

Negotiation & Translation in First Year Composition WPA Work: Transformative Professional  
Knowledge to Composition Practice

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## Copyright Page

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## **Dedication**

To Erin, who I love most.

To WPAs, who do such important work for our discipline.

To our students, who deserve our reflective practice and transformative work.

## Abstract

This dissertation considers the roles that Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) play (and the strategies that they use) in First Year Composition (FYC) programs to promote transformative professional knowledge. This study demonstrates how WPAs not only do the work of translating professional knowledge in Composition's largest and most visible theater (FYC), but also how they are on the front lines of promoting *transformative* knowledge (challenging dominant conceptions of writing and education) and negotiating how that knowledge is taken up in program practices. Looking broadly at transformative knowledge—including feminist, critical, anti-racist, de-colonial, translingual, and other “emancipatory politics and pedagog[ies]” (Greenbaum, 2002, p.xii)—the analysis in this study seeks to articulate how strategies and ideals, theories and practices come together in the work of WPAs as they negotiate their positions and institutional realities. Nine FYC WPAs who identified as doing activist work of negotiation and translation were interviewed about the strategies they employed to port transformative knowledge from the profession into practices in their FYC program and/or the university at large; of these nine WPAs, some additionally shared key program documents whose production and/or use (by the WPA or by others associated with the program) supported transformative work. These findings—of strategies and textual practices—were then analyzed to gain a better sense of the diverse tactics employed by WPAs in different contexts and from different positionalities to reach “emancipatory objectives” (Greenbaum, 2002, p. xiii).

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## Chapter 1: Introduction, Key Concepts, and The Study

For this dissertation, I studied nine Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) of First Year Composition (FYC) programs and their practices within their programs, with a focus on how they negotiated institutional realities and translated transformative professional knowledge—defined here as scholarship and practices in Composition and related fields that strive to realize radical and emancipatory change—into their own practices as well as the practices within their programs. While the transformative knowledges that these WPAs drew upon—from feminist, critical, anti-racist, de-colonial, and translingual traditions to name a few—have occupied many conversations in Composition and Composition-adjacent fields over the years, this study seeks to better understand mechanisms through which these conversations entered local practices, focusing specifically on the roles that these WPAs played as negotiators. The exigency, supporting literature, research design, findings, and takeaways of the study are described in this document.

The findings and takeaways of these nine interviews have potential implications for how we conceptualize FYC WPAs and FYC programs as agents and sites, respectively, for transformative praxis, and for how we conceptualize the professionalization of WPAs as conduits, activists, and change agents. While First Year Composition programs have a long history of reflecting and reinforcing traditional/dominant conceptions about writing, language, and education, they also constitute an important potential site for change. As the single most widely offered and required course (or bundle of courses), FYC impacts a majority of students in the US—in both how they *do* language and how they *think* about language—as well as a range of

other stakeholders in the academy and beyond. Thus, as institutions think about promoting more equity (in school and society) and the transformative/political knowledge work that requires, WPAs are positioned to be powerful change agents.

### **Exigency**

Chris Gallagher's (2009) "What Do WPAs Need to Know About Writing Assessment? An Immodest Proposal" begins with two WPA scenarios, stories of WPAs going about their work. In the first scenario, he describes a WPA negotiating institutional pressures re: composition assessment—meetings with an "Assessment Coordinator," a "department chair," "the General Education Task Force," a "Vice Provost of Something Else" (p. 29)...each, in their own way, representing a pressure to conform to the "technical rationality" of the institution (p. 30); he describes the demands of the Spellings Commission for courses to meet neoliberal imperatives of fitting students to the job market, the pressures to use the SAT or state assessments to make writing placements, the omnipresence of "cohorts" of "testing...test preparation...and textbook compan[ies]" which seek to sort, rank, and define student writers (and writing) (p. 29-30). As Linda Adler-Kassner (2008) notes in *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories About Writing and Writers*, "people outside of the field (faculty colleagues, professionals outside of the field, people I meet on airplanes, administrators on the campuses where I have worked)" often tell a dominant story about composition and composition students that is at odds with the stories that "circulate among writing teachers on disciplinary listservs or in discussions in professional research" (p. 1-2). These dominant conceptions, though hardly coherent or unified, most often could be generalized and summarized as the "belief that composition may be taught as a discrete skill, separated from class, race, or

gender” (Greenbaum, 2002, p. 25)—from the personal and political—and that this neutral skill should be viewed primarily as a means of gaining neoliberal access within the existing system. While these dominant conceptions of composition might not reflect the conceptions that circulate within the discipline, they nevertheless have real impacts on the kinds of work that are done (or not done) in composition spaces—such as first year composition courses and programs—by writing program administrators (p. 1-2).

In the second scenario, Gallagher describes a WPA successfully convincing a dean “to stop using results of standardized writing tests for placement and even admissions decisions,” a “Director of Institutional Assessment...to promote faculty-led assessment across campus,” and a host of faculty to respond positively to the change (p. 30). In this second scenario, Gallagher highlights composition assessment as a potential site for transformative knowledge to inform changes in institutional practices—not just in the first year writing program where the WPA works, but in the broader university as well—and work toward “redressing social injustice” (p. 30). These examples highlight moments of “WPA work as strategic action” and “WPAs as ‘change agents’” (Adler-Kassner, 2008, p. 7) where “drawing on best practices, position statements from National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) or from the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), or from research in composition and basic writing [they are able to promote] an alternative narrative” to dominant narratives about writing, writers, education, and assessment (p. 13).

In both of these scenarios—the energizing AND the frustrating—the WPAs depicted respond to “an ethical imperative, a social responsibility and obligation to engage in actions that work toward transforming inequity and oppression”(Greenbaum,

2002, p. xv). Both fictionalized WPAs are engaged in activist work that seeks to realize a Composition (and an institution) that better reflects the knowledges that circulate on our listservs, in our journals, and across our classrooms. These two scenarios, for Gallagher, represent the “politics and pedagogy, burden and opportunity, threat and promise” of WPA work (p. 30). On one hand, these represent the pressures that WPAs often experience to meet what Horner (2015) calls “institutional charges” (p. 452) for composition (to transmit, norm, assess, filter, rank, and fit students to market imperatives)—which have the potential to “re-inscribe...class-, race-, and gender-based privilege” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 30). On the other hand, these represent the possibilities for WPAs to be a part of effecting meaningful institutional change by bringing emancipatory “research on and theories of writing and writing instruction” (p. 34) to bear as “a means of redressing social injustice” (p. 30). As WPAs work toward transforming the programs they work in, it is these pressures and possibilities—and the politics of negotiating them in an institutional context—that create a sense of what change can be achieved, as well as how to achieve it.

The importance of doing this transformative work goes beyond simply naming and rectifying specific (race, class, gender, etc.) inequalities, and is not about “tweaking” writing programs so that they might more neutrally (and thus “fairly”) serve all students in their quest to succeed in school. It also encompasses fundamentally transforming how we think about the work done in our programs, embracing and acknowledging that “language work” is always political, socially situated, contingent/changing, and bound up in relations of power. Because it is *as political* to choose to run a FYC program in a “traditional” way (in alignment with dominant conceptions about writing/language) as it

is to espouse an interest in transforming it, this means seeing all WPA work as involved in envisioning and enacting politics of knowledge.

While, in his article, Gallagher addresses *assessment* as the point of intervention for WPAs who are interested in using elements of their position to effect transformative change in their local context, it seems that assessment is just one of many potential tools in WPAs toolboxes...to be considered alongside hiring (Horner, 2016, p. 116), instructor training (Canagarajah, 2016), the writing/curating of administrative documents (Dryer, 2013, 2016), the creation of pedagogical discussion spaces for collaboration on curricular projects (Gunner, 1994), and many more. These tools/practices—and how they vary in availability, use, and efficacy from setting to setting—are important to better understand if WPAs seek to use their institutional positioning to promote first year composition programs that are informed by critical, feminist, anti-racist, de-colonial, translingual, and other liberatory/transformative theories of education and language, and which might be at odds with how others (English department chairs, admissions officers, deans, the Chronicle of Higher Ed, the public, etc.) envision and demand how FYC programs should be approached.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the foreword to Brown and Enos' (2002) *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource*, Lynn Bloom notes the variable and protean nature of WPA work, and the challenges that such a nature raises for any attempt to articulate a general description of “WPA work” or the tools necessary to complete it. Addressing the potential roles of the WPA, Bloom notes that the WPA might be:

“...policymaker, problem solver, curriculum designer, lobbyist, personnel recruiter and evaluator, teacher, teacher trainer, mentor, judge, community or secondary school liaison, fiscal manager, accountant, fundraiser, computer programmer, test developer, program evaluator, Web designer, scheduler, record keeper, office manager, secretary...[and] three significant roles—researcher, scholar, and writer” (xi)

Bloom also weighs, alongside these roles, the relative status and stability of the WPA (from “CEO” to “conciierge”), which she notes “depends on the nature of the school, the level of support, as well as the personality and aims of the person occupying the job” (p. xi). As Rose, Mastrangelo, and L’Eplattenier (2013) echo: “the WPA’s work is determined and constrained by exigency and the rhetorical situation of the institution, the programmatic structure, and the position” (p. 50).

The observations in Bloom and Rose et al. (2013) on WPA positionality could even use further expansion and elaboration. As Gallaher (2014) observes in *On Being an Island*—in which she explores the experiences of WPAs who were the only composition scholar in their program, department, or institution—the nature of the housing department or institutional positioning of the standalone program might also have an effect on a WPA’s level of stability, authority, or access to allies. Likely included in Rose, Mastrangelo, and L’Eplattenier’s (2013) use of “the position,” a WPA’s status might be impacted by whether or not they have tenure, whether the role is permanent or rotating, whether the position is conceived of as full time or supplementary to other roles, whether the position is shared across multiple WPAs, etc. Compounding these external influences, as Bloom observes, are the “personality and aims” of the WPA—features potentially



impacted by the WPA's disciplinary background and training, theoretical commitments, or other more personal identity features. These articulations—of the different roles, and status positions, and personal characteristics—highlight the complexity of arranging a text that is “the” resource for WPAs, and which can provide the “tools” necessary to effect transformative change.

I want to continue to return to Brown and Enos' (2002) text in this “Statement of the Problem” section because there is a tension that I feel in reading their foreword, introduction, and first anthologized essay about the “tools” for WPAs that I think provides a good jumping off point for this project. In the beginning of the foreword, Lynn Bloom invokes Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care*, comparing it to *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource* as another example of a “handbook.” Like a “manual on how to rear children or repair cars or use standard grammar and mechanics or administer writing programs,” Bloom constructs the text as an invaluable guide “for newcomers—the uncertain, the insecure—as well as the confident who need a ready reference” (p. ix); indeed, on the following page, she notes that “the answers to [your] questions—and many more—are in your hands” (p. x). Particularly in a text designed for writing scholars, this comparison to the “standard” grammar manual—Hacker's small, spiral bound chapbook or Strunk and White's tidy little booklet with all the answers you might need in the form of a collection of pronouncements on correct, appropriate, conventional usage—stands out. If only we could learn and memorize all these answers—to questions about “standard” grammar usage, or writing program administration, or child rearing—then we might use them as tools to operate with greater

efficiency, might be able to move past the basic nuts-and-bolts of administration and on to higher order concerns.

In the introduction that follows Bloom's foreword, Brown and Enos (2002) describe their project as "develop[ing]...practical, applicable tools to effectively address" the "fundamental practices and issues encountered by WPAs in their workplace settings" (p. xvii). These tools appear, by juxtaposition, to be supplemental to the "formal preparation and training" in degree programs and through professional organizations that Brown and Enos feel are "beginning to catch up" to the needs of "increasingly specialized and professionalized" WPA work (p. xviii). This specialized and professionalized turn, for Brown and Enos, seems to be linked to the Portland Resolution and the "steady growth of the Council of Writing Program Administrators" which has helped to secure more recognition for WPA work as intellectual labor (p. xviii). This is all, then, echoed in the first subsequent anthologized chapter of Brown and Enos' book by Louise Wetherbee Phelps; in the beginning of her chapter "Turtles All the Way Down: Educating Academic Leaders," Wetherbee Phelps sketches out several discourses—of faculty roles and rewards, graduate education, professionalism, and faculty labor—related to desired changes in the "professionalism" of the faculty and WPA landscape. Tying these cherry-picked elements of Bloom's, Brown and Enos', and Wetherbee Phelps' chapters, an image might become clear: through the creation of authoritative resources (handbooks), graduate training (internships and coursework), and professional guidelines and credentialing (the CWPA), we can better "professionalize" and "standardize" WPAs, both securing external appreciation of the labor that WPAs do AND increasing the

efficacy of WPAs in their institutions AND ensuring that their labor reflects best practices of the field internally.

Of course, neither Bloom, nor Brown and Enos, nor Wetherbee Phelps actually ultimately advances this claim. Bloom pivots from the “handbook” analogy to complicate the concept of “WPA work,” and to construct the text as more of a Burkean Parlour into which readers might enter and begin to critically engage, extend, modify, or reject existing discourse about WPAs’ strategies for negotiation and translation. Brown and Enos explicitly reject the idea that the text is a “handbook” of simple tools and strategies, which they believe would be “too prescriptive” to adequately address the “complexity, multiplicity...polyvocality” inherent in the actual practices of WPAs. Wetherbee Phelps—though definitely calling for a “professionalization” of the WPA position and more explicit training—dives deeper into the “complex issues of *professionalism* and *power*” that attend discussions of WPA work (11) and cautions against reductive constructions of WPA labor and tools, which she argues “misrepresent the complexity of the environment...instead of encouraging the open-minded inquiry that would develop more nuanced positions and unfold heterogeneous, unforeseen options for participation and identity” (16). Overall, in these initial chapters and the subsequent ones, the project of *The Writing Program Administrator’s Resource* constantly deals with this tension between providing practical guidance on tools/strategies for WPAs and providing complex articulations of different facets of WPA work against which readers might plot their own practices and develop their own strategies...sometimes doing both at once.

This tension was particularly salient to me as I attempted to articulate the problem that this dissertation was addressing and the purpose of my research. As Adler-Kassner

observes in *The Activist WPA*, “strategies without ideals is a menace, but ideals without strategies is a mess [sic]” (2008, p. 5)...and my initial impulse was that this dissertation research would be useful for generating concrete recommendations for WPAs who were struggling to develop strategies that were effective at translating transformative theories (representing their—and the field’s—best ideals about composition and education) into programmatic practices. This initial impulse was motivated by a concern that without readily available strategies that are specifically attuned to—and informed by—transformative theories, new WPAs would have to invent new strategies whole-cloth in each program (sometimes with very little preparation or guidance), or fall back on guides which offer guidance that is too generalized to be of much local utility or which participate in more traditionally prescriptive narratives of administration science that are at odds with transformative aims for education.

At the same time, however, it was clear to me that monolithic or one-size-fits-all advice on successful “transformative” strategies and tools for WPAs overlooked the great complexity and variation present in WPA work, and risked enforcing views of WPA work as a “managerial science” (Rice, 2009, p. 9)—in which, for example, strategies are promoted for feminist WPAs that “might actually be complicit in maintaining inequitable labor relations” within the program while promoting transformative, feminist content and teaching in instructors’ classrooms (Bartlett Snyder, 2009, p. 29). The aim of creating stock or standardized “transformative” tools might discourage WPAs from doing the dynamic work of negotiation and critical reflection in their local contexts, just as easily as the stock or standardized tools might be “unwittingly complicit” in the very things they seek to address (Fox, 1999, p. 3); further, as Lil Brannon observes “standards, even those

we agree with, even those that are constructed with good intentions, can and do turn into repressive dogma” (Brannon, 1995, p. 445). For these reasons and more, the distillation of a core, standardized “toolbox” of transformative approaches was no longer attractive.

The challenge seemed to me to be how best to support WPAs’ situated, reflexive, and critical development of and reflection on strategies that they might use to do important transformative work. Shifting from a “recommendation” mode to an “inquiry” mode—not suggesting how people should go about the business of doing WPA work, but, rather, engaging in the kinds of searching they might do, themselves—I found myself freed of (or, at the least, less paralyzed by) the concern that I might promote some sort of shiny-but-repressive dogma. It also then opened me up to an orientation toward “WPA strategies” that I’ve come to call “experiencing the breath of others” after Adler-Kassner (2008). I take this approach from a scene in the Preface and Acknowledgments to Adler-Kassner’s *The Activist WPA*, where she describes her own project:

I would tell [people] that I was working on a book about strategies for writing program administrators (WPAs) ... to employ to affect policy. But this shorthand summary doesn’t really do justice to the work involved in ‘developing strategies’ ... Instead this is really about understanding ourselves as WPAs and teachers and working from this understanding to enter into relationships that invariably continually change that understanding in sometimes unexpected and surprising ways. Our breath is our own, yes. But when we hear the breath of others and develop our practice in concert with others, that practice changes in ways we don’t always anticipate. (vii)

This “breath of others” approach sees WPA work the way that we have increasingly thought of writing and writers in our Composition courses over time. It moves from an attempt to describe an ideal endpoint for a WPA to reach in their writing program (product), to exploring the challenges, plans, changes, and progress that WPAs go through as they work toward the kinds of local transformations that they envision (process). It moves from narratives of the lone WPA as the sole architect and authority (the Author/the Boss Compositionist), to a dynamic picture of the WPA working within an institution, profession, culture, and moment in time (the ecological approach). It moves from a handbook of canonical pronouncements on WPA “best practice” (prescriptive, traditional), to an expanding corpus of contingent and situated examples of WPAs doing the work of the discipline, against which WPAs might cast their own experiences, and out of which they might generate new and unexpected approaches (descriptive, socially produced and changing).

The problem that this study addresses, then, is the amount of “breath of others” available to WPAs who are seeking to better understand themselves as activists, conduits, or translators of transformative theories into practice. The project aims to provide a bit of that breath of others to the transformative WPAs who feel most isolated or alone on their journey, and to add to the breath of others experienced by those transformative WPAs who have found that community—in colleagues from their degree programs, at conferences of the CWPA, among the social media presence of the WPA-L Feminist Revolution, etc. It is part of an ongoing project with a long tradition in WPA scholarship—of program profiles, WPA interviews, and personal testimonials—through

which WPAs continue to be energized, to learn more about themselves, and to develop a dynamic understanding of transformative change.

### **Purpose of the Study**

As is demonstrated by the nine WPAs in this study, there are many mechanisms which FYC WPAs utilize in order to negotiate institutional pressures, bring transformative disciplinary knowledge to bear, and play a role in transforming local composition practices of teaching and learning. This study describes and explores the reflections of these nine different WPAs on the strategies they employ to negotiate with others and institutional structures—interpersonally and textually—in translating elements of transformative knowledge into institutional practice. By examining these WPAs’ critical reflections, this study attempts to continue to expand the amount of examples which highlight “the breath of others” for the purpose of supporting other WPAs (novice or expert) as they imagine their own strategies of negotiation and translation and as they go about the processes of doing transformative WPA work—in concert, in conversation, and in contrast with others, as Adler-Kassner suggests.

### **Key Concepts and Terminology**

The ensuing section on “Key Concepts and Terminology” identifies complicated ideas, practices, and roles—important variables for the dissertation. Functioning like a literature review, this section enables me to address each of those variables and to explicate how complicated and varied each is to avoid oversimplification. In many cases, these terms (writing program, First Year Composition, WPAs) are part of our everyday lives, and our own experiences of them flatten them as a matter of practicality (and in

ways often inflected by dominant ideology)—so reactivating their complexity helps to then highlight the work that can (and needs to) be done with them.

### ***Writing Program***

Given the focus of this dissertation on writing program administrators and the writing programs that they administer, it is important to first explore the breadth of potential interpretations of the term “writing program” in the US postsecondary context. While this dissertation looks at one kind of writing program in particular (first year composition), there are many kinds of programs engaged in the same sort of work, and I do not wish to ignore them here, as their work is often complementary and intersecting with that of FYC writing programs. Indeed, many of the participants in this project articulated ways through which their FYC programs intersected with these other kinds of programs. In this section, I explore several texts which sketch out the breadth of program types, sizes, institutional locations, and purposes that might be referred to when someone refers to a “writing program” before more concretely defining the type of “writing program” I seek to explore in this dissertation.

In the Foreword to Enos & Borrowman’s (2008) *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*, John Trimbur observes that the programs that WPAs administer constitute “larger or smaller chunks of curricular real estate in the political economy of higher education,” but otherwise does not define what a “writing program” is or might be (ix). This is explained, perhaps, in the next chapter, “Living in the Spaces Between: Profiling the Writing Program Administrator,” where Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos—addressing the design of the survey of WPAs they conducted for the book—admit that their research “does seem to assume a single WPA directing a first-year



composition program” (p. 14). For many, unless otherwise articulated or indicated by the context, the term ‘writing program’ suggests a mandatory, core-curriculum, writing-intensive course or course sequence “that serves only first-year students” (McLeod p.166).

In their survey, however, Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos include a question asking participants to identify the type of writing program in which they work, including several options such as: technical/business writing, writing center, WAC, professional writing, and ESL (2008, p. 306). Similarly, in *Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context* (Reiff et al., 2015) the authors observe that the concept of a writing program extends beyond “first-year composition programs, to undergraduate writing majors, to writing across the curriculum programs, to undergraduate and graduate programs in rhetoric and composition—writing programs are complex ecological networks” (p. 4). The authors of the various chapters in each of these two texts (Enos & Borrowman, 2008; Reiff et al., 2015) also reinforce and expand on these lists of types of writing programs. *Ecologies of Writing Programs* anthologizes multiple chapters each for first year composition (Webb-Sunderhaus & Amidon; Leathers Dively; Fishman & Reiff; Inoue), WAC/WID programs extending beyond the first year (Ballif; Kinney & Murray Costello), undergraduate rhetoric and composition majors (Kerschbaum & Killingsworth; Ostergaard, Giberson, & Nugent; Beard), and writing centers (Sanford; Brady, Singh-Corcoran, Dadisman, & Diamond), as well as a pre-college summer transition program (Moore, Pyne, & Patch). *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration* includes chapters by a director of a National Writing Project site (Peguesse), two directors of writing centers (Green, Weaver), and multiple administrators associated with

campus-wide WAC/WID/WI/WEC<sup>1</sup> initiatives (Enchelmayer; Fulwiler; Lunsford; Langston)...as well as many allusions by authors to colleagues on campus who they see as also engaged in “writing program” work. This work might also include the work of ESL programs (Matsuda, 2006, 2012), dual-enrollment or concurrent-enrollment programs/collaborations (Hansen et al., 2013), course-embedded writing tutor/fellow/consultant programs (Dansereau et al., 2020), parallel academic and research writing programs through libraries (Walsh et al., 2018), and others.

The diversity of programs referred to by the term “writing program” is further reflected in the self-description of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, where they observe that their members might work with programs including “freshman composition, undergraduate writing, WAC/WID/CAC, and writing centers” as well as writing oriented departments, academic divisions, and upper-administration initiatives (CWPA, 2020). Thus, while ‘writing program’ often refers to a ‘first-year composition’ course/courses of some sort, the term is ultimately much broader and might be applied to any course, curricular initiative, outreach program, university support service, major/minor/certificate, or graduate degree program for which the production of student composition or engagement in metalinguistic inquiry are central concerns.

It is important to acknowledge this breadth of program types that are engaged in “writing program” work, as well as to think of the people who work in these programs as not just ‘doing similar work,’ but, also, potentially as the collaborators, co-conspirators,

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<sup>1</sup> WAC = “writing across the curriculum,” WID = “Writing in the Disciplines”, WI = “Writing Intensive.” WEC (“Writing Enriched Curriculum”) While each of these has important differences in focus and aim, they usually refer to curricular initiatives or credit requirements beyond those of first year composition—and expanding beyond English or Writing departments—that develop/promote/accredit/administer courses with a focus on situated writing conventions (e.g. “Writing in Biology”) or on features of writing that are ostensibly shared across the academy.

and sources of inspiration for WPAs doing transformative work in first-year composition programs. For the purposes of this dissertation, however (as I explore in the next section), I intend to focus primarily on one type of “writing program”—the “first-year composition” writing program—and will use “writing program” to mean “first-year composition program” unless noted otherwise. First-year composition writing programs, of course, have their own incredible diversity—living in different departments, operating under a range of composition pedagogical traditions, employing instructors from a range of backgrounds, manifesting in a range of different course types; it is this diversity that I seek to explore next.

### ***FYC (First Year Composition)***

Having explored a broad definition of “writing programs” and addressed the tendency to conflate “writing programs” with “first-year composition,” I would like to pivot to an overview of first-year composition (FYC) paradigms, programs, and pedagogies. For the purposes of this dissertation, I limited my study to administrators whose work—in part or in whole—relates to first-year composition, and limited my investigation only to the parts of their work that involved the administration of first-year composition. Given this dissertation’s focus on administrators of first-year composition programs in US colleges and universities, it is important to explore both the genesis/history of first-year composition programs in the United States, the major epistemological traditions that have influenced them over that history, and the various forms that these programs (and the courses within them) might take in our current context.

In his histories of writing instruction in American colleges (*Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* and *Rhetoric and Reality*), James Berlin identifies three epistemological traditions of writing and rhetoric instruction in U.S. composition programs: a dominant “objective” tradition chiefly represented by current-traditional rhetoric; a “subjective” tradition, often embodied in aesthetic approaches to composition; and a “transactional” tradition invested in the interaction of elements in the rhetorical situation (Berlin, 1987, pp. 6–15). While these “traditions” could never be adequate categories for the vast diversity of writing programs that exist and have existed, and while Berlin notes that his “taxonomy...used in discussing rhetoric and writing up to 1975 does not prove as descriptive after this date,” these categories nonetheless provide a basic grammar and framework for discussing the history of writing programs in the US and several through-lines in writing/the teaching of writing (Berlin, 1987, p. 183).

I begin this section with the creation of the first FYC program at Harvard, which leads into a discussion of the early and enduring presence of the objective “current-traditional rhetoric” that arose from it. I then explore the transactional tradition from the late 1800s to 1950, starting with midwestern “normal schools” before turning to the more traditional history of elite colleges and state universities. After briefly addressing the “subjective” tradition as embodied in the “rhetoric of liberal culture” and expressivism, I then explore the traditions of FYC in the period from the 1950s-1990s. These roughly historical chunks presented as subsections, each describing movements with commitments to various epistemological traditions in Berlin, largely avoid connecting the underlying epistemologies and ideologies to the present, as these connections are addressed in the subsequent sections “Dominant Stories about FYC” and “Transformative

Knowledge.” Instead, I end this section with a brief description of composition 2000-present and the different forms that these programs might take in different institutional settings.

**US Composition Beginnings and “Objective” CTR.** According to Wallace Douglas’ (1976) “Rhetoric for the Meritocracy: The Creation of Composition at Harvard” (in S. Miller, 2009, pp. 91–94) and John Brereton’s (1995) *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925*—the first FYC program in the United States was formed at Harvard during the period between 1870 and 1885 under the leadership of Charles William Eliot (President of Harvard University) and Adams Sherman Hill (Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory). Douglas notes that Eliot, in particular, was concerned about “deficiency in the values and attitudes of the American people...in the training system that the American people had developed for sorting themselves out...something gone wrong with the stratification and licensing system of the society” (in Miller, 2009, p. 91). As Eliot observed in his 1869 Inaugural Address, Harvard was beginning to open itself to “students in all conditions of life<sup>2</sup>” in response to complex changes in the industrial middle class, socioeconomic landscape, cultural values, and organizational structures of universities in the United States following the Civil War (Fox, 1999, pp. 19–20).

According to Douglas, Eliot’s primary concern related to this ‘opening up’ of universities in the US to new student populations was Harvard’s role in maintaining (or curating) a “college-produced elite” that reflected aristocratic values—including those of language, literature, and culture (in Miller, 2009, pp. 92–93). Under Eliot’s sponsorship

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<sup>2</sup> Not quite. While, certainly, there were more students from socioeconomic backgrounds that had not featured heavily at Harvard before, this primarily meant admitting middle-class, white, male students.

and direction, in furtherance of this role, Adams Sherman Hill devised “a placement examination in English composition” in 1874 and the first-year “English A...a two-semester course in rhetoric and writing” in 1885 (Brereton, 1995, p. 11); according to Fox (1999) “the exam system and later, freshman composition, were created as a moat to protect the castle within [against]...the advancing hoards [sic]” of linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically different students (p. 21), and did so through what Susan Miller describes as a process of “winnowing and indoctrination” (1991, p. 63). In this way, Eliot and Hill were able to either weed out undesirable students<sup>3</sup> while collecting tuitions, or to inculcate in successful newcomers the proper manners, styles, and ideologies of a newly meritocratic elite. In response to the same environment and to Harvard’s model (in imitation, modified form, or opposition as Brereton observes in Chapters 3 and 4), other colleges and universities increasingly turned to the mandatory first-year composition course for similar purposes of winnowing and indoctrination.

College enrollments across the US increased rapidly after 1880 (Brereton, 1995, p. 7), which Fox (1999) explains helped to increase/stabilize colleges’ revenues from tuition during a time of educational restructuring. These expanding enrollments, coupled with a new first year composition requirement, created a critical teaching situation within these new writing programs—4 teachers and 2 graduate assistants for 1198 first year composition students at the University of Michigan in 1894, 20 teachers for 2000 composition students at Harvard University (Berlin, 1984, p. 60). As Connors notes, “most teachers were responsible for teaching between 140 and 200 students” leading to such “gross overwork” as professors at Yale University and the University of Iowa being

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<sup>3</sup> “roughly one-half” according to Fox (1999); 67% either “passing unsatisfactorily” (thus placing them in English A) or “failing altogether” according to Berlin (1984, p. 100)

responsible for responding to the writing of over 250 students each semester (1997, p. 140).

Partially as a response to the Harvard Report of 1892, which identified “spelling, grammar, usage, and even handwriting...matters of superficial correctness” as the primary issue facing incoming students (Berlin, 1984, p. 61), and partially as a means of simplifying the process of responding to 140+ student papers each week, first year composition programs and teachers abandoned earlier concepts of rhetorical preparation in favor of “simpler assignments that could be scanned for obvious flaws” and which could be responded to through mechanistic “rating systems [and] error counts” (Connors, 1997, p. 141). The resulting Current-Traditional Rhetoric approach to teaching FYC, according to Berlin (1984) made “mechanical features...the sole concern of the writing teacher” (p. 62), with a focus on the arrangement and style of “words, sentences, and paragraphs” (p. 71) in ways that privileged “superficial correctness [as] the most significant measure of accomplished prose” (p. 73). While Connors regretfully observes that this birthed “the soulful trust in the powers of grammar that still rules the methods of *some* instructors today” (1997, p. 130, emphasis added), Berlin argues more broadly that “Current-traditional rhetoric has been the most pervasive...in fact, the dominant rhetoric overall” in 20<sup>th</sup> century writing programs, straight from “the hands of A.S. Hill and Barrett Wendell of Harvard” (Berlin, 1987, pp. 8–9).

**Transactional Alternatives in Early US Composition.** In practice, the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century first-year composition programs—whether in “private eastern colleges [or] large state-supported universities in the Midwest and West” (Fitzgerald, 2001, p. 230)—were often characterized by adherence to reductive practical textbooks, a

focus on grammar marking, and linguistic-character deficiency<sup>4</sup> narratives about the students who were not part of the predestined elite (Brereton, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2001; S. Miller, 1991); according to Fitzgerald (2001) “the result for undergraduate students was...that the composition requirement perpetuated class distinctions by holding the non-elect in a course that taught inconsequential forms of writing, while students from qualified backgrounds, exempted from first-year composition, were promoted promptly to rhetoric courses in which they learned to speak and write for powerful public forums” (p. 225). To the reader of these histories, the dominance of objective current-traditional rhetoric seems total.

Fitzgerald (2001) nuances this position, though, to argue that other institution types—particularly those of the public, midwestern “normal schools” tasked with vocational teacher training—were simultaneously engaged in the creation of competing traditions of composition. Fitzgerald highlights two ways through which the normal schools differed from programs based on the Harvard model: first, the normal schools resisted the urge to construct issues of student ‘linguistic competence’ as reflective of inherent and unchangeable character flaws (preferring a linguistics-influenced social view of language), and second, the normal schools viewed composition pedagogy as a more complex endeavor than was presented by formalistic grammar textbooks (Fitzgerald, 2001, pp. 234–236). These differences in the normal school approach, according to Fitzgerald, come from a commitment to European pedagogy (especially Pestalozzian and Herbartian)—rather than, or in supplement to, the guidance of domestically produced practical, Current-Traditional rhetorical textbooks—and to

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<sup>4</sup> “professors at elite eastern institutions often attribute[ed] grammatical error to character deficits like stupidity, laziness, or moral turpitude” (Fitzgerald, 2001, p. 234)



reflection on teaching and learning aims and methods based in the disciplines of sociology and psychology. This pedagogical commitment—though certainly more reflective and less intolerant of student differences—included two beliefs about the composition course worth noting: first, that the proper role of education in writing and composition “was to ‘fit,’ or adjust, all students to society,” and, second, that that “teaching grammar meant teaching logic” and was thus important if education was to provide students with the necessary skills to access and succeed in society and industry (Fitzgerald, 2001, pp. 234–236).

Fitzgerald’s history of first-year composition programs in public, Midwestern normal schools concludes with a lament over “the absorption of the normal school...into the research oriented university” which she believes “had the effect of destroying the status of pedagogy as a complex human endeavor uniting theory, research, art, and method in a mutually constructive conversation” (Fitzgerald, 2001, p. 245). From 1900-1920, though, Berlin notes that Fred Newton Scott (Michigan), Joseph Villiers Denny (Ohio State), and Gertrude Buck (Vassar) were setting forth on similar programs of progressive and socially engaged composition pedagogy—based in the educational theories of Dewey—which were “consciously formulated as an alternative to current-traditional rhetoric” (Berlin, 1987, p. 47). From 1900-1940, adherents to this “social rhetoric” drew on psychology, sociology, and linguistics—as well as a revived sense of rhetoric as political—to attempt to deconstruct monolithic constructions of correctness, expand conceptions of what could/should be addressed in FYC, and articulate a radically democratic pedagogical project (Berlin, 1987). Among the projects that fall under this category, Berlin notes Fred Newton Scott’s “rhetoric of the public good” at Michigan

(which valorized language difference, highlighted its role in constructing reality, and promoted an ethic of critical social engagement), Gertrude Buck's process oriented spinoff of Newton-Scott's rhetoric, and Harrison Ross Steven's "ideas" approach (which asked students to consider the role of rhetoric in addressing pressing issues of legal, political, and social import), each of which has traditions continuing today.

The broader program of progressive education within writing programs continued to draw on the sciences of psychology and sociology in the period from 1920-1940 with the aim of reshaping society through increased attention to student needs and differences and a dedication to improving access and opportunity for all. Berlin notes, however, that the dominant uptake of Dewey's theories by scholars and practitioners in composition—which sought to synthesize psychology and sociology—was often selective and ended up serving other epistemological traditions. Objective "current-traditional programs were including those features of progressive education that were compatible with their positivistic epistemology," drawing on psychology and sociology for new methods of placement and evaluation in writing programs, new writing focuses (research writing and "real-life" genres) in their courses, and course practices for bringing students into alignment with dominant conceptions of 'good writing' (such as student conferences) (Berlin, 1987, pp. 69–70). Berlin identifies this current-traditional uptake of new forms of placement and assessment with the development of "organized freshman writing programs headed by directors," which instituted new regimes of placement testing, new course sequences of leveled introductory (and pre-collegiate) writing courses, and new configurations of faculty and contingent instructor staffing. In the other tradition, subjective "Liberal Culture," with its focus on individualism and the cultivation of the

self, drew on the “psychological and individualistic” elements of progressivism, emphasizing the “development of the individual..[and] the cultivation of the aesthetic capabilities of the student” in ways that led to the expressivist turn in rhetoric and which emphasized writing as “creative” self-expression divorced from surrounding social context (Berlin, 1987, p. 60).

Having identified—in the section “US Composition Beginnings and ‘Objective’ CTR”—that current traditionalism continues as a dominant rhetoric to this day in writing programs, and briefly having examined its ability to absorb elements of progressivism in the period from 1900-1940, I instead would like to turn, in the next section, to Berlin’s third epistemological tradition in composition—the subjective “Rhetoric of Liberal Culture,” before returning to the transactional/epistemic in “FYC 1950s-1990s: Admissions and Access, Transactional Rhetorics.” As I leave the beginnings of the “Transactional” movement in writing programs, it is with a sense that the progressive goals of the early proponents of transactional rhetorics align most strongly (of the three epistemological traditions) with the aims of transformative theory as I will describe it in this dissertation. At the same time—in the ways that elements of the transactional epistemology were adopted by current-traditionalism and liberal culture—there is a clear demonstration of how transformative approaches can be conscripted by (or themselves responsible for reinscribing) the logics of the very epistemologies to which they are consciously formulated as an alternative. The tendency in these early transactional movements—whether rooted in Pestalozzian, Herbartian, or Deweyan ideas of education—to conceptualize the role of writing programs as increasing *access* and involvement in public discourse, seems to have occasionally encouraged a focus on

fitting students in writing programs to society or the economy in a way akin to the “standards”/“access” relationship explored in Fox (1999), and in ways important to examine as one thinks about what “transformative” writing programs (and WPA work) might look like going forward.

**From Subjective Rhetoric of Liberal Culture to Expressivism.** In contrast to the rhetoric of meritocracy (objectivist current-traditional rhetoric) and the rhetoric of democracy (epistemic transactional rhetoric), Berlin describes a third major school of writing programs, based in a subjective rhetoric of aristocracy that he terms “the rhetoric of liberal culture” (Berlin, 1987, p. 35). The birth of the current-traditional Harvard writing program in the late 1800s “alarmed many English professors at other colleges,” and, in response, professors like William Lyon Phelps of Yale University developed a “competing type of literature-based program, the ideas course” with an emphasis on “character formation” (Brereton, 1995, pp. 236–237). This reaction to the CTR—viewing it as mechanical, commercial, and philistine—promoted, instead, “the liberal humanist culture of the genteel tradition”—based in ‘great books’ of English and French “high culture,” and intended to cultivate new, secular, elitist cultural values (Russell, 1990, p. 57).

