

Snapshots of #WPALife: Invisible Labor and Writing Program Administration

Megan McIntyre
Sonoma State University

Abstract

Writing program administration work is a significant reality for many within the field of rhetoric and composition, and though such work has long been part of our disciplinary fabric, it often remains invisible to departments and institutions. In this article, I offer two brief snapshots of how writing program administration work is often obscured by seemingly brief documents or interactions, which elide the complex communicative and political work at the heart of program administration. I then offer a hashtag-based Twitter community, #WPALife, as one potential way of making this work more visible and of building the capacity to create more just, equitable, and anti-racist writing programs. Visibility can't be an end in and of itself; rather, making this work visible allows me to be a more effective advocate for equitable and anti-racist practices in my program, institution, university system, and discipline.

Megan McIntyre is an Assistant Professor of English and Writing Program Director at Sonoma State University. She was formerly the Assistant Director of Dartmouth College's Institute for Writing and Rhetoric and director of the University of South Florida's Writing Studio. She received her PhD from the University of South Florida in 2015, and her research interests include digital rhetoric and writing, writing program administration, and post-pedagogy. You can find her recent work in *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, *Prompt: A Journal of Academic Writing Assignments*, and *Composition Forum*.

EO 1100, on the other hand, had some surprisingly earthshaking consequences for us. Since the creation of our stretch composition program, around 2010, we had also been running a 4-unit, one-semester composition course that fulfilled the written communication general education requirement. Though one semester of writing is insufficient to help students develop transferable writing and reading abilities, the composition faculty on my campus had done a great job of building courses that served students well by using the additional hour (most GE courses were 3 hours instead of 4) as a way to give students additional practice, time for revision, and individualized attention. According to EO 1100, though, these 4-hour courses were no longer permissible.

The writing program response to the EO was further complicated by large-scale, campus-level changes to GE. The EO had caused our campus to rethink the entirety of our GE program, and so a special working group assembled at the end of the 2017-18 academic year to draft an entirely new GE sequence. The new GE proposal did little to articulate a new vision for the written communication requirement, but it did integrate the Chancellor's Office 3-unit requirement for GE classes. There would be no special dispensation for our writing courses; our 4-unit writing course was dead.

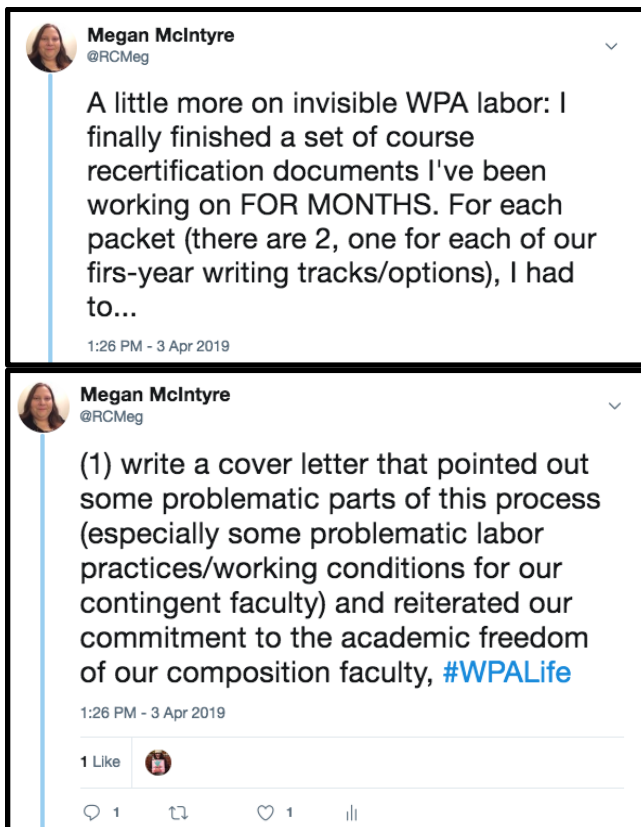
This required change would, of course, have an effect on our students; as I made clear in the documents I crafted related to this process, the loss of one hour per week of instructional time means that students are likely to get less specific feedback and less one-on-one time with their instructors. But the bigger impact was on our composition faculty: with caps of 25 (which represents a reduction of two students from our previous caps) for ENGL 101, composition faculty teaching a full 12-unit load of ENGL 101 courses will see an increase of one course and 19 students, which is the equivalent of approximately 1,500 extra pages of student writing to respond to over the course of the semester. Our faculty are being tasked with significantly more work with no increase in compensation.


