From Bell Cows to Overburdened, Contingent Labor: An Examination of Ecological Shifts in Brown University's Writing Fellow Program

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In *Writing Program Ecologies*, Mary Jo Reiff and her colleagues argue that writing programs are best understood as everchanging ecologies, rather than static entities. They contend that writing programs are "quintessentially discursive and material ecologies because they emerge through complex networks of interrelations [and] depend on adaptation, fluidity, and the constant motion of discursive systems..."

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(4). Indeed, while composition scholars have long understood the writing process as ecologically driven, applying this view to writing centers illustrates how programs are living beings, defined by the economies that support them, the policies and procedures that structure them, and the faculty, staff, and students who populate them. According to these authors, "an ecological perspective shifts the emphasis away from the individual unit, node, or entity, focusing instead on the network itself as the locus of meaning. All of the acts, actors, and objects in an ecology are connected, both in space and time" (6). Though writing center literature does not use ecologies to describe its programs, we argue that this ecological framework could be useful for understanding writing support programs.

Our experience in co-directing the Writing Fellow (WF) program at our university (Laurie as the Director of First-Year Writing and Karen as the Writing Center Director) drew us to investigate ecologies of WF programs. We decided to trace Brown University's (BU) WF Program, the one that ignited the WF movement, from its inception to the present, to learn how one program's ecology changed over time. We believe that examining WF programs is important since the *National Census of Writing*'s 2017 survey revealed that 29% of fellow programs are housed in writing centers ("2017 Four-Year"). Furthermore, there may be a growing trend to house WF in writing

centers as the percentage of funding for fellows increased from 40% to 55% from 2013 to 2017 ("2017 Four-Year," "2013 Four-Year"). In order to better understand BU's ecology, we interviewed three women who had the longest and most powerful impact on the program. Examining the ecology of the WF program at BU, as it evolved from Tori Haring-Smith's leadership in the 1980s, to Rhoda Flaxman's mentorship in the 1990s and early 2000s, to most recently, Stacy Kastner's vision, provides a history of a program that has become the grandparent of many WF programs. We contacted them, set up phone interviews, and obtained their permission and IRB approval to record and publish findings. Following the interviews, we transcribed the conversations, separately conducted narrative analyses, and then examined the common themes.

ENVISIONING AND CREATING A WRITING FELLOW PROGRAM

As we huddled around the phone on Karen's dining room table, we felt Tori Haring-Smith's energy and enthusiasm as she began to share her story. We immediately realized what made Haring-Smith so successful as she initiated a new WF program at BU: she understood and responded to BU's ecology and used that knowledge to create novel networks. Her stories about her first years at BU emphasized the importance of listening to key players, recognizing their values, and working efficiently to address their felt needs. Haring-Smith recounted that a sense of urgency to reshape writing and writing support had captured her administrators' attention. Her dean at the time, who had started a fellows program at Carleton University, was determined to begin a similar program at BU. As a new assistant professor with no money to start such a program, Haring-Smith was tasked with helping students fulfill the university writing requirement. Additionally, the problem of assessing writing was quite complicated: there were neither composition courses nor a writing center in which to teach writing, and Haring-Smith did not have any graduate assistants or other faculty to help her. Challenging as this was, Haring-Smith, apparently undaunted by the charge, began to develop an innovative program by garnering faculty support and by cobbling together a plan.

DEVELOPING A PLAN CREATES A NEW ECOLOGY

Nurturing a new writing ecology required persuading faculty to participate in a new program focused on talking about writing. As a faculty member, Haring-Smith was positioned to argue for a WF program because she understood faculty's lived experiences and the struggles they encountered when teaching and grading writing. She developed a plan that encompassed convincing faculty to participate, recruiting fellows, creating a course, and constructing a system. In her search for faculty participants, she looked for Bell

Cows, a term she uses to describe "the people who stand up in the faculty meeting and they say, "this is a good idea," and everybody says, 'Of course it is.'" Haring-Smith then met with faculty across generations, disciplines, and personality types to present A GOOD IDEA. To create faculty buy-in, Haring-Smith convinced faculty that they could spend less time grading and more time teaching in their discipline.

Recruiting fellows in majors across disciplines, however, required a different strategy. To reach students, she positively pitched the opportunities of working with writers, taking a unique course, and explaining how everyone benefits from feedback. After recruiting faculty and fellows, she then created a 400-level course that taught fellows how to respond to students' writing in non-evaluative ways and how to prompt students to think about how to clearly articulate ideas. Finally, she developed a system to match fellows to professors who assigned two or more papers during the semester. The professor would create two deadlines for each paper, one for the WF and one for the professor. For each paper, the professor received both drafts that included the draft with the WF's comments and the final draft. Professors would not accept a final paper that did not have the WF draft. Though snags existed, such as convincing mature writers they could benefit from feedback or determining how to please demanding faculty by carefully pairing faculty with fellows who could negotiate their writing expectations, a new writing ecology began to emerge. This ecology evolved from Haring -Smith's ability to listen, network with key stakeholders (Bell Cows and administrators), and understand the importance of creating a shared vision to move forward.