The purposes of writing programs in this tradition were primarily to identify and “cultivate the exceptional students, the geniuses” whose inherent qualities as writers and individuals made them ideal for individualized instruction (Berlin, 1987, p. 72), and to provide a generalized course of literature appreciation “separate[ly for] the unpredestined” (S. Miller, 1991, p. 74). As one anonymous critic (and proponent of liberal culture) put it: “the best way...to become a good writer is to be born of the right

sort of parents; this fundamental step having been unaccountably neglected by many children, the instructor has to do what he can with second- or third-class material” (in Brereton, 1995, p. 240). For the un-predestined, the program would fulfill a civilizing function by exposing them to “the best that has been thought and said” and by developing in them a faculty to recognize, appreciate, and internalize the intellectual and spiritual achievements of elite, aristocratic culture (Berlin, 1987; S. Miller, 1991). Ultimately interested in the thoughts of great/genius/artistic individuals—either the production or appreciation of—the rhetoric of liberal culture resisted writing instruction that prescribed, proscribed, or otherwise reduced writing to a rote performance of correctness. One can sense echoes of this ideology in Carolyn Miller’s (1979) “A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing”—in both her defense of technical writing, and in her colleagues “who teach literature” who are skeptical of the humanistic value of a “skills course.”

Berlin notes that while they offered this literature-based writing instruction in their own programs, “the proponents of the rhetoric of liberal culture discouraged writing instruction,” decried it being offered at other institutions, and denied that their students needed or would be meaningfully changed by it (1987, p. 46). This resistance seems to spring out of complex concerns about changes in the training of teachers, the focus on pedagogy, the staffing of writing programs, and the effect those changes might have on the discipline of English language literature. Miller observes that early compositionists moved away from literary studies—and sought to escape a feminized, subordinated identity—by connecting their programs and teaching practices to “science” (1991, p. 122), to objective testing, measurement, and pedagogical research based in psychology...and that this was of concern to proponents of liberal culture. As one 1986

article decried, writing programs were “suffering at present from an acute attack of pedagogical psychology” which the author worried would supplant teachers’ knowledge of “their [literary] specialty and human nature” and lower the statuses of “the natural born teacher” and “people of real culture” (in Brereton, 1995, p. 239-241).

In this, as well, is a concern about *who* taught these courses, *what* these instructors valued (or did not value), and *how* these shifts would affect the status of English language literary study. Lane Cooper argues in his 1909 MLA address that the teaching of writing “squanders the energy of the teacher”—who is a “partly trained” graduate student in literature—by causing “him to spend an immoderate share of his time upon a mass of writing that has no intrinsic value” and functionally ruining him (sic) for the true liberal investigations of the English professoriate (in Brereton, 1995, p. 254). These proponents of liberal culture also voice concerns about labor conditions—teams of “English slaves” (Cooper) “mark[ing] over seven hundred themes a week” (Lounsbury); the proportions of course enrollments—a proportion of 3 composition classes to every 2 literature classes (Cooper); the reliance on “the contents of some text-book” to shape what is taught in the course (Lounsbury); and the growing administrative and staffing cost of maintaining such a large, mandatory program (Lounsbury and Cooper in Brereton, 1995, pp. 251–291). These concerns help to illustrate both what proponents of liberal culture felt they were responding to as they shaped their own writing programs, as well as to reinforce my earlier observations about the “strategies and tools” through which WPAs might negotiate transformative changes in their programs.

While Berlin (1987) notes that Liberal Culture “did not survive as a major force” in US writing programs, the underlying individualism, coupled with Freudian depth

psychology, impacted the development of “an egalitarian conception of expressionistic rhetoric” in the 1920s (p. 46), and re-emerged in the subjective expressionistic traditions of the 1960s and 1970s (p. 145). Pushing back on current traditional programs that emphasized writing as a rigid performance of formal and grammatical mastery, as well as programs in the “social” transactional tradition that sought to promote access through the teaching of genres of public discourse (of which the expressionist tradition was suspicious), the expressionistic position encouraged self-expression and freedom from limiting conventions, which students would achieve when teachers removed constraints and facilitated environments/practices in which students could better access their subconscious (Berlin, 1987, p. 76). With emphases on creativity, voice, and artistic processes of generating insight from within, teachers of the expressionism relied on a nondirective approach, employing workshop-based writing (or other disruptions of the traditional class structure, such as “happenings”) in which the student determined their own focuses. Ranging from an “anarchist” rejection of all rules and conventions as a form of domination, to a way of thinking about writing that appears similar to transactional and epistemic rhetorics in how it links language with the construction of reality, Berlin argues in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” (1988) that the expressionistic emphasis on the self ultimately interferes with a social conception of writing as discourse, through which writers engage in language negotiation with others to achieve meaningful social change. Put more bluntly, expressionistic rhetorics encouraged students to compose inwardly-faced writing on “observations from personal experience and narratives,” which led to a “diversion from the actual task of learning to write consequential discourse” (S. Miller, 1991, pp. 59, 61).

Berlin, Miller, and Russell all note a through line from the earliest rhetorics of liberal culture to more recent forms of expressivism, which is manifested in a subjective, inward focus on the “self.” This contrasts to the objectivism of CTR, which locates writing externally, in monolithic and immutable rules for what constitutes clear and effective prose. In the next section, I turn to the revival of rhetoric, expanding enrollment and diversity in postsecondary institutions, and the various “transactional” approaches that arose (continuing the earlier Deweyan projects) in an attempt to respond to these new conditions. In particular, I address how rhetorical and transactional approaches sought to locate writing in interactions between the self and others, to foreground politics of language, and to explore constitutive and epistemic functions of that language.

**FYC 1950s-1990s: Admissions and Access, Transactional Rhetorics.** Writing intensive General Education movements gained steam during the postwar period of the late 1950s and 60s, and even more attention to writing instruction was driven by “skyrocketing enrollment” that continued from the early 70s through the 80s with the advent of Open Admissions (Russell, 1990). According to Russell, “the intensification of the Cold War and changes in economic, social, and political arrangements” were driving forces behind increased college enrollments and intensified federal investment in the teaching of writing at the secondary and postsecondary levels; in turn, there was a pivot to a greater “professionalization of composition teachers,” with more graduate training, pedagogical research and publications, reflections on the state of the profession, and expansion of professional organizations (Berlin, 1987, pp. 120–122). While Current Traditional Rhetoric remained dominant, the establishment of New Criticism (Literature) and New Grammar (Linguistics) as professional commonplaces also opened the door for



a complementary New Rhetoric, which explored the role of language in maintaining, producing, and participating in the democratic project (Berlin, 1987).

As in other historical periods of composition that I've outlined in this introduction—when compositionists appealed rhetorically to empirical science as a means of legitimizing the profession—cognitive, behavioral, and social psychology also impacted this professionalization, particularly in a pivot away from product-based approaches to writing and an embrace of process-based approaches. During this period, the language of “process” manifested in different ways in different paradigms: in the objective tradition as a monolithic, externally valid, scientifically proved “best” process; in the subjective tradition as a discovery of one’s own personal, creative process (and process of becoming through writing); and in the transactional tradition as a process of intersubjective negotiation through which meaning and knowledge are made.

In addition to the impact of rhetoric and psychology, linguistics (sociolinguistics, transformational grammar, psycholinguistics, semiotics, etc.) also impacted the development of different paradigms during this period. In the objective tradition, structural linguistics, traditional grammar, and transformational grammar provided content and approach for teachers to “improve the syntactical maturity” of their students; in the subjective tradition, an almost counter-linguistic commitment to “the unique, individual vision” and “originality of expression”—as well as an emphasis on linguistic identity and the construction of self through language—connects to psycho- and sociolinguistics (Berlin, 1987). Finally, a “synthesis of linguistics, classical rhetoric, and the pedagogical” contributed to the formation of a progressive, communications-focused, general education movement during the 50s (Russell, 1990, p. 61), and a transactional

“epistemic rhetoric grew out of...[this] general education and its commitment to the communications course” (Berlin, 1987, p. 167). Drawing on sociolinguistic concepts of discourse community, dialect, language convention/shift, and the social role of language—as well as a sense that rhetoric is constitutive—this transactional epistemic turn saw composition instruction as a way to teach students how to participate in democracy, gain access to various discourse communities, and effect transformative change.

At the same time—in the midst of this social rhetorical turn, widespread acceptance of process approaches to composition, and expanding/diversifying postsecondary enrollments—the historical institutional charge for composition to fulfill a role of “winnowing and indoctrination” persisted. In one notable example, Russell’s (1990) history of WAC programs in the US explains how the progressive aims of the transactional epistemic movement were coopted by neoliberal rhetorics of access. This WAC movement, in response to open admissions in the 70s, took the concept of discourse community and posited that “students must learn the linguistic forms of a community before becoming part of it” (Russell, 1990, p. 63); in between a monological “one right way” approach to writing like CTR and the dialogical approach envisioned in an epistemic ideal, this WAC simply pluralized the object within the same monological frame by envisioning multiple “right ways” to which students needed to be fit<sup>5</sup>. Elevating access granting above the transformative potential (and shifting, dialogic nature) of

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<sup>5</sup> This sentence indexes two sources, but neither source is written in reference to WAC. The first, (Bruch et al., 2019, p. 2), describes the “approach” to writing at the University of Minnesota; I found the language of “monological” and “dialogical” and “one right way” useful in this context. The second, (Pennycook, 2008, p. 38), describes “English as a Lingua Franca” or ELF as “pluraliz[ing] the object [of what is being taught/described] from within the same [monolingual] epistemology”; to me, this parallels WAC/WID.

language, the WAC movement “claimed it would assimilate, integrate, or (in the current phrasing) initiate previously excluded students by means of language instruction” while also preserving that “less pleasant dimension of discourse communities...to restrict access” through “remediation” (sequestering linguistically marked “others” in pre-collegiate quarantines, such as Bonehead English<sup>6</sup>) or “abolition” (eliminating composition and shifting responsibility for writing instruction to the high schools or to other departments in the university, as in WID/WEC programs) as it had always historically done (Russell, 1990, pp. 62–63).

The period from the 1950s to 1990s was undeniably an important one in the history of FYC, from the social turn and rise of transactional and epistemic approaches, to the impact of the communications movement, to the widespread acceptance of process approaches. Across paradigms the descriptions of what it meant to *do* language—to compose with it, to be composed by it, to use it to work with others to change the world around us—were shifting and evolving. By 1987, Berlin notes an expansion of epistemic approaches with rising influences of poststructuralism, cultural criticism, deconstructionism, critical theory, hermeneutics, and other movements on rhetoric and composition. Greenbaum traces Freirean influences and critical pedagogy in composition during the 1980s to an explosion of emancipatory movements in the 1990s, including “neosophistic rhetoric, cultural studies, feminism, and postcolonial studies” (2002, p. 24), and—also writing in 2002—Kastman Breuch describes (through an exploration of Post-Process scholarship) how “postmodern and anti-foundationalist,” “dialogic,”

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<sup>6</sup> The term “bonehead English” is one from the introduction to *Errors and Expectations* (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 2); in the text, she does not appear to consider remediation as “access restricting”

“hermeneutic,” Deweyan, and Freirean ideas continued to influence the pedagogical discussion in FYC in significant ways throughout the 1990s and early aughts.

As with Berlin’s “epistemic rhetoric” that took many competing forms in the 1960s-80s, Gore describes “fragmentations within each discourse” (speaking specifically about critical and feminist pedagogy) making it harder to describe unified “traditions” in a coherent theoretical sense (1993, p. 15). Gore’s division of critical and feminist pedagogies into “*critical pedagogy*,” “*critical pedagogy*,” “*feminist pedagogy*,” and “*feminist pedagogy*” (emphases hers) highlight differences in how scholars approach the connections between theory, teaching, and scholarship—as well as how they conceptualize the translation of theories into practices. In discussing Thomas Kent’s postprocess pedagogy (or paucity thereof) Kastman Breuch (2002) muses 1) that Kent’s resistance to articulating a robust pedagogy might be seen as resisting the “pedagogical imperative” described by Dobrin, instead working to flesh out the theory before rushing to application, and 2) that the postmodern and anti-foundationalist beliefs underpinning the various post-process theories present a paradox to Kent (and others) when it comes to articulating a stance, a goal, and the practices that will lead them to this goal.

Whether resisting pedagogical imperatives, or wrestling with a paradox of postmodern pedagogy—or simply exhibiting a reality of how the translations of theories into practices are always incomplete, imperfect, contingent, constellated, shifting, not wholly articulable, etc.—the expansion of influences (many listed above) on epistemic approaches to composition leading up to (and continuing into) the 2000s makes it hard to trace distinctive traditions in the recent past. Entering the 2000s, the Current Traditional and Expressivist traditions continued to influence writing instruction, but the

transactional and social epistemic tradition continued to grow in influence—and in the breadth of theoretical traditions influencing it. While potentially a problem of perspective and closeness to the moment, it seems to me that the “social epistemic” tradition is increasingly difficult to describe as its proponents draw on bespoke mixes of influences and respond to a range of global and local pressures/influences/contexts.

Having surveyed major developments in first-year composition from 1950-1990s, and arguing that the “present” of the past 20 years is less definable by “traditions,” I pivot in the next section mainly to the different types of courses that one might encounter under the umbrella of “first year composition” today; while Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos’ (2008) study of WPAs found that a majority of Research, Comprehensive, and Liberal Arts institutions require 1-2 courses and often enable students to “place out” of these courses, the courses themselves, their arrangement into sequences or tracks, the program “types” to which they belong, and who teaches them can vary widely, and often says something about how “composition” is constructed at a given institution.

**FYC Programs and Course Types Today.** As Susan Miller (1991) notes in the introduction to Part II of *Textual Carnivals*—expanding on Stallybrass and White (1986)—talking about writing programs and writing pedagogy in the terms of paradigms, or traditions, or historical movements (including and especially the three traditions of composition articulated in Berlin’s work) risks portraying individual writing programs as unified in their aims, methods, and governing ideologies. The after-the-fact rhetorical construction of “traditions” as a means of scapegoating (Kastman Breuch, 2002, p. 132) or creating false binaries (Matsuda, 2014, p. 480) in order to introduce “new” and ostensibly “better” movements by contrast is also well documented, and deserving of our

attention. Even as a fiction “extrapolate[d]...from the textbooks of the time” (Pullman in Kastman Breuch, 2002, p. 131)—or from the syllabi, or public utterances of WPAs, or staffing patterns—the theories, paradigms, and traditions as they have been named, described, and applied after-the-fact nonetheless bear on how we conceptualize and discuss our work within our discourse community.

What Berlin’s historical approach does allow us to do is to look at how different, loosely clustered ideas of “the role” of first year writing programs have the potential to affect what and how many courses are offered, what content and aims those courses are designed to address, how students are ranked and measured into/through those courses, who is expected to teach the courses and with what training, how the selection of texts impacts course delivery, and many other elements. Today, the term “first-year composition” encompasses a wide range of courses, fulfills a range of curricular purposes, and participates in the complex articulation of what it means to “write” or “compose”...producing many conceptions or “stories” of writing that bump up against, reinforce, challenge, and modify the dominant stories that circulate in the history of our discipline and in the broader culture. I address these “dominant stories” in a later section, and instead use this section to provide a brief survey of the kinds of classes that “first year composition” might be associated with in the past 2 decades.

***Remedial Composition Courses (Basic Writing & ESL).*** As Russell (1990) describes, many colleges and universities “shift responsibility” for FYC by offering a “‘remedial’ or ‘developmental’ course” for students who ostensibly “have difficulty meeting the standards of university work” and who are deemed underprepared or pre-collegiate by some placement measure (Huse et al., 2005, pp. 29–30); these courses seek

to address language differences that they fear would prevent students from participating in “mainstream composition courses,” both of ‘same language’ (Basic Writing) and ‘other language’ (ESL) varieties (Matsuda, 2006, pp. 637–638). While this course might be taught by faculty in English/Rhet/Comp, Russell (1990) notes that these courses are more often “taught by those outside of—or on the fringes of—academia (graduate students, part-timers, tutors, etc.)” (p. 63); these courses might also be taught by instructors with backgrounds in TESOL or linguistics with a teaching focus (Ashley, 2016, p. 36). This course might stand alone, and fulfill a first-year writing requirement, but more often might “not count toward degree credit requirements” or successful completion of the first year writing requirement, instead constituting an additional course in a sequence (Huse et al., 2005). As Ashley (2016) observes about “basic writing” and Shuck (2016) notes about “ESL,” these courses have long and often problematic histories of competency measuring and gatekeeping, but have also sought to “reframe writing classrooms” in new ways, as with conceptualizing the FYC space as one of Mary Louise Pratt’s ‘contact zones’ in which students and faculty draw on (for example) critical and queer theories to make “relations of power...explicit” (Ashley, 2016, pp. 42–44).

*Pre-Collegiate “College” Composition (AP/IB/CE/DC).* Different forms of pre-collegiate “first year writing” are also worth noting, particularly those targeted at students who are not yet college age “who participate in these programs...with the expectation that they will be awarded college credit hours” or placement as a result (Hansen, 2016, p. 155). These courses participate in the logic that college composition can be learned separately from the situated experience of being in college, that it constitutes a limited course that students just need to “get...out of the way” (Wecker & Wilde, 2019, p. 116),

and additionally participate in the “shifting of responsibility” and “abolition” that Russell (1990) notes by shifting responsibility for FYC from colleges to the high schools and reinforcing the idea that FYC is a “waste of time and money” for the university, students, parents, and legislatures (p. 63-64). After defining the “first year writing” that pre-collegiate writing is designed relative to, the CWPA (Hansen et al., 2013) describe three different pre-collegiate program types: the College Board’s “Advanced Placement” (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Concurrent Enrollment/Dual Credit (CE/DC).

1. **Advanced Placement & International Baccalaureate:** Though distinct programs, AP and IB share similarities in that they are delivered in the high schools, are taught by high school teachers with little/no required training in composition, and both validate student performance with external testing coordinated by the nonprofit (College Board or IB) that developed the curriculum. Composition in the AP curriculum lives predominantly in two courses—“Literature and Composition” and “Language and Composition”—and the final “passing” scores (3, 4, or 5) to potentially receive college credit are determined by a timed test (multiple choice and essay); the “Language and Composition” class and exam, first developed in 1980, is intended to align better with some commonly shared outcomes in FYC classes (Hansen, 2016, p. 156). In contrast, most IB courses are writing intensive, and completion of their Diploma Programme requires students to take multiple process-based writing classes; the final “passing” scores (4, 5, 6, or 7) to potentially receive college credit are determined by instructor grades on lower-stakes assignments (20%) and external reviewer scores on “theory of knowledge”



essay examinations (80%) (Hansen, 2016, p. 165). While Hansen (2016) views IB more favorably than AP (even arguing that “WPAs should realize that pre-college learning can sometimes be a valid substitute for an on-campus FYC course”), she chronicles the stories that students, parents, high schools, admissions officers, and legislatures tell themselves about these courses—about preparation, placement, persistence, and prestige—and deems them “somewhat suspect” (p. 158).

- 2. Concurrent Enrollment & Dual Credit:** According to the joint statement of the CCCC, TYCA, CWPA, and NCTE, concurrent enrollment or dual credit (CE/DC) courses involve the delivery of a college composition course with the oversight of a “postsecondary, credit-awarding institution” as recommended by the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) (CCCC, 2019). These courses initially arose “in the 1970s...to address worries about a lack of rigor...and help students become college ready” (Hansen, 2016, p. 159), and began to enter the broader WPA/FYC conversation in 1991 (Wecker & Wilde, 2019, p. 113). These programs can take a range of forms and appear in a range of locations—online, on a college campus, in a high school, or taught at a community center. In one form offered through the University of Minnesota, for example, College in the Schools (CIS) involves courses taught in the high schools by high school teachers (like AP and IB), but those instructors are approved, trained, and assessed by UMN faculty associated with FYC; in another form offered by the University of Minnesota, Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) enables

high school students to come onto the college campus to take classes alongside college-age students, in classes taught by UMN instructors with graduate training (UMN CCAPS, 2016). As Hansen (2016) notes:

some CE programs have national reputations for high curricular standards, excellent teaching, and strong student performance...some, frankly, have raised questions about whether the sponsoring college's purpose is really to offer high school students a quality experience or just to generate more tuition dollars. (p. 160)

As with AP/IB, CE/DC is sold to parents and students as a way to get credit or placement in lieu of FYC, and to schools and legislatures as a means of increasing persistence in and preparation for college.

***First Year Composition (Single Course)***. Remedial and pre-collegiate courses are often articulated in relation to an assumed standard, single semester, FYC course, offered by an English or Writing department, or in other departments but administered under a college-wide writing-intensive program, with an introductory numerical association (100, 101, 1000) and “an enrollment of 15- 25 students per section” (Hansen et al., 2013, p. 3). This course can take on many forms, which I divide here into two roughly outlined categories: First Year Composition and First Year Seminar. In either form, the course tends to respond to stakeholder concerns about struggles in the transition to college writing, challenges of persistence beyond the first year of college, and under preparation for writing/rhetorical situations in college and beyond; just as it has historically been, even when it is not the avowed focus of the instructors of the course, the perpetual

“perception of a national literacy crisis” provides a demand and rationale for these courses (Townsend, 2016).

1. **First Year Composition:** The first category includes courses taught within and English or Writing departments/programs, often with titles like “University/Academic Writing” or “College Composition.” As recommended by the NCTE/CCCC “Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing,” FYC courses are generally taught by instructors with graduate education in English or Rhetoric/Composition (faculty, adjunct, grad student instructors), and instructors are usually hired, trained, and assessed by a WPA with training in Rhetoric/Composition (J. Charlton & Rose, 2009, p. 122). Course sizes tend to be small, with a recommended 15-20 students per section (CCCC, 2015). These courses could belong to any tradition in FYC pedagogical history, but often treats writing/language (in some form) as both the content and mode of assessment for the class, generally with a claim to prepare students for participation in postsecondary discourse and to develop a rhetorical sensibility. According to the NCTE and CCCC, the goal of FYC is “to teach students knowledge and practices about writing that they may successfully carry forward, or transfer, to other writing contexts” (CCCC, 2019) and the course should reflect the CWPA “Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition.” Doug Downs (2016) describes FYC as ideally concerned with “access... invit[ing] students in” to the university, achieved through “interaction” (rather than lecturing) which valorizes “writing that tries hard ideas poorly over writing that safely offers easy ideas well,” with particular

attention to practices of "textual production" and theories of "rhetoric" (p. 58-59); at the same time, Downs recognizes a "wide range" of approaches that arise out of tensions between professional histories, FYC's "public charter" (see: Traditional/Dominant Stories/Conceptions about FYC), and the ideals that he articulates about the course.

- 2. First Year Seminar:** The second category includes "themed" or "seminar" courses, often offered by faculty from across the curriculum, primarily covering a topic with which the instructor has content expertise and on which students will write an agreed upon "intensive" amount of writing, which is then assessed. FYS instructors are often faculty in the disciplines—writing instruction is not their primary focus—and their participation in the "writing intensive" seminar is voluntary/additional to their primary focus; these courses are often administered and assessed by a faculty committee, of which a WPA with a background in Rhetoric/Composition is often a part. As Townsend notes, "diplomacy [is] key" in these programs (2016, p. 119). These courses could be connected to the concept of a First Year Experience program—an integration/retention oriented plan for new students that might "include first-year seminars (FYS), learning communities (LCs), living-learning communities (LLCs), common reading programs, peer mentorship, and extended orientation programs" (Thomas, 2020, p. 9)—and seminars might take on an explicit "transition to college" theme, some special academic topic of interest to the instructor, an "introduction to the major" focus, or something more akin to the remedial aims of Basic Writing and ESL (Porter

& Swing, 2006). In some cases, when located in an English department, the course might take on a writing-intensive “literature seminar” focus corresponding to instructor interest (similar to the rhetoric of liberal culture tradition described by Berlin), but seminar-style FYC is more often distributed across faculty from a range of departments, and thus takes on a more WAC/WID characteristic.

*FYC as [Part of] a Sequence.* Though often conceived of as a one-off introductory course, FYC has had instantiations where it extended beyond the single semester format throughout its history, and continues to do so today. One approach, “a two-semester cohorted stretch course” addresses deficit constructions of Basic Writing by positing that “*most...*students will need more than one semester of composition” (Melzer, 2015, p. 83); conceived of as either taking a more deliberate and moderately paced approach to the same single-semester FYC course content, or as a bundled basic writing/FYC, “stretch composition” is predicated on the belief that students benefit from “*more time*: more time to think, more time to write, more time to revise” (Glau, 2007, p. 31).

As Glau’s account of the ASU first year composition program at the time of their inaugural “Stretch” course captures, many schools have a composition “sequence” involving multiple courses with different designations that are conceptualized as building on each other (at ASU, for example: WAC101, ENG101, ENG102) (2007, p. 32). The 2-3 courses in the sequence—taken during the first year of a students’ college career—might take on different focuses; in the University of Southern Maine’s writing program document “Detailed Overview of ENG 100 and ENG 102 as Connected, Sequential

Courses,” for example, ENG100 (“College Writing”) is conceptualized as “establish[ing] a *foundation*” through process- and rhetoric- based approaches, and is followed by ENG102 (“Academic Writing”) which is conceptualized as “building on the fundamentals” by moving into more specific genres of academic inquiry and research writing (Ouellette, 2020). As with “Stretch,” these sequences posit that students benefit from more than one semester of composition instruction and practice.

Glau’s description of the ASU sequence also highlights the existence of different sequential “tracks” designed for different student populations (“Traditional Sequence: ENG 101 → ENG 102,” “Accelerated Sequence: ENG 105,” “ESL Stretch Sequence: WAC 107 → ENG107 → ENG 108”), and the offering of different “tracks” of composition is not an uncommon practice in US postsecondary composition programs (2007, p. 32). Placement into these tracks is often described as part of an “effort to get new students into the most appropriate beginning composition course(s),” and might involve the use of standardized tests and/or placement essays on the part of the institution, or some form of directed self-placement (DSP) on the part of the student (Royer & Gilles, 2016, p. 23). As Melzer notes “the remediation and basic skills discourse...[of] testing and tracking” participates in the same “Remedial Writing Framework” that can be traced back to the early admission/placement writing tests at Harvard in the 1880s, and the ability of students to “place out” (or place into an abbreviated or accelerated track like ASU’s ENG 105) further motivates the aforementioned pre-collegiate composition industry (2015, p. 82). DSP is often presented as an alternative that provides solutions to the problems posed by testing/tracking, as it enables students to select the course or course sequence that best suits them.

One final major way that First Year Composition sometimes participates in a “sequence” is *also* visible at ASU in how “Director of Composition David Schwalm” worked with “John Ramage...Director of ASU’s Writing Across the Curriculum program” to develop a range of new approaches to composition at the institution (Glau, 2007, pp. 30–31). Whether formally named or not, Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID, as well as CAC, CXC, ECAC, and WEC) programs often begin with introductory “WAC” courses in the first and second year of college which have an expressive “writing to learn” function and focus mainly on students’ discovery of what it means to be an “academic” writer; these programs then tend to move on to intermediate/advanced “WID” courses that focus on discourse specific conventions and genres with a transactional “writing to communicate” function (Townsend, 2016, p. 118). In the WAC/WID program, First year composition would represent the first course or two, would take on a WAC focus, and would be more likely to be housed in an English/Writing department or program; other courses in the WAC/WID vertical curriculum might rely on “discipline-based faculty” who have received some program-led training on teaching with writing, or might utilize something like “rhetoricians in residence” who are situated in the disciplines but have graduate training in English/Rhetoric/Composition and specialize in the writing conventions of that discipline (Townsend, 2016, p. 119). As with the First Year Seminar model (which could be the beginning of the WAC/WID/WEC sequence, as it is at Colby College), these programs are often run by a committee of faculty in the disciplines and a WPA, or by a WPA team with graduate training in Composition/Rhetoric.

*FYC Today Conclusion.* Two composition programs, one at Arizona State University and one at Colby College illustrate how multifaceted and situated the concept of a composition program is:

- The composition program at ASU involves a multi-tracked course sequence, delivered in the First Year Composition tradition (writing as course content and method of assessment). It has a stretch option replacing remedial “basic writing,” which is administered in collaboration with a larger WAC/WID initiative. The overall “program” is administered by a host of WPAs with composition training, and courses are taught by faculty/adjuncts/grad students with training in English, Composition, Rhetoric, and Linguistics.
- The composition program at Colby College involves a non-tracked vertical WEC sequence (W1, W2, and W3 courses offered in subsequent years). It offers an initial course (W1), delivered in the First Year Seminar tradition (writing as method of assessment), and “remedial” students are supported through additional “writing labs” and the college writing center. The overall “WEC” program is administered by a WPA team and faculty Writing Committee, and courses are taught by faculty in the disciplines, supported by pedagogy lunches.

Programs take on further shape from the textbooks and pedagogical approaches at their core; one worth noting for its growing prevalence is Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’ “Writing About Writing”—both a pedagogical approach and the name of their textbook series—which reimagines FYC as an “introduction to writing studies” and which centers



the development of metalinguistic awareness and exploration of threshold concepts about language (Downs & Wardle, 2007). As WPAs work with the other constituents in the programs they're hired to administer, they additionally bring their expertise with composition/rhetoric scholarship as well as their own ideological commitments as teacher-scholars—often to transformative theories of education. These diverse and broadly defined theories of “emancipatory politics and pedagogy...dominated and influenced...rhetoric and writing instruction” (Greenbaum, 2002, pp. xii–xiii) by the early aughts, and thus hold important roles today in the work of Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) who steward First Year Composition.

***WPA (Writing Program Administrator)***

Having defined the broader term “writing program” and the narrower focus of this study on writing programs that are associated with “first-year composition” courses, I now turn to a definition of “writing program administrators” or “WPAs” as the people charged with directing and administering these programs. In this section, as I did when exploring the range of entities to which the term “writing program” might refer, I seek to illustrate the diversity of the term “writing program administrator.” I first explore the WPA position in relation to their role, title, and tenure status, which shows how WPAs might be situated within a hierarchy/heterarchy, as well as begins to address issues of stability/contingency and empowerment/disempowerment. I then explore how WPAs are situated disciplinarily—in terms of the location of their position at their institution, in terms of their disciplinary training and identity, and in a temporal sense (getting at changes in the WPA over time). Finally, I address the many roles that WPAs might be

expected to fulfill at an institution, expanding on similar observations in the above “Statement of the Problem” section.

**WPA Position/Title/Rank.** According to Susan McLeod’s (2007) *Writing Program Administration*, until the WPA position was formalized with the creation of the Council of Writing Program Administrators in the late 1970s, “the job [of WPA] was usually a service task assigned to some faculty member (often to supervise TAs), and there was usually one per campus, in the English Department” (p. 3). As she makes clear in the ensuing pages, WPA work has expanded considerably since that time, moving beyond the work of one single “Director” on a campus in charge of the graduate teaching assistants and adjuncts teaching within a composition program, to now include multiple directors of different types of writing programs (Writing Center, WAC/WID initiative, FYC, ESL, etc.) and a hierarchy of administrators that might exist within each program type—Department Chair, Director, Associate Director(s), Assistant Director(s), Coordinator(s), and a range of Graduate Assistant positions. To better deal with this complexity in this definition, I, like McLeod (2007) intend to “focus on the administration of first-year writing programs, since that is still the most common kind of WPA work” (pp. 3-4).

According to the Portland Resolution of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (Hult, 1992), “the WPA” (with the definite article, presumably the *lead* WPA in a program with multiple administrators) “should be a regular, full-time, tenured faculty member or a full-time administrator with a recognizable title that delineates the scope of the position” as an important matter of job security and empowerment to make program decisions within the institutional hierarchy (p. 90). Despite the idealized WPA

outlined in this resolution, many WPA narratives highlight ways in which WPA positions have been defined locally by institutions, and it is not uncommon for those narratives to describe a tenuous/contingent role or circumstances that lead to WPA disempowerment. In *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration* (2008), Enos and Borrowman devote 3 sections to the issues of tenure and administrative-professional status: Chapter 4 “Tenure Track Faculty as WPAs,” Chapter 5 “Nontenure-Track Faculty as WPAs” and Chapter 6 “Tenure, Promotion, and the WPA.” Even before these chapters, in Chapter 3 “Credibility, Disciplinary Bias, and the WPA,” Encheimayer describes taking a WPA director “position with no immediate tenure” (p. 50) and then being excluded from decisions on everything from required program texts to course enrollment caps (pp. 52-57); Kurtz describes being a “junior faculty member, untenured...[without] a true administrative title” (p. 61) who is both ignored and circumnavigated by colleagues in respect to the composition program that she is tasked with running; McNabb describes the challenges (voiced by many others in the book) of balancing tenure expectations with undervalued WPA administrative work (p. 70); and O’Neill recounts directing a writing program as a junior faculty member on the tenure-track where her “tenure and promotion prospects” were weaponized by other “tenure-track faculty” who wanted to micromanage her work (p. 75).

Positioning within department and university hierarchies and the degree of tenure protection available to the WPA are important factors in how WPAs might think about the potentially risky proposition of pursuing overtly transformative aims in their work with the writing program. At the same time, as Weatherbee-Phelps (2002) observes, “envision[ing] a single, powerful individual dominating activity and decision making

from the top down” is outmoded and fails to recognize “postmodern organizational practice” as “interdependent” and “dynamic” (p. 5). An *empowered* WPA exercises power within/through an ecology (Reiff et al., 2015), and how they conceptualize/operationalize power has implications for the system that they hope to transform. As demonstrated in texts such as *The Feminist WPA Project* (Carter, 2006) and *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition Studies* (Ratcliffe & Rickly, 2010a), there is an interest in how emancipatory/radical theories (such as feminist theory) might transform practices of administration and authority. Micciche & Strickland’s book review of *Performing Feminism* makes clear, however, that the question of *how* to translate these theories into truly transformative practices—to negotiate the complex politics and power of admin—remains an open one (2013, p. 171).

**WPA “Home” Location, Training, and Disciplinary Identity.** One issue potentially impacting the WPA role is the “home” departmental, programmatic, and disciplinary context in which the position is situated. Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos found that Liberal Arts colleges were significantly more likely not to require a composition course (21%) than Research (9%) or Comprehensive (0%) schools, and significantly less likely to offer two courses (Research 62%, Comprehensive 76%, Liberal Arts 37%); their finding that Liberal Arts colleges were more likely to offer “more than two courses” is likely explainable by the WAC/WID phenomenon described in the previous section (2008, p. 12). The implication of these differences for a WPA are made further clear by the discrepancy that they found in the average number of sections offered and the differences in who teaches them:

- Research: Avg. 157 sections offered, taught by an average 42 TAs, 22 non-tenure track faculty, and 3 tenure track faculty
- Comprehensive: Avg. 61 sections offered, taught by an average 12 TAs, 22 non-tenure track faculty, and 8 tenure track faculty
- Liberal Arts: Avg. 20 sections offered, taught by an average 8 non-tenure track faculty and 6 tenure track faculty

These “average” program profiles for different institution types have implications for WPAs—for the number of WPAs, the types of instructors they work with, the types of training needed or possible—as well as the course “types” and likely departmental homes for the WPA.

In the 2007 WPA-L survey by Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos, the authors reported that 72% of their respondents identified themselves as being housed in an English department, 5% in a separate Writing/Rhetoric department, less than 1% in a Communications department, and 22% “chose not to answer this question” (Enos & Borrowman, 2008, p. 11). Of those who “chose not to answer” there are several additional potential configurations, often relating to the “program” not living in a departmental home, but rather as a standalone “program” or part of a standalone “center” that advises faculty in other departments. One participant in this dissertation is housed in a “First Year Experience Program” which administers several gen ed courses including the composition/communication course sequence. The 4 WPAs in the University of Minnesota’s Writing Enriched Curriculum (WEC), which is housed in the Center for Writing and consults on/supervises the development of writing enriched courses in the disciplines, are examples of WPAs operating within this “center” model. Respondents

might also have been affiliated with more nebulously defined writing programs or “WPA”-like roles where the actual location of the WPA work is not clearly named or connected to a departmental home. Two participants in this dissertation reported situations like this one—knowing their own department, but noting a more complex “home” for the program at their institution—which would make answering the survey question difficult. The majority of participants in this dissertation, though, reflect Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos’ distribution of departmental homes, and report being homed in an English department. This departmental housing can have complex implications for the work of WPAs, as I explore next.

Describing the long and tenuous connection between English belles-lettres departments and composition, Schilb notes that “English departments have long clung to composition out of self-interest” despite “doubt[ing] composition’s worth” and often questioning the value of relationships between the two fields (2014, p. 166); noting “at the very least...[literature] colleagues who...ignore composition” Schilb also observes that “plenty of writing program directors report that literature colleagues have blatantly abused them,” leading to calls like Maxine Hairston’s where “people in charge of the writing program talk of making it independent” (2014, p. 167). The tension in English departments—between wanting to hold on to the curricular real estate, tuition, and expanded funding for grad students, adjuncts, and professionals on the oversaturated English market, and the skepticism about or dismissiveness of composition’s theoretical worth—can mean that being a WPA in an English department requires a fair amount of diplomacy.

Referencing Schilb—and his description of fighting for office space, respect, staffing, qualified hires, course content, and funding for training, among other things—Robin Gallaher’s (2014) dissertation *On Being an Island: A Grounded Theory Study of Being a WPA and the Only Composition Scholar at an Institution* further explores how the “ideological differences between literary and composition scholars” can affect the distribution of resources, lead to marginalization of WPAs, and impede the development of a writing program (p.119). While Schilb notes that both fields share a “social-constructionist” turn and influences such as scholars like Fish, Foucault, and Butler, both Schilb and Gallaher describe a lack of shared language, values, and pedagogical understandings that makes WPA work in an English department a complex and potentially frustrating endeavor, particularly as WPAs seek to translate transformative theories into local practices. While both fields share, for example, robust interests in feminist scholarship, Gallaher begins her dissertation with a lament that “the options for feminist WPA work are significantly different for WPAs who have composition scholar colleagues”; she later explains this arises from differences in knowledge about, commitment to, and willingness to invest in feminist theories of composition, and notes that such differences make it difficult to engage mutually and collaboratively with English colleagues (2014, pp. 6, 225).

Being a WPA in an English department certainly does not mean that the WPA would necessarily be the sole compositionist, but Gallaher reports anecdotally that during the 2010-2011 academic year there were 62 WPA positions listed on the Academic Jobs Wiki, and of those at least 27 were for positions where the WPA would be the sole compositionist in a non-composition disciplinary home, as determined by a search of the

faculty specializations for the hiring institution (2014, p. 5). Put into conversation with overall statistics of “housing departments” for WPAs, as well as the historical relationship between English and Composition, the anecdote is suggestive of the higher potential for a Composition/Rhetoric trained WPA to experience isolation in an English department where there is greater investment in literary and belles lettres study.