For the most part, my approach to this process has been to note, loudly and frequently, what is being required of writing program faculty and to ensure that affected faculty are invited to every meeting I'm in regarding these changes. My department chair has been similarly committed to ensuring that composition faculty have a voice and a seat at the table as these decisions get made by faculty committees outside our department. And the composition faculty have responded with thoughtfulness and care, but all of these changes ask for something they have very, very little of: time. As Jesse Priest convincingly argues in his examination of how time factors into material working conditions for writing teachers, "time is inseparably connected to labor in a variety of ways: we spend time, we engage in work while also engaging in time, and our institutions, our students, and ourselves put pressure on us to mediate our time in certain and specific ways" (42). And for those in contingent positions, time is in quite short supply. This process has taught me a lot

about myself and my institution. Among the most important lessons is this: it's not enough to make space for our contingent faculty; I also have to find ways to center their voices and facilitate their participation in ways that don't require time they simply don't have.

Ultimately, our department was faced with the choice to refuse to participate in the recertification of our courses within the new framework, and put our contingent faculty in an even more uncertain position with regard to their course assignments for the academic year, or participate in what we saw as a flawed process so we could make good-faith offers of work. We've chosen the latter course, for better or for worse. But I've taken every opportunity in the recertification documents I've crafted to reiterate the labor and pedagogical concerns that the process is largely ignoring.


Here's how I recently described this process on Twitter:



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(2) fill out an official form complete with a 50-word explanation for the change (which is harder than a 300-word explanation because the reasons for this are varied and political), #WPALife

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(3) compose a brand new syllabus for each of these courses so as not to put one of our contingent faculty's syllabus under a university level microscope, #WPALife

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@RCMeg

(4) pull out a "signature assignment" from said syllabus and explain its connection to university-level guidelines/outcomes (which haven't officially been approved by our faculty senate yet but need to be implemented for us by Fall 2019 b/c of system level tomfoolery), #WPALife

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And (5) craft a set of program-wide syllabus and signature assignment guidelines that are broad enough to protect our faculty's academic freedom but specific enough to make it through this process. #WPALife

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
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And honestly, I'm lucky: our GE subcommittee was open to consultation and responsive to feedback from me and from my department. Still, this process has engulfed my whole first year here and just the creation of these packets has taken me 60 or more hours each. #WPALife

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

2 Likes  

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It takes so long b/c (1) writing a good syllabus take a long time, (2) I want to present evidence-based arguments for decisions that put me at odds w/ some on campus so I needed to do research, and (3) the audience for these things is huge and varied. #WPALife

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3 Likes   

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We also share our mundane experiences, which take as much time and require as much labor as the more sustained endeavors that make up the majority of the discussion in the first half of this article. Members of this hashtag community tweet about office drop-ins from publisher reps:



Figure 7: Example of #WPALife Tweet about Speaking to Publishers' Book Reps

And meetings:



Figure 8: Example of #WPALife Tweet about Meetings and Time

And email inboxes:



Figure 9 Example of a #WPALife Tweet about the Volume of Email WPAs Wade through Each Day

And phone calls:

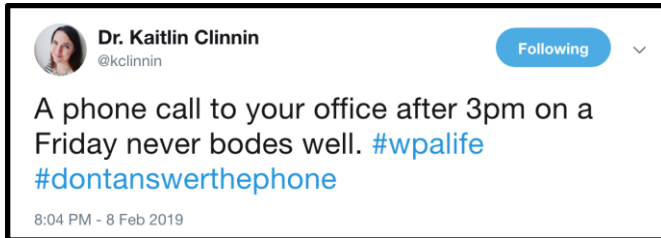


Figure 10: Example of a #WPALife Tweet about Dealing with Phone Calls and Crises

Basically, on a regular basis we articulate our labor in a public, semi-permanent space. We “heart” and share and respond to one another and in the process, for me at least, feel a little less isolated in our work.

Hashtag-based Twitter communities like this one are built around a set of shared interests represented by a specific hashtag; the shared interest is often but not always identified by the content of the hashtag. In her discussion of the #YouOkaySis hashtag, Paige Johnson argues that hashtags can serve as both a “rallying cry and gathering place” (57). Hashtags are also, as linguist Vyvyan Evans notes, a “linguistic marker of emphasis” (“#Language: Evolution in the Digital Age”). In the case of #WPALife, we can see all these traits at work simultaneously: the messages shared using the hashtag call for attention to invisible but necessary work, emphasize those parts of our jobs that feel most important or least likely to be seen/understood, and offer a space for commiseration, support, and advice from others in similar circumstances.

There are, of course, limitations to a community like this and to this community in particular. There a number of pre-tenure women participating in the hashtag community, but so far as I can tell, all but one of the WPAs tweeting using the #WPALife hashtag are white. This speaks, to return to an earlier refrain, to the precarious position of faculty and WPAs of color, especially those who are pre-tenure. Public conversations in social media spaces can be dangerous, especially to women and people of color. For this to be a community dedicated to equity, we must find ways to center those voices here as well.

