey bore this out. We offered two separate choices to describe possible mentoring relationships — mentoring received as graduate students and mentoring received while on the job—and we found that 60% of writing

center directors identified on-the-job mentoring as a source of their preparation. Fifty percent cited mentoring they received as graduate students.

### *Graduate WPA Preparation*

The “most urgent finding” of Scott Miller et al.’s national survey of graduate students published in 1997 was that “by and large, students express great satisfaction regarding the ‘present tense’ of their lives [...], but they are greatly worried — or, frequently, know very little — about their ‘future tense’” (393). To address this, WPAs have sought to educate future administrators through apprenticeship/graduate WPA (gWPA) experiences. Almost a third of our writing center director sample (30%) indicated their gWPA work had prepared them.

On the other end of the graduate preparation spectrum are the more formal, discipline-based avenues of preparation, specifically WPA coursework, which, Theresa Enos argues, serves as a credential for WPA expertise (64). Jackson, Leverenz, and Law echo this point, and, after a careful review of their own writing center administration course syllabi, conclude that such courses “certainly prepare future writing center administrators to enter the field with a clear sense that it is a field, that it has a history (a complex, contested history, in fact), that all practice is informed by distinct theoretical or philosophical stances, that research can and should be conducted in a writing center” (132-33). While Anthony Edgington and Stacy Hartlage Taylor’s 2007 survey of gWPAs and WPAs only elicited two mentions (out of 63 respondents) of a specific WPA-related graduate course as preparation (165), it is clear from our data that far more graduate students have taken such courses: 15% of writing center directors had WPA-related coursework. Five percent had even written a WPA-related dissertation.

### **The Future of WPA Professionalization**

Almost fifteen years ago, Dave Healy wondered “how and why writing center directors entered the profession,” given that “[o]utside the academy, we expect professionals to have sensed some kind of ‘calling’ to their profession and to have devoted themselves with considerable intentionality and focus to their chosen specialty” (38). While faculty were assumed to have been called to work in a particular academic discipline, administrators, he argued, usually “ended up” there “for a variety of reasons and with a variety of attitudes toward and kinds of preparation for the responsibilities they assume” (Healy 38). While it is still true that many administrators, some of whom are the leaders and mentors of our field, just somehow found themselves in their positions, it is also true, as our survey suggests, that more of us are actively choosing administrative work and deliberately preparing for and embracing its intellectual demands.

### **Notes**

[1] Ianetta et al. ask the question, “Are writing center directors writing program administrators?” in their 2006 article, “Polylog.” They, and I, answer that question in the affirmative, so, when I use the term “WPA,” I am referring to writing center directors as well as what Ianetta et al. call “curriculum-based program directors.”

[2] See Rose and Weiser for one of the most thorough discussions of these objections in print.

[3] The survey questionnaire covered a range of issues, with a total of 57 items

related to demographic data (age, gender, institutional type and size), WPA experience (whether or not they were or ever had been in an official WPA position and if so, for how many years and how many different positions) job responsibilities (based on list in the **Portland Resolution**, including a question about whether they were responsible for scholarship and research in these areas), tenure status and prospects, and preparation for WPA work. We e-mailed survey tokens to 413 CWPA members, and 226 completed the survey, a response rate of 55%.

**[4]** It is important to note that each survey discussed in this article had a different population (including CWPA and NWCA members, WPA-L and WCENTER participants, and NWCA conference attendees, and Writing Lab Newsletter subscribers), so I am careful not to make direct comparisons or to suggest that the data I discuss here (from our survey and/or other surveys) suggest absolute trends.

**[5]** While it is true that there are many more writing program and writing center administrators out there who have been prepared (in some way) for their work, our survey results still show a somewhat remarkable number of writing center director respondents — 15%—who say they had “no preparation” whatsoever.

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