In the introduction to Rita Malenczyk’s (2016) *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*, noting that WPAs are not all “the same,” two variables shape her exploration of the difference. The first seems most commonly addressed in the literature: the field(s) in which WPAs received their training. Malenczyk, first, distinguishes between types of training in Rhetoric and Composition (“history and theory of rhetoric,” “theory and practice of teaching writing,” “multimedia composing,” “community literacy”), and those who “have written dissertations in writing program administration” (2016, p. 5); this is noteworthy since most studies of WPA demographics seem to use Composition/Rhetoric as a single category, referring to a generally shared body of preparatory graduate work. She continues on to describe the terminal degrees in other fields that might also lead to WPA work, including “creative writing,” “literature,” “linguistics,” and “education” studies. While Malenczyk is not sure of the proportions of these terminal degrees, Charlton & Rose found that, of 188 WPA participants in their national study asked about their most advanced degree, 53% reported holding a degree in “Rhetoric and/or Composition,” 27% in “Literature,” 6% in “English Education,” 2% in “Creative Writing,” 1% in “Linguistics,” 0.5% in “Speech/Communications,” and 11% in “Other” (2009, p. 122). Conducted in 2007 as a replication of a similar study by Peterson 1987, the Charlton & Rose study additionally showed that over that 20 year period the



percentage of WPAs with their highest advanced degree in Rhetoric/Composition almost quadrupled (15% → 53%), which Charlton & Rose attribute to the increasing number (and growing visibility) of degrees in the field; the continued growth of graduate programs in Rhetoric/Composition since 2007 suggests that the percentage is likely higher today. With this dissertation exploring how transformative theories from scholarship in Composition/Rhetoric enter into local practices, a WPA's familiarity with Composition/Rhetoric scholarship is obviously a variable in how likely they are to draw upon it in their negotiations.

The second variable that Malencyk addresses relative to WPA variety is also visible in the Charlton & Rose study: *time*. Even with WPAs who come from “the fields that comprise rhetoric and composition,” Malencyk notes that WPAs who entered the field “in the middle to late nineties might view our work through a more theoretical lens than those who began twenty years earlier” and “WPAs beginning their work now may be markedly more invested” in theory work and implications for their WPA identities than their counterparts from the 1990s (2016, p. 5). While Ray (2012) argues in “Forgotten Radicals: A History of the Term ‘Theory’ in Three Decades of WPA Scholarship” that “from its inception, WPA discourse has theorized the administrative position while also embracing less conservative, more subversive ideologies,” he also notes that WPA scholarship has more “directly engaged” theory since the mid 1990s (p. 9). From Gunner's (1994) “Decentering the WPA,” to Carter's (2006) *The Feminist WPA Project*, to Adler-Kassner's (2008) *The Activist WPA*, to Strickland & Gunner's (2009) *The Writing Program Interrupted*, to Ratcliffe & Ricjkly's (2010a) *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition*, to Horner & Tetreault's (2017)

*Crossing Divides: Exploring Translingual Writing Pedagogies and Programs*, it is clear that this direct engagement of the theory-practice binary is in full swing. As expressed in Charlton et al.'s (2011) *GenAdmin: Theorizing WPA Identities in the Twenty-First Century*, scholars are increasingly *choosing* WPA work (rather than being assigned it) and do so because they see it as a serious intellectual site of theoretical and transformative work.

**WPA Roles.** The disciplinary home and disciplinary identity of a WPA (as well as how recently they entered WPA work) then might affect the ways that they think about and approach the roles that come with the WPA position. As noted earlier in the Statement of the Problem section of this dissertation, Lynn Bloom (in Brown & Enos, 2002) describes WPA work as comprised of a wide variety of roles, including:

“...policymaker, problem solver, curriculum designer, lobbyist, personnel recruiter and evaluator, teacher, teacher trainer, mentor, judge, community or secondary school liaison, fiscal manager, accountant, fundraiser, computer programmer, test developer, program evaluator, Web designer, scheduler, record keeper, office manager, secretary...[and] three significant roles—researcher, scholar, and writer” (xi)

Each role also represents a site of potential transformation—crafting antiracist policies, redesigning a curriculum to reflect translingual understandings, lobbying for more equitable compensation for TAs, enacting disability justice pedagogies in the WPA's own classes, facilitating trainings that expose teachers to critical theories of language, etc.—and, thinking of the roles in this way, WPAs might increasingly see all roles as equally

“significant” as “researcher, scholar, and writer.” To these roles, it is worthwhile to add several “conceptions” of the WPA that recur in the literature.

The first of these is the “WPA as Boss Compositionist,” a term that entered circulation after Sledd’s (1996) “Composition and Civic Education” in which he describes “boss compositionists” as “educators on the Left, who babble about liberation and empowerment by transformative intellectuals” but who participate in perpetuating inequality in many ways, including/especially by their participation as middle-manager “bosses” in an exploitative hierarchy (p. 2-3). The WPA Joseph Harris reflects on his “position as a manager in a system that treats so many of its teachers unfairly” in response to Sledd’s critique, and resolves to “think through the conflicted class interests of many of us working in composition in order to see if some of the contradictions we face might be turned into opportunities for positive change” (2000, p. 45). Sledd’s critique of the boss compositionist also goes beyond exploitative labor elements to also articulate with the idea of a WPA as a single, powerful individual (as noted in Position, Title, Rank above) who imposes their idealized version of composition on the teachers who work under them<sup>7</sup>—and, as a result, the concept of “boss compositionist” has taken on importance in self-reflective WPA work, particularly feminist WPA theory which seeks to reimagine WPA work as collaborative. Though not mentioned explicitly by participants in this dissertation, many of the participants seemed to be articulating their roles as WPAs with the “boss compositionist” in mind as something to avoid.

The second is a cluster of conceptions—articulated in Susan Miller’s *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*—of the WPA as feminized, subordinate, low, and

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<sup>7</sup> A process described as “hegemonic re-form” (S. Miller, 1991, p. 160)

janitorial (p. 164-165); McLeod calls this conception “The WPA as Unappreciated Wife” (2007, p. 11). Building from her initial description of how composition teachers are positioned as “sad women in the basement,” Miller posits that WPAs “suffer from the same stigma” (1991, p. 165). This stigma involves seeing composition as intellectually inferior work, in which WPAs (and teachers) are nurturing initiators, whose teaching is seen as service work (rather than serious inquiry) meant to bring immature writers to adulthood. While the gendered elements of these conceptions are largely presented as metaphorical, they do spring from a historical reality in which women have regularly been tasked with teaching writing as contingent, underpaid, undervalued faculty...and that history persists in the institutionalized sexism surrounding composition work.

Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos note that WPAs are “two times more likely to be female than male” (2008, p. 18), and Charlton & Rose find that 64% of WPAs identify as female vs. 36% as male—which makes the percentage of female WPAs considerably higher than the 41% of full-time faculty who identify as female (2009, pp. 118–119). The metaphorical “basement” element of Miller’s term also connects to very real working situations reported by many WPAs, who often describe program offices being housed in “an assortment of small, separate rooms” (Schilb, 2014, p. 165) “probably in a basement somewhere” (McLemee, 2011) or on an “unused third floor” (Fulwiler, 2008, p. 93). As Lynn Bloom (1992) parodies in her essay “I Want a Writing Director,” the WPA is ideally female, nurturing, non- or pre-tenured, and willing to endure humbling conditions and unfair pay. Taken together this conception of the WPA role speaks to a potential institutional expectation of the WPA role and the type of person who inhabits it, and is a “role” that WPAs might need to negotiate or address as they establish themselves within

an institution. Many of the WPA participants in this dissertation referenced role elements in this cluster of conceptions as things that they struggled with (in either their current or past WPA roles) and as a site for negotiating what it means to do WPA work.

A third cluster of conceptions about the role of the WPA could be termed the “WPA as Scholar,” in which the work of WPAs is seen as meaningful intellectual labor (McLeod, 2007, p. 14). Bloom’s (2002) setting aside of “researcher, scholar, writer” as the “three significant roles” for WPAs unfortunately echoes regular moves to separate “serious” scholarly endeavors from the ostensibly less meaningful/intellectual labor of “directing a writing program.” In many of the conversations surrounding WPA work, this separation is referenced as a problematic issue for how institutions value WPA work in discussions about promotion and tenure. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) responded to this issue with their 1998 position statement “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administration,” in which they articulate how WPA work should be seen as “scholarly work...worthy of tenure and promotion,” particularly when it “produce[s]...advances and enacts disciplinary knowledge within the field of Rhetoric and Composition” (CWPA, 1998). Horner (2009) pushes back on how this CWPA document buys into problematic issues of promotion and tenure—specifically the division of valued labor into scholarship, teaching, and service—and how the rush to externally measure (and reward) the “intellectual” labor of WPAs is likely to occlude and denigrate the work of others. The CWPA framing, however, is not the only possible one, and the aim of GenAdmin (and Malenczyk’s observations about WPAs over time) seems to be to suggest an increased self-perception of scholarly value in WPA work separate from conversations about promotion, tenure, and reward; this increased, self-perceived

value challenges dominant valuations of WPA work, and further (through things like feminist WPA theory) values emotional labor, collaboration, and explicit attention to systems of power within the program. Articulating a new metaphor Janangelo (2016) describes the “scholarly work” of WPAs as a process of “gleaning”—of paying close and critical attention to useful remnants (from our institutions, the field, and other sites of value) and bringing them together to make something of value in negotiation with others—and also relates the work to critical approaches to “received wisdom and (re)discovering meaning” (p. 443). Combining gleaning, reception, production, advancement, translation, negotiation, enactment, assemblage, and (re)discovery, WPA work eschews the theory/practice binary (or service/teaching/scholarship ternary) and participates in an intellectually dynamic “continuum of theoretical action,” analyzing writing programs through existing theoretical lenses, generating new theories out of day to day WPA work, crafting policies that implement theoretical ideas, challenging/modifying received theories and knowledge from new standpoints, and sharing the products of all of these through professional WPA and Composition/Rhetoric discourse (Ray, 2012, p. 11). All WPA participants in this dissertation—in some way or another—articulated tacit and explicit ways that they think of WPA work as scholarly/intellectual labor, and did so in ways that both reinforced *and challenged* the CWPA position statement, highlighting the complexity of how WPAs envision their roles.

A fourth cluster of conceptions about the roles that WPAs fulfill is encompassed in the ideas of the “WPA as Change Agent” (McLeod, 2007, p. 17) and “WPA as Activist” (Adler-Kassner, 2008). In this conception, WPAs both apply and generate

theory from composition and related fields with an aim to transform local conditions and the “stories” about writing that are dominant/circulating at the institution; they bring together ideals and strategies to achieve progressive and emancipatory aims. Adler-Kassner (2008) cautions that this kind of work should not be undertaken lightly, and that WPAs “who want to change stories must understand this historical backstory” of American education and writing instruction, as well as changes/attempts to change it, lest they “invoke versions of it that ultimately undermine the very points [they] are trying to advance” (p. 10). At the same time, program profile texts and anthologies like Brown and Enos’ (2002) *The Writing Program Administrator’s Resource*, Enos & Borrowman’s (2008) *The Promises and Perils of Writing Program Administration*, Strickland & Gunner’s (2009) *The Writing Program Interrupted*, Charlton et al.’s (2011) *GenAdmin*, and Reiff et al.’s (2015) *Ecologies of Writing Programs* all dedicate significant space to the potential and actual impact of activist and change agent oriented WPA work. As Shaw et al. (2009) observe, these impacts might not necessarily rise to the level of “deep institutional change,” as institutions’ conservative values might resist further-reaching changes and limit them to the ‘program’ itself (p. 162); but WPAs might also have broader impacts on their departments, colleges, universities, and systems as attested by many in the literature and in this dissertation. Drawing on metaphors of “rewriting” (C. Charlton et al., 2011) and “reframing” (Adler-Kassner, 2008) “stories” (about composition, about labor, about WPAs, about education, etc), this conception of the WPAs involves using the roles, tools, strategies, collaborations, and knowledge available to them to bring about transformative change. All participants in this study described localized changes that they were able to effect intentionally—grounded in composition

theories, responsive to composition's histories—and many further described ways through which their activist work had affected their institutions more broadly...whether in admissions policies, institutional assessment practices, cross-curricular conceptions of writing, hiring practices, or other areas.

Bloom's list of the wide variety of roles that WPAs fulfill—and many like it in other parts of the WPA literature—speak to the kinds of tasks that WPAs might be expected to do as part of their professional practice, and further symbolize the sites and tools with(in) which WPAs might act upon their programs; the conceptual “roles” that I articulate following Bloom's list then speak to the conditions, stances, and aims of the work achieved through the strategic use of the roles that Bloom describes. Multiple conceptions are often operant—WPAs in this study describe being “feminized”/“marginalized,” but also working from those positions subversively to enact change, while also producing new theoretical/scholarly contributions through processes of discovery associated with that work. As Ray (2012) observes in response to Gracie (1982), “WPAs [are] not only translators of theory but makers of it,” engineering applications of scholarship from the field while also generating new solutions out of their practical, day-to-day work as they “negotiate institutional constraints” in ways that have meaning for the field (p. 15). This work, according to McLeod has the potential to be “subversive,” to challenge dominant or institutional stories about composition, language, the aims of education, labor, and a host of other factors central to WPA concerns. Having surveyed roles that WPAs fulfill, and the potential for those positions to be “transformative,” I now pivot to an articulation of what, exactly, “transformative” WPA



work might actually seek to transform, re-write, or re-frame...namely the “traditional” or “dominant” stories.

### *Traditional/Dominant Stories/Conceptions about FYC*

“Writing Programs” interpreted both broadly (including Writing Centers, four year writing intensive initiatives, majors, etc.) and specifically as done in this dissertation (FYC) all participate in constructing what writing is at an institution, how it is assessed, and to what ends. These writing programs are envisioned by students, parents, faculty in the disciplines, deans, journalists, and the public as sites where “good writing” is defined, taught, assessed, and regulated; these programs are also the sites where WPAs and writing instructors reinforce, expand, challenge, or subvert others’ conceptions of “good writing” and have a chance to tell different “stories” of the role(s) of composition in postsecondary environments. As the earlier section on the history of FYC in this dissertation explores, these stories (sometimes constructed as “paradigms,” “traditions,” “approaches,” or “types”) shared/promoted by writing instructors and WPAs alike include ideas about why we need to teach composition, what functions it should play for institutions (and society), who should teach the course(s), and what content the course(s) should explore, among other elements. Despite the major changes—documented in this dissertation—in the scholarly discourse of Composition/Rhetoric starting in the 1960’s and continuing to the present, Berlin’s observation that “current-traditional rhetoric has been the most pervasive...in fact, the dominant rhetoric overall” in US postsecondary education speaks to the enduring impact of certain “traditional” stories of what first year composition stands for in the broader US culture.

In chapter one of *Subculture: The Elements of Style*, Hebdige (1979) explores a variety of definitions of “culture,” how they relate to “myths” and “ideologies,” and how these concepts then relate to “hegemony” (pp. 5–19). He begins by articulating “two basic definitions of culture” that he has identified in popular circulation, the first of which is that culture is “a standard of aesthetic excellence: ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’...derived from an appreciation of ‘classic’ aesthetic form” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 6). In this definition, it is possible to see elements of Berlin’s current-traditional rhetoric (fitting students to an immutable standard) and the rhetoric of liberal culture (writing instruction as preparing students to appreciate and aspire to ‘high culture’). Hebdige’s second basic definition, drawing on Raymond Williams, describes “culture” as “rooted in anthropology,” invested in the description of “the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a way of life,” and concerned not just with “art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behavior” (1979, p. 6). In this second definition, it is possible to see Berlin’s Transactional Rhetoric, with its social epistemic focus, and interest in describing, deconstructing, understanding, engaging in, and changing societies, cultures, discourses, etc.

Reflecting on the second definition and its role in early academic Cultural Studies discourse, Hebdige notes that hangovers from the first definition continued to inflect the work of thinkers like Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, who—while elevating working class and other marginalized cultures in their scholarship—were nonetheless still “concerned [with] establish[ing] aesthetic and moral criteria for distinguishing the worthwhile [cultural] products from the ‘trash’” and maintained that “it still required a literary sensibility to ‘read’ society” (1979, p. 8). What was being “read,” according to

Hebdige, were what Barthes called “myths...the normally hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups (i.e. those in power) are rendered universal and ‘given’ for the whole of society” (1979, p. 9); what this “reading” ideally helps one to do is then to make ideologies (normally subconscious) explicit, to deconstruct them, and—through that process—disrupt hegemony.

Thinking in this way of the dominant cultures—in academia and in the broader US society—and the implicit and explicit meanings and values embedded in institutions and ordinary behavior, it is possible to identify some dominant conceptions (of language, of education, etc.) that have inflected US composition instruction. Described by Rendón (2009) as “agreements that are firmly entrenched in the academic culture” (p. 26), by Downs (2016) as “stakeholder expectations: FYC’s public charter” (p. 51), and by Horner (2015) as the “official institutional charge[s]” and “interlocking assumptions” of composition instruction (p. 452), these conceptions motivate and underwrite the larger “stories” of composition that we tell ourselves in the US. Traditional myths/stories/conceptions of composition—the sort that have remained dominant like Berlin’s current traditional rhetoric—share several elements, all of which relate back to these agreements/expectations/charges and to Hebdige’s definitions of culture.

**Cultural Deficiency & Literacy Crisis.** Whether constructed as the cultured aesthetic heights to which students should aspire, or the “cultural standards” against which acceptable performance should be measured, or the dominant cultural “ways of life” to which students should strive to fit themselves, US composition has—throughout its history—been concerned with students’ “cultural deficiencies” and “cultural otherness,” and has fulfilled a gatekeeping role of winnowing and/or indoctrination in

one way or another. Since its first inception at Harvard, first year composition has responded to a perpetual “perception of a national literacy ‘crisis’”—often taking the form of “Jonny Can’t Write” or “kids these days...” proclamations (Townsend, 2016, p. 117). This perpetual crisis has, in turn, intensified around each new wave of “others” admitted to our postsecondary educational institutions—from the middle class, from women, from domestic minorities, from international students, etc.<sup>8</sup>—and has responded as a counter force to democratization of education by defending “the monoculture upon which college curricula” and other dominant social institutions are based (Downs, 2016, p. 52). In the broader public, the perpetual literacy crisis leads to consistent demands for more high school writing, more standardized testing, a return to ostensibly “more successful” past literacy learning projects (often involving grammar drilling and reading Great Works), and—as a final stopgap—more sections of required FYC. Within higher education, the crisis underwrites administrative and faculty investment in a gatekeeping/tracking FYC, vertical WAC/WID support, Writing Centers as fix-it shops, and a remediation industry that makes “composing skill” an issue beneath the work of faculty with “content” expertise.

**Literacy, Morality, and Correctness.** As Downs observes, “popular stakeholder notions of FYC”—including the institution, parents, politicians, the public, students, other faculty, and graduate teaching assistants—often see composition instruction as ideally “a high-transfer how-to course centered on grammar instruction,” and do so as an

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<sup>8</sup> Not necessarily a “new population,” but—anecdotally—recent pushes to support queer and trans students (pronoun policies, gender neutral language, etc.) have had functionally similar results, leading to conversations at multiple institutions with which I’m affiliated about how these changes “erode” traditional language standards and grammar rules...and the MnWE newsletter/listserv devoted a thread to a (historically inaccurate) attack on the singular “they.”

extension of “cultural equations of literacy with morality and of ‘writing’ with grammatical correctness” (2016, p. 51). Arising from several of Rendón’s (2000) “agreements”—but most clearly the “agreement of monoculturalism” (p. 41)—Downs (2016) explains how dominant Western conceptions of “‘proper’ speech and writing [are] associate[d] with upright moral character,” and, conversely, how “others” who “speak ‘poorly’” are perceived as having “suspect morals, low education, and likely as lazy and shiftless” (p.53). The “proper” speech, writing, and grammar gestured to—the capital-L “Literacy” associated with morality, education, industriousness which is considered immutably “correct”—is often constructed as “Standard English,” and (though mythical) most closely resembles the “speech habits of middle- and upper-class whites” (Young, 2009, p. 55). First year composition’s perceived role, then, is to “‘scrub’ the new, lower class [and marginalized] students” and to fit their language to the immutably correct “standards” of the dominant racial and socioeconomic groups in the US (Downs, 2016, p. 53); while, as Young (2009) argues, this produces double-consciousness in those marked as “other” and perpetuates linguistic white supremacy, perceptions of reduced efficiency with or attempts at abandoning the project of “Standard English” conversion therapy invariably result in increased public (and professional) complaints of literacy crisis.

**Neoliberal Access & Competition.** In “Tense Present” (2001) the famous (racist, misogynist, domestic abuser) novelist and public intellectual, David Foster Wallace shares the advice he gives to black students in his first year composition classes. A teacher of FYC at Emerson, Pomona, and Illinois State University despite his complete lack of expertise or relevant training, he moves from his “outsider” take of the “prescriptivist/descriptivist” divide in language study, to his “insider” reflections on how

this should impact our writing pedagogy in this essay. Turning to a boilerplate speech he reportedly delivers to generically “other” students who find it “unfair” to have to learn and complete all their coursework in “Standard White English,” Wallace endeavors to share a more personal—but no less anthologizable—“This is Water” moment:

Maybe it seems unfair. If it does, you’re not going to like this news: I’m not going to let you write in SBE [Standard Black English]...in class—in my English class—you will have to master and write in Standard Written English, which we might as well call “Standard White English”...In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE...you can believe it’s racist and unjust...but I’ll tell you something: If you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you’re going to have to communicate them in SWE...African Americans who’ve become successful and important in U.S. culture know this...And [INSERT NAME HERE], you’re going to learn to use it, too, because I’m going to make you. (Wallace, 2001, p. 54)

While maintaining the language of “Standard” English, Wallace’s “standard” is not presented as immutably correct; he readily and repeatedly recognizes multiple dialects, language shift, the arbitrariness (and *almost* the racism) of insisting upon SWE.

Wallace’s argument is predicated on the belief that “student’s access to academic and economic privilege is contingent upon meeting standards” and that we “empower our students by giving them...the language of the dominant culture” (Fox, 1999, pp. 5–6).

Part of FYC’s public charter—the story that is dominantly told about it—is “that ‘writing

is a ticket to professional opportunity'... a skill essential to both social standing and employment prospects" (Downs, 2016, p. 54), and, as Brandt observes, this constructs "literacy as one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage"... something to be coveted, hoarded, regulated, and deployed strategically (1998, p. 1). This neoliberal conception of writing participates in what Rendón calls "the Agreement of Competition," or the belief that merit is best individually measured as an outcome of competition on an ostensibly neutral field of contest, which then is envisioned as ensuring meritocratic access to culturally prestigious opportunity (2009, p. 37).

**Doing Writing vs. Studying Language.** Whether treated as a neutrally and immutably correct standard, or as an important-but-arbitrary cultural standard for neoliberal access, Standard Written English represents a complex of "stories" about what constitutes "good writing" or capital-L "Literacy" in the broader U.S. culture and FYC classes. For students of composition, achieving mastery of this "Standard" is conceived of as an important enculturation and aestheticization, which is made visible through performances of correctness and style. The summative assessment of how "correct" or "stylish" a student's writing is, then, focuses on the marking of a "final product" (paper, essay, story, etc.). Because "grammar" (the immutable standard OR the arbitrary market expectation) is a central part of this assessment, it also necessarily constitutes part of the "content" of first year composition classes, where students are taught the formal "rules" that must be followed to produce good writing. Style, on the other hand, is often conceived of as less directly teachable—either something inherent in the student (creative genius) or something discovered through experimentation and exposure to the stylish writing of experts. Treating grammar and style as just the "form" part of a "form versus

meaning” dichotomy, dominant conceptions of first year composition then wrestle with either seeing composition as solely focused on transmitting a superficial skill (“mere ornamentation”) with no serious intellectual core, or substitute/supplement with other “content” which the instructor feels has more intellectual merit (Ray, 2015). Because of the course’s history, the traditional approach to teaching writing in secondary education, the common disciplinary home of first year composition programs, the educational background of many of its teachers, and a perception that the course should also prepare students to appreciate “high culture,” that intellectual core is often drawn from English Studies and deals with “literature rather than composition” (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p. 568). Within this conception of composition, “reading and writing about literature” not only provides an ostensibly serious content, but also provides students with examples of “great writers” from whom they might indirectly learn elements of style, while the remaining, immutable “rules” of grammar are attended to through the inclusion of a guiding “rhetoric,” or handbook of grammar rules and conventions. Within this dominant conception of composition, there is no need to critically examine grammars/conventions or literary canonicity/value, as their value has already been attested by a long history within English education.

**Academic Writing vs. Academic Writings.** When the stories surrounding composition do not involve appreciating literature (high culture) and fixing student writing in relation to an immutable standard, other dominant stories of composition tend to take on the rhetoric of fitting student writing to a discourse. Conceiving of first year composition as “introduction to academic writing”—a position more common in composition/rhetoric and increasingly common in the broader U.S. postsecondary



landscape—there is an acknowledgement that the rules (or conventions) of writing in higher education are different from the kinds of writing that students might be familiar with from high school. Serving all students, who might go into a range of different majors, the role of this composition is to describe “a unified academic discourse” with generalizable features that might be found across the disciplines (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p. 552). In a vertical WAC/WID-style program with multiple courses over multiple years, later courses address unique disciplinary conventions in-major with more specificity for students, an acknowledgement that the monolithic “academic writing” of the initial course was a useful fiction; in a solely-FYC model program, however, the dominant rhetoric is that the skills developed in the class will “automatically transfer from FYC to other courses and contexts” (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p. 554). Whether imagining a singular “conventions of academic writing” or plural “conventions” of *different types* of academic writing, this dominant story about composition is that it should teach students how to write, with an emphasis on acceptable forms and content. As in the Literature/Grammar approach, in this dominant conception there is little need to critically examine the “acceptable forms and content,” to explore how they have changed over time (and are changeable), or to question the politics of “acceptability.” In this way, a WAC/WID “academic writing(s)” approach does little to move away from the prescriptive monolingualism of current traditional rhetoric, and instead “reinforces the same language ideologies...[by] pluraliz[ing] the object from within the same epistemology” (Pennycook, 2008, p. 38).

**Dominant Conceptions: Distributing Literacy & Defending Culture.** In *Composition and Resistance* (1991), Hurlbert and Blitz begin by observing that the

dominant story about composition instruction is that it “attempts to make composing less aggravating and more programmatic, merely a matter of acquiring useful, marketable skills” (p. 1). This conception makes the distribution of literacy learning appear culturally neutral—neutral and immutable, or neutrally meritocratic—and “overlook[s] the politics of that distribution...the social prejudices and moralism” embedded in such a project (S. Miller, 1991, p. 45). Composition in this traditional story is English 101 (taught with and alongside belles lettres), involves the transmission of a Standard English that represents a vital baseline of “proper” language use, is supported by the reading and imitation of model “expert” texts and grammar manuals by students, and simultaneously excludes the uninitiated AND initiates the excluded (winnowing and indoctrination, maintaining standards and granting access). As Fox (1999) observes: “if we tell ourselves and our students that they will achieve access if they master writing standards, we are obscuring and underestimating the powerful forces of racism, sexism, elitism, and heterosexism that continue to operate despite students’ mastery of standards” (p. 6)... standards which are not neutral themselves, but “reflect the values of those in power” (p. 41). The traditional and dominant conception of composition does not address power and politics; it distributes capital-L “Literacy” to students and defends cultural “standards” of communication without directly examining, critiquing, redefining, or otherwise acknowledging language ideology as an important part of studying language.

These dominant conceptions—plural but also sharing several major overlapping elements—exert a consistent pressure and influence on how writing programs and WPA work are perceived in US culture and higher education. As Horner observes, because these dominant conceptions treat linguistic and educational “power relations...as set

rather than subject to and in constant need of reworking” any attempt to examine, critique, or change First Year Composition becomes “understood in apocalyptic terms as tragic resistance, revolution, and/or violent breaks with” commonsensically nostalgic stories of the best aims and methods (2015, p. 453). Having explored these dominant conceptions, I now pivot in the next section to the theories informing new approaches to FYC which are often labelled “resistant,” “emancipatory,” “liberating,” “critical,” and “radical.” These descriptors often serve as umbrella terms for theoretical movements—such as feminist, antiracist, decolonial, critical, disability justice, queer, etc.—whose application would challenge dominant stories and change the aims and methods of writing programs. This emphasis on *changing* what FYC is (as well as the dialogic effect that this process has on theories as they are translated into practice) leads me to cluster these approaches under an umbrella term of “transformative knowledge.”

### ***Transformative Knowledge***

Having explored what might be meant when scholars in Composition refer to a “traditional” or “dominant” conception of FYC or writing education more broadly, I now pivot to professional knowledge in the field that is constructed in ways that seek to transform the researching, theorizing, teaching, and learning of writing. In this section, I explore “transformative knowledge<sup>9</sup>” as an umbrella term for a diverse range of theories and pedagogies—which, themselves, are not fixed, and sometimes end up in opposition to each other—but which are generally united in a shared commitment to identifying and

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<sup>9</sup> Rendón (2000) also uses versions of “transformational” and “transform” throughout *Sentipensante Pedagogy* alongside of (and synonymously with) “radical,” “liberatory,” “emancipatory,” and constructs the site of that transformation as the “Dreamfield” (roughly synonymous with “story” and “narrative” in this dissertation).

remedying structural inequalities and striving for a more democratic future. The theories and traditions that these transformative knowledges spring from often extend beyond Composition, and have their own specific manifestations within the field, but generally are “constructed as oppositional to ‘mainstream’ or ‘traditional’ schooling practices and theories” (Gore, 1993, p. 3). Fox (1999) describes this oppositional “political activity” as it manifests in first year composition as “ideological work, work that critiques dominant ideas of literacy and argues for new ones” and names “Writing program administrators” as having “a series of opportunities to transform the gatekeeping functions” that characterize the dominant narrative (pp. 76-78). WPAs’ senses of how literacy might best change and what practices are best to arrive at that changed ideal—defining the aims and methods of transformation—are then impacted by a range of theoretical discourses that respond to and seek to change the dominant narrative.

Lists of these transformative knowledges/discourses/theories/pedagogies/traditions are common in reflections on composition pedagogies, and often apply some sort of umbrella term or definition to cluster transformative and “theoretical” pedagogies separately from more mainstream, historical, or “practical” pedagogies (such as “expressivist” or “WAC/WID” or “process,” or “genre studies”). Seeking to map these “theoretical” discourses, Greenbaum describes emancipatory “conversations” in composition/rhetoric as “coalesce[ing] around four key areas: neosophistic

***A Guide to Composition  
Pedagogies Redux***  
**Kelly Blewett**

<b>Basic Writing</b> #endangeredpedagogy #badfeelingsacademicapartheid #oppressedstudents #outofahistoricalmoment #swallowedupbythemainstream #yaymina	<b>Cultural Studies</b> #criticaltowhatend #socialconstruction #swallowedupbythemainstream #leftyleaning #england1960s #greatassignmentmaker #analyzethegarbage
<b>Collaborative</b> #wayofthefuture #commercetoclassroom #whogetssilenced #gradingisconfusing #donealotbutnotmainstream #studentresistance #dialogicversushierarchial	<b>Expressive</b> #swallowedupbythemainstream #personaltoacademic #studentvoices #ilovepetrelbow #gradingisconfusing #studentlove #visibleidentities
<b>Community-Engaged</b> #withforabout #leftyleaning #whatistheteachersrole #gradingisconfusing #badfeelingsmissionarywork #writingfantasiesfulfilled #savingtheworld #studentresistance	<b>Feminist</b> #swallowedupbythemainstream #collaboration #canmeanalotoffthings #socialjustice #leftyleaning #womensexpericencematters #visibleidentities
<b>Critical</b> #badfeelingsindoctrinatingstu- dents	<b>Genre Pedagogies</b> #genreisrhetorical #literacy

*Figure 1: Screenshot of Table from Blewett (2016)*

rhetoric, cultural studies, feminist studies, and post-colonial studies,” and also acknowledges “multitudinous [additional] perspectives, ranging from queer and film studies, to eco-composition” (2002, p. xii). Gore (1993) similarly describes “socio-political approaches” to pedagogy “constructed as oppositional to ‘mainstream,’” listing “‘progressive pedagogy,’ ‘radical pedagogy,’ ‘critical pedagogy,’ ‘feminist pedagogy,’ ‘socialist pedagogy,’ and others” (p. 3). In *Sentipensante Pedagogy*—itself a distinct transformative pedagogical approach—Rendón lists “critical pedagogy, feminist teaching and learning theories, holistic education, native ‘coming to know,’ integrative learning, transdisciplinary studies, and Red Pedagogy” as discourses which “have created openings to conceptualize education in a different way” (2000, p. 17). Riffing sardonically on Tate et al.’s (2001) *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Blewett’s (2016) table of approaches to composition pedagogies hashtags “cultural studies,” “community engaged,” “feminist,” and “critical” pedagogies as “#leftyleaning,” and, along with “collaborative” pedagogy she marks these approaches with hashtags that signal some attempt to transform dominant conceptions of language and education (p. 93).

**An Extended Caveat.** In a similar vein of providing and describing examples of the types of movements that fit under the umbrella term of “transformative knowledge,” I would like to share a list of approaches, to articulate some of the key tenets attached to each approach (broadly), and to gesture to some key texts which further explore the implications of each approach for Composition and WPA work. At the same time, I recognize that this listing engages in a potentially problematic reduction of those movements, necessitating some framing, which this caveat seeks to provide.

In “Conservative Writing Program Administrators (WPAs),” Rice (2009) addresses theories of composition that challenge dominant assumptions, and how they are then presented to new instructors by texts like Tate et al.’s (2001) *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* and Clark’s (2002) *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing*. In his critique of these two texts, he notes that a desire for “consistency” and “continuity” exert a powerful conservative influence on how transformative theories are presented in a way that “can promote conservatism even if that’s not their intent” (p. 7). Despite describing one text as presenting “cultural studies as distinct from feminist studies, critical pedagogy as a category somehow outside of both,” Rice argues that—going beyond the surface differences—the text nonetheless returns readers to the same “familiar positions regarding what writing entails” (2009, p. 7). He concludes:

Regardless of the section’s content, each approach upholds the need for teaching clarity and specificity of claims and supports in student writing. In effect, whether you name the pedagogy critical, collaborative, expressivist, or feminist (as the book’s chapters do), you still often have the same treatment; the same conservative, familiar values; the same consistency...one might wonder, however, just how far...critique or inquiry could go within this formalist taxonomy. (Rice, 2009, pp. 7–8)

This conservatism that Rice and others describe has several components to it: the flattening and isolation of movements, the production of new hegemonies by those movements, and the re-conscription of those movements for mainstream purposes (much like Blewett’s hashtag #swallowedupbythemainstream in Figure 1).

First, the formalist taxonomizing of these movements promotes a vision of each approach (critical, feminist, collaborative, etc.) as discrete and unified—a complete, consistent, and continuous ideological position; as Rendón notes “the act of categorization is an act of simplification” which bears considerable risks, chiefly the papering over of different strands of thought AND the preclusion of overlapping/mixing strands (2009, p. 16). As Gore (1993) and Rendón (2009) clearly illustrate in their investigations of feminist and critical pedagogies, there are many ways through which different interpretations of “feminism(s),” “critical discourse,” and “pedagogy” come together to create unique conceptions of what transformative pedagogy might be, as well as many shared elements/influences/goals between those unique conceptions. Nearly all participants in this study articulated, in some way, a resistance to defining their WPA work in relation to any singular theoretical frame (often describing their work at the intersection of multiple), and/or voiced complex feelings about a perceptually coherent “theory” that their own theoretical and practical positions might be measured against. Both reactions (“multiple intersecting” and “complex/coherent”) illustrate why such “formalist taxonomizing” might be misleading to newcomers to WPA theory and work against “transformative” aims (by establishing purity tests, by isolating one potentially complimentary approach from another, by occluding the ability of individuals to transform the “transformative” in newly productive ways, etc.).

Second, as visible in the discomfort that participants reported in relating their practices to a named, capital-T “Theory,” presenting any approach as a discrete, unified, coherent, consistent, and continuous “counter-hegemonic” movement risks turning the approach into a litmus test or standard to be measured against. As Lil Brannon says

“Standards, even those we agree with, even those that are constructed with good intentions, can and do turn into repressive dogma” (in Fox, 1999, p. 9). Treating these approaches so monolithically would then reduce “transformative” work to the mechanical application of and adherence to the approach in a local context, with no dynamic interaction with (or transformation of) the approach.

Third, as suggested in Rice’s (2009) observation that these pedagogical approaches might ultimately be conscripted to serve conservative ends and noted in Blewett’s (2016) use of the hashtag “#swallowedupbythemainstream,” the power of dominant/traditional narratives/stories about writing is always present and capable of being reinscribed in the new stories we tell about Composition. Berlin (1987) describes how transactional and social epistemic approaches in the 1970s and 80s came to embrace elements of the Objective Current Traditional and Subjective Liberal Culture; Russell (1990) similarly describes how WAC/WID approaches ended up abandoning transformative aims for ones of neoliberal access, again predicated upon the dominant “Literacy Myth” (Graff) of helping the marginalized through assimilation.

**Some Types of Transformative Knowledge.** With all of that said, there are several traditions regularly referenced in the literature as “radical,” “liberatory,” “emancipatory,” or some other designator meant to highlight their “pervasive commitment to name and transform ideological and social conditions that undermine the possibility for forms of community and public life organized around the imperatives of a critical democracy,” and my hope here is to describe several of them (Knoblauch, 1991, p. 20). This short list with accompanying descriptions of key tenets is not meant to be exhaustive, but, rather, to provide some examples of what “transformative knowledge”



might look like. Some are more often invoked in relation to the content of what is taught (e.g. Neosophistic Rhetoric or Translingualism), others are more often invoked in relation to the methods of teaching (e.g. Disability Justice), and yet others are more often invoked as broader political programs (e.g. Feminist or Anti-Racist theory); despite their most common invocations, all have implications for all elements of WPA and Composition work.

*Neosophistic Rhetoric.* The first section of Greenbaum's (2002) *Emancipatory Movements in Composition* concerns the "transformative implications inherent in pedagogy" springing out of the teachings of Sophists like Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Thrasymachus, Isocrates, and Antiphon (p. 6-7). Greenbaum's sense of sophistic rhetoric as transformative is grounded in 4 clusters of concepts—*logos/antilogike*, *to dynaton*, *dissoi logoi/nomos*, and *arete/dikaiosyne*—which are then prime for "rewriting" as part of projects like Susan Jarratt's (1991) *Rereading the Sophists*. Noting that much of the dominant/traditional writing pedagogy is grounded in an Aristotelian rhetoric, Greenbaum suggests that a rewriting of these concepts might then transform what and how we teach in writing classes.

- *Logos/Antilogike*: Greenbaum suggests that a transformed composition might draw attention to the relationships between words (*logos*) and our perceptions of the world, as well as facilitating a "contact-zone" awareness of the need to accept and negotiate seemingly contradictory (*antilogike*) socially constructed understandings with others (2002, p. 12).
- *To dynaton*: Echoing Poulakos (1983), Greenbaum teases out differences between Aristotelian/Platonic rhetoric (logical and formal) and Sophistic

rhetoric (artistic and experimental), settling on the concept of *to dynaton* (the possible) as a uniquely transformative element of the Sophistic project that could be taught to transformative ends. For Greenbaum, *to dynaton* focuses not on *what is*, but on *what could be*—to envision and communicate better (more just, more democratic) ways of being, and then (by contrast) make us aware of “what has been rendered commonsensical, ordinary, and therefore, taken for granted” (2002, p. 15).

