

Chapter 23. Overloaded: Balancing the Ethics of WC Administration and Student Labor

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Writing center administrators (WCA) often need to come up with creative means of accomplishing all of the duties of our positions. Sometimes, duties may be offloaded to other writing center (WC) workers, such as graduate students. If we choose to offload duties, we must weigh the ethics of the responsibilities we give to those we employ. In this story, I detail the successes and struggles I experienced in asking undergraduate students to take on administrative duties and question the ethics of this kind of labor.

I am the sole administrator of my institution's writing center and a faculty member. Though I was originally hired with a 2-2 teaching load, one of my course releases was taken away in fall 2021. I scrambled to meet all of the expectations of my job with less available time. One of the ways I tried to do this was by creating positions for my staff members—undergraduates who are paid through work-study—to carry some of the responsibilities. My biggest time fillers that could be passed to undergraduates are (1) promotion and outreach and (2) scheduling needs. So, in the 2021-2022 academic year, I created two new positions: promotion specialist and staffing coordinator.

Creating these positions did take labor off of me, particularly in terms of promotion and outreach. The promotion specialist and I met for 30 minutes at the beginning of the month to decide on the events, workshops, and campaigns for that month. Beyond this meeting and the occasional check-in, I was able to be hands-off with promotion. By creating this position and filling it with a qualified student, I was able to let go of most of the promotional requirements of my job.

As I reflected on this position, I realized that in offloading some responsibilities to tutors, WCAs need to be cautious that they do not put their tutors in the same position we are in: requiring them to do more work than they have time for. In my case, I struggled with making sure the load on the promotion specialist was not too great. Because promotion can be carried out in a number of ways, a person in charge of promotion could easily get overloaded. For example, because a tutor in the writing center had multiple ideas for events and workshops in the spring, the promotion specialist planned one event or workshop every week for a month. This was on top of sending emails to the campus and maintaining our social media. This particular student is a good advocate for himself, but what about the students who are not? Because I am an authority figure—often, I am

the student's employer *and* professor—students may feel they cannot tell me no. I would, therefore, be putting a student in a position to be overworked.

The staffing coordinator position helped in some ways, but not as much as I hoped. While the student who worked as the staffing coordinator was responsible and organized, there were times I still needed to step in. Particularly around midterms and finals, students became less willing to volunteer for shifts. Though some would respond to the staffing coordinator asking them to fill in, occasionally the weight of the director needed to be applied before a student was willing to substitute. At other times, no one could substitute because they all had class. During these times, it was my responsibility to decide whether to close the center during that time or otherwise figure out how to proceed. In an ironic turn of events, hiring someone to take care of staffing substitutes sometimes created more work for me. I not only needed to find a substitute or handle scheduling in other ways, but I also had the extra step of going through the staffing coordinator to find out who needed their shift filled and who had already been contacted.

For this position, I needed to consider the extent to which I should be asking an undergraduate to take on the ethics of staffing. In the fall semester, only one student regularly volunteered to fulfill substituting needs. Prior to hiring a staffing coordinator, I would personally contact other available workers so the frequent volunteer did not become overworked. Once I created the new position, I needed to decide whether this issue would be put on them. The staffing coordinator could easily feel awkward coaxing their reluctant peers to fill in as substitutes; this could be especially difficult for a student who struggles with anxiety. Additionally, the tutors may feel no pressure to say yes when they are responding to a peer. In a similar situation, I needed to decide how much responsibility would be put on the staffing coordinator to find substitutes at the last minute. There is significant stress that can come with needing to find a substitute for someone whose shift is in, say, two hours. Even more so if the staffing coordinator happens to be in class. In my position as WCA, I can get away with stepping out of a class I am teaching to find a substitute. It is unlikely a student could do the same. In the end, I decided that it would be more ethical if I took on these responsibilities. For how little the staffing coordinator was paid (\$7.25/hour) and for their, frankly more important, responsibilities as a student, I could not justify putting this amount of pressure and stress on my undergraduate student.

It can be very tempting to put students in potential positions like those above. There are certainly benefits for the student; they gain experience that they can put onto their resumes, which may set them apart from other graduating students. There is a more practical reason, though: WCAs have a myriad of duties that they often do not have time to complete. Like many other WCAs, I am both an administrator and faculty member. I struggle with finding time to balance not only my administrative duties, but also my faculty and advisor requirements. The main administrative duties that I can drop without harming the operations of the WC involve helping my staff conduct and disseminate research. However, this is

where much of my advising experience comes from, experience that is required for me to go up for promotion. I also often conduct and disseminate research in collaboration with my WC staff, which helps fulfill the scholarship expectations of the faculty side of my job. Dropping these administrative responsibilities may help with my director role, but it would seriously harm the faculty parts of my job. As the number of course releases I have does not equate to the time I need to effectively run all parts of the WC, handing responsibilities off to other workers can allow me time to attend to both the operations of the WC and to my faculty requirements.

As can be seen in my story, WCAs handing off administrative duties to undergraduates need to consider emotional maturity as well as financial compensation. Generally, we assume that undergraduates have less maturity than graduate students. However, some students come into college with not only work experience, but also experience of taking care of family members or other responsibilities we often assume occur later in life. Also, like my Promotional Specialist, some students have already become good advocates for themselves. So, we could potentially hire undergraduates who could emotionally handle administrative responsibilities. We would need to do the work, though, of ensuring that the students we hire are truly emotionally ready for the labor. On the other hand, even if an undergraduate student is mature enough for the position, the financial compensation needs to be enough for the stress of the duties. Graduate students in administrative positions typically have financial compensation through stipends or tuition coverages. Yet, undergraduates are infrequently offered these kinds of opportunities. As many workers in the States seek fair wages, we must ask what a fair wage for WC administration is, particularly for workers who are also balancing their undergraduate school careers.

Thinking long term, WCAs must consider what happens in the center as students fill these kinds of positions. If the student is overworked and put in unethical situations, the overall work environment is likely to suffer. If the work environment is poor, the students who come for writing help will likely feel that and stop coming. On the flip side, if a position is created that is successful and ethical, what happens when students graduate? For instance, my current Promotional Specialist is wonderful, but I will need to be aware of my expectations for a new student in that role. Each student has different strengths and interests, so WCAs need to make sure they are willing to be flexible with the specifics of the position and the students' workflow, so they are not trying to force a new student into the exact mold of the previous worker.