As one of the more prolific users of the tag (a title I share with Brad Dilger, I think), there are concrete steps I can take to promote more diverse voices among this community of administrators. First, and most basically, I can start by tweeting the work of scholars and WPAs of color into the tag. Recognizing the foundational contributions of women, BIPOC, disabled, and LGBTQ+ scholars to rhetoric and composition as a field and to my work as a faculty-administrator is quite literally the very

least I can do. Secondly, I can begin using additional hashtags (alongside #WPALife) to connect to ongoing conversations around equity and diversity, especially hashtags celebrating achievements of diverse scholars. There's danger here, though: hashtag spamming (the practice of using many popular tags as a way to draw attention to your own tweet) is widely seen as manipulative and, for folks within the community represented by the hashtag, exploitative.

Thirdly, it feels important to acknowledge, in the #WPALife space and elsewhere, the continuing lack of diversity in WPA positions. As a WPA who has significantly benefitted from the amazing work of scholars, teachers, and WPAs of color as I work to build an anti-racist practice and program, I owe an enormous debt to scholars like Asao Inoue, Christina Cedillo, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Django Paris, Staci M. Perryman-Clark, Collin Lamont Craig, and so many more. Finally, members of this community should specifically invite WPAs of color into the community. This final action, though, must be preceded by the others. Before I ask scholars of color to do the work of participating and strengthening #WPALife, #WPALife must become a space that is proactively welcoming to those scholars.

Conclusion: So What Do You Want?

What is it, then, that I want? Following Paula Patch, I want a revolution. I want a program built on empathy and equity, recognizing that “equity is generous and does not look like withholding things from people who are doing good work just because the way they do it or the way they arrived at it looks different” (“Academic Fragility/Academic Imagination”). I want better ways of advocating for the contingent faculty that make up the vast majority of faculty in our program. And I want their work (and mine) to be visible and rewarded by institutions. I want to be, as Inoue has called us to, anti-racist in my teaching and administration practices. I want to decenter whiteness and center marginalized voices. I want to make space in our program for polyvocality, equity, and multiliteracies. This is the better writing program—and the better world—I’m fighting for in these small skirmishes marked by course change forms and learning management systems.

I also want accessible communities for those of us sometimes overwhelmed by the enormity and mundanity of our work. In one of the recent kerfuffles on the WPA-L,¹¹ a few long-standing members of the list

¹¹ WPA-L is a listserv that began as a way to connect writing program administrators from across the U.S. At that point in the history of the discipline, many WPAs were the only writing faculty in literature-focused English departments. Additionally, most faculty in WPA positions at the advent of the WPA-L were not specifically trained for WPA work, so the listserv allowed faculty to request and share resources and knowledge and forge much-needed relationships with others in similar positions. As Craig notes, though, faculty of

waxed nostalgic about how WPA-L, at its inception, was a supportive, generative space when most WPAs worked alone inside hostile departments of English. Many other members of the list (including colleagues of color, graduate students, and women) noted that WPA-L had never been a welcoming space for them, marked as it is by coded (or not so coded) racism, mansplaining, and general hierarchical nonsense. What I want is a space that actually enacts community in the way a select few on WPA-L once experienced it. I've found a bit of that in #WPALife, and I see it happening, too, in spaces like the NextGen listserv, and in Feminist Caucus workshops, and meetings at the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Visibility can't be, for me at least, a goal in and of itself. Visibility has to serve a larger purpose, one rooted in equity and social justice for exploited, under-supported faculty and underserved students. For now, what I most need is a space where I can build the capacity for such work, where I can make the managerial work that takes so much of time visible to others in ways that allow us to strategize about how to do that seemingly mundane work in service of those larger purposes. That's the heart of it for me: I need a community that can help me be better at the hard work that might help me create a more just future. For me, that's #WPALife.

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color have long been underrepresented in official WPA positions and in histories of WPA work. Given that historical lack of recognition and support for faculty of color, and ongoing problems with sexism and mansplaining on the WPA-L (see "The Idea That Was a Forum" from the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition), in fall 2018, a movement to acknowledge this problematic history and to find a better way forward emerged on Twitter, mostly around the #WPAListservFeministRevolution hashtag. At the risk of overgeneralizing a diverse set of issues that emerged under the umbrella of #WPAListservFeministRevolution, there were generally two camps: one that argued for the reform of WPA-L and one that called for its abolition. On the listserv itself, a third group, disinclined to support any change at all, also persisted.

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