- *Dissoi logoi/Nomos*: Gesturing to Crowley (1989) and Jarratt (1991), Greenbaum identifies *dissoi logoi* (approaching the truth through exploration of different sides of an argument) with the postmodern questioning of dominant narratives and how that enables us to transform our understandings of truth/reality, as well as our relationships with custom (*nomos*). By teaching *dissoi logoi* in our writing classes, Greenbaum sees a potential for teachers to make visible dominating ideology AND “make clear [their] political and ethical commitment to social change,” while avoiding a mandate for “students to adopt a ‘politically correct’ position” (2002, p. 17).
- *Arete/Dikaiosyne*: Finally, throughout her survey Greenbaum notes that the Sophists saw a rhetorical education as going “beyond the mastery of skills [and] into the realm of self-improvement and critical awareness” (2002, p. 6). Contrasting Aristotelian *ethos* with the *ethos* of the Sophists, she highlights the focus on ‘character,’ especially re: *arete* (virtue) and *dikaiosyne* (justice), and observes that (in conjunction with *to dynaton*)

teaching it can help students to see their rhetorical “power to transform the ‘actual’”(2002, p. 21).

Several participants in this study mention rhetoric as part of their transformation of their programs, both in terms of course content (see the section in Chapter 3 on Rhetorical Studies) and approaches to doing WPA work (see the section in Chapter 7 on WPA Rhetorical Theory)...and while this rhetorical focus does remain somewhat tied to Aristotle, it’s also clear to see Neosophistic elements in it...not the least of which being *to dynaton* as they envision futures for the programs they work in.

**Cultural Studies.** Greenbaum follows her section on Neosophistic Rhetoric with a chapter on the influence of cultural studies on transformative approaches to composition, paralleling and citing Hebdige’s (1979) account of Paul Hoggart and Raymond Williams (and concepts from Claude Lévi-Strauss) in a discussion of “culture” and “literacy.” Exploring how “discursive cultural practices are shaped by dominant ideological forces that constitute a culture’s belief system” and therefore how composition cannot be taught as discrete “from class, race, or gender,” Greenbaum connects the movements of Cultural Studies to important composition touchstones like the NCTE’s Statement of Students’ Rights to their Own Language (2002, p. 25). Pointing to the work of Fox, Scribner and Cole, Tannen, Brice Heath, and Smitherman, Greenbaum shows how influences from cultural studies have supported in-field critiques of the “Culture” of Berlin’s “Rhetoric of Liberal Culture” and the corresponding racist, classist, sexist, xenophobic, etc. construction of a mythically “neutral” standard language for composition; these authors, in turn, argue against “turn[ing] difference into deficit” and transform the focus of composition from a singular capital-L “Literacy” to one concerned with exploring and

valorizing many “literacies” (Greenbaum, 2002, pp. 38–39). This trend that Greenbaum identifies in the 90s and early 2000s evolved over the 2000s and 2010s in literacy studies (Gee, 2010), linguistics (Canagarajah, 2013; Pennycook, 2008), and composition (Horner et al., 2011; Horner & Tetreault, 2017), feeding into the current “translingual” movement.

Though not explicitly named by participants in the study, most gesture to key concepts (discourses as ideological, situated language values, challenging capital-C and capital-L constructions of Culture and Literacy in composition spaces, etc.), and clearly share a commitment to addressing “difference as deficit” in their work.

***Feminism(s)***. In the beginning of Gore’s (1993) *The Struggle for Pedagogies*, she notes that “in the discourse of feminist pedagogy, two strands can also be identified...one strand emphasizes instructional aspects of pedagogy, and the other strand emphasizes feminism(s)” (p. 17). This emphasis on plural feminisms is a common caveat, as in Olesen (2005) when she notes that feminism is “highly diversified, enormously dynamic, and thoroughly challenging” (p. 235); illustrating some of this diversity, Jones (2016) highlights “Chicana feminism, Asian feminism, and Black feminist thought” as transformative/advocacy-oriented social justice frameworks through which we might consider language.

Going beyond Gore’s two emphases (pedagogies and theories), scholars in composition and rhetoric have envisioned other emphases, including WPA “femadmin” work. Reviewing Ratcliffe & Rickly’s (2010b) *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition Studies*, Micciche and Strickland (2013) note “a conversation about feminist WPA work” occurring from the mid-1990s to 2000, including work by “Sally Barr-Ebest (1995), Marcia Dickson (1993), Amy Goodburn and

Garrie Leverenz (1998), Jeanne Gunner (1994), and Hildy Miller (1996)” (pp. 169-170). Micciche and Strickland (2013) describe *Performing Feminism* as “the only recent book to take an explicitly feminist approach to WPA work” and “a lonely book, a genuine outlier in the field” (p. 170), further lamenting that the text reflects “second-wave feminism” (p. 171) and reduces the third-wave concept of “performing” to “operational...pragmatic and instrumental” acts (p. 173).

While Micciche and Strickland (2013) identify a potential cause for this—noting that, in “Feminism and WPA work...High-minded principles and political commitments are nearly impossible to uphold in the seductive scene of management” (p. 171)—two other pieces out at the time explore more deeply the disquiet felt by feminist WPAs and suggest a reason for the apparent lacuna. In “Feminisms and the Problem of Complicity in WPA Work,” Laura Bartlett Snyder (2009) surveys the literature on WPA work and feminism from 1990-2009, concluding that “it seems that the feminist WPA agenda has been (and still is) guided by liberal and cultural” feminisms associated with the second wave (p. 37)—seeking to gain equal access for women in the workplace, while also introducing “women’s nurturing and caretaking ways” into “masculinist” positions (embodied in the practice of “collaboration”). This is a problem, according to Bartlett Snyder, because “while such feminist administrative practices may diminish the appearance of inequality and improve the way contingent instructors feel about their jobs, it nonetheless maintains a labor system that perpetuates the exploitation” by simply making “modifications within the capitalist, patriarchal system” (p. 38).

In *GenAdmin*, Charlton et al. (2011) provide a potential explanation for this liberal/cultural second-wave hangover and why the discourse is both so spare AND

seemingly stuck. In Chapter 2, “Listening to and Rewriting History,” they note that “the tension...that exists between generations of WPAs is mirrored by the often unspoken conflicts that exist between second- and third- wave feminists...[where] critiques by third-wave feminists have been silenced...because the younger feminists are perceived to be ‘unmindful of [their] foremothers’” (p. 50). They then describe how third-wave critiques of “the organizing practices, strategies, or conceptions of feminism promoted by second-wave feminists” are often met with accusations of “disregard[ing] the advancements [of] the second wave” (p.50). Charlton et al. (2011) argue that because of this third-wave feminists, members of GenAdmin, and GenAdmin who are third-wave feminists all might feel “disconnected...angry, hopeless, and confused” as they seek to negotiate “a monolithic view of what WPA [or feminism] is...that doesn’t leave space for differing, resisting views” (p. 51). Faced with conflict or being perceived as disrespectful to senior professionals and “national superstars,” Charlton et al. conclude that “in many ways, it would be much easier to stay quiet” (pp. 51-52).

Both Bartlett Snyder (2009) and Charlton et al. (2011) then respond to these circumstances with calls for reframing, resisting, and transforming. Bartlett Snyder (2009) argues for a turn to radical (materialist, critical) feminism and postmodern feminism, moving beyond binary constructions of gender and gender essentialism and toward feminisms focused on transforming the material labor conditions. Charlton et al. (2011) address the reticence to enter into conflict with our forebears and articulate a “necessity to consider new ways in which to tell WPA stories that resist the old binaries and create space to come to new understandings” (p. 52) and explore “more emergent histories and theories of our discipline” (p. 60). The creation of “spaces to

dialogue...[which are] visible and accessible to any or all persons who need them, desire them, or have been routinely denied them” (p. 63) then suggests the potential creation of new forums outside of the traditional sites of WPA (and feminist) knowledge production and legitimation.

The *WPA Journal* symposium/article “Building a Twenty-First-Century Feminist Ethos: Three Dialogues for WPAs” by Adler Kassner et al. and edited by LaFrance and Wardle (2019) is then an interesting response to the persistence of second wave feminism, the challenges of generational difference, and the potential to transform what “feminist WPA” work and theory look like (and how that, in turn, transforms composition). The editors and authors note that their creation of this space (within a traditional/formal site of WPA knowledge production) sprung out of the (less formal) #wpalistservfeministrevolution that evolved on social media in response to a “discussion<sup>10</sup>” on the WPA-L (more traditional, if less formal). The symposium is centered around two guiding questions—“1. How do we build an intersectional feminist ethos into WPA work? 2. What does ‘radical inclusion in WPA work’ require, look like, inspire, or unfold?” (p. 13)—and is supported by further questions which encourage a critical examination of the feminist WPA project and invite the sharing of “issues, experiences, or concerns” by “newer members of the field”...all of which potentially support a discussion of “which elements of feminism need themselves to be disrupted or interrogated” (2019, p. 14).

Broken up into sections with “Later Career WPAs,” “Early Career WPAs,” and “Graduate Students,” the symposium serves as an important contact zone in which the

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<sup>10</sup> I address this “discussion” in my methods, but—in short—the WPA-L issue reflects some of the stronger generational/theoretical divide problems identified in Charlton et al. (2011).

kinds of discussions hoped for by Micciche & Strickland (2013), Bartlett Snyder (2009), and Charlton et al. (2011) can take place. While the “Later Career WPAs” start by wondering “How can we make the existing structures work?” they also then ask “How can we transform them to make them better, more inclusive, and accessible for all stakeholders?” (p. 15), including by connecting their feminist commitments with antiracist, critical, decolonial, disability justice, and other transformative theories. The Early Career WPAs then question the structures/system more forcefully, how it positions their work, and how it focuses on assimilation; in response, they seek to radically reshape the system by drawing—as García de Müller says—on “theories of translanguaging, antiracist writing assessment strategies, critical race theory, cultural rhetorics, and policy studies” (p. 23). M. Melissa Elston drives this last home, asking whether we just gesture to things “like feminism, decolonization, or antiracism...in a superficial, virtue signal-y” way, or begin to embed them in the policies in our classes and programs (p. 25). The Graduate Students, anchoring the symposium, then use their experiences to highlight inequities, anxieties, and power imbalances...and the editors, in reflection, note that the final write up of the symposium—while sharing those experiences—also did much to re-center “established power, unintentionally granting weight to more senior and professionally ‘established’ voices in the field” (p. 31).

I spend so much time here tracing through these texts because “feminism” was by far the most commonly noted transformative commitment among the participants in this study. While Micciche & Strickland were concerned about feminist WPA theory in 2013, it seems clear to me that a new wave of graduate students and jWPAs were reckoning with a generational divide, making their way into the field, carrying on side-



conversations in less-sanctioned spaces, and starting to think about coalition building—not just as an organizational strategy—but also as an approach to theory. In the symposium, Genevieve García de Müeller notes that “antiracist work is feminist work” (p. 24), and Mya Poe observes that this work is focused not just on gender, but on addressing “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. 18)...intersectional oppression requiring intersectional responses. Finally, Bartlett Snyder (2009), Charlton et al. (2011), Micciche & Strickland (2013), Adler-Kassner et al. (2019), and the participants in this study all emphasize and espouse a commitment to “knowledge making [and] position[ing] WPA work as ‘imagination’” (C. Charlton et al., 2011, p. 60)...echoing the Neosophistic emphasis on *to dynaton*.

***Critical Approaches.*** In a similar way to how she describes “two strands” of feminist pedagogy, Gore (1993) also describes how “within the discourse of critical pedagogy, two main strands”—one articulating a broader social vision, and the other focused on developing instructional practices—“can be identified” (p. 17). Gore (1993) describes the first strand (social vision) as being grounded in Giroux and McLaren’s versions of critical theory which have their “theoretical and political roots in Neo-Marxism and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School” and which critique “social injustices and inequities, particularly those constructed around class differences” (as well as race and gender) and how they are perpetuated in society through schooling (p. 34). In particular, Gore observes how Giroux and McLaren critique schooling while resisting describing classroom practice, noting that this “stem[s] from the explicit opposition of critical pedagogy to ‘dominant discourses’ which prescribe practices in rather rigid and technical ways” (p. 34); the alternative (which Gore critiques) to prescribing

practice/practical solutions is then a process of highlighting “possibilities,” sustaining critical conversations, and promoting hope for the achievability of a transformed future. This approach is, clearly, of substantial influence on this dissertation.

Describing critiques of Giroux and McLaren’s strain (that they are more theory than practice), Gore then contrasts their “pedagogical project” (critical educational theory) with the “pedagogical practice” (critical pedagogy) of the second strain, which she says is most commonly visible in the work of Freire and Shor. Freire and Shor’s “strand of critical pedagogy...offers concrete suggestions and examples taken from their own pedagogical practice” and is directly addressed to educators trying to develop critical practices in their own class (Gore, 1993, p. 40). In this, Friere and Shor are closer to my initial impulse for this dissertation, seeking to offer concrete examples and strategies for people to achieve transformative educational goals.

Gore’s (1993) critique of Giroux and McLaren’s strain argues that it is a “failure” because of its inattention to classroom practice in favor of describing a broader educational “vision,” and (while also somewhat critical of them) holds up Friere (literacy) and Shor (English) for their focus on “content-specific” and classroom-based practice (p. 42). Gore states:

“[Giroux and McLaren’s] vision has not been actualized, and it is my contention that the ‘failure’ to live out its own politics is resultant, *in part*, from insufficiently attending to pedagogy; that is, pedagogy as the politics *of* classroom practice, not pedagogy as politics (articulated by the theorist) *and* classroom practice (left for the teacher to create)” (p. 42)

It seems to me, however, that this oversimplifies Giroux and McLaren's position while also overlooking how pedagogy goes beyond "politics of classroom practice" (to politics of program practice, of institutional practice, etc.) and how "theorist" and "teacher" relate to each other (Giroux to a teacher-practitioner he's never met, local theorist to a practitioner colleague, theorist-practitioner to self, practitioner who has tacit theories communicating 'practical' ideas to other practitioners, etc.).

Going beyond Gore's two strands (of social vision and instructional practices), scholars in composition and rhetoric have envisioned other emphases. I focus here on two essays from Strickland and Gunner's (2009) *The Writing Program Interrupted*: Sid Dobrin's "Freedom and Safety, Space and Place: Locating the Critical WPA" and Bruce Horner's "Redefining Work and Value for Writing Program Administration." In Dobrin's essay, he contrasts places ("secure and stable," "where consent has been achieved or imposed") with spaces (unstable, "where hegemony is trying to happen, but where counter-hegemonies still have footholds"), and connects them to WPA (the profession) and wpa (the individuals in the profession) work (pp. 56-57). Noting that "generally speaking, the work of WPA is useful and often remarkable," Dobrin nonetheless argues that "writing program administrators seek out hegemony for safety...[and] hegemony becomes the very mechanism of control manifest in common syllabi, policy, orientation, practicum" when "wpas" seek to validate the local by tying it to the global (such as the WPA Outcomes Statement) and master narratives of the discipline (p. 58). The "wpa" in Dobrin's account strives to "homogenize/standardize" and to strive for "professionalization," which leads to a "legitimation" that works at cross-purposes from

“emancipation” when it authorizes “wpas” to assume “singular control over the production of a given program’s cultural capital” (pp. 61-64).

Dobrin’s critique of WPA/wpa focuses on its role in the broader educational project and questions how (and to what extent) it is considering critical theories or reflecting on itself; in order for WPA/wpa to work toward liberation or emancipation, he suggests a de-territorializing and de-centralizing of the WPA/wpa and concludes: “the critical wpa must not only question the power, methods, and institutional function of the wpa, but also work toward the disruption of those very powers, methods, and roles” (p. 70). In this way, wpas are “participant[s] in the Becoming of Composition,” involved in a process of continual disruption, redefinition, and struggle toward a more-perfect future.

Like Dobrin (and Giroux and McLaren) Horner’s “Redefining Work and Value” also addresses the stickiness of dominant discourses (in this case about the value of WPA and composition instructors’ work). Also like Dobrin, Horner identifies ways that WPA professional discourse (as exemplified in CWPA statements) participates in the re-inscription of dominant discourse at the same time that it seeks to emancipate WPAs and instructors from it. Where Horner’s approach differs, however, is in the explicit focus on working conditions, commodification, and labor value. In particular, Horner focuses on ostensibly transformative moves to claim “value” for composition work (for WPAs and instructors) which merely reinforce existing systems of valuation (“intellectual value,” “skills production,” and anti-paternalism). In regards to:

- intellectual value: Horner highlights how the fight to get WPA work rewarded as “intellectual labor” merely participates in the re-drawing of a

line of “ideological division between physical and intellectual labor” (p. 77)

- skills production: Horner notes how the argument that FYC produces tuition dollars and skills in students further commodifies composition, reinforces the literacy myth, and perpetuates the view of composition as “service work”
- anti-paternalism: Horner highlights how the narrative of “boss compositionist” and “enslaved labor force” has led to a struggle for justice based in anti-“paternalism” and collectivism, but which fails to account for how “the very poverty of the conditions in which most adjunct composition teachers work...means that those teachers do not have the resources of time, space, leisure, or access to scholarship to make decisions about composition curricula” (p. 81). In their absence, then, the invitation to collectivism simply provides more space for literature faculty to again re-inscribe their own valuations of composition work.

In conclusion, Horner suggests that “negotiations for the improvement of working conditions”—themselves seemingly “critical” and “Marxist”—“may make small gains within the terms of such discourse, [but] are equally likely to lead to further debasements of that work” (p. 84).

Critical approaches to FYC and WPA work, then, operate on multiple axes: the broader educational project, the individual classroom, the potential function of WPAs as hegemonic agents of “composition knowledge,” and the roles that WPAs might play in addressing (or reinscribing) capitalist exploitations of composition labor. All four of these

“critical” approaches are visible to some extent in the responses of the WPAs in this study.

***Other Transformative Knowledge Approaches.*** Neosophistic Rhetoric, Cultural Studies, Feminism(s), and Critical Approaches are not the only transformative knowledges impacting composition. WPAs in this study made references to movements such as Antiracism/Critical Race Theory, Disability Justice, Decolonial Theory, Queer Theory, and Translingualism...and, given more time, I would delve more deeply into them. These transformative approaches all have the potential to contribute to conversations about the politics of knowledge, and—through them as lenses—to transform our understandings of composition (and WPA) work.

**Conclusion to Transformative Knowledge.** In *Sentipensante Pedagogy*, Laura Rendon notes that “any new transformation is likely to involve us in shaking up a system while being shaken up ourselves” and, thus, “calling to employ a [transformative] approach carries significant responsibility” (2009, p. 147). She notes “the dangers of making [transformative] work public...includ[ing] not getting support for promotion and tenure, being viewed as troublemakers, and being perceived as touchy-feely or marginally intellectual” (2009, p. 147). There is danger, as well, that our attempts at transformation might fail, or simply succeed at being #swallowedupbythemainstream (Blewett, 2016). But there is greater danger in not seeking to transform the historical and ongoing systems—from micro to macro contexts—which our disciplinary knowledge explicitly identifies as harmful and oppressive.

## **Research Questions**

In response to the exigency of WPAs needing tools and strategies in order to successfully negotiate institutional realities and promote transformative knowledge, this study recognizes that how-to guides for WPA work risk overlooking the incredible diversity of WPA work (even when limited to FYC), promoting monolithic approaches, or encouraging practices that simply reinscribe existing inequities. The purpose of this study, then, is to avoid authoritative pronouncements of *what to do and how to do it*, in favor of an exploration of “the breath of others” as they describe their own active theorization of the possible and negotiation of institutional realities as WPAs in pursuit of transformative FYC programs.

This study seeks to address several research questions—articulated here—which are suggested in the preceding exigency, statement of the problem, and proposed purposes of the study:

1. What tools and strategies do FYC WPAs describe using and finding efficacious as they negotiate institutional pressures and their unique positionalities as WPAs to translate transformative knowledge from Composition Studies and adjacent fields into program practices?
2. How do FYC WPAs connect their commitments to transformative knowledges to their performances of administration and collaboration?
3. In what ways do the shifting and tacit theories (of how to negotiate the institution, of how to translate transformative knowledge to practice, of how to ‘be a WPA’) of WPAs constitute important “theory” work of the discipline, off of which other WPAs might articulate different theories?

### **Significance of The Study**

Responding to the above exigencies, problems, and proposed purposes this study was designed to draw on the reflections of multiple FYC WPAs on their experiences and practices as they sought to translate transformative knowledge from Composition and Composition-related fields into institutional practice while negotiating complex contexts. This research, then, suggests several potential significant contributions to the existing scholarship on WPAs which I will explore here.

First, this study contributes to conversations of WPA professionalization and development, offering descriptive examples of WPAs developing and doing their work rather than more prescriptive modes of guidance and advice. Echoing Adler-Kassner's suggestion that our own explorations of strategies for doing "activist" WPA work are enriched by the "breath of others," the responses ("breath") of the nine WPAs in this study provide critical reflections on WPA decision making *processes* and emphasizes the strategies of negotiation that led to "products" in their programs. As with a shift in composition from product to process, from prescriptive to descriptive, from linguistic rule adherence to metalinguistic and rhetorical negotiation, this dissertation seeks to move from the concrete finished product of "advice" to a depiction of WPAs' active reflection on and theorization of strategies for negotiation and translation *in process*.

Second, this study shares a range of ways that these WPAs think about dominant conceptions and practices of composition (historically and presently) in their local contexts, and what theories and practices they feel are most likely to transform those conceptions. As they talk through these transformations—either those that they have been able to facilitate or those which they hope to negotiate in the future—it provides other WPAs with a sense of the possible, as well as providing them with approaches against



which WPAs might articulate other aims. Significantly, it highlights how WPAs do the work of our discipline—as conduits, producers, and negotiators—in between professional knowledge and actual practice.

Third, this study maps out the different stakeholders with whom WPAs must do their work, and provides examples of how the WPAs in this study do that work. By providing examples of these acts of negotiation and collaboration, the dissertation highlights complexities of the relationship between WPA and stakeholder, strategies that are employed to make working with others more successful, and the benefits of collaboration. Highlighting the ecologies in which WPAs work, it paints a more complex picture of transformative WPA work as distributed and negotiated.

Fourth, this study provides insight into how WPAs wrestle with their perceptions of the role and the concept of “authority.” While considering the “roles” that WPAs fulfill is a common feature of WPA discourse, the participants in this study further explore how those roles (as others envision them, as they envision themselves) connect to their transformative commitments. Rather than providing concrete solutions, the WPAs struggles with and nuancing of these relationships help to illustrate this area as a potentially productive one for ongoing conversations about transformation.

Fifth, this study catalogues and describes a diverse toolbox of texts and practices used by these WPAs to achieve transformative goals in their programs. Textual and rhetorical, the exploration of these toolboxes highlights how we can use writing studies methods to better understand our own practices in the field, much as Dryer (2013) does in his article “Scaling Writing Ability.”

Finally, this study seeks to expand current conceptions of how we talk about WPAs as doing “theory” work. In his “Forgotten Radicals: A History of the Term ‘Theory’ in Three Decades of WPA Scholarship,” Brian Ray suggests that there are “four distinct modes” of how “theory” has manifested in WPA scholarship: 1. “the analysis of an issue through an existing theoretical lens,” 2. “the production of...original theories in the field of composition,” 3. “the implementation of theoretical ideas through policies, curricula, and WPA’s day to day decisions,” and 4. “acts...that blend the previous three” (p. 11). The WPAs in this study are engaged in all four of these modes—applying transformative theories to their analyses of their own positions, producing theories of WPA work and composition practice, and implementing transformative theories in elements of their programs. In addition, however, the reflections of these WPAs represent something that is less refined and more metatheoretical—active, contingent, negotiated, shifting theorizations of how the transformative knowledges and theories of our field find their ways into practice.

### **Summary of Methodology**

This dissertation project involved two primary modes of data collection: a short initial participant information survey, then a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. Several participants were identified initially through a purposive sample, which was then followed by snowball sampling; each participant was directly emailed with an attached letter of informed consent and a link to an initial survey constructed in Qualtrics. In the initial survey participants shared information about their institution, program, position, theoretical commitments, and contact information that might support more directed questions during the interviews.

Following the initial survey, I contacted the 9 Writing Program Administrator participants from different institutions to schedule a more extensive interview at their convenience. I then conducted semi-structured interviews with the participant WPAs over the Zoom video-conferencing platform, during which questions focused on their practices of negotiation and translation within a first-year composition. The core 11 interview questions explored participants' practices of policy formation, professional practice, and procedures of negotiation, as well as participants' theoretical/ideological commitments (in respect to language theory and pedagogy), and workplace successes/struggles. Interviews lasted between one hour and two hours in length, and were audio recorded and transcribed.

### **Chapter Overview**

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I have outlined the exigency for this study (a range of environments where WPAs must develop strategies to negotiate institutional realities in order to effect change); a statement of the problem (a dearth of situated examples of WPAs developing these strategies and tools, against which other WPAs might critically and reflectively plot their own strategies); and the purpose of the study (to provide snapshots of 10 WPAs engaging in strategies of negotiation and translation to bring transformative knowledge to bear on their writing program). Following the purpose of the study, I have offered a brief survey of the literature in relation to several key terms and concepts in this dissertation: "writing programs," "first-year composition," "writing program administration," "traditional/dominant stories/conceptions about first-year composition," and an articulation of what I mean by "transformative knowledge." Following that, I introduce my research questions; a summary of the methodology;

definitions of key terms for readers of this dissertation; and this overview of the subsequent chapters of the document.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the study design, research questions, and methodology, situating my approach to exploring the transformative work of WPAs alongside other studies that have taken a similar approach in the past. Next, I describe the initial survey demographic results, including my participants and their institutional contexts, and address WPA representation in the study. I then address my use of semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection, my use of qualitative coding, and my approach to reporting and synthesizing the results.

In Chapters 3-7, I report results of my data collection and discuss themes and trends that emerged from the interviews, breaking down “transformative” WPA “negotiations” and “translations” into several categories, each arising from the data as moments in which the WPA participants seemed to be “breathing the same air.” While participants articulated different idealized visions of the programs that they were associated with, the overlaps in these areas were both remarkable and revealing of what it means to be doing transformative WPA work.

Chapter 3 addresses the FYC courses themselves, addressing course content/focus, pedagogical approaches, and course types/aims. Overall, the chapter focuses on how the WPAs in this study negotiated local histories and conflicting contemporary visions of the course(s), and thought of them relative to discourses of transformative change in the field. While some participants articulated commitments to approaches that this dissertation has been critical of (such as literature content, or remedial “Basic Writing”), the ways in which these WPAs describe their commitments

highlight the diverse and nuanced ways that WPAs wrestle with systemic change while also supporting students.

Chapter 4 then focuses on the various stakeholders—from students (undergrad/grad), to instructors (including grad students), to departments/programs, to people in the broader institution, and finally external to the institution—with whom WPAs collaborate, contest, and negotiate visions of FYC; this chapter goes beyond a simplistic us/them top-down “wrestling into alignment” and instead reinforces a feminist understanding of how shared ownership and collaboration enriches programs. In this, WPA “translation” work reflects not just what Pennycook would describe as glossodiversity (word difference, marked by changing words from one language to another), but also semiodiversity (meaning difference, marked more by processes of mutual construction and feeling out).

Chapter 5 turns to the exploration of “administration,” and of how WPAs approach, resist, modify, and think about performances of “authority” and “ownership” (of expertise, of the program, of responsibility/complicity) in their work. It is in this chapter where WPAs most visibly wrestle with their “transformative” commitments—whether in relation to exploitative labor conditions, or assertions of expertise, or the politics of standardization/articulation of “better ways”—and articulate how the practical imperatives of their work intersect with their higher theoretical goals.

Chapter 6 chronicles the “tools and strategies” that WPAs use to enact transformative negotiations and translations, most closely mirroring the initial goals of this dissertation, and most practically addressing the question “how do WPAs go about changing the institutions in which they are located?” Many of these approaches—happily

for a scholar in Writing Studies—involve the production or curation of program texts, but more broadly always involve deeply rhetorical decisions of how, when, why, and to what end interventions are introduced. One area, in particular, that arose in this section as a site of “shared breath” was a broad *and positive* view of the transformative potential of program assessment.

Chapter 7 then wraps up the results and discussion of the findings from this study with a focus that evolved over the course of this dissertation. Originally focused on WPAs as conduits through which theories entered the field (a view shared by many of the participants), the project developed an additional focus on WPAs (and their negotiations with others) as generative of new theories—a focus which is responsible for a large portion of this final body chapter. The conduit approach treated theories as finished products—external to the WPA, existing “in the field”—which were then “translated” to local conditions in a practice of application; many participants agreed that their experiences aligned with this construction, frequently noting that there was little time for them to be engaged in the active production of capital-T “Theories” alongside their many roles and duties. In both in their explicitly prompted reflections and peppered throughout their responses to other questions, however, it was clear that these transformative WPAs were *also* engaged in active processes of theory production...both of the tacit lower-case-t “theory” type, and of a potentially more valorized capital-T “Theory” sort. This chapter, then, seeks to describe some of the theories that arose in participants’ responses.

Chapter 8 finally concludes—while acknowledging the descriptive and non-directive nature of the dissertation—with five observations that I take away from this study about First Year Composition and WPA work. These observations seek to tie

together various threads from Chapters 3-7, and to stake out some of the positions that I am beginning to take re: WPA work as a result of the “breath of others” that I have experienced through this process.

## Chapter 2: Methodology and “The Breath of Others”

In this chapter, I discuss my methodological approach to this study, beginning with my research questions and the assumptions underpinning the study. I then address the approach that I utilize, situating my study in a tradition of WPA studies that utilize “the breath of others”—often in the form of personal testimonials or program profiles—to offer insight without proscription. I then turn to the methods of data collection in this study in order: a short intake survey for participant background information, interviews with FYC WPAs who self-identify as doing the work of negotiating and translating transformative knowledge into local practice, and the discussion (and occasional sharing) of program documents that the WPAs identified as playing an important role in their transformative work. I then address the participants in the study, their transformative commitments, and the breakdown of institution-types represented in the study.

### The Study

This study seeks to address several research questions—articulated here—which are suggested in the preceding exigency, statement of the problem, and proposed purposes of the study:

1. What tools and strategies do WPAs describe using and finding efficacious as they negotiate institutional pressures and their unique positionalities as WPAs to translate transformative knowledge from Composition Studies and adjacent fields into program practices?
2. How do WPAs connect their practices of negotiation, translation, and exploring their roles as administrators to concepts of “professionalizing”?



3. In what ways do the shifting and tacit theories (of how to negotiate the institution, of how to translate transformative knowledge to practice, of how to ‘be a WPA’) of WPAs constitute important “theory” work of the discipline, off of which other WPAs might articulate different theories? How might this conception of WPA theory disrupt concerns of WPA theory as managerial science?

This study seeks to record the experiences of WPAs doing transformative work while negotiating the institutional realities of the first-year composition programs they administer; it does so to provide examples of the active theory work of WPAs (both in the *translation* of “transformative” theories from the field into local practices AND the *development*—in process—of transformative theories within their programs) so that other WPAs might be enriched by their stories and labors. As readers of this study encounter the transformative practices and negotiations of the WPA participants interviewed, the hope is that—like students in our writing classes—they are able to identify in some ways with these peers, and to consider their own processes in relation to the processes of others.

### **“The Breath of Others”: An Exploratory Approach**

Quoting her yoga teacher, Michael, Linda Adler Kassner states that “Hearing everyone else’s breath...reminds us that we practice in a community” ( 2008, p. vii). When I first got started on this project, I emailed my family a list of texts on WPA work—texts that have shown up in this dissertation already, some whose presence are more glancing, and others that I have chosen to omit—requesting them as birthday and Christmas presents in an initial searching for that breath; over the next few years, I added

to that stack as friends and colleagues mentioned even more of them to me. Even outside of or just walking into the room where the practice is occurring, the sounds of others' breath reduce our bodily anxieties, remind us that we're not alone, and get us excited to join in.

Excited as I was—to extend the yoga metaphor—I didn't know all the positions. As I struggled with how to go about addressing the research problems that interested me in this dissertation, Pat Bruch had two bits of advice that enabled me to see a path. First, Pat highlighted a tension in my writing between a dominant “polemical” tenor (a hangover of decades of argumentative and position-taking writing) and a more subdued “exploratory” focus...and he suggested that I think about the affordances of leaning more into the exploratory. Like my father and me—both athletes—attempting to turn our first yoga experiences into a competitive sport (and subsequently hurting ourselves), the obviousness of this became instantly apparent. Second, Pat encouraged me to think of the kinds of books I'd read—about composition, about WPA work, about pedagogical theory, etc.—whose approaches most inspired me, or whose structures I most might want to imitate. This, too, made all the sense in the world...as it had when—in those early most stressful days of the pandemic—I looked to my wife for coping strategies and soon found myself in our living room, on a mat, watching and imitating her as she moved through her morning yoga positions.

As I thought about those bits of advice from Pat and looked over the books I'd assembled, the ubiquity of one genre stood out to me in particular: the collection of program profiles or individual reflections on WPA/composition theory and practice. From Hartzog's (1986) case studies in *Composition and the Academy*, to the experiences

shared in Enos and Borrowman's (2008) *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*, to the interviews and stories of colleagues in Rendón's (2009) *Sentipensante Pedagogy*, to the program profiles in Reiff et al.'s (2015) *Ecologies of Writing Programs*, to Stenberg & Minter's (2018) study of 10 veteran WPAs, the bringing together of experiences enable these texts to explore our work without limiting it. As Rendón notes, "listening to the stories of others" helps us to understand others and ourselves, to find a "common purpose" in our work, and to reduce the feelings of isolation that can paralyze us (2009, p. 51).

Charlton et al. (2011) discuss this storytelling in *GenAdmin*, noting that it is "a useful site for the co-construction of WPA identities," a means of "offer[ing] blueprints and ideals," and a way of "mov[ing] between theory and experience" (pp. 43-44). They note as well, how stories enable us to imagine new possibilities and to reflect on our communal values, echoing Greenbaum's (2002) Neosophistic interest in *mythos*, *to dynaton*, and *nomos*. Charlton et al. also warn of the potential danger of storytelling—how, beyond what we gain, these narratives have the potential to limit us or perpetuate issues of exclusion and oppression—and encourage us to be cautious of mapping those stories onto tidy metaphors or simplistic continua.

The breath of others—the stories and vignettes in this dissertation—come from people who are aware of these stories we tell ourselves as a field, and were likely influenced by those stories (certainly, I felt it at times). Sometimes, as well, the stories are just that—stories—persuasive narratives that the participants tell themselves and others about their work. My hope is not that these stories are seen as perfect exemplars of "what to do," or—for example—that readers take a participant's assertion that something

“was transformative” as truth; instead, I hope that readers encounter these narratives, then question, challenge, draw inspiration from...and articulate responses relative to them.

### **The Survey and Participants**

In the initial conception of this study, it was my intent to begin the project with a survey distributed to the full WPA-L, the professional listserv for writing program administrators; the ideal results of this survey would have resembled large scale WPA surveys of the past which provided a ‘state of the profession’ (J. Charlton & Rose, 2009; Hartzog, 1986; Olson & Moxley, 1989; Rose et al., 2013), as well as serving as a recruitment tool for WPAs who identified as doing “transformative” work and who opted in to an interview. The ‘state of the profession’ findings (% of WPAs with Composition/Rhetoric backgrounds, shifting disciplinary homes of writing programs, % tenured/untentured, etc.) might then have also informed my understanding of how ‘representative’ my interview sample was, or how their experiences might map onto the experiences of others. Findings from the survey, additionally, might have further helped to make certain WPA challenges more visible, and then influenced topics of conversation with participants during interviews.

Events of the past few years (roughly 2018-2020), however, made me increasingly wary of posting to the listserv. There is, first, an established narrative that the WPA-L is a fraught space for grad students in the current job market (Kahn, 2018), and there are concerns of young or contingent scholars suffering professional repercussions from their participation in the listserv. While the posting of dissertation CFPs is not uncommon, it also requires publicizing the focus of one’s dissertation and potentially opening that focus up to unwelcome (rather than constructive) criticism. This

concern of a negative reception has been exacerbated in the past few years by a spate of charged “incidents” on the WPA-L, in which micro- (or macro-) aggressions were called out by WPAs and other participants with transformative commitments; these call-outs often elicited conservative backlash, nostalgic appeals to an idyllic past when listserv discourse was “more civil/less political,” and accusations of political correctness as censorship...which, in turn, elicited further critiques on- and off- listserv of the racism/sexism/xenophobia/classism/etc. of the listserv (Olejnuk & Messina, 2020).

More specifically for me, the incidents elicited a consistent low drumbeat of WPA-L complaint rhetoric about wokeness and activism (comments around Heterodox Academy, as noted in Olejnuk & Messina, are a good illustration of this), which made me feel increasingly that the WPA-L would not be a good home for my CFP. I look forward to the dissertation or history that someday explores this period—the new WPA-L moderator board has already begun to research the toxicity of the environment—but the general outcome has been an exodus of many of the sort of WPAs to whom I sought to appeal with my CFP. Several participants confirmed this, including one who spoke on it at some length:

“I refuse to follow the WPA listserv because of the clusterfuck that it is. Which really, honestly, sucks [because] I was on it for [2+ decades]. If it worked the way that it should work, it could be a really valuable resource for me, but it doesn’t and I’m not doing it. [The Irving Peckham sexism incident] was the last straw for me. That’s when I left. And I should have left 6 months before when everyone was ripping on Vershawn’s call for the 4C’s that year, and I was *this close* to leaving...” (May)

Since the major alternative to the WPA-L—the “NextGen” listserv—is intended primarily for graduate students (with an expectation that participants leave after obtaining their degrees), it seemed to me that a blanket listserv survey was no longer an ideal approach.

Additionally, around this time, I recognized that the “state of the profession” survey—while ‘nice to know’ for my project, and certainly valuable to the overarching WPA discourse—was less important to my intended aims. Since my goal was not to produce some ‘authoritative’ account grounded in claims of statistical significance or representativeness of my sample, but rather to explore the experiences of self-identified “transformative” WPAs, it became clear that the *recruitment* element was the most important function of the survey. I realized further that I would not need to survey *all* WPAs to find these WPAs with self-identified “transformative” commitments, and that I could contact them more directly, then expand selection through snowball sampling.

