

# 1 Introduction and Overview

Although the work involved in writing program administration has existed for some time (as documented in Chapter 3), it was not until the formation of the Council of Writing Program Administrators in the late 1970s that the work was dignified with a title that aligned it with other administrative positions in the university. Before that time, the job was usually a service task assigned to some faculty member (often to supervise TAs), and there was usually one per campus, in the English Department. That situation has changed radically in the last twenty years; not only has the title of Writing Program Administrator (WPA) caught on as a general descriptor for the intellectual as well as bureaucratic work involved in such positions, but also the number of different kinds of writing programs has grown. If you called some of the larger institutions of higher education in this country and asked to speak to the writing program administrator, you would be asked, “Which one?” At Purdue University, for example, you would find a Director and an Assistant Director of the Writing Lab, a Director and two Assistant Directors of Composition, a Director and an Assistant Director of the Professional Writing Program, and a Director of the ESL Writing Program. At Washington State University, there is a Director of Composition, a Director of Campus Writing Programs, a Director of Writing Assessment, and a Director and Assistant Director of the Writing Center. Other institutions have Directors of Basic Writing, Directors of Writing Across the Curriculum or Writing in the Disciplines, Composition Coordinators, Directors of Writing-Intensive Freshman Seminars, Directors of Business Writing, Coordinators of Upper-Division Writing, and in growing numbers, Chairs of Departments of Writing or of Writing Studies. All these are writing program administrators. This volume will focus on writing program administration within or among academic departments (usually English departments), with a focus on the administration of first-year writing programs, since that is still the most common kind

of WPA work; it should be noted, though, that much of the present discussion also relates to writing program administration of other stripes.

### ISSUES IN WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

The issues in writing program administration, like those of any university administrative position, are numerous and varied. The administrator is called upon to respond to regular directives and deadlines (for budget proposals, five-year plans, personnel evaluations); because the job is driven by these and by various crises that arise (like budget cuts, grade complaints, seriously ill faculty), one must guard against being reactive rather than proactive as a WPA. Knowing what the basic issues are and making plans each year, perhaps each term, to allocate time and energy to the most important issues, can help a WPA plan administrative time wisely. The matrix below is one way to think about how to plan time and energy.

Administrative Issues	
Urgent and important	Urgent but not important
Not urgent but important	Not urgent and not important

We tend, because of the nature of administrative jobs, to deal with the top half of this matrix—always dealing with what is urgent. Experienced administrators deal with the left half—blocking out time for what is most important for the job and delegating or ignoring the rest.

The main issues a WPA deals with are curriculum and pedagogy, assessment and accountability, staffing and staff development, and professional and personal issues of various stripes, including tenure and promotion. Further, whether or not the WPA handles his or her own budget, knowledge of how budgets work in his or her own institution is essential. Graduate programs in rhetoric and composition, recognizing that many of their students will be hired immediately into WPA positions, have begun offering seminars in writing program administration. However, administration, like teaching, is experiential and therefore best learned in an apprenticeship, working with and observing someone who is experienced, taking on some of the tasks grad-

ually and with supervision. Recognizing this fact, many institutions now hire new faculty as assistant directors of composition, a position from which a new faculty member can grow into the job of a WPA.

## ORGANIZATION AND SCOPE OF THE TEXT

Because it is a reference guide, the book provides a summary of the literature in the field; the organization of the book follows the usual format for this series, *Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition*. Chapter 2 deals with distinctions and definitions of the term “writing program administration.” Defining this term is more difficult than might first appear; although there are many similarities among positions that involve writing program administration, there are also significant differences. Chapter 3 outlines the history of writing program administration in the U.S., with some background on both the development of first-year composition (a uniquely American course) and on the tenacious history of current-traditional rhetoric, an issue that WPAs must still deal with in many programs. Chapter 4 focuses on current views of the most important issues in Writing Program Administration as they appear in the literature and practical guidelines as to how to deal with them. Those new to the concept of writing program administration might want to read this chapter before reading the history chapter. Chapter 5 is a glossary of useful terms and abbreviations. The final chapter is an annotated bibliography of useful resources for writing program administrators.

I have tried to present the literature in the field as the authors themselves would have the work presented, as objectively as I can. However, I should acknowledge here my own personal biases in terms of administrative theory and practice. My work as a WPA has been informed by two major influences: my training and experience as an agent of change in the U.S. Peace Corps in the 1960s, and my experience in the Bryn Mawr Summer Seminar for Women in Higher Education Administration in the 1980s. It was at Bryn Mawr that I first encountered Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s *The Change Masters*, a study of successful organizational change in business. Kanter’s research resonated with my own experiences in both the Peace Corps and as a WPA. It helped me articulate my own vision of writing program administration as an activity that aims at bringing about institutional change in the way writing is viewed and taught in higher education—away from a view

of writing courses as remediation and an accompanying current/traditional pedagogical approach, towards an acknowledgment of writing as intertwined with learning and critical thinking and a pedagogy that treated students with the respect due to neophytes learning ways of doing things in a new culture, that of academe.