Chapter 12. From Dream Job to Unsustainable

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My undergraduate university had the kind of writing center that would make any writing center practitioner (and probably Stephen North) cringe: a "writing lab" relegated to the corner of an upper floor of the library that was never advertised or mentioned in any of my courses. It wasn't until I entered graduate school at a different university and began volunteering as a consultant in their writing center (while simultaneously enrolled in a rhetoric & composition course) that I learned what the space represented, in theory and practice, and felt a strong connection to its purpose and procedures. As a graduate assistant the following year, I served as the assistant director of the writing center; in addition to tutoring, I helped the director with training, attended workshops, and observed in more detail exactly what the center represented for the university and its students. This illuminated connections between tutoring and teaching, and I knew right away that composition studies were for me.

Toward the end of my last semester in graduate school, the director abruptly resigned and left the university. The writing program administrator and I collaborated to finish the semester (co-teaching the tutor training course and overseeing the consultants' daily work), and the English department faculty offered me a one-year interim director position (which later became permanent). I remember feeling shocked and honored, thinking to myself, *"I never thought I would get my dream job right out of graduate school!"*

My 11 years as writing center director were incredibly rewarding, and I credit my colleagues in the English department for embracing me (especially since I had been a student in many of their classes). They included me in department meetings, email discussions, and job interviews; listened to and considered my ideas; and even asked me for help with their own students, or with teaching writing or designing assignments. I had room to innovate in my position and developed a credit-bearing course sequence to help graduate assistants become more effective teachers. My visibility across the university increased when my colleagues introduced me to other faculty members or invited me to workshops. I received funding to attend conferences every year (and presented at many), and returned with ideas for the writing center, my own classrooms, and writing course curricula. I was never micromanaged and felt like everyone trusted me to make good decisions, report data, and request only what I really needed for the center.

Although I was happy and felt supported and successful, my job (like many in higher ed) was demanding, despite the fact that it was dynamic and multifaceted. As time went on, my workload increased and expanded, yet remained

compressed under "other duties as assigned." As an NTT staff member, I already felt pressure to say "yes" to anything I was asked to do–even when the "ask" involved becoming a program coordinator in an unfamiliar discipline. I worried that the one time I said "no" would somehow show up on my performance evaluation, or would give administrators the impression that I "didn't *really* want this job." That is how my singular position evolved into three: the writing center director (the job I was hired for), the coordinator of teaching for graduate assistants (a role I created and proposed), and the coordinator for a subset of writing courses transferred into the English department (a role I was asked to take on). Yet, in the eyes of the university, I was only the writing center director.

Complicating my work further was the fact that I felt like my position was situated "in the middle." Although I was classified as "staff," my work was "faculty-like": teaching, academic committee service, research, and presentations (by my own choice, not because I was required to). My reporting line was very confusing; the English department chair completed my yearly performance review, but I was technically aligned under the College of Arts & Sciences. My "staff" classification generated a "staff" performance evaluation from Human Resources, which did not provide room for me to report everything that my job entailed. I often felt like I was out on my own island, and that no one other than my department chair and closest colleagues *really* understood.

I felt fulfilled and valuable to many people (my undergraduate students, particularly in first-year writing; my writing center consultants; the graduate assistants; and numerous colleagues) but realized around my ninth year that at my university, I was at the top of my career. There was no room for me to advance, even if I got a Ph.D. (which I did not want to do). Even though I liked my work, I didn't like feeling "maxed out" (in position title and salary) at a young age. I tried proposing a more comprehensive position title after I added "program coordinator" to my workload; while administrators supported it, Human Resources denied the request and said that my new responsibilities only warranted another bullet point in my job description.

Faced with these realities, I began to do research into the labor of writing center professionals (particularly for NTT staff, faculty, and administrators). I connected with wonderful co-researchers, presented workshops and roundtables on the topic, and discovered that–even *before* the pandemic–many others had written editorials, articles, and books highlighting the same precarity, isolation, and edge-of-overwork feelings I was experiencing. While it was comforting to know that I was not alone, nor was I being overdramatic, the community of people and the existing research that surfaced were concerning. The question I kept coming back to was, *"Are all writing center professionals eventually susceptible to this experience?"*

The pandemic answered that question in many ways. Fortunately, I was able to retain my staff and my budget, and no one questioned me or told me what I could and couldn't do. Many others (who I met through virtual conversations in

the *Directors of Writing Centers* Facebook group and "WCD Coffee and Chat" sessions) faced cuts to personnel, budgets, and spaces, or were forced to return in-person while COVID-19 spread and risks were still high. At a time when we all missed the in-person, "normal" environments of our classrooms and writing centers, and when our actual and emotional labor had increased exponentially, those virtual conversations were a respite. Here was a community of people who *understood* each other, in ways that many of us felt our colleagues outside of the writing center did not. Those conversations were therapeutic, productive, and emotional; for every question or problem someone posed, someone else had already experienced it and provided a suggestion. For every emotion expressed, at least one other person (if not more) felt the same.

What became evident, both through the virtual spaces for the field and in my own life, was that the pandemic represented a significant shift. Through the remainder of 2020 and into 2021, I saw posts from people who left their writing centers–and higher education altogether, in some cases–to pursue new paths. Others reinvented their centers and positions with energy and enthusiasm. While I tried to remain positive, I lost my enthusiasm during summer 2020, when my employment was up in the air for months, and I finally concluded, *"this is unsustainable."* Doing everything online in fall 2020 was tiresome *on top of* already-existing burnout, and I knew it was time for me to move on and listen to the quiet wondering that had been in the back of my mind for a while: *"I wonder what my skills would be worth in other industries."* I reworked my resume that winter and quietly began looking at positions elsewhere that focused on editing (the "side hustle" I had developed a few years prior). After a short search process, I was fortunate to be offered a position in healthcare; even in this new industry, I feel more valued, balanced, and focused than I ever had in higher education.

I have been out of academia for over a year now, and I do not regret my decision to leave. I miss my colleagues, and I miss having the opportunity to mentor others, but I have been able to remain connected to the writing center and higher education communities by outwardly offering support and a listening ear for anyone who is considering leaving. I also remain connected to some of the "long-distance writing center friends" I met online. It is still difficult for me to emotionally detach myself from the changes my former university announces, but I remind myself each time that it's no longer my concern. I am, however, grateful for all of the characteristics I developed during the first 11 years of my career (innovation, altruism, and a desire to help others improve), and if there is one thing I learned during my job search, it is that those characteristics–the ones that *make* a writing center director–are invaluable across all industries.