Although the specific umbrella terminology of this dissertation—to look for WPAs engaged in “transformative work”—is not commonplace, the major theoretical alignments that I mean for “transformative work” to encompass (critical, feminist, anti-racist, de-colonial, translingual, queer, etc.) have occupied a considerable amount of the WPA literature. Whether searching for “feminist WPA” or “anti-racist WPA,” it is possible to find scholars espousing a commitment to or interest in exploring what specific transformative theories might look like in the work of WPAs. By searching for peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books with these commitments, then exploring the faculty pages of authors to ascertain whether they (currently or previously) served as a WPA, I was able to come up with an initial list of 30 potential participants, to whom I sent my

CFP (Appendix A) and a link to the initial survey (Appendix B). Recipients of the CFP were, further, invited to share the call for participation with other WPAs for whom they felt the dissertation topic might be of interest, and almost every participant ended their interview by suggesting more names of people who they felt would be an ideal fit for this study. This snowball sampling enabled me to contact an additional 10 participants after the initial 30 and made it possible to include voices from a wider range of institution types and professional positionalities.

The survey was composed in the Qualtrics program and was comprised of a link to my IRB Information Sheet<sup>11</sup> and nine open-response questions (Appendix B); I distributed the survey as a link at the end of the CFP, which I sent individually to each prospective participant via my university email account. The survey was designed to briefly solicit information from the participating WPAs on their position, years of experience with WPA work, transformative commitments, and institutional context; data collection here was limited, with the understanding that more robust information would follow in the scheduled interviews. Additional elements of the survey verified the participants' interest in continuing on to the interview, solicited pseudonyms, established preferred modes of contact to set up the interviews, and shared the IRB consent form/information sheet. All nine respondents were current or former WPAs associated with FYC programs who self-identified with one or more of the “transformative” theories given as examples in the CFP, or who felt that they identified with Linda Adler-Kassner’s description of “the activist WPA.”

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<sup>11</sup> This study (STUDY00010103) was deemed “Exempt” by the University of Minnesota IRB on 7/9/2020

Tables 1 through 5 below represent the survey responses and highlight the distribution of the WPAs in the study:

*Table 1: Current Institution Type by Carnegie Classification*

<b>Carnegie Classification</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Doctoral University: Very High Research Activity (Public)	3	33.3
Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity (Private, not for profit)	1	11.1
Doctoral University: High Research Activity (Public)	1	11.1
Doctoral/Professional Universities (Private, not for profit)	1	11.1
Master's Colleges & Universities: Medium Programs (Public)	1	11.1
Associate's Colleges	2	22.2

Early on in recruitment for the study, I had a concern that my initial list of CFP email recipients was skewing in the direction of WPAs who were situated at R1 (now DU: Very High research) institutions, perhaps because of their higher visibility in the WPA scholarship. I also knew that I wanted to include the voices of WPAs from smaller colleges and universities, private institutions, and community/2-year colleges; luckily, over the course of collection—both through recommendations from others and through further searching—I was able to draw on the experiences of WPAs from a wider range of institutional backgrounds, as well as to discover how several participants’ histories of WPA work had covered multiple institution sizes and types.

Tables 2 and 3 move from the “institution” level to the housing department/program and to the number of class sections offered per year by the First Year Composition program, giving a sense, both, of the disciplinary home and the scope of the FYC program itself. A third question—on the number of instructors (including tenured, tenure-track, adjunct, grad student, etc.) teaching in the program—was hoped to add further sense of the program size, but responses to this question were inconsistent, sometimes unclear, often hedged, and, ultimately, I decided to leave out this data. Better



wording of the question, or a change in the format (to a matrix-style question, for example) might have made this more usable, and might have helped to give a better sense of the labor conditions within these programs, as well as another data point to highlight how many people a WPA’s decisions has the potential to impact.

*Table 2: Housing Department/Program*

<b>Housing Unit</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
English	6	66.7
English, Linguistics, and Writing Studies	1	11.1
Writing Studies	1	11.1
First Year Experience Program	1	11.1

*Table 3: Programs by Number of Class Sections Offered*

<b>Sections Offered (per year)</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
200+	2	22.2
150-200	3	33.3
100-149	1	11.1
50-99	3	33.3
0-50	0	0

That a large number of First Year Composition programs were housed in an English Department was not hugely surprising to me in the data represented in Table 2; nonetheless, I wonder how reflective it is of the current distribution of First Year Writing programs at undergraduate institutions in the US, especially considering the growth of graduate programs in Composition & Rhetoric and Writing Studies. As Charlton and Rose observed in their survey “Twenty Years More in the WPA’s Progress,” the most frequently reported field of coursework for WPAs had shifted (from 80% “English” in 1986 to 53% “Rhetoric and/or Composition” in 2007) in a reflection of the expansion of “graduate coursework in rhetoric and composition” (2009, p. 122); it would be interesting to see whether this graduate-level expansion has been mirrored at all in the housing of

FYC writing programs, and whether this has any impact on the transformative work of WPAs.

The relative evenness of distribution of “program size by sections offered” in Table 3 was heartening to me, especially in light of the skew toward “Doctoral Universities” of various sorts in Table 1. This seems to me to suggest that WPAs from programs of all sizes might find some common ground with at least a few of these participants if size-by-sections is a salient feature in their considerations of how to approach transformative work.

Tables 4 and 5 complete the coverage of the data elicited from the survey, and focus primarily on the WPAs themselves. Table 4 addresses the WPAs title and rank, speaking initially to their position at the institution, job security, and potentially relative authority. Table 5, finally, addresses their years of experience in WPA work. For some respondents, this was their first time serving as a WPA; for others, they had served at multiple institutions or in multiple ranks over time; this table simply reports total years without breaking the numbers out into separate figures or by limiting experience to their current position.

*Table 4: WPA Title and Rank*

<b>WPA Title</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Director of the Writing Program	Assistant Professor
Director of the Writing Program	Associate Professor
Director of Composition	Associate Professor
Director of Composition	Associate Professor
Director of First-Year Composition	Associate Professor
Faculty & Department Coordinator	Associate Professor
Associate Director of First Year Writing	Staff
Rhetoric & Composition Faculty	Assistant Professor
Faculty (w/ administrative roles)	Associate Professor

*Table 5: WPA Experience*

<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
0-5 years	5	55.6
6-10 years	3	33.3
11-15 years	1	11.1

While I had hoped to include more professional, non-tenure-track, and non-tenured WPAs in this study, several participants were able to speak to their experience in the past of contingent WPA work, as well as the struggles surrounding doing transformative WPA work in pre-tenure positions. In Charlton and Rose’s study, they showed a 14% lower percentage of WPAs reporting being fully tenured than in Peterson’s 1987 study, but suggested that this seeming increase in “not yet tenured” WPAs was likely reflective of growing WPA professionalization—where a tenured Director worked with a non-TT but full time Associate Director and a graduate student Assistant Director, who would ostensibly go on to later fill a tenured or TT Director position elsewhere (2009, p. 132). One participant in my study, however, did note that they believed that we will see an increased normalization of non-tenure-track WPAs in the next few years, so this is a potential place for additional research in the future.

Half of the participants in the study—as represented in Table 5—were still relatively new to WPA work, and thus able to speak to general concerns of how to “administer” a program at a new institution while figuring out the dynamics, institutional history, local politics, etc. in ways that might be equally useful to professional, non-TT, and not yet tenured WPAs.

## **Interviews**

Using purposive sampling, the initial wave of surveys enabled me to recruit 6 WPAs for interviews; snowball sampling at the end of those 6 interviews then enabled a second wave of recruitment resulting in 3 more survey completions and interviews. In

August and September 2020, after participants had completed the survey, I worked with them over email to schedule interviews which were conducted over my university Zoom account. I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each WPA, with each interview lasting between roughly 1 and 2 hours in length. While I offered to cut questions and end interviews at the 1.5 hour mark, several participants asked to keep going beyond that point.

Before beginning the question portion of the interviews, I briefly (~1-2 minutes) introduced myself, shared a bit about the study, outlined my aims in it, and forecasted the questions and average length. As Talmy (2011) describes it, I did not think about these semi-structured interviews “as a research instrument” designed to neutrally collect “uncontaminated data,” so much as “as a social practice,” characterized by collaborative production and discursive co-construction (p. 27). While some believe that “the danger that interactional aspects of interviews pose” should be minimized by the interviewer “so as to maximize the chance that they will collect full and accurate information,” Wortham et al. (2011) argue that this is unavoidable (and undesirable) as “Interviewer and interviewee...adopt interactional positions and engage in social action with respect to each other and the larger social world” (pp. 41-42). To that end, the initial framing—as well as interviewer additions permitted by semi-structured interviewing—were simply part of negotiating the social context of the interview as well as our own stated positions (re: the content/topics of the interview, re: composition, re: education and social change, etc.).

The interviews were structured around a core 11 question interview protocol (Appendix C), although I did cut Question 9 (about texts and genres) in several

interviews where it had already been addressed or we were short on time, and Question 7 (a request for an example) was occasionally not necessary. Questions in the interview concerned the WPA's institutional context, interest in and practices for changing elements of the program, transformative theoretical commitments and effects on practice, conceptions of the role and authority, and thoughts about WPAs as generators of theory. In their answers, WPAs were asked to think about tools and strategies, resistance/negotiation/collaboration, and the many axes on which they were engaged in “transformational” work. All participants consented to have their zoom interviews recorded (Zoom has the functionality to generate both a video and audio recording), with the understanding that their participation would be confidential, protected by a pseudonym and the de-identification of their responses.

### **Analysis of Interviews**

Utilizing the auto-caption function on Zoom while recording also produces a .txt file at the conclusion of the meeting with a “transcript” of the interview—although that transcript is rough and not entirely accurate. To refine that rough transcript, I copied the content of each .txt file into a separate Word Document (titled with the interviewee's pseudonym) and went through the transcript, formatting and making corrections as I re-listened to the interviews. As I did these corrections, I also removed identifying information (biographical information, institution names, program specific in-house textbooks, references to colleagues, etc.). In total, the process generated about 150 pages of transcripts, which I then printed for coding and analysis.

My analytical process most closely resembled Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), although it did not include the practice of formal memo writing. To describe my process:

1. I took notes immediately after each interview, including noting particular snippets or elements from that appeared to be related to snippets or elements in other interviews. In this way, during data collection, I already began to have a sense of emerging themes across multiple interviews.
2. I then added to those notes as I cleaned the transcripts and was able to compare across all interviews. At this point, I was able to start tidying up the notes and developing more standardized proto-codes for the data.
3. I then began to code the transcripts. According to Saldaña (2013) “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data [such as]...interview transcripts” (p. 3).
  - My approach to coding employed a conventional (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279) and open approach, deriving descriptive codes from the data.
  - In steps 1-3, I engaged in constant comparison with open coding.
4. As I began to amass codes, I started to cluster them and identify categories of codes. As I described the categories (such as “Negotiating Expertise and Authority”), I then returned to the data with those categories in mind, searching for additional potential members of that category.

- In step 4, I engaged in constant comparison with axial coding.
5. I then returned to the Introduction/Literature Review to add, expand, and reorganize; this then helped my reflection and helped the categories emerging during axial coding to firm up.

These categories that emerged from this axial coding then became reflected in the chapter titles for Chapters 3-7, with descriptive codes then represented as subsections in each chapter. Major categories that arose were Negotiating Theories of Composition (in which WPAs discussed FYC courses), Negotiating Working with Others (in which they explored how they collaborate with various other stakeholders), Negotiating Expertise (in which they wrestled with their authority and the WPA role), Negotiating Tools/Strategies (in which they reflected on mechanisms for effecting change), and Negotiating Theory (in which they articulated their role as both conduits and creators of new theories). Each chapter is then broken down into subcategories corresponding to the descriptive codes that arose out of the data.

### Chapter 3: Negotiating Theories of Composition

*“After many, many years of fighting, the compositionists in the department were able to get rid of it, because...it was not all in line with what we knew about best practices about writing” (May)*

Having described my interview method and the “breath of others” approach, I now move into the results of my interviews and the first thematic cluster of responses. Collected in the category “Negotiating Theories of Composition,” this chapter documents and explains the ways WPAs in the study discussed the course(s), approaches, and aims in the FYC programs they administered, as well as how they negotiate those realities and seek to transform them.

As the survey of literature on first year composition paradigms, approaches, courses, and dominant conceptions highlights, several questions can frame our understanding of FYC:

- What is taught and what is assessed? (Course content)
- How is it taught and how is it assessed? (Teaching methods)
- In what sort of curricular structure? (Curriculum)

These questions all index an additional one—“to what ends?”—which speaks to aims/purposes of the course. Historically and culturally dominant conceptions of the course—Current Traditionalism and rhetorics of correctness, Liberal Culture and the civilizing function of literature, Neoliberalism and rhetorics of access, etc.—provide their own answers to these questions, and do so in ways that many stakeholders (deans, colleagues, students, parents, etc.) find compelling and unproblematic. Having articulated how these conceptions participate in the maintenance of harmful language ideologies, scholars in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies have in turn sought to create new



professional knowledges—new theories of composition—with the potential to transform those dominant conceptions.

Like (and as) those scholars, the WPAs in this study had perceptions of the dominant stories that are told about FYC in our broader culture, as well as the local histories of composition at their institutions that their work was being articulated relative to. As they thought about what it meant to “transform” or “negotiate” realities of composition at their institutions, they then tailored their approaches relatively. Often, they would describe visions of the course that had circulated in the field or program historically, or that still held some currency with people who remained in the program to this day (in ways that then led to negotiations like those described in Chapter 4). While they described these dominant stories/conceptions—of course content, teaching methods, curricular structure, and aims/purposes—they expressed degrees of understanding, resistance, and desire to transform.

### **Course Content and Paradigms**

This section begins with two types of FYC content which WPAs in the study mentioned regularly which needed to be negotiated—at least—if not directly addressed, remedied, or transformed: courses that constructed “literature” as the appropriate content of the course and/or courses that constructed “grammar” as the appropriate content of the course. These two types of content were perhaps unsurprising given the number of WPAs (n = 6) who worked in a traditional English department, or who worked in a program “between” an English department and other(s) (n= 2).

Following these existent approaches to content, WPAs often then articulated a range of alternative content(s) which they felt more appropriately suited FYC, enabling

certain approaches to teaching methods, fitting into a specific place in the curricular structure, and helping them to achieve certain aims/purposes. These course contents included “writing studies,” “rhetoric,” “genre,” “multimodal,” and “student writing.” While “writing studies” often functioned as an umbrella term for composition, rhetoric, genre studies, and WAC/WID when used by participants, other participants—who did not use the term “writing studies”—seemed like they might be attempting to articulate a more specific content commitment by mentioning only one “subfocus.”

### *Literature*

In alignment with the departmental and institutional homes of most of the WPAs in this study, a majority of the WPAs described department histories—or presents—in which one or more of the FYC offerings had some degree of “literature” content. These WPAs often related the literature-as-content to instructor background and training (which I address more fully in Chapter 4), but note that the content also carries with it certain teaching methods and aims, which are then more or less compatible with the types of transformations the WPAs were interested in facilitating.

In describing their program—where they had just moved from a single course to a two-course composition sequence—May describes the state of the program when they came in:

[FYC 1] was a literature-based composition course. And after many, many years of fighting, the compositionists in the department were able to get rid of it, because...it was not all in line with what we knew about best practices about writing. We had the continual problem that we always had with people trying to

teach it as an intro to lit course rather than a writing course that included literature.

May makes a distinction—between “an intro to lit course” and “a writing course that include[s] literature”—that seems important. No WPAs in the study stated that literature had no place in FYC, or that its inclusion was incompatible with achieving program aims/purposes; more often their concern was when courses replaced the focus on composing for diverse audiences with a focus on the analysis, appreciation, and reading-centric exploration of belles lettres prose that more closely resembled a literature seminar/lecture.

Managing the shift from “intro to lit” to “writing course that [potentially] includes literature” appears difficult. Alex describes what happened with the new course in their two-part curriculum after it was introduced:

“[We created FYC 2 as an] advanced composition course. And unfortunately, what happened is that some of the problems with the old [FYC 1] were starting to be replicated in [FYC 2] with some of the instructors really wanting to teach it as a literature course or as like a cultural studies course.

This seemed to be a common issue, particularly with First Year Seminar or themed course models (explored later in this chapter), where exploring the course content overcame the actual course outcomes. As May observed in their program—where they were also moving to a 2-course sequence with intro and advanced composition—“There’s a contingent [of instructors] that are still very ‘why can’t I teach my 12 novels about monsters’ which, yes, that really happened...somebody wanted to teach in our [FYC 2] course...their syllabus included...was themed on monsters and included 12 novels.” Both

Alex and May explain how challenging it was to then begin the process of negotiating course content expectations and re-transforming their brand-new courses (with new course texts, course agreements, negotiated outcomes documents, etc.).

Negotiation was not one-directional in Alex and May's examples, and both described working with colleagues who preferred literature content on re-envisioning the course, developing new outcomes, and finding ways to still incorporate instructor interests/expertise. Alex and May did, however, describe more forceful attempts to move away from literature content than some other participants, such as Daniel. In their program, Daniel also notes the connection of background and training to instructor choices of content:

Basically, everyone teaches writing. No matter what the background you come from, everybody [in the department] teaches writing, so we have people who are more literary studies, who are more linguistics, who are more developmental or basic writing focused, and then we have people like me who come from a writing studies background.

Daniel then describes the acts of negotiation this diversity necessitates, while also checking their "writing studies background" in a move that acknowledges the need to move toward better ways of doing things, but also remains cognizant of the potential to reinscribe writing studies as a new hegemonic norm:

It's a negotiation within the department so how can people with a literary or creative writing background bring that in, and still meet the goals that we know we need to have as a department. How can people with that expertise in writing studies be mindful and be flexible about the ways that other scholarly traditions

approach the teaching of writing—but also, how can we make sure that our students are having a consistent experience as well?

Like Alex and May, Daniel appeared to have a strong sense of some pitfalls associated with literature-driven approaches to FYC and gestured to them at times during the interview. At the same time, Daniel articulated a sense of how they might use the professional knowledges from other fields to transform instructors' sense of the course outcomes...thus enabling instructors to keep working with literary content, but in ways that are both more congruent with and potentially transformative of our own understanding of best practices. Daniel observes:

We started talking about “okay what are the many different flexible ways that that we can teach towards this [particular outcome].” So, I mean, we talk about ‘audience’ in rhetorical studies all the time, but Creative Writing talks about ‘audience’ too—not quite in the same way, but, I mean, it’s more or less the same—so, we were able to come together on those kinds of things. Like literary studies—unless you are super like New Criticism or Russian Formalism kind of thing—like, they’re concerned with ‘audience’ too, you know, so there is just more of a “okay what did the audience mean for the way that this author approached this? like what was going on in the world at the time?”

So, while WPAs in the study identified “literature” content as a potential site needing transformation—likely related to Berlin’s critiques of rhetoric of liberal culture, as well as a long disciplinary history of tensions with English belles lettres—their approaches to “transforming” existent literature content commitments in their home departments more

often resembled collaborations and negotiations in which stakeholders explored how a range of course contents could support agreed upon aims of value.

### ***Grammar Instruction/Current Traditionalism***

An issue did arise around belles lettres English (creative writing and literature) content for several WPAs, however, which highlighted an additional problem—that, when literature made up some percentage of the “content” of the class, instructors seemed to differentiate it from a “literature” class by adding on another particular sort of “writing” content, namely: “Standard English” grammar. Roxanne describes this in their program where instructors are a mix of full-time instructors, part-time adjuncts, and graduate student instructors from across multiple programs:

There’s so many English faculty who are looking for ‘Standard Written English,’ and will grade down for that and so even though we [tried to address that in our Outcomes]...I don’t think people necessarily realize that expecting ‘Standard Written English’ is a practice that perpetuates anti-black linguistic racism. So, so that issue is certainly, you know, present now among...it’s something that I want to work on in the comp program, and have workshops on, and whether, yeah, I wonder. I think all the graduate students—or at least the PhD students—are already on board with this, the Master’s students who are focusing in literature and creative writing, maybe less so, same with probably the part time instructors who haven’t been exposed to these theories.

“Standard Written English” loomed in the background of many of the interviews, and most often manifested through a discussion of “white language supremacy” (Rachel), “racist oppression” (Julia), “systematic exclusion” (Alex, re: race and class), “English as

a bludgeon” and “racist structures” of “white English” (Kay). As Rachel noted, the ubiquity of this particular approach to talking about “Standard Written English” was likely because discussions of anti-racist pedagogy had “bubbled up again” in response to the murder of George Floyd (which happened during/just before the interviews) and national reckonings on race.

Context and reason for the framing aside, the “rules” of an ostensibly “Standard” English that mirrors White, cosmopolitan, middle-class language practices constituted an additional source of content for Roxanne’s instructors “who haven’t been exposed to these theories” about language diversity which circulate in composition and writing studies. Roxanne wasn’t alone in the issue with instructor background and familiarity with writing studies criticisms of SWE, as Alex observed in their program:

So, we have some people who are creative writers, some who have Master’s in library science, and then a lot who have studied literature, without any sort of pedagogical training before they get hired. So, those people—my colleagues who don’t have the background in writing studies—are really like current traditionalist.

Alex’s naming of the instructors’ approach as “current traditionalist” then turned to the course content—to assigning Graff & Birkenstein’s *They Say, I Say*, to teaching students “standard” grammar that would “prepare” them. Like May (about literature approaches), Alex describes the inclusion of this current traditionalist content as “not based on best research practices,” gesturing to the professional knowledges circulating in composition and writing studies.

Interestingly—in the same section of the interview where they discuss shared understandings of audience with their writing colleagues from other scholarly traditions—Daniel also shares how their colleagues in literature think about the place (or lack thereof) of “Standard Written English” content in a FYC context:

We had these common things that meant something to us. So, adapting to audience. Things like grammar not being that big of a deal, or things like Student’s Right to their Own Language. Things like valuing dialects that are not the “Standard White English,” right? So, we were able to come together on things that we valued in what we wanted our students to learn.

Whether addressing literature-as-content or grammar-as-content, the WPAs in this study seemed to be identifying that content choices reflected certain values that instructors had come to accept—not coincidentally values that aligned with dominant constructions of composition—sometimes without realizing the implications or potential for alternatives (as Roxanne notes). Roxanne, Alex, Rachel, and Daniel then all talk about the importance of bringing conversations of these values to the fore—not just to change instructors or impose understandings from composition studies upon them, but to also mutually expose WPAs to professional knowledges outside of our own conversations which might also be transformative.

### ***Writing Studies/Threshold Concepts***

WPAs in this study described two “other” contents (literature and grammar) that historically and presently had occupied FYC curricular space, and often did so with a sense that some degree of negotiation or transformation might need to take place. Other WPAs either left the dominant/pre-existing course content unstated (simply describing



where they hoped the program might head without saying where it had been), or described a pre-existing course structure that was more recognizable within our professional conversations. Describing the courses in their 2-course sequence, Alex says: “[FYC 2] classes [are run] as research seminars into writing studies, and then [FYC 1 classes] are kind of...Now I’m revising them...but like they’re kind of intro to writing studies.” Following the “writing about writing” approach<sup>12</sup> described by Wardle & Downs (2007), these two described approaches treat scholarship from Writing Studies as course content, from which students might derive understandings about language, and to which they might respond in their own research and writing.

Daniel also describes a commitment to “Writing Studies” in their 2-course sequence, referencing Adler-Kassner & Wardle’s (2015) *Naming What We Know*<sup>13</sup> as having a comparable content as to that which they offer in their courses:

our [FYC 1] and [FYC 2] are pretty progressive as far as theories are concerned. We are based—and have been actually since before *Naming What We Know* came out—we’ve had a threshold concept curriculum...We have a very writing studies-centric, threshold concepts-focused curriculum, where we...do a lot of work with reflection and...we do a lot of work with civic writing, and we have a pretty good split in the department between people who really focus on a more rhetorical studies approach, and people who are focused on a more genre studies approach.

The invocation of “threshold concepts” in Daniel’s description of the course content (and aims) speaks to a transformative aim. As Ray Land notes in the introduction to *Naming What We Know*, “the field of threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge” is

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<sup>12</sup> Roxanne and May also note developing a Writing About Writing curriculum for instructors of FYC 1

<sup>13</sup> Julia also discusses *Writing About Writing* and *Naming What We Know* as major influences

interested in “how an encounter with unfamiliar discourse” (even *discourse about discourse*) has the potential to “provoke a state of liminality and subsequent *transformation*” (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015, p. xi, emphasis added). Daniel expands on this to explain how it works as a guide for content: “threshold concepts are sticky and they're those ‘aha!’ moments that you can't really control for. You can't just turn threshold concepts into outcomes... these are the aha moments that we want to help students build towards, and maybe they reach them, or maybe they don't.” While not translatable to outcomes—or directly teachable as content—they note that the unfamiliar discourse of Writing Studies (as content) provides a starting point from which they can move toward those understandings.

Daniel also notes a “split in the department between people who really focus on a more rhetorical studies approach, and people who are focused on a more genre studies approach,” which speaks to and highlights that the umbrella of “writing studies” often seeks to contain a range of different approaches. Alex also observes this, describing their “Writing Studies” approach as a blend of “a rhetorical analysis [and a] genre based approach.” I address these two approaches next.

### ***Genre Studies and Discourse Communities***

Most WPAs in the study gestured to practices that we might traditionally associate with “genre studies”—things like having students conduct rhetorical analysis of a genre, or the exploration of situated conventions—but only one participant explicitly pointed to genre as part of the course content in their programs. May describes their role as to overhaul part of the 2-course sequence at their institution:

when they hired me, like one of the things that they wanted me—or you know anyone else that would have taken on this job—was to implement this—I ended up calling it the reboot—to implement the reboot of [FYC 2], so that it became like the course it was supposed to always be, which was a course focused on genre, discourse communities, and discipline specific research.

May's description of the course as supporting "discipline specific" work potentially speaks to a systemic functional WAC/WID logic underpinning the genre approach at their institution: students learn rhetorical principles in FYC 1 which are adaptive "across the curriculum," then move into more applied genre approaches in FYC 2. At the same time, the pairing of a rhetoric FYC 1 with genre in FYC 2 has the potential to promote understandings of genre much more aligned with rhetorical genre studies. May's "reboot" of FYC 2 at their institution seeks to transform the existing structure (a strong literature focus), and likely (with the 2 potential interpretations) necessitates ongoing negotiation of how "genre" content is framed in the classroom for students.

### ***Rhetorical Studies***

More commonly than "genre," WPAs in the study referenced a commitment to FYC courses with "rhetoric" as a core source of content. Kay notes: "The common curriculum is great, in terms of being within parameters for what I've perceived kind of first year writing being in the field...so it's really, like I said, it's really based in rhetoric in terms of like content and implementation." The perception that rhetoric was "within the parameters" of what "the field" accepted appeared true for most WPAs in the study, and potentially speaks to why it came up so frequently; alternatively, as the faculty of

UMN Writing Studies/RSTC observe, perhaps it's just the unifying lowest common denominator for a field with such diverse interests.

Roxanne describes the content of their FYC 1 course (in a 2-course sequence, where the second course has a stronger research focus)—which is still based on a course content developed by their predecessor, and which they are still working to re-envision in their own mind—is that the class is:

more focused on rhetorical analysis and critical thinking and maybe argument.

Some people use *Everything's an Argument*. Some people do everything and everything under the sun. But yeah, I see it as more about rhetorical analysis.

Roxanne is still committed to this rhetorical analysis and argumentation approach, but is looking for ways to modernize it—to bring in, for example, an anti-racist element.

This was also true for other WPAs in the study. Kay described the situation of coming into a program with a pre-existing in-house text with rhetoric elements:

So, the other thing that came out in [our in-house textbook] was a really Classical approach to rhetoric, so it was really Aristotelian, really ancient Greece, it was like a chapter each on ethos, pathos, logos, kairos

Kay felt that the Classical rhetoric content was outdated, but was conflicted about permitting instructors to deviate from the content:

And so what ended up happening there was these people who weren't specialists stopped using the book, which is bad because I...my sense was like "they're not specialists in rhetoric, they need the support of rhetorical content and now they're not using it and I don't know what's being taught...or how they're approaching rhetoric"

But as Kay began to describe the content of their own FYC 1 course (and how it reflected their feminist and translingual commitments), they also became excited about the modifications that were possible to the “rhetoric” approach:

there’s a way to build in [Foss & Griffin on invitational rhetoric, plus translingual scholarship]...in one of our structured assignments [where] they do the meta-critical reading...and then write two summaries for two different rhetorical situations...in my examples and in my, you know samples, and in the way we’re talking about these things [in class] like, that’s where I think those theories come out, you know. Yeah, and encouraging faculty here about themes like because new faculty be like, “Oh, I don’t know—I want to do 21st century rhetorics,” and, it’s like “YAY! Go! Do!”

Kay’s enthusiasm about what could happen with newly energized approaches to rhetoric was common across the interviews, where WPAs noted the value of some form of Classical rhetoric as a common content and shared language (especially for programs with instructors from a range of disciplines), but also looked to 21<sup>st</sup> century rhetorics—rhetorical listening (Beverly and Rachel), invitational rhetoric (Kay), rhetoric of respect (Daniel), decolonial rhetorics (Alex), digital rhetorics (Kay), etc.—for contents with more transformative potential.

### ***The Multimodal/New Media Imperative***

One cluster of 21<sup>st</sup> century rhetorical theory that came up in several of the WPA interviews was New Media/Multimodality/Multimedia/Digital Rhetorics. This addition to the content of the traditional rhetoric approach to classes seems to follow the logic laid out in Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 2004 4Cs address on the necessity of expanding our

conceptions of the texts appropriate for study in our composition classes; In response to her call, it seems programs have added elements from this cluster to their course curriculum, and even—in Kay’s case—began to hire “digital literacy” specialists to facilitate that work. Kay explains:

All of this work was done before I arrived. The previous WPA took—what the people here now call it was like “the Wild West”—and revamped it into an actual rhetoric based common first-year writing curriculum. . . . There’s a digital literacy component that’s expected in every course. They don’t just write a research paper; they do research, but then they have to make a multimodal project to argue for their position.

The same was true with May, where FYC 1 had an expected multimodal component to it when they arrived at their program:

Last year was when I was like “now it’s time to talk [FYC 1], because we’re still assigning five different major projects in 15 weeks, and—except for the remediated project—these are pretty much identical to what I did as a grad student [over 20 years ago]”

May’s program not only had a “re-mediation” (multimodal/multimedia) component baked into FYC 1, but also offered an alternative FYC 2 course focusing on digital media and digital composition.

While many of the WPAs thought about adding multimodal/digital rhetoric content to their FYC programs as a way to modernize literature, grammar, or Classical rhetoric content, Kay and May were not the only WPAs who arrived to programs when there was already a digital/multimodal requirement in place across sections—and their

generally approving takes on that extant focus was not always shared. Beverly notes that their institution

did a big overhaul 10 years ago, so it's getting to be an old program that I'm actually in the process of making major changes to. And it wasn't bad. It's just that there's a big focus on discourse communities and digital rhetorics, and I'm starting to kind of take that apart now.

While declaring an intent to "take apart" the discourse community and digital rhetorics components, Beverly nuances their stance:

So, the curriculum, like I'm saying, it needs it needed to be changed—just because it's old, not because it's bad. And I think that's important to keep in mind...like the goals of the department, the goals of this writing program, and the goals of rhetoric and writing studies more broadly, are good

It seems, the more that Beverly talks about digital and multimodal rhetorics, the more they get to the crux of the problem: a push around 2004 encouraged FYC programs to adopt multimodal, digital literacy, and new media elements more broadly than they had done in the past...but the movement (in some places) has potentially become stale, lost some of its sense of purpose, and—perhaps—been #swallowedupbythemainstream.

Beverly continues that they are interested in a new curriculum focused on:

Playing with text and media and found...objects, looking at like what is a text and what is writing and what do we think of as composing. So, I also feel like—in addition to all this really critical work—I want writing to be playful and tactile and for students to see it as playful and tactile and something compelling to them and of course looking at how writing crosses in and out of actual writing. I also

feel like some of the digital work...that's been privileged in [our institution's] curriculum is...it's very...it's like "let's make a website, this is what we use now" and it's not like "why are we doing this?"

Beverly's concerns mirror Shipka's (2011) concern "that emphasis placed on 'new' (meaning 'digital') technologies has led to a tendency to equate terms like *multimodal*, *intertextual*, *multimedia*, or still more broadly speaking, *composition* with the production and consumption of computer-based, digitized, screen-mediated texts" (pp. 8-9). Like Wysocki (2004) observing that "new media texts do not have to be digital" and that what is key is the non-effacing of a text's materiality, Beverly asks questions about why we are emphasizing certain composition practices over others, and to what ends.

These WPAs—in their discussions of a core multimodal content to FYC at their institutions—highlight transformation and negotiation as ongoing processes, with no single transformation serving as a fixed solution. As Horner (2011) observes in his discussion with Selfe:

in discussions of multimodality [there] seems to be a tendency to adopt a celebratory stance toward practices that dominant ideology has trained us to recognize as multimodal and to push to the background or dismiss as unduly restricted those practices that this same ideology has trained us to recognize as, well, monomodal (p. 7)

As WPAs negotiate the types of content (modes, media, genres, literacies, etc.) in their programs, the transformation, then, seems to be around what we privilege and celebrate and why...and what is potentially effaced, lost, or pushed to the background as a result.

***Student Authors***



Beverly's approach to multimodality was also just one place in the interview when they referenced how their vision of FYC that they are seeking to promote involves reframing students in the class. They note: "I was trained much more as a process writer, and in in a program focused on process writing, and I really kind of see the first year as like an opportunity practice and play, and get a sense of yourself as a writer...a student writer." As multiple WPAs in the study did, Beverly was joined by Julia in articulating a belief that FYC "needed to be more student centered."

Though likely true for several WPAs in the study, only one explicitly connected that student-centric focus to the content of the class. Speaking about their in-house rhetoric/reader textbook, May shares:

I feel like having them [students] read student writing is one of the most powerful rhetorical moves we can make, because it says both programmatically—and then in terms of individual classrooms—that we value student voices, that students can be experts, that students have important things to say, that student writing should be read by everyone. I think that's transformative... I never ever want to lose the student writing, I just, I feel so strongly about it.

This commitment to treating student writing as serious content of the course echoes Lu's (1994) call to "contest the distinction between 'real' and 'student' writers" (p. 447).

Although they don't announce the role of student writing in the content of FYC, Kay's account of an instructor's response during a professional development to the text *Everyone's an Author* ("Everyone...everyone *isn't* an author. What's this bullshit")—and Kay's corresponding frustration with that instructor—highlights "institutional practices toward [students that]...treat them as emerging, or as failed, but never as actually

responsible ‘authors’” which continue even after Susan Miller’s (1991, p. 196) remarks. May’s commitment as a WPA to presenting student writing in classrooms as real, legitimate, responsible, and influential content that is worthy of serious consideration gets closer to the transformation of student subjectivities in the ways Miller describes.

### **Teaching Methods/Pedagogical Approaches**

Going beyond the content of the course, the WPAs in the study did spend some time speaking about the teaching methods and pedagogical approaches used, although mentions were more sporadic and often assumed shared understandings/common practices. As Rachel notes, it can be a process to work through those assumptions:

As a result of coming out of a writing studies program—spending so much time around people that asked the same questions and had the same sensibilities...even if we have departure between us it was like we all swam in the same water or something—and it’s still surfacing for me the stuff that...like, I took it for granted that everyone had their students do reflection.

The WPAs in the study did, nonetheless, “surface” some teaching methods/pedagogical approaches that needed to be negotiated and potentially transformed, and from those, three clusters in particular stood out: balances of interactional learning methods in a class (lecture, discussion, workshop, lab), approaches to writing (process vs. product), and methods of enacting pedagogical theories.

### ***Interactional Learning Methods***

Scattered throughout their interview responses, the WPAs in this study referenced the types of classroom interactions (teacher-class, teacher-student, student-class, student-student, class-community) that took place in order to facilitate learning, as well as their

sense of which types of interactions might be more or less successful at producing the kinds of learning environments different from the dominant norms. That dominant norm often took the form of teacher-class “banking model” (Freire) and lecture driven interactions. As Roxanne remarked about one instructor in their program:

his teaching experience...was lecturing about literature and linguistics to large groups so basically he was used to the lecture format, so the seminar format was not natural [to him]...I was sort of fighting this internal battle of wanting to celebrate his background as a lecturer, but also wanting to make sure that his students had a good experience and weren't lectured at.

The teacher-class lecture approach—although some WPAs felt it might have a time and place—was a safe type of interaction to critique and lament, as Kay demonstrated when talking about the effects of COVID on teaching modality:

People are also teaching online [with] webcams, [and there are] people who want to just like, turn on the camera and lecture anyway and make students login like that's, that's not how I teach so...Yeah, yeah. I used to love the classroom, with active learning...so there were pods with chairs and LCD screens and students collaborated all the time and...that's not happening now.

In response to situations like this, WPAs were trying to think of ways to bring more active learning and more dynamic interactions (student-student, student-class, class-community) into the class context. Talking about the COVID resources they were amassing for their instructors, Alex reported:

I'm encouraging people to use a different kinds of reading strategies and tools, so like I'm going to use Perusall for the first time, this semester...[and I'm] helping

them understand like different technologies. I've given some workshops on different kinds of like feedback strategies, and peer review.

The kinds of activities and resources that WPAs were banking—like Rachel's engaging “activities, peer review, and...like 21 icebreakers to do in an online class”—emphasize an attempt to negotiate authority and knowledge ownership in the classroom in ways that mirror the inclusion so student texts. Peer review, in particular, made up an obvious and large percentage of the favorably-mentioned learning interactions, emphasizing student texts as content, process approaches to writing, and genre studies understandings of typification. Emphasizing the practice of peer-review and other student-student interactions did appear to be one major method that WPAs felt had transformative potential.

WPAs did not present peer review as a panacea, though, and identified that—while it was good for some things—it didn't fully address the needs of the learning situation. Roxanne chronicled their experience with “peer review alone” approaches in the past:

I discovered last year that some instructors were just doing peer feedback, then the students would revise and then they would get a grade, and they couldn't revise after getting the teacher feedback and grade. And it was caught whenever there was a student complaint. It was usually that they came to me, usually involved that they couldn't revise. So it was partly “this will prevent some complaints,” but also just it's good practice and it's important to encourage revision in a variety of ways...and peer feedback has a different purpose from teacher feedback.

Roxanne’s comments highlight a teacher-student interaction that rejects “banking with summative assessment” (or “peer learning with summative assessment”) in favor of a more dialogic learning environment with commitments to formative learning.

One final relationship—between class and community—arose in a few interviews, but most strongly in Beverly’s:

one of the things that I’m going to do in the second part of this course where students are doing a lot of research, but more research into the community since they have this community engagement focus already and there’s so many projects locally and even on campus. I want to bring much more community work into, like, into every writing class, and I think because it’s an urban campus, it’s really doable.

