

Chapter 16. Writing Center as Life Raft: The Fracturing of the Grand Narratives of Working in Higher Education

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There's a grand narrative to working in higher education. The narrative goes like this: finish your undergraduate degree in four years with great grades, get into a great MA and then Ph.D. program with a good TAship. Complete your MA in two years and your Ph.D. in four years. Publish articles, engage in the field, go to conferences, network. Land your dream job as an assistant professor and writing center director. Jump through the hoops of tenure and promotion, sacrificing your life to publish enough and do enough to gain tenure and be promoted. Continue to publish and do good work, and get promoted to full professor. And when you get full professor, you can really settle into your career, do interesting work, and feel completely secure.

Grand narratives have a tremendous amount of power. They shape our behavior and mindsets, and when they are shattered, they leave us shattered with them. Narratives have more power for people who are working class, who come from nothing and have nothing, and who have had to carefully learn the "rules" and how to navigate the system.

My own story looks just like that opening grand narrative. I was a model student, model academic, and a lot of it was driven by my working-class background. I felt like I had to be the best because I grew up poor and in an extremely challenged area of the country that is known to be uneducated, racist, and religious fundamentalist. I felt like I had to rise above these roots, above my own marked dialect, and above my poor country girl status by working as hard as I could to be the best. Because of this grand narrative, I believed that if I jumped through all of the hoops and invested all the work, I would be in a good position, and I could have a stable and great career. This narrative continued to hold truth for me right up until 2020. I was the faculty director of a very well-respected, endowed writing center. I was a tenured full professor and a world-famous scholar, being invited to deliver writing center conference keynote addresses, workshops, and do consultations all over the globe. As director of the writing center, I had done everything to the best of my ability: crafting annual reports leveraging institutional mission and priorities, creating data-driven and effective assessment and research, expanding our services in strategic ways, and offering effective university leadership. I was also a model faculty member, publishing multiple articles per year, having high teaching evaluations, winning teaching and research awards, landing grants, and engaging in substantial service to my university, discipline, and community.

I had given up a great deal to have that career. I had given up getting married and having children. I had given up a lot of other possibilities for travel, freedom, and to have new experiences. I felt that from the time I entered graduate school at 22 to the time I became a tenured full professor at age 38—I had put my life on hold, and my career was the only thing that had mattered. I had been satisfied with my earlier life sacrifices because the payoff should have been outstanding—a stable career and good pay, reaping the rewards of being a well-published scholar, and having a kind of financial resources and stability that, for a working-class person, is generally unheard of. I achieved tenure at my second institution and was promoted to full professor in fall 2018, about a year before the pandemic and chaos began.

And then there's the moment when everything shatters. When you realize that grand narrative is nothing but smoke and mirrors. And the foundation upon which you have built your life, made decisions, and invested your energy for almost two decades is a lie.

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Like many universities, my university was already having financial difficulty and enrollment declines before the pandemic began. The pandemic put this financial emergency into overdrive and created a great deal of upheaval, made much worse by cruel and inept university leadership. This mess included restructuring the entire institution in terms of academic units and refocusing our mission. This mess also included firing about 30 percent of the university employees while our upper administration (some of the highest paid salaries in the entire state) took multiple pay raises.

It all began in April 2020. We had moved online, gotten through the beginning of the shutdown, and were proud of the hard work we had accomplished. Soon, faculty began hearing about the university's financial emergency. In May 2020, our union announced the planned 28 percent faculty cuts, with cuts happening to those who had the least seniority—that is, years employed at our university—with tenure or rank being of no consideration. Every month, the news would grow more dire. That summer was excruciating, with everyone on edge and in a constant state of fear, reading the contract carefully, attending the meetings, and trying to figure out where the cuts would happen, who was safe, and who was not. I could hardly sleep. I had to start taking medication for anxiety and depression for the first time in my life, literally drugging myself through each day to remain functional. In early October, we learned how many faculty would be cut from each department but not names, adding to the torture. Somehow, we were supposed to continue to be productive, continue to teach, and continue to administer the writing center. Finally, on November 30<sup>th</sup>, I received a letter saying that my job—as a full professor with tenure—would be terminated by May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021. If they had given us notice and then sent termination letters in a timely fashion, it would have been one thing. But to have these termination letters span such a terribly

long period of time, almost a year from start to finish, and in the middle of a global pandemic, there are really no words to describe the anguish of this experience.

As someone who has survived sexual assault and rape, I recognize that this whole experience was for me almost identical in terms of emotions and suffering: feeling violated, worthless, and numb, having my entire foundation of life in upheaval, and feeling like my world was ending. Instead of my body being violated, I had my life and career violated. And since I had given up so much for this career—including having children and a family—the experience was so much more visceral. The idea that a career could do that to you, that upper administration could do that to you, is inconceivable to me, even now as I write this almost two years removed from the experience.

During all of this, I somehow continued to be the model writing center director. In order to save money, the university was restructuring, and the college that housed both my department and the writing center was being eliminated. This meant that where the writing center would be housed, who would fund it, or even if the writing center would continue was unclear. And so, I did what needed to be done. Despite my termination letter on the table and the anguish I was facing, I crafted a careful proposal that showed how our writing center aligned with the new institutional priorities and would meet them. I learned much later that I was the only unit on campus who did so and who showed positive support for the new strategic plan, and that gained me a tremendous amount of goodwill from upper administration, which bore fruit. I reached out to a college that I thought would be an excellent long-term fit for the writing center, and the dean of that unit and I crafted a proposal to move the writing center there permanently. I did what any good writing center director would do—I engaged in strategic thinking and action and found my way through the chaos.

In the months that followed my termination letter, a colleague stepped up to retire early and save my position. I was filled with gratitude and relief. The writing center, through my strategic work, was placed in the best possible circumstances in a new unit that would help us meet our many objectives with the financial and moral support to do so. In the time since then, the writing center has moved into the forefront of our new strategic plan as a model, and has gained a new space, new funding, and new stability. Crisis averted.

But everything is not fine. I still have the trauma of this violation embedded deeply within me. Trauma that makes me wonder if I can stay in this career or ever be happy in it again. Trauma that makes me question how I will heal from this experience and who I will be when I do. Trauma that makes me internally shudder every time a student says to me that they want to go into higher education and become a writing center director. Trauma that brings me to tears almost every time I drive to campus.

As I write this, my university continues to be in upheaval, and my department is faced with a tremendous amount of pressure surrounding our inability to deliver courses without adequate faculty, raising course caps on writing courses to

some of the highest in the nation, and considerable bullying by upper administration. After the trauma of the termination letters, I feel numb in the face of this new upheaval. What more can be done to us that hasn't already been done?

And yet, I find myself retreating and focusing on the place I can control and which is positive—the writing center. As we have endured the pandemic together, I have created a haven of safety. I have worked to show every bit of compassion for my tutors and staff and the struggles they are going through. I have worked to create a kind of life raft amidst this ongoing chaos at our institution, a life raft filled with community, good food, feeling valued, and making a difference. I have worked to treat my staff in ways I wish I could be treated. And perhaps that will get all of us through.

What is a writing center? Who is a writing center director? What is the work that we do? If you had asked me these questions in the “before times,” I would have given you a very different answer, rooted in the grand narrative of higher education and in my own success in the field. I recognize that I am no longer that perfect scholar; I don't even know who I am any longer. I don't have an easy end to this narrative. I don't have any grand lessons or advice to give. All I can say is that higher education is changing, and for those of us who choose to endure, we all need to find some life rafts to hold onto. May the writing center be yours.