Haring-Smith explained that once students learned they benefited from feedback, they started to talk more about writing all over campus. As she describes, "There were times when you'd walk across campus and under every tree, there would be a pair of students talking about writing. You'd walk into The Grill, and there would be students over hot dogs, talking about writing." Haring-Smith explained that this exciting shift in writing ecology did not stop with students; faculty began to comment more on papers, Bell Cows led future Bell Cows with their testimonials, faculty were better able to separate lack of conceptual understanding from poor writing, and faculty were doing less work because writing was better, freeing them up to do the "important work" of teaching in their discipline. Students felt honored to be nominated for a fellow position, and fellows learned even more about writing. Finally, Haring-Smith found that writers gained the ability to "become intentional in their writing rather than just hoping that, once again, they hit the mark."

As a result of these positive dynamic interactions, the WF program gained buy-in from students, fellows, and faculty, creating rich networks and interactions between the actors.

INSTITUTIONAL DECISIONS TRANSFORM ECOLOGIES

Haring-Smith left BU in 1987, and for the next twenty years Rhoda Flaxman directed the fellow program as a staff member and worked as an adjunct in the English department teaching one course per semester. The decision to shift the faculty-led program to a staff-led program illustrates significant changes within the university and the gradual reshaping of BU's ecology. Even so, Flaxman was instrumental in building upon the thriving WF program, and at its peak, she supervised up to eighty fellows a year. For the first fifteen years, she also treasured the freedom to direct the program in a way that she "thought was responsible to both the writing fellows and the students." But this independence, successful leadership of the WF program, and adjunct status in her department disconnected her from the interconnected network Haring-Smith had built, distancing Flaxman from the faculty (and the Bell Cows) WFs served.

Though Flaxman lacked close connectedness to faculty, she did create strong networks among the fellows and herself. Like her predecessor, Flaxman sustained the program by teaching an intellectually challenging course, mentoring fellows, and creating a community using strategies that included offering cookies and coffee at their gatherings as well as throwing an occasional party. Flaxman's ecology embodied a close-knit WF community where fellows developed long-lasting friendships in their non-working hours. Her devotion to fellows not only resulted in their loyalty to the program where they often worked until graduation, but it also contributed to her joy. She stated that though her days were very full, she found her work satisfying: "I think there's a whole culture of people like us. And—and we're the crazy ones. But we're happy. We love our work. I loved what I did. Absolutely loved it." These connections to fellows fueled her energy to shepherd the WF program during her long working days, but it also left her little time to network with faculty.

Flaxman's autonomy came at a price—she operated outside the faculty's ecological network and suffered from their lack of support. In contrast, Haring-Smith had garnered faculty support because she was in an ideal position to network with them and was able to convince them of the program's benefits. On the other hand, the administration's decision to hire Flaxman as staff disjoined her from faculty, contributing to the eventual ecological erosion. During Flaxman's last five years, as funding sources declined and program-

matic changes were destined to occur, Flaxman felt her autonomy waning. Her painful decision to leave behind the work she loved is echoed in her reflection: "Well, it was a dream for twenty years." From Flaxman's description of the program, we concluded that her dedication left an indelible mark on the fellows and students they served.

SITUATED HEALTHY AND DETERIORATING ECOLOGIES

When Flaxman left in 2007, the WF program experienced cuts, including the elimination of the WF Program Coordinator position. The WF and Writing Center program director positions were consolidated in 2007 into one: the Director of Writing Support Programs. Douglas Brown held this hybrid position until 2014, and though we were unsuccessful in contacting him, Laurie was fortunate to interview Stacy Kastner who was hired in 2016 as Associate Director of the Writing Center and Writing Support Programs, coming on board after a second dramatic restructuring had occurred. In 2016, writing support programs moved to the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning as part of the newly created Brown Learning Collaborative, a program that sought to scale the WF model. Though the loss of an important position and added responsibilities can deteriorate an overall ecology, moving the services to the Center for Teaching and Learning did create a situated healthy ecology as it generated renewed faculty interest and interconnectivity. This new organizational structure offered Kastner opportunities to consult with faculty, which resulted in the development and facilitation of course-embedded writing workshops for the growing number of faculty interested in working with the WF Program.

Over the next few years, the increased responsibilities to support the Writing Center, the Excellence at Brown Program, and graduate writing weakened the ecological health for the WF program. Like Flaxman, Kastner did not have full-time faculty status, and she supported a substantial number of fellows and faculty—up to 60 fellows and 20 faculty--but unlike Flaxman, Kastner also worked in the Writing Center and supported around 40 writing associates, a few Ph.D. professional writing coaches, and the Excellence at Brown program (a week-long writing-intensive residential pre-orientation program that served around 100 students with a staff of over 40 undergraduate and graduate students and 10 faculty members). In addition, each year she coordinated dissertation retreats, writing groups, and workshops to support graduate writers; helped faculty design class writing assignments; provided course-embedded workshops; and worked with the Office of the Dean of the College to support the University's writing requirement.