Beverly talked about community-based research, community literacy work, and community outreach as elements of FYC regularly throughout the interview, highlighting it as both civically important and also a valuable method for constructing a learning environment.

While—as with course content—these WPAs described the work of FYC as a range of choices made by individual instructors in their programs (with each classroom and teacher developing their own approaches), they also talked about these teaching methods as choices that the WPA might (or should) be involved in negotiating with individual instructors. In some cases, their concern about certain methods led them to articulate a desire to transform the practices in individual classrooms, or to promote more shared understandings of those methods across the program.

### *Approaches to Writing*

Another “teaching method/pedagogical approach” which was not mentioned explicitly often—but seemed to be a shared assumption—was the value of “process” approaches to writing. Implied by references to “peer review” and “revision” and “prewriting” and “remediation” and “reflection,” most WPAs in this study showed some degree of commitment to “process over product.” Beverly mentions their training in process approaches to writing, but Rachel is the only WPA who mentions their attempts to support a transformation in how FYC instructors approach writing in their classes

[I assign] a little thin text that’s called [something] like *The Principles of Teaching Writing*—it’s just like a Bedford text—but it basically is an approach for writing in the disciplines. It’s like a little green book, it’s not great...but I just wanted something...I wanted the new instructors to have something that could be a backdrop of authority, to be like “okay, writing classes are *process* classes, like it’s a *practice* class, like it’s not a products-based class.”

This framing of writing as a “practice,” which needs to be approached with an attention to the processes of composition—as opposed to simply focusing on the final product or “polished composition”—then seems to be something that Rachel is negotiating with their instructors as they establish “better” methods for teaching students in FYC.

### ***Methods of Enacting Pedagogical Theories***

As is clear in the process/product subsection (less than a page for one of the bigger issues that we talk about in composition with outsiders), the WPAs in this study did not spend a lot of time addressing the teaching methods being used by individual instructors in FYC. Some referenced teaching pedagogical theory or teaching practicum style courses for their graduate student instructors, and others talked about running

professional development style workshops for instructors...but the content of those courses and workshops was often left unsaid. In contrast (visible in the first part of this chapter), WPAs in the study spent a lot of time talking about course content as a site of negotiation and transformation.

It is interesting, then, to consider three different reflections—one from Kay, one from May, and one from Rachel—in which they talked about methods of enacting anti-racist (and feminist) teaching in a classroom. Each weighs something of course content, then seems to push for a hard to encapsulate “something more” which is tied to classroom practices, assessment, angles of approach to language, etc. Kay muses:

it’s not just enough to have a diverse syllabus right anymore... what are some actual anti-racist teaching methods... we need to change our pedagogy, we need to radically change assessment, we need to think about—you know—how are we using academic English as a bludgeon and not as a...conversation

Kay notes that the syllabus—seemingly the sequence of readings—is “not enough,” and further (with “actual”) seems to signal that syllabus tweaks which simply slot new content into an existing paradigm do little to “radically change” (or transform) FYC.

Though less potentially critical of the course content, May seems to be arguing that an anti-racist pedagogy can exist in any course, regardless of content:

I think that you can teach writing in an anti-racist way, in a feminist way without [it being an explicit content focus]... who are you assigning? what's your curriculum? who are students reading? whose experiences are you presenting as normative and whose experiences are unusual or exotic? What are you valuing about language practices? what are you teaching them about language practices?

how do you construct your authority in the classroom?... I can be an anti-racist teacher without having explicit anti-racist content in the class

May's observations about normativity/exoticization ask us to negotiate and grapple with a potentially uncomfortable position re: the content we include and how we frame it. At times, May even seems to feel that the imperative to make gender or race or other axes of oppression explicit in the content of the class might be less effective:

Occasionally, we do get "well, why are we talking about this in a writing course?" And I don't necessarily want to say I'm sympathetic to that view...but I mean, I certainly do hold the view that like not everything is up for discussion in a writing course, and that this isn't a cultural studies course

May ends this observation by highlighting the enthusiasm—but also potential performativity—of some approaches to anti-racist pedagogy in FYC:

So much of my life is working with grad students that I think sometimes they think that an anti-racist pedagogy is like, just like standing in front of the classroom being like "fight the power"... like, okay, well that's one way it can look...But I can be an anti-racist teacher, without having like explicit anti-racist content in the class

Between Kay and May, there is a call to focus on classroom interactions, methods of teaching, approaches to assessment, implicitly/explicitly shared values and aims and language ideologies, etc.

Rachel also connects anti-racist transformation of teaching not just to the content in classes, but to teaching and assessment practices. Talking about how they were



energized by the Demand for Black Linguistic Justice (2020) by the Black Caucus of the NCTE/CCCC, Rachel identifies:

a demand for more than just “understanding your white language supremacy” and teaching black literature...[but] understanding that so many of our teaching practices are anti-black...I’m glad to see the movement and the field around leveraging assessment for kind of liberatory and emancipatory [work]. And I see it as part of—I don’t want to use the word reparations, because I don’t think changing our assessment practices is like a form of reparations—but, it gets us closer to that conversation of how reparations can look in terms of writing instruction at a university.

While Kay, May, and Rachel frame this work in relation to anti-racist (and feminist) practice, the push to go “beyond content” seems germane to how we might apply all transformative theories to WPA and FYC work.

### **Curricular Structure/Course Types**

Having explored the WPAs’ thoughts on course content and pedagogical approaches, I now pivot to their focus on curricular structure and course types—a section somewhat forecast by content (literature in themed seminars, applied genre approaches in the second part of a two-course sequence, etc.). The participants talked a lot about the courses in their programs and how they were historically configured, presently developed, and might be transformed in the future through acts of negotiation and translation. These visions of the course often forecast their views of the aims/purposes of FYC, but also speak to the local situations they seek to negotiate—something to keep in

mind, particularly in times of stark contrast (such as polarized views on Remedial/basic writing).

### ***Remedial***

In the First Year Composition part Chapter 1, I began the subsection on FYC Course Types Today with an exploration of Remedial or Basic Writing approaches to FYC. While some participants made only glancing comments about this course type (Daniel “if you count basic writing courses...we have somewhere along the lines of 200 sections [of FYC] a semester”)—where the existence of the course was simply a fact of life—others staked out Basic Writing as an important topic when thinking about negotiation, translation, and what it means to do transformative work in writing programs.

Alex begins with an account of why they were hired to be a WPA at their institution in the first place: “My [research] is on writing placement practices...so my committee wanted to hire me because the department was trying to make changes with placement...based on best research practices.” Alex’s colleagues hired them because of their previous transformative research on this topic and brought them in with the intent that they translate that “best practice” knowledge—from the field and from their research—into local practice. Alex elaborates on the aims of that transformation:

We have [FYC 0] and [FYC 0.5 but] there are so few developmental classes offered now...We revised our placement method [and agreed] as a department...that we wanted to place more students into [FYC 1] directly, so we have very few students taking [FYC 0]. We’re only offering one section of that a year, sometimes.

Even with this agreement as a department, Alex has to negotiate how instructors' ideas of course content and aims continue to place pressure to revitalize developmental/remedial courses for certain students:

some of my colleagues without that kind of [writing studies] background are raising questions about whether students are underprepared or basically they're thinking that we should implement a different exit strategy, because the students who pass [FYC 1] now, they think are not ready for [FYC 2], but that's not that's not really what I see.

Alex elaborates on the WPA work that they did in their first few years—bringing in speakers, running workshops, meeting with instructors, revising the outcomes—in an attempt to move the department away from “developmental” classes, then notes exasperatedly:

some people were like, “Well, wait, what's happening. We're not offering any—you know—or, we're offering so few sections of developmental classes and the students are not prepared” and we're like, “Well. This is what we agreed to, and you're wrong.”

From an initial negotiation, Alex began to work on remedying the dominant remedial view of writing—with peer buy in—and successfully transformed the outcomes, course offerings, and training...but not completely (one section remaining, some holdout faculty, some divergent interpretation of the outcomes, etc.). Alex's transformative successes are nonetheless significant in their program.

Others, like Kay (“we don't have a remedial program; all of our courses are credit bearing”) and Julia (“[we have FYC 1], which is the first year writing course that is credit

bearing [and FYC 0], that is credit bearing but does not count for the requirement”) emphasized how “remedial” writing often “counts” (or not) in writing programs and re: core-curricular requirements. Exploring their intent to transform basic writing at their institution, Julia recounts how:

we did start some initial things...I mean, I think it was important to start reforming and reconsidering what [FYC 0] is, to stop thinking of as a deficit course, and to empower the students in that course in a different way...and to start thinking about why is it [FYC 0], why doesn't it count towards the credit? Can we partner with different programs to invite people in, to see the work of these students...I mean, I think that that was a start.

Julia's thoughts about transforming the remedial class consider how the course and others construct students, and ask an important transformative question before pivoting to the types of negotiations and coalition building that they might have to do in order to meaningfully change (or eliminate) the course. As they went on, Julia seemed to have multiple potential positive resolutions—helping student self-perceptions through reframing, helping to change institutional cultures of how the students were perceived, preserving the course but increasing the value (through broader connections), or ultimately building up enough support to argue for the course to fulfill the requirement (or else dissolve it).

At the same time, some WPAs seemed to see decisions about eliminating basic writing as an element of institutional self-image. Sam observes that “if you're going to think of working at an institution that thinks itself as an elite school...then you [need to]

think about messaging and how you think about writing is not as ‘remedial’ but as kind of like ‘experiential.’” Put more bluntly by May:

It's really humiliating for me to have to say that we really don't have basic writing at [our Institution]...because the university likes to proclaim that like “there are no basic writers”...and that any “basic” writers could be found on the regional campuses and so like we don't have to get our hands dirty, that's not our problem...there's just so much elitism.

May's feelings about basic writing were particularly strong, and were based in their long history of working in basic writing contexts. As they got into it, it became clear how much they saw “basic writing” as important and transformative work:

I worked in basic writing classes [and] a writing center that was designed for students in those particular basic writing courses...And that immediately got me thinking “what's up with this?” These are the writers who the university has marked as deficient in some way, that the university has marginalized. Look how neatly this lines up with their positioning in society as well...Those are questions I've carried with me: “who has access to the university and who doesn't? who is set up to be successful in the university and who is not? Who gets the resources and who does not?”

Speaking to certain aims and purposes of FYC—to grant access and resources to marginalized students so they can be successful—May took a position that was opposite to that of other WPAs in the study. While other WPAs (and I) might disagree with May whether it is more humiliating to 1) not have basic writing or 2) accept valuations of certain students that label them as “basic,” they all share the concern of how an institution

constructs—and thus approaches the service of—students...and see those constructions as key sites for negotiation and doing transformative WPA work.

### *Pre-Collegiate*

The second subsection on FYC Course Types Today that I surveyed in the introduction concerned pre-collegiate (AP, IB, concurrent enrollment, and dual credit) alternatives to FYC. WPAs in this study often gestured to these programs and how they affect placement and credit. Kay reports that:

[For] students who come in with AP credits or some other really high placement test score there's a two-credit accelerated option for them. And transfer students who took the first semester of a sequence somewhere else have a two-credit option to kind of top that off here.

For some WPAs, like Roxanne, pre-collegiate work was just part of their program and another site to manage as they thought about their overarching project of negotiating course content and aims:

I'm working with our dual credit coordinator, who's also composition instructor, and we have a collaborative research project with some of the dual-credit teachers where we're talking about how issues of race and racism are negotiated in the different dual credit classrooms in different contexts.

In such programs, pre-collegiate options were often constructed as uncontroversial, even generally positive.

For other WPAs, however, pre-collegiate options were bound up in complex issues of money. Sam observes that their “[institution] is not known as a neoliberal institution for nothing...it seeks to monetize any kind of experience that it can,” including

by increasing alternative and pre-collegiate offerings. Julia gives some similar insight, albeit in the direction of cutting back on pre-collegiate offerings:

So, we had support from the [Institution], that came with a dovetailed request—well, or demand—which was about increasing enrollment through changing the...making it harder to test out of the class. They were changing the scores and so it was going to be inherently increasing the size and so it was like with this increased size...which was clearly going to make them a bunch of money.

For several WPAs, negotiating what sort of pre-collegiate offerings were accepted (or not) not only served the institution, but also served the Writing Program; it enabled them to hire more full-time instructors, or to give contingent/part-time faculty better compensation/more courses--or, in one case, to help a former employee avoid deportation. By centralizing programs where FYC was taught in high schools, WPAs were able to extend their negotiations of dominant conceptions into new instructor pools through professional development, centralized outcomes, and course agreements.

One WPA—May—talked about pre-collegiate options at length in their interview, and I'd like to give their attention some extended attention. May begins by describing the impact of pre-collegiate options on FYC at their institution:

We only have about 30% of the incoming class that takes first year writing now, because so many of them are bringing either dual credit...or AP credit. [Our institution] also has the portfolio program [where students can]...submit a portfolio of their writing, and we give them specific guidelines of what has to be in that portfolio...This year the pandemic has blown everything to hell [and]

we're going to have 1000 extra students taking [FYC 1] this year, because they didn't earn AP credit.

May begins by observing how many students “now” (traditionally, in pre-COVID present) place out of FYC. Their state has a range of course agreements with different concurrent enrollment and dual credit programs, and their institution has its own portfolio option to place out, but May feels that the biggest impact comes from their state’s decision to accept a 3 on the AP exam as “equivalent” to FYC:

That’s what really killed our [FYC] enrollment, honestly, because up to that point we required I think a four. And, yeah, we, we always had some students get [placed out] but it was when it dropped to three that our [FYC] enrollments were just decimated...So yeah, so the fact that so many of them come with credit and these various ways. It makes our situation different.

May notes that most of this came into place before they were the WPA, and that their own preference is for students to go through the FYC program, where there can be more quality control over what course content and understandings are being trafficked. They explain how they handle this:

More often than not, I refuse to offer credit because so many of those [concurrent or dual enrollment] courses, they’re literature courses. You know they write maybe one paper, and I was like, that's a high school English class...at best, it's a crappy literature course, not a writing course. That can be hard for some 18-year-olds and occasionally their parents who contact me. That can be hard for them to hear.



As May addresses the dismay that students and parents experience when they find out that their course credits won't carry over, a larger issue comes into view:

I mean...and as somebody who is the parent of a high schooler, I get it, because...the propaganda that my daughter's high school uses to talk people into signing their kids up for these courses...I mean I just roll my eyes at it. Like "oh, you know it totally counts, and you're going to start college with all these credits" and inwardly I'm just like, "No, they aren't!" Especially if they're going out of state...if they're in state then, yeah, given who I know her school partners with—I mean my daughter's taking a dual credit course right now through [other college], it's a public speaking course...[and if] she goes in state AND there's a public speaking requirement, THEN you know she can check that box—but a lot of these kids, you know, that just not the case.

While the commodification of composition is an issue in the postsecondary space, May seems to be observing the degree to which secondary schools and testing/curriculum companies are—knowingly or unknowingly—leveraging the public's lack of knowledge about college composition to sustain a lucrative economy. May also observes (as does Alex when talking about "really wealthy students...doing early college") how aggressively parents and students pursue these pre-college options, seeking ways for their children to get a leg up and move more quickly to classes with ostensibly more "consequential" content. As Deb Brandt (1998) observes:

Literacy, like land, is a valued commodity in this economy, a key resource in gaining profit and edge. This value helps to explain, of course, the lengths people will go to secure literacy for themselves or their children. But it also explains why

the powerful work so persistently to conscript and ration the powers of literacy.

The competition to harness literacy, to manage, measure, teach, and exploit it, has intensified throughout the century. (p. 169)

Brandt concludes that “we serve instead as conflicted brokers between literacy’s buyers and sellers. At our most worthy, perhaps, we show the sellers how to beware and try to make sure these exchanges will be a little fairer, maybe, potentially, a little more mutually rewarding” (p. 183). In participants responses, it is clear why—as brokers of literacies—WPAs are so conflicted, and why this particular course type presents such challenges for negotiation, translation, and transformative work.

### ***First Year Composition***

While generally constructed as the norm for FYC—the single, mandatory, writing and rhetoric focused class in which students do significant writing and revision—less than half of the respondents to this study reported teaching in such a curricular structure...and were often sparing in their descriptions of it (or why it was preferable to other curricular structure). May observes:

I think [our] composition program is pretty traditional in that, um, you know, our students take [FYC 1], which is our first-year composition course, we...you know...we don’t use stretch. We and the regional campuses do use a studio model.

Dismayed that they did not have basic writing, and that pre-collegiate options chipped away at enrollment, May’s account appears to portray a thin program...but later on they connect FYC 1 to a multi-year writing initiative and seem to describe a FYC 2 course. In this, perhaps, “our first year composition course” speaks more to the course content and

aim of the class. Kay also describes a “one semester course that meets the students’ first year writing requirement” which is “five credits, typically, and so it tries to do a two-semester sequence in one semester.” Like May’s course, Kay describes a “rhetoric based common...first year writing curriculum” which they “perceive” as being close to standard “for the field.”

Two other WPAs—Julia and Sam—describe a “single course” FYC 1 requirement, but do so while outlining programs that could mostly be described as “directed self-placement” in style, with multiple levels of course fulfilling (or not, in the case of Basic Writing) the FYC requirement as described by (Royer & Gilles, 2016). Each course in that DSP-esque framework then shares some version of the rhetoric and writing based curriculum described by May and Kay. Because these WPAs seemed to feel that their approaches were standard, they did not comment extensively on how placement (self-directed or otherwise) might also benefit from further degrees of negotiation or transformation...but other WPAs might if asked.

### ***First Year Seminar***

Operating in a First Year Experience program at a small college, Rachel describes a FYC program that more closely follows the “first year seminar” model—although it cleaves more closely to traditional FYC at times.

we have 30 sections of our first-year experience class...we don’t only just focus on writing in that class, because their writing instructor is also their advisor. So when I’m training instructors I have to think about how they’re not just their writing teacher, they’re also their advisor and how can how can those two things come together in a way that’s meaningful because you know like learning about

like what discipline you might want to be a part of there's cool writing tasks to help you look into that and that kind of thing.

While having WID elements to it, the course further tackles social justice themes, as well as instructor interest, posing occasional challenges for Rachel:

being the only writing studies...being like...being positioned as the writing expert by other people sometimes sucks, it's sometimes hard because, you know, I, I've just never been the kind of scholar that's like, yes I do know a whole bunch about [rhetoric and composition]... I'm most comfortable sharing what I know if we're *all* doing that, rather than like this like top down [approach]...So, having to step into the position of an expert has actually been challenging for me.

Rachel finds the institution's commitment to a seminar approach sometimes difficult to navigate with the institution (and instructors') pressure for Rachel to provide a centralizing/norming expertise; for Rachel, the pluralistic seminar model is a good pairing with their views about teaching communities.

Kay, on the other hand, describes their program as a traditional "rhetoric-based" FYC, but notes that:

each instructor gets to choose a theme. And then they use that to guide the common readings and stuff. And I feel like that's another source where I need to do more support and guidance...as a WPA then my work is like 'what kind of professional development can I offer so that no one forgets that they're teaching a writing class, and they're not teaching a class on their theme?'...what I will say is this: instructors who are the most...afield, far afield from the common

assignments definitely are teaching a first year seminar on something that they want to jam on.

While both Rachel and Kay use common readings, teaching groups, professional developments, and outcomes-like documents to give their programs a stable core, the different tenor of their comments about centrifugal (theme and aims diversification) and centripetal (rhet-comp norming) suggest that WPA negotiation in “first year seminar” is a potentially fruitful site for future investigation.

### *FYC as Part of a Sequence*

More frequently than WPAs described a single FYC course, they described multi-semester sequences of courses which students moved through at their institution. Alex describes “four classes kind of in a sequence. So, we have [FYC 0], [FYC 0.5], [FYC 1], and [FYC 2]. [FYC 1] and [FYC 2] are like Comp 1 and 2.” With two different Basic Writing classes (into which students were placed), Alex’s subsequent FYC 1 and 2 classes—“comp 1 is like a ‘beginning to work with integrating sources’... more like ‘intro to academic writing’ and comp 2 is the research and information literacy class”—meant that students could conceivably be taking “First Year Composition” for 3 semesters. This “Comp 1 and 2” model was popular—May, Beverly, Roxanne, and Daniel all similarly offered 2 courses—and seemed to have both affordances and limitations.

For May, the two-course sequence enabled them to differentiate content between the two courses in a way that seemed to parallel the WAC/WID distinction—one course on more general concepts of rhetoric and academic writing, and a second course on situated conventions. They describe FYC 1 as more of a “writing about writing” course

with readings of writing studies and rhetoric scholarship along with student writing and 5 major writing projects from a course shell, then see FYC 2 as “Advanced composition...as a course focused on genre, discourse communities, and discipline specific research.” For others, as well, the logic here was that FYC 1 developed a shared base upon which the second course could build.

With the assumption that FYC 2 should build on FYC 1, curricular alignment becomes a central challenge according to WPAs in the study. Beverly observes that their institution “has a two course sequence” which “is consistent across the state” institutions to signal shared understandings (for credit transfers) of the “2 course sequence...but then what the curriculum is within those two courses can vary” both within their institution and between institutions (creating transfer issues). Daniel adds more to the challenge within an institution, noting that they have to ask the question:

how can we make sure that our students are having a consistent experience as well...that sort of not-quite-norming. We don't want everyone to teach the same projects in the exact same way—that doesn't acknowledge that those different types of expertise—but at the same time, we don't want a student who takes [FYC 1] one semester, and then [FYC 2] (That's our intro and intermediate writing) the next semester, to go into the second course and have absolutely no idea what's going on because they were so different from one another.

By establishing a second course in the sequence, something of a “shared starting point” is posited, which then adds pressure to the WPA to “norm” the classes—either with core assignments, texts, readings, rubrics, etc. (as May does), or with stronger articulations of the shared outcomes, aims, and purposes of the class (as Daniel does). More courses in a

sequence enable a WPA to expand the amount of time that instructors have to work with students on deep issues of language and society, increase the curricular real estate (and thus visibility to instructors and administrators outside of the program), and provides a rationale for WPAs to do more training/assessment/outcomes articulation, and more...and in these ways have great transformative potential. At the same time, it's clear, they also come with new challenges that need to be negotiated carefully.

### **Aims/Purposes of FYC**

There is a popular image often shared at DEI workshops or other pedagogy talk type events that has continued to evolve over the years. In the same genre as the “climb that tree” cartoon (in which 5 different animals given the task of ‘climbing that tree’ represent our educational system), the panel drawing depicts several conditions under which individuals (all different heights) attempt to watch a baseball game over a fence. The earliest version I remember seeing of it had three panels--Reality, Equality, and Equity—each representing different configurations of wooden crates that 3 people of different heights can stand on. Shortly thereafter, I remember first seeing the fourth panel, which is labeled different things in different versions, but often “Justice” or “Liberation.” More recently, I’ve noticed the addition of a fifth panel, often labeled “Inclusion” (the full sequence is portrayed in Fig. 2 below).

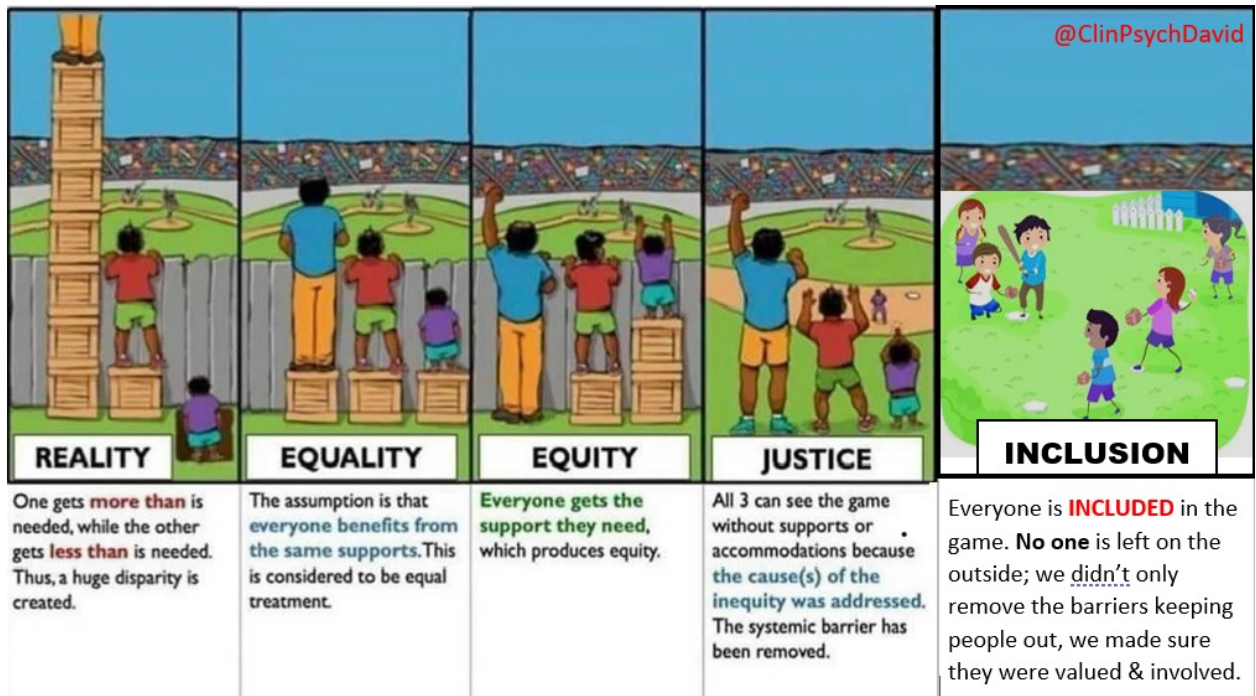


Figure 2: Modified "Equality and Equity" Illustration from David Murphy's Twitter account @ClinPsychDavid

There are many critiques of these images, which have achieved performative wokeness meme status. The metaphor isn't particularly strong, and ultimately, as Do (personal communication, March 31, 2022) points out, people only get to play the game at "Inclusion" and the game is baseball: an American cultural institution, governed by arcane and abstruse rules, competitively win/lose, ostensibly meritocratic (but absolutely not), and shot through with questions of disability justice. So, it is with some trepidation that I include this image in this dissertation, but I do so because it helps to illustrate a few things that I think have to do with the aims and purposes of FYC, and with where "transformative" work might take place.

In May's lament about the absence of Basic Writing courses at their institution, their critique centers around access to the university, success within the university, and the allocation of resources (in support of access and success). They expand on the aims of FYC after lamenting the lack of Basic Writing:



in teaching composition we're not only teaching them about "writing," we're teaching them "how to do school." And I absolutely see that as an issue of access...I just think it's critical for some of our students that we, you know, we need to teach them "how to do school," we have to meet them where they are as learners. And we have to teach them how to do school, to help them be successful in college

Attempting to map this onto Fig. 2, my first inclination is to put May's approach in the "Equity" box with other approaches that seek to give everyone the same "unobstructed" view without eliminating the systemic barrier. I think, however, that May might critique as fanciful the imperative for a WPA to build/guide/administer a single course (or one-track sequence) which does all things for all people in a transformative way; their focus on basic writing as "designed for students" seems to speak to this.

Like May, Kay also described an initial approach to FYC that treads similar waters—of access and inclusion—before building toward something potentially 'more':  
to [teach FYC] in a way that's as inclusive and keeping within I think, what are the great promises of the field right and when we, when we want to think of our best selves, right, [our aim is] to work so that students can find agency and voice and to identify political problems and work for solutions

Kay's identification of the politics surrounding the teaching of FYC and the need to solve them takes on more specificity as they continue:

I think that's the next step in anti-racist work that I know...I'm going to try some stuff, and fail some stuff, and do some stuff wrong, and do some stuff better, and, you know, hope that more students are...I don't know...I hope fewer students

suffer from, you know, racist structures that we have right. The struggle that I always have is about “how do you work within a racist structure to dismantle it?” Kay’s focus on “dismantling” the racist structure in which they work—and part of that dismantling being an aim of the class, something the students are working toward as well—speaks to a different kind of transformation to me. Attempting to map onto Fig. 2, this is where I see the utility of the fence metaphor; rather than helping students to access “the game” (school, society) by helping them see over “the fence” (racist/classist/etc. standards) through the stacking of “crates” (remedial classes), Kay’s approach draws attention to the fence itself as something which is constructed, and thus can be deconstructed.

## **Conclusion**

Like others in this chapter, Kay portrays transformative work as an ongoing and imperfect process—not some polished product—but also as a project characterized by hope and a commitment to the struggle. The transformative efforts and agendas described in this chapter highlight the many different fronts on which WPAs engage in the practical day-to-day of FYC while also maintaining a commitment to critical reflection and institutionalizing recognition of the politics of knowledge. Whether doing work on the content of the classes, or the methods of teaching employed, or the overall curricular structure, or the unifying aims/purposes of doing FYC, these WPAs are engaged in processes of envisioning what is possible (*to dynaton*) and working with others within an ecology to negotiate more just conditions.

## Chapter 4: Negotiation, Collaboration, and Support: Theorizing Working with Others

*“While the idea that acting in collaboration is an important and/or useful activity is itself a principle, I would argue that it’s pretty critical—even essential—for successful WPA work.” (Adler-Kassner in Malenczyk, 2016, p. 468)*

*“[WPA work is] so much about building relationships and it’s building relationships with the people teaching in your program, it’s building relationships with the administration, it’s building relationships with the students.” (Kay)*

The previous chapter focused on course content, teaching methods, curricular structure, and the overarching aims/purposes of FYC, which helped to illuminate some of the many ways that WPAs do important knowledge work while dealing with practicalities of FYC work. As they dealt with historical and present realities of how FYC was delivered in their programs (and to what ends)—negotiating conceptions of composition—participants in the study foregrounded the importance of working intentionally toward transformation while also accepting/acknowledging the diverse expertise and interests within their programs. Building on that discussion, this chapter pivots from the course(s) to the people in, around, and invested in the programs that these WPAs have been tasked with running.

As the WPAs in this study talked about negotiating theories of composition, they did so by addressing the various constituents and stakeholders that are part of the FYC ecology at their institution. These ecologies varied considerably from institution type (2-year community college) to institution type (R1: Doctoral Universities – Very High Research activity), but always represented complex mixes of people in different roles. At a basic level, all WPAs worked with at least 5 different categories of stakeholders: Students, Instructors, Department/Program Leadership, the Broader Institution, and External Stakeholders. In the case of programs at institutions with graduate programs,

graduate students (as part of the “Student” category) and graduate student instructors (as part of the “Instructor” category) also constituted a major stakeholder group.

As the WPAs in this study talked about their work with these stakeholders they gave examples of negotiating divergent understandings of composition, with stakeholders sometimes reflecting dominant conceptions of composition, but also with stakeholders often enriching the WPAs’ transformative work by instigating critical reflection. WPAs identified these stakeholders as people they saw as their job to support—helping students to achieve goals, defending instructor autonomy, etc.—but, again, also found that these stakeholders were often also their greatest supporters...the allies they needed in their transformative work. Finally, to that note, the WPAs in the study describe productive collaborations with these stakeholders which enable them to make the kinds of changes that they would not be able to on their own.

## **Working with Students**

### ***Working with Undergraduate Students***

The WPAs in this study often mentioned practices of negotiation and collaboration with their students in ways that meaningfully transformed the teaching of FYC at their institution, and did so in ways that highlighted how valuable students can be as local resources for generating productive change. Several WPAs talked specifically about the importance of working with undergraduate students to keep them grounded. As May notes about finally getting back into the FYC classroom:

I’ve really missed working with first year students, because I’d always done it, and then when I came here, I suddenly was not doing it at all. And I really missed them. But it definitely helps...to be able to say like, yeah, none of my students are

really getting this either so when we get when we revise the pilot curriculum for next year we've got to make sure that we, you know, do XYZ or fix ABC or whatever.

Quite often, seeing student's failures or struggles highlighted areas where attempts at transformation had failed (or needed tweaking) to better serve students. Alex describes trying out some new curriculum:

I did all these like cool assignments and then one of my classes, it was like they were late starts...basically all students who had taken the class more than once, and failed. Obviously, and like, some of them just couldn't even. I was like, they didn't they didn't know how to do the work they didn't know what was going on...and so I was like, "Man, this is totally like shattered all my expectations."...For these theories to effect any change, they have to be dynamic. Because we can be as well informed as ever, but if it doesn't work, then...Well, well I guess some people do that right like, "Okay, well this is how it has to be and if you're not doing it you fail," but I want to figure out how I can support my students with individualized instruction

Daniel had a similar experience of student failure which highlighted for them some areas that might be ripe for some sort of change:

I really like the idea of honoring the work that goes in, it's something that makes a lot of sense to me. And it actually sort of depressed me a little bit...because I had a student a few semesters back, who worked her ass off, but because I had a more like standards based grading form she didn't pass. Even though she made a ton of progress over the course of the semester, because I had a thing that said

“this is the level of writing that is established in the syllabus, that I’m evaluating everyone on,” I didn’t feel like I could fairly bump her grade up while at the same time holding others to that same standard...Her story really stuck in my head for a few semesters and when I read Asao [Inoue]’s book I was like, “Yes, this would have allowed her to pass.”

Students factor heavily into how Daniel thinks about translating Inoue’s transformative approach to assessment to their local context:

There’s so much [theory] out there that can be done at the community college level with a very, very different body of students in open access institutions in general, but [specifically] community colleges, like in my [FYC 1] classes...In a [FYC 1] class, I could have people who have no major at all...I could have someone who is getting their certificate in welding, I could have someone who’s getting their contracting license, I could have someone who is in a culinary [program], I could have an English major...

Daniel notes how the difference in student backgrounds and aims creates a unique environment where some form of adaptive grading—like that proposed by Inoue—would be useful (albeit logistically challenging), and then explains the process of modifying it in negotiation with their students.

One common theme was having explicit conversations with students about what FYC is attempting to do, or, as Beverly says “why are we doing this?” These conversations then take on an element of critique—inviting students to question/challenge assumptions of FYC—as well as providing space for students to think about what they bring to bear. Alex describes connecting this to their transformative

commitments, both finding ways to transform how students approach rhetoric/writing, and finding ways to work with students to make their experiences of college more affirming:

As I'm getting older and more experienced I'm also having more explicit conversations with my students, especially about feminist work. So, when they want to argue a position and I'm trying to explain why I want to focus more on analysis—or even in class discussions—I talk to them about...taking a feminist decolonial approach, and it's important that we think about collaboration and building *on* not tearing down. In terms of transformative theories...I'm trying to do culturally sustaining work. That is one that I am actively pursuing. I have explicit conversations with my students about it...and they find that validating [when] they can relate to...we have similar kinds of material conditions and backgrounds. That I'm in this position of power and affirming their experiences and their writing and making it explicit I think is valuable.

Beverly also sees student experiences as important content for the course, grounding their ideas of how to transform both program-level and classroom-level practices: “[WPAs need to] really engage with people to really look at: What are your students bringing into the classroom? What do they know? How can you as a teacher build on what they know? And of course that dovetails really nicely with a lot of anti-racist pedagogy.” Beverly’s resulting curriculum then involves students reflecting on what they bring, but also engaging in a critical questioning of school and society with the aim of transformative change:

Students say, “I’ve always thought about this but nobody’s ever asked me to [reflect on language ideology]. I’ve never looked at it as something you would look at in school!” I feel like *there’s* the theory building, it’s like we’re looking at writing and language and relating to people and communities and relationships and like...what are they all doing to help us think about where we are and how we can make changes.

Beverly sees transformative change coming from students, who go out into the world more likely to question and challenge the dominant narratives.

Other WPAs think about the role that student feedback plays in assessment and in highlighting program-level adjustments that need to be made. Rachel describes student-centric assessment at their institution, noting that “any assessment project we do is more looking for like descriptions from our students and our instructors about the different ways they teach.” For Kay, this kind of assessment—based in “what kinds of questions students are asking”—is key for making FYC “robust and rich and diverse and equitable and transformative for students.” Kay’s experience with this goes beyond that of other WPAs because of a local peculiarity:

One of the reasons...is because we have access to some differential tuition funds that students voted in place years ago...before I got here, but then we have to keep reapplying for it every three years. Every three years we’re making the case [for FYC] to students to vote on. There’s a student panel that votes to keep the funding going and it has to be approved continuing on its way up (through the admin), but these student senate folks are the ones who are responding. So, I think



that part of what that makes me do right is to always be accountable to different stakeholders on campus in a way that's maybe different from other programs.

Finally, in ways that sometimes echo the "intro to college" conception of FYC, WPAs note the importance of FYC as a site for students to negotiate a whole new educational landscape, where we can support them as they go through their own transformations. Kay notes that students often:

meet more people on the first day of orientation than they've ever seen in their whole lives and so there's, there's a lot of change happening for them. Right? and that's another thing to remember in our, in our first-year writing classes: that that all kinds of transformations are happening in terms of what they're considering and taking in

Simultaneously, though, May observes how WPAs and instructors of FYC can be transformed by our students:

I feel like if I'm open and listen they teach me a lot of what I need to know which honestly I mean that pretty much matches up with my philosophy of teaching too...that, you know, if you are open and honest with students and like leave yourself open to learning from them like...you'll learn the things you need to know to teach them.

### ***Working with Graduate Students (as Students)***

Most of the reflections by WPAs about working with graduate students (as students) center around their time in teaching practicums, pedagogical theory classes, or professional development sessions, all of which are often expected roles for WPAs who work at "institutions that had graduate student training at the center of the position"

(Beverly). Thinking about grad students as future (or imminent) teachers of writing who play an essential role in transforming the teaching of writing, WPAs talked about the negotiations with these students—in classes and in non-class learning opportunities, to help them grow as thinkers. Simultaneously, WPA anxieties about their *own* theoretical/scholarly recency led them to think of these interactions with grad students as learning opportunities for themselves, through which they might better do transformative composition work.

May, Beverly, and Julia all report a challenge with teaching practicums at institutions where instructors are drawn from multiple departments, especially where English Literature is a core focus. A frustration about not having “a lot of opportunities to teach upper-level courses in their disciplines, or in their areas of specialization” (May) often boiled over into resentment about the kinds of pedagogical training they were being asked to engage in. As Julia describes it at their institution:

there was, you know, a long-standing agreement with some of the Graduate instructors from the English department where we were also training new graduate instructors every year for a course that they didn't want to teach you know so it was just, it was, it was...ah, it was a hard.

May experiences this too in their program, where they:

“have a yearlong practicum...two separate courses [PED 1] in the fall [PED 2] in the spring. The goal in [PED 1] is really to support TAs during the first semester of teaching [FYC 1]...[and] the second semester we continue to offer that support, but we're also preparing them to teach [FYC 2].”

Because FYC 2 at May's institution is reserved for students with a rhet/comp focus, May often has to defend the utility of PED 2 to non-rhet/comp grad students.