Despite this heavy workload, Kastner fully dove into these responsibilities, committing her energies to the fellows who gave her true joy in her work. Kastner described the passion she felt during that time in her career, saying, "That was some of the best work I will ever do in my career. Students were hungry to talk about writing, and it was a pleasure to work with them." Though modest compromises were made to address staff deficits and though Kastner found the work to be exhilarating and deeply meaningful, this ecology was unsustainable without an additional full-time staff position, so she chose to move on in 2019. Over time, this faculty-led program had devolved into one led by overburdened, contingent laborers who were separated from upper-level administrators and who lacked the power to make systemic change.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS, NETWORKING, AND AGENCY

Though there is much more we could address in our analysis of these three different ecologies, we only have space to discuss our primary findings. We learned that writing support programs depend on strong interconnections between fellows, faculty, and administrators. These interconnections depend upon a director's ability to effectively network with each community and articulately convey the benefits of practices. Haring-Smith successfully built a WF program because she developed strong interconnections with her upper administrator, faculty, and fellows. We also believe her success resulted from her understanding of her institution's ecology and her power as a faculty member, and she used her status and understanding to gain buy-in from the Bell Cows, an essential skill for the creation of any institutional program.

The ecology Flaxman entered had shifted, and she was not hired as a faculty member, which created a disconnected network from the start. Her strong interconnection with fellows nourished a thriving ecology within the WF community. We did not perceive that Flaxman's connectedness with her administrator was compromised, but her experiences illustrate that directing a program with sound pedagogical foundations and a tight-knit WF community may not be enough; an ecology of trust and partnerships must continually be built with faculty and administrators through dialogue. We also believe that directorships distanced from faculty may struggle to gain their support and subsequent buy-in for the programs they lead.

Kastner entered the most challenging ecology of all as she lacked a permanent position, faculty status, and upper-level administrator support, all of which are essential for building ethos with faculty

and administrators. Hired as contingent labor, Kastner was given multiple and varied responsibilities while trying to please administrators. She was overtasked with an impossible job to direct fellows and tutors while trying to build connections with faculty, yet she still found her work highly satisfying, just like Flaxman. Regardless, it was problematic to task Kastner with directing a university-level WF program and the writing center when she held little agency to enact change or self-advocate. Without proper support, permanency, and status, directors may lack agency and struggle to sustain their energy and mental stamina.

LESSONS LEARNED

Our analysis, though limited to one program at one institution, agrees with Reiff et al. that an ecology is discursive and emerges through interrelations that must continually adapt to constant motion. But we also found that this description is not sufficient for those in writing support programs who often must lead programs and create shared visions through intricate, discursive dances with faculty and administrators. Actors in ecologies must be empowered to enact change and have sufficient status in an ecology that provides them with the agency to ethically direct their programs. Haring-Smith had both the agency and interrelationships to create a healthy ecology. Her intentional planning and continual networking with the triad of Bell Cows, administrators, and WFs was also key to her success. Flaxman and Kastner did not hold the positions or power Haring-Smith enjoyed, making the development of interrelations more challenging. One lesson we've learned is that writing support program directors must carve out time to maintain relationships with Bell Cows and guide stakeholders to understand the benefits of their programs.

Sometimes directors can enter ecologies that are difficult, deteriorating, or impossible to change. Nevertheless, even when institutions present formidable challenges for empowering directors and allowing them to thrive, the joy they receive from working within their situated WF ecology may provide life-sustaining energy to continue their work. We found that situated healthy ecologies can exist even when these small ecologies must battle larger, unfavorable environments.

Despite the joy directors experience, real danger exists in overburdening directors, hiring them as contingent staff, and placing directorships in departments distanced from faculty interactions and administrator networks. But even more disturbing is the elimination of director positions themselves as these decisions directly impact fellows, tutors, and writers. Over the past few years, WCenter list-

serv posts reveal that the ecology and events at BU are not isolated, suggesting that we're going to need a lot more Bell Cows, both locally and at large, loudly clanging their bells to lead the charge for reforms and innovations. As writing support programs continue to adapt to changing climates, we must staunchly advocate for permanent director positions, thoughtfully placed in the hub of faculty discursive systems, and fully supported (and appreciated) by upper-level administrators.

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Authors' Note:
The electronic version of this article differs slightly from the printed version of the article.

SEASON 3 OF SLOW AGENCY TO APPEAR ON THE *WLN* BLOG

Stay tuned for Season 3 of the Slow Agency podcast, hosted on our blog, *Connecting Writing Centers across Borders*. Season 3 features conversations with Noreen Lape about her book *Internationalizing the Writing Center: A Guide for Developing a Multilingual Writing Center*; Joe Essid and Brian McTague on their edited collection *Writing Centers at the Center of Change*; and with Susan Lawrence and Terry Zawacki on *Re/Writing the Center: Approaches to Supporting Graduate Students in the Writing Center.* This season will be released in mid-March. We hope these conversations support and inspire your writing center research and practice.