Most intensely of the participants, Beverly was focused on the ways that grad students grow in their program. Starting with the pedagogy course, Beverly notes that "the grad students who were being trained to become writing professionals weren't getting the opportunity to develop what they were studying in theory and pedagogy so much in their own classes." This was because of a history of how the program constructed FYC:

[The past WPA leadership] really standardized the curriculum so everything is in this handbook—the first-year composition handbook—like every assignment, every project, every rubric. So, the teachers aren't really getting to develop their own materials, and I felt like that was really important...for the graduate students who are being trained to teach.

While straddling the line between "graduate student teachers" and "graduate students," Beverly notes how graduate student frustrations with the standardized curriculum highlighted a disconnect between what they were learning in their graduate program and what they were getting to learn on the job.

Beverly was also interested in another type of graduate student learning, a type that resonated with me from my own graduate experience. They talk about an uncomfortable position they found themselves in between the grad students and the department:

we had a situation [where] there were some of the graduate students protesting the department—some of the practices in the department—and they were really angry and kind of started a little protest movement...where they actually named certain

faculty as having racist practices and misogynist his practices. And basically it turned into a real feud between the students and the faculty and the department, and the dean tried to just shut it down, they wouldn't listen to the students...I was working a lot with these students, and I thought they were brave, and I thought they were learning a lot. They weren't doing everything right, certainly, but I thought "you know it's fine if they don't do things right, and if they make mess and, you know, this is, this is how they learn to take charge of their education"

Beverly's reflections on this situation are extensive, and center on how institutions (and faculty) leverage power against graduate students who push for change, attempting to squash it or co-opt it in ways that make it more institutionally palatable. Beverly's ultimate involvement in the situation boiled down to the contingency of the graduate students—who feared expulsion and retaliation—and Beverly's ability to use their tenured position to advocate for and shield them from most repercussions. Summing it up, Beverly notes: "it's going to make everybody better scholars from doing that critical work, but it can be really scary." Beverly is not alone in describing this sort of situation where grad students—steeped in discussions of radical and transformative change—push faculty or institutions beyond their points of comfort, and where the WPA then negotiates between stakeholders.

Where Beverly saw what grad students could learn from these situations, other WPAs felt that they learned a lot themselves when grad students pushed back against program or institutional issues. May describes one of their grad students who

designed a program [about raising racial consciousness] in response to some issues at [institution], and he was working with this kind of team of undergrads

and some grad students to do this, and it was something that we really tried to integrate as much as we could, into the [FYC 1] curriculum

Other WPAs talk about their students making them aware of campus protests, of connecting them to new scholarly literature, of making them aware of problematic practices that they (the WPA) themselves were engaging in, etc. Altogether, though, their feelings about this were best reflected an observation by Roxanne: “I’m...grateful for the graduate students who push us in the right direction and make me aware of things.”

### **Working with Instructors: GSIs, Non-TT Faculty, TT Colleagues**

While many WPAs in this study had a chance to work directly with undergraduate students, others did not—or were only able to do so sporadically. Beverly says about a project that they developed for the FYC curriculum: “I don’t get to teach this project, I only get to teach the teachers who teach this project.” Kay notes how that remove affects their self-perception as a WPA:

I’ve really thought of myself as a teacher, and really thought of myself as a teacher of my colleagues, and, and, and so it’s partially like conduit but then it’s also like how can I see this as a course that I’m teaching, and what are my outcomes for my colleagues and what do I hope that they’ll be able to know and be able to do as a result of me being here

Sometimes as a teacher of the teachers (GSIs, adjuncts, non-TT and TT full time faculty), but also as a colleague, boss, confidante, advocate, and fellow traveler, WPAs in this study often described working with instructors as a key part of achieving transformative goals in their programs—or as a site of negotiation where differences threatened to fully disrupt attempts at change.

### ***Shared Ownership & Collaboration***

While many WPAs in this study talked about the benefits of collaboration and shared ownership (Daniel, for example, before and after this section), Rachel's reflections on their colleagues were particularly energizing:

I found allies...individual people that just speak the same language as you...you just gravitate toward one another. I started talking about this assessment project [and] I said aloud to these two women from [another] department [who work in FYE] "I gotta get [my chair] moved away from this idea that the direct assessment of student writing is a good idea" and they were both like "Yep, we do gotta move him away from that"...Sometimes I wonder if my instincts about writing and about assessment [are good]...and I need people to remind me of that, but I also need people to challenge me

Rachel then frames these people—instructors working around them in the first year experience program—as their most valuable asset

I think as much as you can, having...an interlocutor—[one colleague] is really good at being my interlocutor, where he makes legible for me the stuff that *I* know [but] that *other people* don't know, that he can see really plainly by being around me so often, and hearing the way that I am with students. He can see really well what knowledge I have in ways that I can't, so I think you have to, like, he's been really helpful for me and so have the other two women in my department...just like saying, "what you just did there, I don't think other writing teachers do that." I think having a really good team of like interlocutors that can make legible for you the stuff that is kind of under the surface

In both cases, reflections from other instructors firmly supported a transformative change in Rachel's program—prompting a shift in assessment, making gaps visible, and suggesting new pedagogical approaches—and gave Rachel the confidence to act from a place of authority with outside sanction.

Because of Rachel's comfort with their interlocutors and fellow instructors, they also feel more comfortable including those instructors in their program assessments at all stages, not just as “subjects.” Alex—like many others—reports something similar in their program:

one year, we revised our outcomes to include—rather than the WPA outcome statement—I think it was something about discourse communities. We revised that and then changed it to something about “demonstrate understanding of the history, rhetoric, and grammar of African American language”...we didn't want to do an assessment project for the institution, based on students' mastery of that, or like understanding of it...in the first semester. So [instead] we solicited faculty narratives about how teaching it went. And then like that we could use, we can analyze that and then use what information we learned from it to revise our curricular approaches in the next year.

Many of the WPAs in this study talked about this in relation to some version of feminist administrative theory, and put it in terms of “a flattened hierarchy of administrative structure” (Sam), “an invitational approach” (Kay), and “collaborative community building” (Roxanne).

### ***Negotiating Differences in Instructor Background and Training***

Whether with GSIs from other disciplinary homes, or instructors from other backgrounds, or with a home department in which the WPA was the sole person with a rhet/comp or writing studies background, almost every WPA had a story of negotiating differences in instructor background and training. Even in grad programs with a rhet/comp focus, the turnover of WPAs (and thus teachers of the practicum and approaches to the program) could result in—as it did for May—“a contingent particularly among the older, like the like the third and fourth year, third, fourth and fifth year PhD students who were around before me, who I did not train” and who are resistant to new approaches. These negotiations could be productive—leading to new realizations about the program for the WPA and instructors—or could pose real challenges, necessitating more drastic responses.

As described in past sections, Daniel’s experience at a community college is that “everybody teaches writing, so we have people who are more literary studies, who are more linguistics, who are more developmental or basic writing focused, and then we have people like me who come from a writing studies background.” Daniel’s approach to negotiating this has been to look for the commonalities between the fields, as well as to find values in other disciplines that can be applied to FYC work, actively demonstrating to the instructors in their department that there is no “writing studies” monopoly on “right ways” to do composition. Daniel also feels that their instructors have more buy-in because there’s no chance to “avoid” teaching FYC:

what we value in writing at a community college is different, because in a traditional four-year school—especially one with a graduate school—if you don’t have a background in writing studies or are a tenure-track professor, you can often



avoid teaching writing altogether. You can just say “oh that’s for the grad students, that’s for the adjuncts, that’s for the people who want to do that here.”

Other WPAs (like Rachel) also talk about this “shared ownership” and process of validating the expertise of other instructors as an important part of negotiating differences, and of coming together to effect meaningful change.

Some WPAs, though, encounter strong disciplinary divides based in a long history (locally and more generally) of antagonism. Alex tells a story about:

one of my colleagues who has a literature background, which—I have [a] literature [background]--don’t we all?—She was like, “well, we don’t care what you have to say.” And I had like brought all these books, and I was super prepared, and she was like, “No.” I’m like, “You don’t care what the writing assessment person has to say?” And she’s like, “Oh, we already know what you think, so we don’t want to listen to you” and I was like [\*bewildered gesture\*]

Alex articulates a few takeaways from this:

that kind of taught me...a bunch of different things about being a new faculty member, trying to enact change based on best practices. But also, it made me kind of reroute like “all right well if I can’t make any headway here with this approach, then I’ll try a different approach, or I’ll try a different place.”

As in other places in Alex’s interview, their response is to look at the situation as a rhetorical problem, reflecting on the conflict, thinking of new appeals or angles of approach to that particular instructor, but also weighing other avenues to achieve their goals. It’s possible to see this in Alex’s reframing of assessment—grounding it in faculty narratives—where they likely subverted some of the literature colleague’s expectations.

## **Working with a Leadership Team**

All of the WPAs in this study described some degree of a “leadership team” that they worked with to administer their writing program. In some instances (like Kay’s) these were looser collaborations (between a Writing Program Director, a Writing Center Director, and a Digital Literacy Specialist who worked semi-independently), and in others (like Beverly’s) these were structured, hierarchical teams (Director, Associate Director, multiple grad student Assistant Directors). In many cases, the same feminist administrative theory was operant with members of the leadership team as was with instructors (flattened hierarchies, shared ownership, radical listening, collaboration, etc.), although these collaborations weren’t always without conflict.

Graduate student assistant directors were particularly interesting collaborators to hear about, as their participation in leadership was often seen as a source of “professionalization”—preparing them for future work as a WPA. To that end, there was a tension in some responses about how professional or probationary/provisional these grad student assistant directors were. For others, however, grad student assistant directors fulfilled important roles. Roxanne gives several examples:

It was one of the assistant directors who told me “Hey, some of the undergrads are going to have a march, you know...should we talk to instructors about letting their students participate in this?”...and I was like “Yes! Let’s!” and then we started using our Facebook group [and] our email list [to] share articles, talk about “how can you get involved with the event.” I had heard [about the march] but I wasn’t making the connection to how our instructors were affected and how our students were affected until this graduate student, kind of said that. So, yeah, so I just have been really grateful for that and I mean another, another assistant

director just said the other day—because we were talking about how we want to have a brainstorming meeting where we talk about what goals do we want to set for anti-racist writing instruction—and she said yeah we really, you know, this is really important you know we’ve had three shootings [of black men by police] in [town] recently and...then I felt guilty because I send out these weekly emails to the instructors, and the email that I sent out this Tuesday was just like, “I hope everyone’s doing well, here’s a few announcements, bye.” And I was thinking...about how when someone is murdered in our community ...I read about it but I don’t talk about it with my students...and so I was thinking about “why am I so uncomfortable and what does that say about me, and what community do I want to be in, and how dehumanizing is it for me that this is not an issue...”...[my grad student assistant director] reminded me of that, when she...it was like, yeah my email just did not mention anything.

In both examples, the grad student assistant directors provided a vital lifeline (to instructors, to the undergrads, and to issues outside of the institution) and further connected transformative goals of the program to concrete moments and issues.

May also found their grad student assistant directors to be invaluable collaborators, noting that:

Before I tend to answer questions about “what do you think about curriculum?” or “what do you think about this or what do you think about that?” I tend to answer by saying “well I need to talk it over with the composition team” (meaning myself and my assistant directors)...This is something that I do negotiate with the assistant directors, especially like the first year when I was doing the job. It hit. It

was figuring out like “What the hell do I do with grad students? I haven’t had this before.” I had M.A. students at my former institution, but that was it, and never in that type of relationship, you know? They were my students and my students only. But [now]...I’m still their boss—like the decisions are ultimately mine—but I also really value their expertise...and I want that to be like I want it to be a discussion that we’re all part of that we all have a voice in and where we all feel heard.

May also has their grad student assistant directors as co-instructors of the teaching practicum, invites them to design their own assessment projects, and increasingly delegates other tasks of central administrative importance to them.

There are similar degrees of collaboration, mutual trust, and distributed leadership reported in other WPAs narratives of their work with assistant and associate directors who are not currently grad students (though all except Daniel’s co-WPA were non-tenure track). This is potentially a factor of most of the participants being the “head” WPA, and most being tenured or tenure track, and might deserve more critical attention. As Kay observes:

I’ve been thinking a lot about the changing position of the WPA. So, everyone told me “Don’t take a WPA job until you have tenure. Don’t even apply for jobs that are for WPA...” you know like, whatever. And I just don’t think that’s an institutional possibility anymore, you know. The advice that our mentors who’ve been out of graduate school for a long time, are less aware of like the budget crises and institutional context that are making WPA work more common for less senior faculty.

One participant in this study was a non-tenure track, junior WPA...and their experiences of working in a WPA team were of high ideals and best intentions, and of a commitment to feminist administrative values...but also of a practical day-to-day that didn't always (or often) reflect those commitments. While I do accept the GenAdmin argument—echoed in Kay's observation—that junior WPA work goes beyond the “Promise and Peril” dichotomies, this participant's experiences did make me curious about how the assistant and associate directors working under/with my participants would characterize their collaborations.

Overall, however, the WPAs in this study regularly asserted how hard it would be for them to complete the work of administering their programs without the help of others in their leadership team and saw the collaborations that they had with assistant and associate directors (as well as coordinators and department chairs) as helping them to do broader and more in-depth transformative work; they were, in these representations, working together as a team toward shared goals. When describing their negotiations, they often thought about equitable sharing of labor and credit, and of how they might deconstruct (or share) their own authority for less empowered members of their leadership team.

### **Working with the Broader Institution**

Several WPAs in this study linked their ability to do transformative work to the broader institutional culture and its receptiveness to the kinds of professional knowledge that the WPA brought to bear. While, at times, the needs of the institution—from Sam's “neoliberal” institution, to May's institutional self-image, to Beverly's past institutions' boards of regents—posed challenges to writing programs, these WPAs more often

recounted positive experiences of their work and initiatives being cheered on by the institution at large. Like Beverly's experience getting hired at their current institution, multiple WPAs in the study report "conversations...with administrators who are like, you know, this is an activist place. We want activist scholars and you're not going to get in trouble here" for pushing for transformative change.

Rachel describes their primary transformative commitment to "anti-racist" theory, and remarks on how their institution has

this whole social justice angle...they're like, very progressive about trans rights and Black Lives Matter and the campus has a history of...the students all stood around the like edges of the university and held hands not to let the KKK in and like, there's just really cool like social justice stuff that's part of the [Institution's] history

That institutional commitment comes to bear when Rachel facilitates workshops or teaching circles or faculty reading groups about anti-racist pedagogy:

they all signed up to be a part of this like teaching community that I told them...I was like "there's gonna be like pressing questions about like anti-racist teaching and like how your teaching is like embedded in white language supremacy"...and I was like, looking at their faces like "Is anyone pissed off about this? Like, who's going to come to kill me?" but they seem *down*

Beyond the instructors, Rachel feels that "we have huge support and goodwill from not just the dean's office but really across campus," which then makes her feel more empowered to put more initiatives, trainings, shared texts, etc. forward.

Kay also describes a similar degree of institutional support, support that goes beyond enthusiasm and into the actual criteria for promotion and tenure:

[we have] a campus wide, equity, diversity and inclusion initiative like lots of campuses do... what I think makes us unique is that the, the, in the development of that, it's now a requirement of our tenure review and our annual review that we can document what we're doing to work for equity, diversity and inclusion in our teaching research or service... our English department was very involved with the implementation and the creation of the policy and adopted it as a department before it went campus wide, so...it's also just like woven into our department in ways that is not true in other departments from what I've heard.

Combined with student buy-in from the student senate (with their control of differential tuition funds), faculty buy-in from negotiated outcomes and program revisions, and their initial hiring (explicitly to come in and make transformative changes), Kay notes that they're:

lucky here at this institution that making the case for equity, diversity, and inclusion is expected, so there can't be—well there *could* be—but, like it's less likely to hear “what are these crazy...what are they doing talking about race and inequality?” you know like, “What liberal agenda is this?” [because] it's actually supported to all levels, or at least, given voice to support to all levels, and denying funding on the basis of that would at least look bad

Like Kay and Rachel, many of the other WPAs in this study remarked on how institutional support helped to make their work easier; in particular, over half of the WPA respondents talked about how their institutions were enthusiastically receptive of

program-initiated self-assessment, which the institutions supported (with funds, with access to institutional assessment tools/teams) and were happy to make changes in response to. I largely leave this discussion for “program assessment” in Chapter 6 but do want to highlight one last insight from Rachel. Speaking about a program led assessment—which their institution supported—Rachel made an important observation about “realizing where I don't have to link up with other parts of the business that is the university...like, I don't have to make my assessment project match what you need to get accreditation<sup>14</sup>.” Multiple WPAs shared reflections like this—not just with assessment projects—where they noted the value of institutional support, but also recognized that it was possible to do transformative work that didn't “link up” (at least not immediately) with all the work going on across the institution. In fact, an expectation of transformation lag (which you can see in Kay's comment above) seemed to be pretty standard.

In Kay and Rachel's cases, the campus commitment to transformative work came from something like a mission statement, but in other institutions came concretely from their institutional identity. Alex reports that “because we're at a minority serving institution, I think that my administration is interested in advancing equity and inclusion, so it's easy for me to make arguments to them about like, we should do this because it's better for our students.” Daniel and Beverly describe similar commitments by their institutions to serving marginalized populations, which then provides further rationale for

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<sup>14</sup> As an example of this accreditation pressure: “we have a coordinator of assessment at the college as a whole, and he is a huge faculty advocate for academic freedom and for shared governance...I don't think I've had a single meeting with him where he hasn't quoted the AAUP. So, he is a great ally to have, but at the same time he also has pressures for accreditation from his direct reports for people who want that sort of quantitative side of things” (Daniel)



why the transformative knowledge they bring to bear should be translated into local practices.

### **Working with External Stakeholders**

In the earlier section on “pre-collegiate” composition, May addressed being in the position of telling parents that the courses that they thought would count for college composition credit would not, which is one example of how WPAs come into contact with external stakeholders. Including parents, pundits, the media, textbook and testing companies, high school teachers, and accreditation commissions, there are a whole host of external stakeholders which WPAs understandably are wary of for their likelihood of ascribing to some dominant conceptions about writing. At the same time, there are other types of external stakeholders—the CWPA, colleagues at other institutions, activist groups, etc.—who also work with WPAs to support their practices of negotiation and translation of transformative knowledge into practice. As the WPAs in this study highlight, WPA work is not exactly always an experience of being besieged on all sides, and productive work often happens in collaboration with people outside of our institutions.

Daniel’s account of external stakeholders begins with the expected issues and concerns that many of us are familiar with from the literature:

External stakeholders, obviously, are the ones that we have a more difficult time with for all the reasons that I’m sure you’ve read about...people have a very traditional view of “what writing is,” people are concerned about “grammar and mechanics” as opposed to “ideas and audience.” They are concerned with the “how things look from an accrediting standpoint,” and they are concerned about

not having quantitative, statistically significant results to be able to show we're having this effect on student learning.

Daniel then immediately continues on to explain how it's not been all quite so bad as it had initially seemed, especially in response to external calls to back up their transformative initiatives with "hard numbers":

That's one place where I feel like I've been able to do some good because I *do* have a background in quantitative training, I can talk stats and can talk mediator and moderator effects. [Describes quantitative study done at institution which highlighted race, class, gender, and first-gen marginalization]. I have a background enough in quantitative work—as well as qualitative work—that I can speak that lingo and I can talk about all the limitations of it, as well as how we might be able to build in some quantitative elements to our own assessments, while at the same time, not being overly reductive in what our students know or don't know or haven't learned. So that's, that's probably been the biggest negotiation.

This rhetorical ability to adjust to the epistemological demands of an external audience, and to then negotiate acceptable terms with them was echoed by Alex as well:

The other thing that has been exciting for me is, especially working with, like other external stakeholders. So, we have some regional bodies that I've been asked to present to, and then with the re accreditation...I think a lot of people outside of writing studies have a very limited view of what assessment in general can be. And I take more of an interdisciplinary approach—I work with psychometricians, so I'm not talking about them, but just like other people.

Anyway, so I was able to make have good conversations with our HLC reviewers, our accreditation reviewers who had like a really limited idea “here’s what assessment should be. Why didn’t you do it like this?” and I was like, “Well, here’s the research that I’m drawing on and why I thought it would be beneficial to our students and faculty,” and they were open to it. So that was pretty exciting. As a result of this rhetorical facility, most WPAs in the study described some degree of external stakeholder work—doing community literacy work, or training teachers in the high schools, or working on state articulation agreements—where they were able to effect meaningful changes beyond their institutions.

WPAs in the study also spoke to the value of having transformative collaborators from outside of their institution. One participant talked about this Facebook group of feminist researchers, and we made a split off group of WPAs this summer...And those conversations are just fantastic. You know, and sometimes they’re just like, “What if my Provost doesn’t let me put my program online? What am I going to do?” like it’s been a lot of intense stuff, but there’s some great people in that group.

Another participant references a similar (or the same) group

I belong to a...I belong to either a private or secret Facebook group for primarily female...at first we were a group of faculty in mid-rank, primarily women. And now we kind of have a subgroup of us who are in that group, but who are also WPAs. And there’s a lot of commiserating that happens there but also just a lot of crowdsourcing, a lot of sharing.

Alex talks about

going to that conference [CWPA]—or maybe the WPA breakfast at Cs—that was one of the first times that I felt really good about being in the field like I felt like I belonged and I think that’s when I saw what you were just describing...[about] WPA kind of people, like it’s a great community.

Rachel talks about direct correspondence

sometimes yeah I have to like straight up like, you know, email [colleague at other institution] and be like “Am I off base here? Like, here’s the context, is this what you would do?” Sometimes I do have to look outside my institution for like backup and—not that I ever like bring that back to my institution but—it’s for my own like well-being and my own peace of mind...having good allies outside of your institution that might know just enough about your institutional context [is crucial]

WPAs in the study talked about reaching out to friends from their graduate programs, utilizing the CWPA consultant-evaluator service, attaching their programs to external development grants and projects...a host of enriching external collaborations that either helped them to strategize their negotiations and translations before they put them into action, or that provided explicit and overt support for their transformative goals.

## **Conclusion**

As Kay says, the work of being a WPA is “so much about building relationships and it’s building relationships with the people teaching in your program, it’s building relationships with the administration, it’s building relationships with the students.”

Considered from one angle, WPAs can’t hope to effectively introduce and advance the professional knowledges that they hope will transform their programs *unless* they begin

to develop connections and trust with the stakeholders of FYC. Considered from another angle, there are often many resources—student groups, campus initiatives, faculty in other departments, etc.—that are ongoing and external to the WPA, and to which the writing program can become productively allied. Considered from a final angle, the WPA can't be—and, likely, doesn't want to be—the sole source of transformative professional knowledges; it is this final angle that speaks most powerfully to why collaboration and negotiation is so important, because it is this factor of collaboration and negotiation that most supports WPAs critical reflection on their own work.

## Chapter 5: Negotiating Expertise, Authority, and the WPA Role

*“I feel like there is an obligation that people like me have to listen well, but also not be so involved in listening that they don’t speak up.” (Daniel)*

Thus far in this dissertation we have surveyed some of the key terms and conflicts around WPA work, addressed how WPAs negotiate conceptions of composition as they manifest in the courses within their programs, and explored the ways that they seek to do transformative work in the presence of (in collaboration/negotiation with) others. In the previous chapter we learned from WPA’s about the relationships they build with the students (undergrad/grad) in their programs, the instructors who teach the classes, their WPA leadership teams, the broader institution, and external stakeholders. In this chapter, we look through a different lens at the work of WPAs in order to better understand how those negotiations require complex reflections on and performances of power and authority.

A vein in the WPA literature that interested me from the start of this project has to do with the performance of authority, and how “transformative” WPAs thought about what it means to negotiate their own position of (relative) authority in a writing program. Even untenured WPAs in this study referenced having been hired or appointed to their position because of their disciplinary expertise in Rhet/Comp and Writing Studies (and sub-expertise in pedagogy, program administration, assessment, etc.). As a result, WPAs in the study often felt a pressure from some stakeholders to step into that authority, or to provide mandates on best practice in a way that normed the program. Particularly in instances where the course content, or program aims, or instructor training, etc. raised concerns in relation to the best research and theory in our fields, assuming and deploying that authority was often a tempting option for these WPAs.

At the same time, many of the WPAs in this study were cognizant of how the “transformative” theories to which they were committed often wrestled with issues of power and authority, and, like Lil Brannon were concerned about how their attempts to translate transformative knowledge from the field could “turn into repressive dogma” (p. 445). Particularly noting how writing programs are often made possible through the exploitation of contingent labor (primarily grad students and adjuncts), the WPAs in this study often recognized how inequitable the relations were between themselves and the instructors in their programs, and, further, how those conditions had the potential to stifle the kinds of critical reflection that would be essential for transforming writing pedagogy and dominant conceptions of writing; in response to these concerns, WPAs seemed to turn most often to feminist administrative theory, which they translated into local practice. Additionally, WPAs in the study realized how the inequitable labor conditions themselves (like those noted in Osorio et al., 2021) were also in need of negotiation and transformation; in response to these concerns, WPAs most often gestured to critical theory.

### **The Blessings of Less Authority**

Several WPAs in the study described ways in which their job description enabled them to bracket off certain elements of “performing WPA authority” as “not my job.” In particular, these WPAs were most relieved to be freed of the responsibility for hiring and firing, which—while a potential tool for curating and pruning a writing program—also meant hands-on involvement in potential exploitation and having to deliver uncomfortable news to instructors. Daniel describes how their current position differs from past WPA roles at other institutions:

the Associate Dean is the sort of administrator, he or she does things like the budgets...and, I should say, hiring and firing kinds of things also go through them. So, for example, when I was doing my work at [other institution] where I was a director of composition in the more traditional role, it was my responsibility to do the hiring/firing piece of it...the sort of personnel aspect of WPA work. Here, unless you are the department administrator—the Associate Dean—you don't do that work.

Kay reports a similar situation with their department chair and office administrator, and how it affects their work:

I'm in a lucky position in some ways in that I don't have that much administrative authority, which is good in the sense that I'm not hiring and firing people. I'm not determining people's contracts. I'm not assigning schedules. There's some stuff that that the chair and our office administrator do that I think of as like the drudge work of being a WPA...like I do not want to do scheduling. And I know most of us have to do that, so I kind of feel a little bit like "shhhh, don't tell anybody."

I'm not doing any contracts...you know like that's on the chair and HR. So, I'm taking that lack of administrative authority as an opportunity to maybe think to think about the leadership and so like what is my job right and it's to, you know, make the case for the curriculum, it's to make the case for teaching writing, it's to make the case for rhetoric and composition. And to do that in a way that's as inclusive and keeping within I think, what are the great promises of the field right and when we, when we want to think of our best selves, right, it's, it's, to work so that students can find agency and voice and to identify political problems and



work for solutions right and so...there's a way that—because I don't have to fire people, and I'm not in charge of anybody's performance review really—that's really helpful for me to be able to think, to compartmentalize. So, I see myself as like chief professional developer and curriculum coordinator and really focus on the big ideas of what it is that I'm trying to do. If I had to...like I'm on every search committee, I recommend people to hire you know, but like in the end if someone doesn't do a great job teaching—I might consult with the chair—but the chair's the one who delivers the news. That's a painful thing to have to do, I mean I've been part of some of those conversations.

While Kay describes lack of administrative authority as enabling them to spend more time thinking about other types of transformation in their program, May's report of a similar situation with their position draws explicit attention to an issue of “exploitation”:

I mean in the spring semester [the institution] fired all of our visiting assistant professors...and all of our adjuncts...Um, but anyway, the associate chair does the hiring when I know that there are positions open. Like, I will, I will nudge [them] and tell [them] like hey this person's really good, you should talk to them first. But I don't hire myself. And honestly, I'm very glad about that. Because that's one of the things honestly about being a WPA that's just awful...is me... I know I'm still complicit in the exploitation of adjuncts, and the entire system. I mean we all are—anybody that works in this system is complicit in it, I think—but not actually having to do that hiring myself, I mean I'm not gonna lie, it's one of these things that made this job really attractive, because my former job where it

was just pretty much all adjuncts all the time...I said long before it even became an issue “I’m never going to be the WPA here. I just, I couldn’t stomach it.”

Other WPAs in the study who were not exempted from hiring/firing, like Roxanne, echoed May in their reflections:

I guess this is maybe cliched, but just suddenly becoming in charge of people who are so exploited—the part-time instructors who are teaching four classes yet they’re still considered part time, and I have no control over whether we can offer full-time year-long contracts so they’re just on semester-by-semester contracts—just suddenly being kind of just complicit in that system does not feel good at all.

May and Roxanne’s thoughts about being “complicit in the system” are interesting to read alongside their commitments to other forms of transformative systemic change, and suggest that this issue of “complicity” could be an important one for WPAs to address going forward.

One final interesting “blessing of less authority” that came up during Kay’s reflection was an inversion of something I had seen in the literature, namely how their contingent not-yet-tenured status relieved some pressure on them:

So there’s that [no hiring/firing] and then I think also my lack of power is also maybe like “well I can’t tell these tenured people how to do the class, like clearly a few of them are not going to do it.” I got to work with who I can, like, it’s not mine to enforce yet, if ever, [so I can] just focus on the folks who do want to, kind of, hop in and do the thing, you know?

Kay's sense was that focusing on the instructors who want to "hop in" enabled them to do transformative work with engaged stakeholders, but also to gradually build the case for their approach with the holdouts.

### **Owning Expertise, Not Abdicating Authority**

All the WPAs in the study, however, did speak to some degree to the importance of owning their expertise and using their authority in strategic and impactful ways. Often, as they talked about these moments of authority, they weighed the alternatives. As May observes re: working with their grad student assistant directors:

I had to talk with [the graduate assistant directors] pretty openly about "how do we do this in a way that doesn't make you feel exploited?" I don't want them to say "[May] doesn't know what [they're] doing...we have to do [their] job for [them]"...I didn't want them to feel like I was deferring all decision making to them. So like, how to make them feel part of decision making—how to make sure they *are* part of decision making—without deferring that role to them.

If one alternative for May was potentially exploiting contingent labor, Daniel's alternative was—in regards to those contingent or tenuous colleagues—how not using their authority might help to perpetuate ongoing systems of inequality:

in terms of looking at intersectionality, looking at privilege and the way that it asserts itself in authority, I really try to use that privilege in a way that that I can advocate for people who might not feel comfortable doing so. And that might be someone who has pre-tenure, that might be someone who is not tenure track, that might be someone who is—well, we're dealing with some growing pains around racial issues in our college [and] in our department as well. Being able to say

‘okay, I don’t have to speak up because these things aren’t affecting me,’ but silence, you know, makes me complicit in things, so I have to be willing to wield that privilege; I have to be willing to walk into a room and say Black Lives Matter, trans women are women, I have to be able to come in and, and, and assert those things and be an ally in that way, while also knowing when to step back...I feel like there is an obligation that people like me have to listen well, but also not be so involved in listening that they don’t speak up.

Like May and Roxanne in the last section, Daniel is acutely aware of their potential complicity in ongoing systems of inequality, and the necessity of occasionally operationalizing their authority and security in thoughtful ways to support others around them. Daniel’s nuancing of “stepping back and listening”—a maxim commonly constructed as “feminist”—draws attention to how silence has the potential to put the onus on our most vulnerable colleagues, and further leaves space for hegemonic norms to assert themselves.

While there were many examples of WPAs owning their expertise, there is just one more example I’d like to home in on, and it’s Rachel’s reluctant assumption of the “authority” mantle at their institution. They note:

having to step into the position of an expert has actually been challenging for me. And thank God I have such a wonderful chair [who is]...so supportive and very patient with me in terms of just being like “You do know a lot about writing. I know you don’t always want to act like that in any given meeting...[but] you believe in the integrity of your work, you know a lot about this, and other people

don't. So, be confident."...He's light touch like he doesn't force me to act like the expert when I'm not comfortable doing it, but I am glad that I've had his support

In particular, what Rachel feels is their expertise—and their transformative commitment—is in doing anti-racist composition and pedagogy work. While they observe that the faculty at their institution are motivated by social justice issues, they have felt some pushback on their authority especially re: anti-racist work:

when I think about administrative authority with my faculty...[for] context I work with a lot of “well meaning white people” is sometimes the phrase that's given. So, sometimes there's like, if I say “We're going to undertake an anti-racist project as part of a learning community,” [then] a lot of people will be excited about that, they'll be like, “Cool! Yes! I'm in!”...[and] if I were to announce “We're going to be doing an anti-racist critical pedagogy thing as part of our discussion for our teaching groups,” they'd be like, “Totally down! Cool!” But it's in smaller examples of...when I say “How is white language supremacy embedded in that rubric that you're giving to your students?” then I get pushback...like and not in, not in big noticeable ways [but that's] when I sense my authority being questioned.

Rachel still asserts this authority in the face of being questioned, though, because of the vital importance of the work to them within their overwhelmingly white context:

I think if you have all white people doing anything, if they're not doing anti-racist work you've got a problem. And I know that's not a total solution and we should still have people of color working with... you know, but if it is all white people and they're not talking about race at all that's even worse.

As for Daniel, the risk of doing nothing is less acceptable than the reluctant exercise of authority.

### **Administration and Labor Equity**

As several of the reflections in this chapter on authority have dealt with issues of contingent labor, I'd like to spotlight two WPAs use of their administrative authority to address these sorts of problems. Early on, describing their program, Daniel talks about the faculty breakdown in FYC:

full time faculty teach [FYC], but—like most community colleges in the country—about 70% or so of our courses get taught by adjunct faculty...[so being a WPA is partly] a matter of wrangling the full time versus part time labor concerns, which is a particular interest of mine

Later on in the interview, Daniel circled back to this interest:

I mentioned earlier wanting to be more concerned with things like labor—we made sure that there were different kinds of workshops that adjuncts could get paid for, [as well as for] doing program assessments...So, when I was working on designing our new program assessment, I built it into where our assessment 'get-together' 'reading/norming' session happened *after* the last paycheck that the adjuncts would receive, and so that way they would get one more after that. [WPAs need to be] mindful about labor concerns like that because adjuncting sucks.

Daniel was not alone in this focus on trying to create fairer working conditions, better compensation, and opportunities for promotion. Sam also addresses similar concerns, noting that:

our part timers are unionized and I want to try to be as transparent with them as I can but there's a real limitation in doing WPA work with unions because the institution has particular way of communicating with the union and working with the union that you cannot change, and that you know they basically like they look at the contract and what the union contract says is what the part timers get. I tried to get my part timers additional stipends for helping me with assessment work and that was like a big hassle like "oh we don't do stipends for part-timers" and so I found that the union both gives and it takes away. So I've been trying to think a lot about [it].

Having thought of a similar "hack" to Daniel to give part-time faculty more money, Sam ran into an obstacle. They continued on:

People who work for us for a certain amount of time get what's called "good faith" which means they're guaranteed a set number of classes. That's fine but I'm not allowed to convert those people into full-time people, meaning [they're] permanent part-time because the institution won't let me do that.

Blocked from offering them supplemental pay and from promoting them to full-time status, Sam identified an even less-protected group:

So ultimately, what happens is because of the way the staging goes out with the part-time contracts for "good faith" is they get their contracts, and everybody else who doesn't have "good faith" has to wait until the entire end of the process, until after the different contracts are back in, and all the full-time people have been staffed, and the graduate students have been staffed...so I get part timers who don't have good faith, with their hat in their hands, like "can you give me an extra

class” and I’m like “I have to wait.” So, this has been one of the things I wanted to work on, was trying to figure out how we can, is there any way to try to nuance this, at all, to try to make it better. That's been a source of lot of frustration for me.

While Sam’s attempts to remedy the part-time faculty situation have been unsuccessful so far, and were disrupted by COVID, they were still able to find ways to help other instructors in precarious positions, even “sav[ing] an international student from being deported” by getting a new position created last minute. While Sam and Daniel’s (and others’) interventions were not always complete successes, it was clear that they were thinking about the very real, transformative work that WPAs can and should be involved in re: exploitation in FYC labor situations.

### **Enacting Feminist Administration**

Circling back to concepts explored in Ratcliffe & Rickly’s (2010b) *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition Studies* and Micciche and Strickland’s (2013) critique thereof, most of the participants in this study addressed “feminist administration” as an “oxymoron” that needed to be negotiated, and did so often through gestures to “collaboration,” “inclusion,” “listening,” “invitational rhetoric,” an “ethic of care,” and “flattened hierarchies.” May exemplifies the commitment to collaboration and flattened hierarchies in their description of their leadership style:

“My leadership style is definitely collaborative. I think that's where you can definitely see the influence of feminism. [Before going remote for the pandemic] my assistants shared my office with me. We worked together...and I was just like, ‘Well of course this is what I do!’”



Addressing the value of listening and stepping back, making space for other ways of knowing in their program, Daniel reports:

I really try to come in and do more listening than I do, talking, just because ... [my colleagues] are coming from a variety of different backgrounds. So, you know, coming into a program where so much writing happens and writing studies happen it could be really easy to come in and go “yeah I know a lot of stuff” ...[I had to] take a step back and realize how much I don't know.

Speaking to invitational rhetoric as a core component of their approach to managing their program, Kay reflects:

I haven't had like the leadership retreat time to sit down and think about like “in what ways am I being a feminist leader”...but I do believe it's happening...if I want to work for change within this program or if I want the program to be a certain way I have to model, those ways of being...like the taking an invitational approach to just about every meeting I've ever had, or every change I've tried to make, or every conversation that's going to result in some sort of changing. I'm thinking about Foss & Griffin, or I'm doing Foss & Griffin even if I'm not thinking about it.

In all three examples here, WPAs reference buzzwords of femadmin in respect to how they run their programs, and very likely these elements of their approach to leadership are recognized and appreciated by their colleagues as embodying a feminist ethos. One thing that stands out to me about them, however, is what is constructed as easy or effortless or instinctual: “of course” it is how May runs their program, “it would be easy” for Daniel to react a certain way, and Kay does invitational rhetoric when they're “not thinking

about it.” I wonder—and perhaps this is a suggestion of something to be studied in investigations of femadmin in WPA work—what a deeper investigation of this might reveal.

An exchange with May, perhaps, illustrates what Micciche and Strickland (2013) see as an important distinction—between “performing femadmin” (ways of doing administration that are identified with “feminism”) and “performance [as] from queer theory or performance studies that might more emphatically call attention to intentional choices to refuse identity categories, the effects of contradictory embodiments, or reiterative subversiveness and its consequences” (p. 171). Early on in the interview, May shares a fear that they see as common—the feminized “WPA as Mother”:

like a lot of WPAs like I often don’t feel respected for what I do. Both by colleagues, but also like the grad students who I think see me as, like, The Mother who’s there to mentor them...But isn’t the intellectual who can direct their research.

They reiterate this concern again several times, as when talking about their relationship with the graduate student instructors in their program:

Frankly, I think for women, it can be even more pronounced because we are expected to be like the nurturer who is always there for you, who is self-sacrificing...and our TAs who—if they were conscious that they were doing this—they would be horrified. But many of our TAs expect us to be those things...to be like the always nurturing always self-sacrificing mother figure. But yeah and I see this in the way that like I get talked about.

Later on, speaking about their expectations for WPAs with undergraduate and graduate students, May shifts stance:

we do it [helping students to adjust to college and grad school] uncomplainingly because you know it's almost like, you know, this is really important and yes there's a director of grad studies, and when I need to I refer out to that person. But they see us every day...they hear my voice so to speak via email, typically a couple times a week...so, of course they're going to reach out to us more of course, they're going to do those things. And like I don't think our job is to *tolerate* that—I think our job is to *embrace* it because like, *this is the job*. This is the job, this is what we're here to do.

I started to ask a follow up about this question, and how it connects to their sense of “the role of the WPA,” but May interrupts “now I'm sort of contradicting myself,” before explaining more:

It gets complicated. It really does. You know, and I fully admit that. There are times when I will strategically embrace the mother role, both with my undergraduate students, and with the TAs. [Shares example of a conflict in their program between grad student instructors, with one grad student badgering another]. I wanted to be careful at first because I said, you know “I'm the person was more power here, I do not want to punch down” like that's not okay...[But the issue kept escalating.] So, at that point I felt like I had to step in. You know, and I flat out said like “So you got to see [my] mama bear come out.”...So that's like when I say “I will like embrace that role strategically,” like that was a time where I felt like “okay, it's time for this to come out.” And I'll do that with

students too, like, because students are used to seeing me like laugh, and smile in the classroom very but...I will be like "I'm very disappointed in you. I know you're capable of more than this, what are you doing?" which I always feel is like the tough mom talking "very disappointed in you, young person." So there are absolutely times I do kind of embrace it. Absolutely.

May takes a beat, then continues:

I mean it's strategic essentialism, and I know it. But I also feel like I don't have all the tools available to me that I would with other sorts of identities...So I have to seize the available means, you know...These are the available means that I have of persuasion, and I'm going to use them all. I'm not talking about anything that's like unethical or rhetorically suspect so I'm going to use them all. That's what I'm going to do. [But] I don't want to fall into this stereotype of like the all-knowing mother, or like the all-forgiving mother, or the always nurturing mother because that's damaging in its own way.

Instead, May says they've been thinking about teacher and WPA ethos, and what type of role they most would like to embody:

I would say...and this is gendered...And actually we just talked about this [in the pedagogy course] yesterday, we talked about like teacher ethos. But for me that this is very similar to my WPA ethos as well...like, you know, "are you a coach? or are you this? or are you that?" ...and I said, "I tend to use more the metaphor of the midwife, which is very similar to a coach. But that's how I tend to think of myself, both as a teacher and as a WPA is. I'm the midwife. I'm helping people." It's not my thing to bring to life, so to speak, but I'm helping others bring this

thing into the world, whether that's a piece of writing, whether that's a classroom, or whether that's a policy. And I guess sometimes I have to be my own midwife, and it's a self-birth.

While a long example—and one that occasionally made me uncomfortable—I think May's reflections here get closer to the “performance” where there are intentional choices to refuse or take on certain identities, there are gnarly contradictions, and attempts at subversion. I am uncertain of what May's performance of WPA identity really means—how it challenges or deconstructs or transforms—but it stood out to me in contrast with simpler, more straightforward declarations of “performing” feminist WPA work...and I wonder what kinds of reflections it might provoke in other WPAs who identify as doing “feminist” administrative work.

## **Conclusion**

Writing Program Administration *is* a form of “administration,” and the titles for people in WPA positions drive this home, whether “Director” or “Coordinator.” WPAs seem to express a lot of anxiety about the performances of authority that being a WPA often calls for, which they often attempt to address through some sort of commitment to “feminist” administrative practices or “critical” Marxist-inflected thoughts about labor/exploitation. At the same time, there is a recognition that transformative WPA work attempts to realize “better ways” of doing FYC and “better conceptions” of what it means to do language—in school and beyond; to that end, WPAs in this study also remained aware of an imperative to use their expertise and authority in strategic—if sometimes limited ways—to push back at or displace harmful dominant conceptions of language and knowledge.



## **Chapter 6: Tools of the Trade: Texts, Tricks, and Tactics for Negotiation**

*“You might think of [writing an OER and developing a curriculum] as traditional administrative work, but they also do a lot of theory work as well...that was the big thing why we started this whole ‘threshold concept curriculum’...no textbooks did that, like textbooks tend to be so conservative in terms of theory. So that's why we started the OER” (Daniel)*

Throughout the introduction to this dissertation, I reference an interest in the tools and strategies employed by WPAs to do the work of negotiating and translating transformative knowledge from the field into practice. In Chapters 3-5, it's possible to see many of the tools (outcomes statements, core texts and assignments, etc.) and strategies/practices (assessments, trainings, etc.) at work. Like I did in the introduction, people familiar with WPA work could also probably come up with lists of tools and practices which might be useful for these acts of translation and negotiation.

This chapter does not seek to make a comprehensive accounting of the possible tools/strategies, but instead focuses in on a few vignettes of WPAs using their “toolkit” to bring about transformative changes in their programs. Following after the chapter on “Negotiating Authority”—in which WPAs often showed their hesitation to “act on” (preferring to “act with”), and May talked about “the available means”—it is interesting to look at how these WPAs think about the various levers at their disposal to make practical gains within their programs and institutions.

### **Negotiating and Translating Through Texts**

As Dryer (2013) observes, “documents used to describe and assess academic writing in first year composition courses” (p. 4) are “material artifacts of theoretical constructs—beliefs about writing and what it should look like” which are “subject to competing interpretations” and political agendas (pp. 6-7). The WPAs in this study were

acutely aware of this, and thus often described texts—local and external, physical and digital—which were useful in their processes of negotiating expectations of FYC at their institutions.

### *External Statements from Professional Organizations*

Participants often gestured to the importance of external documents—particularly statements from professional organizations—as they described how they made changes to local practices. Julia shares their program’s focus on certain key statements, then explains the reasoning for the focus:

the program is trying to follow the outcomes as listed by the 4Cs organization, or the NCTE [Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing]...the WPA Outcomes [Statement for First-Year Composition]...[we] chose those because it was defensible...it was easily defensible to the larger institutional people—stakeholders like [university] big heads—like well if you can gesture towards a national standard, then you don’t have to defend it as much

These texts help to provide a framework/structure for new sets of outcomes, but the imprimatur of a national statement also provides an external rationale—ostensibly beyond the personal “political” agenda of WPAs in their local contexts—which speaks to powerful stakeholders in the language of “standards” (for better or for worse).

Other WPAs similarly mentioned the value of drawing upon NCTE or CWPA statements. Alex talks about the outcome of their transformation of their local outcomes and course: “Throughout the entire sequence there’s a better alignment among those to the course learning outcomes...and they’re adapted from the WPA outcome statements.”



The NCTE “Principles” and CWPA “Outcomes” weren’t the only statements that these organizations put out which people drew on, as Beverly highlights:

we composed an anti-racist statement for the writing program that was based largely on you know some of the other ones you’ve seen: the NCTE statement, the 4Cs statement, and the university Washington Tacoma statement and Washington State statement and I think there was one at East Carolina University...some really good bases for our statement.

Rachel also speaks to the impact of the NCTE/4Cs “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” on their program.

In their account, Beverly points to multiple documents and how they provide a basis for a local statement. It is this sort of translation/collage that many WPAs in the study describe, rather than a whole-cloth importing of external documents. Working through how to think about these external documents, Alex notes:

The AAC&U value rubrics explicitly say something about ‘This is the template, and they should be adapted.’...I don’t know if the WPA statement says that or the [NCTE] Framework for Success. So that’s just kind of like my general approach...there’s been so much emphasis, especially like, you know, in the early 2000s about like locally created as the best, but...we still need to examine our local practices as well.

Alex’s articulation of a dialogic relationship between local and national (and rejection of an over-fetishization of “local” solutions) continues in their description of the process for writing their in-house “outcomes” document:

We have the WPA “Outcomes” statement, and then we also have the [state articulation agreement] stuff, so we had to kind of cross-talk it... we had these conversations in a room with a projector and everything printed out, so we could see “All right, here's what [the state articulation agreement] says, here's what the WPA says, how can we bring them together,” and then “also here's what we currently have, how do we want to adapt them?”...I am working with my liaison on integrating the ACRL framework.

This “cross-talk” is valuable beyond any potential “alignment” with a national statement as well; it provides an assortment of values/approaches against which local agents (WPAs, instructors, department leadership) can articulate their own visions more explicitly. As Daniel notes, this type of outcome negotiation work mirrors “Bob Broad[’s] dynamic criteria mapping” as described in *What We Really Value* (2003).

### ***Outcomes***

Quite often these references to external documents were linked to some discussion of a local “outcomes” document, which WPAs in the study often considered to be a prime tool for effecting change in their writing program. Alex speaks to that process of local adaptation of a national document:

We’ve revised all of our outcomes to align more, which is something else that I was trying to work on so [that] throughout the entire sequence there’s a better alignment among those to the course learning outcomes. They’re adapted from the WPA outcome statements...and with that—if we’re looking at if we really want to emphasize different genres or audience expectations in our curriculum—our curricula have to change.

Thinking about adaptation relative to other statements (as in the last section), Alex and their instructors also thought about what they wanted to emphasize in their curriculum, and where various elements fit into their curricular sequence. Rachel talks about how their institutional context actually somewhat modifies even what “outcomes” are:

“I talked to [a colleague] this summer about our outcomes, which are technically not outcomes because outcomes are supposed to be like measurable, very prescriptive like “it looks like this.” And because we’re part of a first year experience [and]...our writing class is also an advisory experience, and it’s an introduction to [a specific type of] education, ours aren’t traditional outcomes in some sense, and that’s a good thing.

Daniel describes something similar—both about adapting to local circumstances and about the limits of outcomes, which only begin to help programs to build toward their goals:

the revision to the threshold concept curriculum and gave us an opportunity to talk about what it is that we value...you can’t just turn threshold concepts into outcomes...but what learning outcomes in our courses can we establish—or revise from the older version—that will build towards those concepts. And that’s how we came to the outcomes themselves. And then once we got there, we started talking about okay what are the many different flexible ways that that we can teach towards this

Multiple WPAs remarked on this flexibility, and how having agreed upon outcomes often freed them up from concerns of having to micromanage instructors’ course content. I was reminded at these times of how the University of Maine approached their outcomes,

having all instructors in the program meet once a semester to discuss, debate, revise, and recommit to the outcomes as shared values about what we wanted in our classrooms.

As Julia notes, however, it is not always so easy to facilitate these kinds of discussions of outcomes, particularly (as in Alex's case) where there was a pre-existing suspicion/skepticism that the WPA already had a vision in mind and was going to enact it by hook or by crook, or (as in Julia's case) where there is not a long history of program engagement:

even asking people to read something was a big deal, and even asking people to convene over those readings was a big deal, and even asking people to consider what their teaching outcomes are and whether or not their practices were aligning with those outcomes was a big deal, even to use the word outcomes was a big deal

While this sort of response to involving people in reading, writing, and negotiating outcomes was not as common in the narratives from WPAs in this study, there is an element of "what is expected, what we have time for" that runs through this chapter. When things (like "negotiating or reflecting on an outcomes document") are not part of the habitual practice of the program, there's an easing-in process and/or a pressure to provide a succinct and "practical" resource. As Julia notes: "to initiate any change in that context meant that we had to go slower than we wanted to, and any amount of change that we initiated was going to feel like a tidal wave."

### ***Shells, Skeletons, and Core Assignments***

Speaking to that potential for instructors to be overwhelmed, going from zero to sixty miles per hour in a short orientation period, many of the WPAs in this study talked about building course shells, course skeletons, or sequences of core assignments. In

programs with graduate student instructors (like Roxanne's) these were often constructed as training wheels for first-time teachers as they figured out what it meant to do teaching: "the first semester...new GTA[s] do follow a particular curriculum...very bare bones just kind of an assignment sequence." Mentions of these sorts of resources were just as common, however, in contexts sans-graduate instructors. Daniel addresses the practicalities that led them to offering a full course shell in their program:

because we have a 15 credit hour semester teaching load, we don't have a ton of time to reinvent things from the ground up. So we talked about adapting things to these new outcomes we, and eventually what that came to was we developed two different course shells for each of our two major writing courses, and we use Canvas for it. They have writings from the [in house textbook] integrated into it [and] a sequence of major writing assignments that are in there. But each course shell does things a bit differently, and we tell people, "Hey! This is just there if you want to use it." because adjuncts sometimes get hired...the day before classes start or after classes have already started. They don't have time to develop their own course.

Daniel notes that they "eventually" developed shells, but explains why it wasn't their first choice of how to support instructors:

That was one of the things that we originally said is "let's give a skeleton, because then we acknowledge the expertise, we acknowledge the scholarly background of all of our faculty—full-time or part-time"... But then we had adjunct faculty who were hired at the last minute and said 'a skeleton isn't good enough, you need to give us the whole thing and we'll adapt it as we need to.' ...So now we have two

fully fledged course shells, complete with instructor notes and guidance and all of that. And that's what it came towards, but we still acknowledge the flexibility, just like—hopefully—most other departments are doing and say: “as long as you're teaching to the outcomes and can articulate why what you're doing moves students towards that, and perhaps to demonstrate it in an assessment, then you're good.”

Whether for graduate students or instructors who are new to a program, much of the discussion of course shells and skeletons treat these as temporary fixes—good for a semester or two as people develop their own bespoke class and begin to bring their expertise to bear.

Core assignment sequences, on the other hand, appeared to be a more ongoing commitment for many writing programs, and—as a result—it seemed that WPAs tended to think of these assignments as needing a more reflective and recursive approach to development, testing, and revision. This process was short-circuited for May because of the pandemic, to their chagrin:

Last year my two assistants and I pretty much spent the entire year developing a pilot curriculum which we were going to roll out this fall with a select group of instructors. The pandemic happened, and the revised curriculum only has three major assignments. And my chair, said “Can you please just roll out the new curriculum now without a pilot, like I know we always pilot things. What's stopping you from just doing it right now, because this is going to be fewer papers to write, fewer papers to grade for everybody.”

While May still intends to return to the curriculum and revise it, putting everyone onto the same assignment sequence ended up serving an additional practical purpose, in that it made “COVID coverage” easier to manage because everyone knew what everyone else was doing in their classes.

The view that core assignments are developed to operationalize program outcomes is visible in many respondents’ accounts of them; in oversimplified form, a single outcomes document makes it into 3-5 core assignments in a top-down way. Several WPAs (like May, Rachel, and Kay) went further into how assessment (a practice I address more fully later on) played a different role in the development of core assignments and enabled them to move from student texts and instructor modifications of assignments to a revision of the core assignments, in a more bottom-up way. As Kay explains:

I inherited four common assignments and template prompts for those, and I’ve worked really specifically with the assessment team to [revise them]. So they read like 130 student portfolios each, and at the end of that I’m like “all right you know more about what these assignments look like in their natural habitat than anybody, so let’s go back to these prompts and see what can we do with these prompts to support the types of projects we want students to write,” ...and that’s been a really transformative process because it’s been recursive and generative, and coming right out of the students’ writing and what the assessors are seeing in the students’ writing

Like earlier commitments to working with student texts in classes, or to negotiating composition with student stakeholders, this approach to revising core assignments arises from the practices of students and instructors.

### ***Rubrics***

While course shells, skeletons, and core assignments received more widespread acceptance from the WPAs in this study, a related genre—the assignment rubric—did not share the same degree of approval. Where Alex was able to share outcomes and core assignments with instructors with little resistance, the introduction of several rubrics resulted in backlash from instructors who balked at how minutely rubrics seek to standardize the evaluation of student writing. Other WPAs espoused similarly strong negative stances toward rubrics, as May did while talking about their (COVID-driven) adoption of one in their FYC sequence:

We normally are not like a rubric-y program for lack of a better term, we don't typically do rubrics, we don't do standardized, and we definitely don't use standardized rubrics. Like, I am *not* a fan of rubrics. I mean, I make that really clear to the TAs, like "You can use them, but, I don't and here's why." But we kind of felt like this year we needed to offer that as a tool, because, again, they're really just kind of being thrown into online teaching with very little preparation, thrown into this new curriculum and so we felt like we had to give them other types of tools and resources that normally we would feel sketchy about.

As with the core assignments and shells in the last section, the pressure to provide a practical fix to a pressing problem led to May employing a tool that they would "normally...feel sketchy about."



It is possible that good rubrics might exist out there, or that more recursive, generative, and descriptive approaches (like the ones used by Kay, refining core assignments based on student work) could facilitate the development of better rubrics. At the same time, WPAs in the study often seemed concerned that rubrics might promote a hegemonic standard by simplifying and quantifying complex rhetorical acts, then measuring them “neutrally.” It was this ostensible neutrality, which had the potential to short circuit critical reflection on aims, values, and practices that sometimes seemed to concern participants. This is visible somewhat in Rachel’s reflection about doing antiracist work:

if I were to announce that we're going to be doing an anti-racist critical pedagogy thing as part of our discussion for our teaching groups, they'd be totally down...but it's in smaller examples of...when I say “how is white language supremacy embedded in that rubric that you're giving to your students?” then I get pushback

For instructors and WPAs, the rubric—though seemingly small, inconsequential, and apolitical—is clearly important enough to be passionate about; this passion seems to come from its power to simultaneously cloak and promote values (whether the WPA’s or the instructors’) while masquerading as a neutral standard for assessing writing. Recognizing this, the WPAs in this study seemed to largely prefer to avoid the genre so long as it was practically possible.

### ***Intranets/Shared Resources***

A more collaborative text-based tool that several WPAs mentioned was the use of the internet to facilitate resource sharing—of syllabi, assignments, activities, rubrics,

readings, etc.—among instructors in their programs. While less centralized or top-down than sharing program generated core assignments or course shells—and, in fact, much more bottom-up—the resource sharing “intranet” also allows some degree of curation by the writing program. Re: instructor generated content, these intranets can be open access (any instructor can add or share a resource), open-but-controlled (any instructor can send resources to the program, which will post it for them), solicited material only (the program reviews and asks for permission to share something from an instructor), or program-generated (closer to an online “handbook”).

Rachel and Julia both describe intranets closer to the open-access end of the scale, though as repositories of slightly different types of information. Julia’s resource sharing is more focused on professional development of teachers (following on mentions of texts like *Naming What We Know*):

I thought that it was really valuable to invite instructors to introduce their own readings that they felt that were helpful to the community. So no matter what it was, it was helpful to just create a sense of agency amongst everyone that they could introduce knowledge of their own that they thought was important.

Although Rachel’s resource is run through them/their program, the range of resources they describe sharing/intending to share there is much broader:

I put so much stuff on our SharePoint site: activities, peer review, little writing lessons about transitions...stuff that you know new teachers of writing...just want. I put so much stuff, and so much reading onto a SharePoint that I bet three people ever looked at, because it's just impossible to see it. So, finally this year...I had us start a... standing WorldClass shell.... I wanted it to feel like I was putting

stuff somewhere for them in a centralized location that's easily navigable...I wanted a like little resource exchange, so they can start threads and post their own stuff, because some of these people have been teaching writing for like 10 years they have good stuff to share—some of their syllabi are fucking awesome. So I asked yesterday in the meeting, I was like “Will you guys use this little resource exchange thing?” and they were like, “Yes, we will.”

The more organic the intranet, the more idiosyncratic it might become, which both potentially affects the usability of the resource and muddies the waters around negotiations of shared program values and practices; the open access intranet is not without challenges. The amount of energy put into maintaining and curating the intranet seems part of the practical calculations that WPAs make about most efficacious use of their time—hence Rachel’s anxieties about the SharePoint and question about the new WorldClass resource.

While Julia and Rachel were talking about relatively new resources started by them or their immediate predecessors in the WPA position, Roxanne speaks to inheriting an archive of indefinite age and stalled development:

It’s called the [repository] and...just what bothers me is that we have, we have these great workshops, but then we don’t have anything online and the [repository] ...so we have this [repository] which has not been updated in a very long... [someone] several WPAs ago created this [repository]. I think the most recent—well, it looks like everything was posted in 2019 because that’s when it migrated to a different repository, but it’s all there [from] PhD students who are long gone. I love putting everything...I love being organized and sharing

resources and having a repository but right now, they're all scattered...and [with] me, working on other things, it's really been a low priority.

For Roxanne, the repository has the potential to host slides and videos of writing program workshops, and to serve as a permanent site for program-generated guidance on pedagogy. What they've inherited, though, is a repository of handouts (more like the assignments, activities, and peer review handouts in Rachel's WorldClass intranet) from more than a decade ago, under different WPAs, with different outcomes, a different curricular structure, and different active conversations in the field.

### ***Textbooks & Handbooks***

The use of shared resource “intranets” also did some of the same work as two physical text types—required/recommended textbooks and program handbooks—both of which the WPA often had some control over. As Rachel notes, their intranet was home to student activities, handouts, and a shared repository of readings for students (all elements found in textbooks); Julia and Roxanne then describe an intranet as a home for teacher development materials and program documents (all elements found in handbooks). While these two text types are often distinct in their authorship (authors external/internal to institution), audience (students/instructors), and purpose (to provide course content/to orient instructors to the program aims and practices), the growth of in-house texts has highlighted a potential link between the two. Moving from using *Voices* (2019) at the University of Minnesota, I've spent this semester working on a committee to compose a new in-house text for the University of Southern Maine, during which we've surveyed example texts like SUNY Cortland's *RhetDragons*, Georgia State University's *Guide to First Year Writing*, the College of St. Rose's *Strose Prose*, and the University of

Georgia's *FYW Guidebook*. In these texts—each to varying degrees—the writing program is able to not only serve a student audience with rhetoric-reader textbook style content, but also lays out program aims, policies, course sequences/descriptions, major assignments, and even rubrics in ways that overlap with handbook content (and further act upon instructors in norming ways). As several participants in this study also had in-house texts that functioned similarly—and given the parallel with the intranet—I present textbooks and handbooks together.

Kay describes a common WPA scenario with selecting and recommending textbooks to their instructors which were authored external to their program:

the textbook review process was one of those things that happened with the writing program committee...bringing in external texts and reviewing them and having really good conversations in the committee about like, “well, what kind of program do we have? what kind of program do we want? which of these books will help everybody bring that into being?”

While the curation of a few recommended (or required) texts has obvious impacts on what teachers do in their classrooms, Kay's description of the selection process shows how the negotiations *themselves* around selecting texts can productively highlight program values and areas for potential transformation. Continuing on, Kay explains that with the new textbook roll out that is one place where now, more people have to—they can't assign the same chapter that they've always just said like, “Read chapter three for this unit” or whatever—they can't do that anymore so hopefully this will make them kind of reengage

Kay's view that textbook selection plays a role in facilitating critical teacher reflection and encouraging practices of syllabus revision—keeping the class fresh and up to date—doesn't even rest necessarily on the content of the book; the introduction of any new text, as Kay tells it, would force instructors to reengage. This idea about texts, engagement, and course revision is not limited to Kay's reflection, and Rachel takes this even further:

I gave them all a copy of *Writing About Writing*, and I said over and over again “You do not have to use this text...this is an example of a text.” I even thought about having—because I have a really good rep from maybe Bedford or McM...one of the bigger publishers—I thought about letting them come to one of our meetings and say like “these are all the texts you could use, these are what these different ones do” because these faculty from across the disciplines have ideas about the way they want to approach their classes, and I was trying to embolden them...trying to be like “that's good, the more that you can think about your writing class...that will make your class better.” And the more self-aware that they were [about the choice of text and impact on the class], I thought that would help.

Rachel then moves from presenting a range of options all at once to a thought about a one-at-a-time introduction of texts:

I kind of started to think about it in the long term like “I wonder if I can use a different one each year and be like, ‘this is one you can use,’ and then, over time, as faculty talk to one another, they'll be like ‘oh yeah and I did a learning community [Rachel] did, and [Rachel] talked about *Writing About Writing*, but this year they talked about *Active Voices*.’ I don't know if there's merit to that or

not...but I think giving a certain particular example of a text you could use each year and doing a different one each year, you know like, kind of just aligns with...I don't know, maybe I'll feel differently in five years or something, but right now I feel like there are different good texts you can use and you can even use a portion of *Writing About Writing* and a portion of this...so, I think I was trying to just say that there's not one central text you *have* to use because that's not the kind of program we are, and more to say there's lots of different ways in. Rachel's example shows how a WPA's sense of their program and the desired degree of "norming" inflects this choice of whether or not to recommend a textbook or put out a handbook, as the choice affects instructors' sense of autonomy.

Other programs see value in having additional textual reinforcement of the program aims and course practices, though their approaches to this differ. Some programs—like May's—rely on a mix of externally and internally authored texts:

For [FYC 1], we use our own custom reader called [title], which is student writing, as well as a few professional professionally written readings...And then the other piece we use, the other textbook we use in [FYC 1], it's just a rhetoric, [external textbook title] which really just focuses on generating ideas for writing, discovering ideas, stating and using a thesis, organizing your ideas, strategies for developing your ideas...it's very much focused on global writing issues. And those two books are required for [FYC 1], always, even when we don't have the required syllabus the way we do this year.

Julia's program is somewhat similar, although it is in a transitional state. Originally more like Rachel's program, their program is now on its way to a more centralized model.

While instructors still have open choice of textbook, it is paired with a new handbook written in house by the WPA team:

[We're] creating a new Handbook, or a guidebook for instructors and that's kind of an interesting task because I found...so I consulted similar guidebooks from maybe six different institutions...and it was just interesting because it's like, it's a very transactive document but at the same time it has to communicate...a vibe.

Like "how we talk about students"... or "about plagiarism."

While several WPAs in the study talked about texts like *Writing About Writing* as an external text which connects with a view about writing—a rhetorical, socially situated, metalinguistic, threshold concept-oriented, etc. view—which they hope to echo in their home place, Julia's note about "communicat[ing] a vibe" seemed important to WPAs who built in-house texts. Beverly addresses a vibe when they came in to their position:

They really standardized the curriculum so everything is in this handbook—the first-year composition handbook—like every assignment, every project, every rubric. So, I [felt like] the teachers aren't really getting to develop their own materials and I felt like that was really important.

Beverly's feeling that the instructors benefit from developing their own materials is also, however, reflected in a feeling that the program benefits from developing its own textbook which aligns well with the curriculum (and other core texts):

[At my old institution] we created a textbook based on our program, like a homegrown book...—I mean, I think all of these program-authored books are about making money for the department and the program, but—we wrote a book, it took three years, and it was a really good book. It was meant to be used with



[external textbook] and it was based on our curriculum...and I'm planning to do the same at [this institution] once I have the curriculum finished.

As Beverly reflects, the handbook genre has the potential to powerfully influence (and restrict) the ability of instructors to develop their own materials (like a shell, skeleton, or core assignments); the curation of a textbook (externally or internally produced), however, seems to be less of a source of concern.

One feature, in particular, of the internally produced text is the ability for it to be composed collaboratively—with the WPA team, with an ad hoc committee, or with instructor submissions (almost like the intranet). Daniel describes:

90%...of our writing courses including our all of our adjuncts teach our OER (open educational resource), which means that students don't purchase a textbook, and in fact, we have written our own book...as we did this whole threshold concept curriculum no textbooks did that, like textbooks tend to be so conservative in terms of theory. So that's why we started the OER and now it's got something like 60 different pieces that we use across basically all courses in writing

The OER text continues to evolve under the “department OER coordinator [who]...is pretty much just focused on development and maintenance and editing of the actual OER piece, although there's still collaboration” between the coordinator, the WPA team, and the instructors in the department. Notably, Daniel feels that this enables them to get around “conservative...theory” and to work toward a transformed and transformative FYC program.

### **Practices for Negotiation and Translation**

In addition to producing, curating, and operationalizing a range of text types as a means of negotiating program values, WPAs also engaged in various practices which also supported their transformative goals. In this section, I focus on two practices: 1. the use of professional development, and 2. the use of program assessment. Both key parts of doing WPA work, each presents unique opportunities for negotiating local constraints and translating transformative knowledge from the field into practice.

### *Professional Development*

Professional development was one of the most reported roles for WPAs in this study, who often describe a core part of their work as “essentially training and onboarding...and the professional development of adjunct faculty” (Daniel), grad students, and new full-time hires. In addition to serving a practical “program delivery” purpose, as Beverly notes, this has transformative potential: “if you teach the teachers, you’re also teaching a lot...you get through to a lot of students, you can make changes that are good changes that really help people on big level.” Unsurprisingly, then, WPAs in this study had a lot to say about the role that professional development played in their programs.

Several WPAs talked about the value of having external speakers come into the program as guest workshop leaders, particularly when there was not a robust writing studies or rhet/comp base of knowledge at their institution. As Alex reports:

what I tried to do last year was do some of the WPA kind of work, where I, I tried to, like, I brought in a...I brought in speakers and tried to focus on like revising our curricula and so...I have brought in speakers I think every year since I’ve

been here, and they're often from writing studies...[it's one way] I can kind of move our conversations about writing forward.

In this way, the WPA serves as a conduit through which these people (and their ideas) external to the institution and coming from the field of writing studies enter into local understandings of writing.

Rather than have people external to the program represent professional knowledge from the discipline, other WPAs in the study who were also the sole writing studies representation at their institution saw themselves in the conduit role, and envisioned professional development workshops and teaching groups as sites for them to go about translating that knowledge for/with the instructors in their programs. After talking about their composition of an antiracist statement, Roxanne thinks about how they will continue to reinforce that work in their program:

I don't think people necessarily realize that expecting standard written English is a practice that perpetuates anti-black linguistic racism. So, so that issue is certainly, you know, present now among [instructors]. It's sort of unaddressed and just latent in this statement, but it's something that I want to work on in the comp program and have workshops on.

The workshops here, then, make more explicit and begin to put into action some of the principles that Roxanne has been building into a key program document. Rachel addresses similar antiracist work in their main site of professional development—faculty learning communities for new and returning FYE instructors—and how they see it as a central part of their role:

I think I was hired specifically to be plugged into those [transformative] conversations and that's part of my daily work...my professional work. That comes up in my teaching groups a lot...we do more than just like anti-racist, thinking about how to be anti-racist. I mean, in terms of which, like pocket of like transformative theories, I'm kind of like throwing all that against the wall and seeing what sticks with both students and teachers and in my office...we'll like read a book together...to be in community with one another.

In both Roxanne and Rachel's accounts of doing professional development, they focus on the increased "stickiness" of concepts when they get to work together, in person, with instructors on developing shared understandings of how they want to transform their programs. Though led by the WPA, these approaches also seem cognizant of the need for negotiation.

In programs with broader writing studies and rhet/comp representation, WPAs are often able to rely upon other members of the department or writing program leadership to offer robust workshops. In one such example, May talks about professional development workshops as a vital part of their transition into running the program, in which other parts of program/department leadership took on the task of acclimating their instructors to the major curricular changes that they hoped to introduce:

[The challenge is] trying to get everybody on the same page. The fall semester they had already...they meaning the acting chair, and some of the other administrators...had designed some workshops and other things to kind of like, get people on board, and they did some of the messaging for example telling TAs like, you're not going to be able to teach [FYC 2] If you don't come and do this

training...and that helped in that that kept me from being like the bad guy right away

As with other instances where WPAs seek to make big changes, May senses the potential of resistance in the program, knows that some tactics must be employed to get instructors there, and is able to work with other members of leadership to give a sense that the commitment to changes are shared across the department.

Other WPAs sought to get away from the perception of top-down professional development, and described their tactics for getting instructors involved in the delivery of professional developments. As Julia notes, they don't want to "belittle or diminish all of the contributions that an instructor who's been teaching for 20 years in the program has been making" by questioning their expertise, but also want to offer workshops which "invite them into a conversation that feels academic and intellectual" and continues to push the conversation forward at their institution. Particularly where there is a concern about getting instructors to attend and buy in to a workshop, Kay suggests an approach that they say can be particularly effective:

I invited someone to present a workshop at our professional development for continuing instructors and I invited someone to present with them...where it was like her assignment was slightly rogue. And then as she actually had to present it to everybody, she realized it and then she also was present for the Q&A and all that other stuff...That's one of my main ways to try to get people involved is to ask them to present workshops or to... you know like to give them some kind of public opportunity to join in.

Whether constructed as an “opportunity to join in” or more as an example of “sunlight is the best disinfectant,” ceding control of the professional developments to instructors themselves seems to offer some benefits.

In ways that are probably true for many of the WPAs in this study, Daniel describes professional developments of all styles: run by external speakers, themselves as the WPA, other members of department/program leadership, and instructors. For them, these workshop opportunities not only help for “training, onboarding, and professional development” (as in their citation at the start of this section), but also to cover for another important aspect of WPA work:

We simply don't have enough time to go in and do any sort of robust assessment of the part time faculty...[so] most of the professional developments or, rather, most of the assessment comes from, like, workshops that we have where we get to interact with someone...We had a workshop, I want to say my, my first year here where...I ended up in a group with an adjunct faculty member who was like “Oh yeah. Of course, I fail people for not putting commas in the right place.”

Daniel has been able to use these workshops in lieu of individualized assessment of instructors in their program to learn about adjuncts' classroom practices, to discuss their reasoning for those practices, and to give them feedback and guidance in ways that brings them more into alignment with best practices from the field.

### ***Program Assessment***

Far and away, however, processes of doing “assessment” were the most commonly referenced practices for negotiating stakeholders' sense of the program, translating knowledge from the field into local values, and transforming the

understanding of writing at a WPA's institution. At some future point, I would like to return to this topic in more depth...but for the purposes of this dissertation I provide a few vignettes which stood out to me as particularly striking re: assessment and its transformative potential, all of which seem to spring out of a shared understanding of what Daniel describes as "Ed White's law...if you don't assess yourself, you will be assessed."

Asked about collaborations that they found to be particularly transformative, Daniel responded emphatically:

the biggest [transformative collaboration] that I've worked on myself is assessment. It's become this dirty word in higher ed because it's about accountability, or it's about evaluating people from some 'objective' standard. We know from umpteen different books and articles on writing assessment that it has to be local, it has to be tailored to our students and our goals, and what we're trying to do. And so that's where I've tried to do some work, because our department wasn't doing assessment in ways that were consistent and systematic

Responding to concerns by "external stakeholders" who are "concerned with the how things look from an accrediting standpoint," or "about not having quantitative statistically significant results to be able to show that we are having this effect on student learning," Daniel was able to seize on assessment opportunities to not just meet accreditation goals or strengthen elements within the program, but also to effect meaningful change in how external stakeholders perceived writing and language.

In a similar context, Alex talks about proactively going after assessment opportunities so they could transform the *type* of assessment being done, as well as transforming the *aims* of that assessment:

One other assessment thing that I did help with was expanding beyond like the pre- and post-test...that was a pretty routine way that our department did their assessment projects [before, so] expanding the idea of what a quantitative approach to assessment could look like. So, I convinced them...encouraging more indirect methods of assessment. So, one year, we revised our outcomes to include...something about “demonstrate understanding of the history, rhetoric, and grammar of African American language.” It was pretty bold, and we thought...we didn’t want to do an assessment project for the institution, based on students mastery of that, or like understanding of it in the first semester. So, I convinced them to do a project where we solicited faculty narratives about how teaching it went. And then like that we could use, we can analyze that and then use what information we learned from it to revise our curricular approaches in the next year.

By resisting the imperative to quantify their assessment or reduce it to pre- and post-test measurements of “improvement,” Alex is able to give instructors and the program space to develop out a new course outcome with a transformative (anti-racist) aim. Alex’s note about doing assessment “for the institution” puts their assessment into contrast (assessment for “us” rather than “them”) in a way that many others did. Rachel addresses this at some length:



a lot of assessment projects are set up, based on, like, the Higher Learning Commission coming to get the universities... accreditation. A lot of assessment projects are tied to some form of external review and accreditation process, and that's fine. I'm not trying to dismantle that system, that's not the system I'm interested in... I mean, I *am* interested in dismantling that system. Even though I was thinking about just starting a new assessment project, I was like, "why am I thinking like I'm a social scientist and I have to think of this as an experiment and direct measures and... validity" and these kinds of things that have like seeped in even into me--someone that's like I didn't study these kinds of things they're just like part of the Zeitgeist or something that I have to like drink the Kool Aid.

Having expressed their concerns about being assimilated into the social-scientific fascination with assessment, they continue:

We have an assessment team...[and] I'm glad we have our assessment team, even if when I talk with them I'm like "Okay, that's... I don't want to do that, I don't have an interest in doing that," like there's certain things that I pushed against... I'm interested in internal assessment projects that help us make programmatic decisions; I'm not interested if they need us to do an assessment project for HLC for their next visit in 2028. That's a different project... that doesn't have to be my project. I think realizing where I don't have to link up with other parts of the business that is the university [was important], like "I don't have to make my assessment project match what you need to get accreditation."

Even then, having made the distinction, Rachel worries about how assessment logic is affecting their thinking about writing:

You know, it's funny. It's not just pushback from the assessment team...it's in all of us, this desire to want to know, "Well, what do our students [know/develop]?" There are things about assessment, and the big assessment project—capital A big Assessment for Institution capital I—that have seeped into all of our own ways that we think we should be doing things, and I think I'm going to learn a lot about untangling and managing that. And I'm right in the thick of it, so, I don't know the lessons yet but I can feel them around me.

For WPAs like Alex who felt like they had the experience and had learned some of those lessons, there was a seemingly shared understanding that "assessment for us" could stave off, replace, or be used to negotiate capital-I capital-A "Institutional Assessment" conducted "for them."

I think a lot of people outside of writing studies have a very limited view of what assessment in general can be...I was able to have good conversations with our HLC reviewers, our accreditation reviewers who had like a really limited idea "Here's what assessment should be. Why didn't you do it like this?" and I was like, "Well, here's the research that I'm drawing on and why I thought it would be beneficial to our students and faculty," and they were open to it.

In this way, the WPA is not just a conduit for knowledge from our field to enter local practice, but also a means by which our professional knowledge can transform dominant conceptions about writing and assessment in HLC assessment.

Even before reaching this level of comfort with "big assessment," Rachel is nonetheless thinking of:

leveraging assessment...using assessment as a way to dismantle white language supremacy and standards of English Standard like the myth of standard English...I'm coming up with it as I go...I'm glad to see the movement and the field around leveraging assessment for kind of liberatory and emancipatory ends...I don't think changing our assessment practices is like a form of reparations but it gets us closer to that conversation like how reparations can look in terms of writing instruction at a university

Plugged into a group in the broader writing studies community interested in antiracist assessment practices, Rachel has found a community of colleagues who have given them the confidence to use assessment to effect some powerful transformative changes at their institution.

## **Conclusion**

The toolboxes of WPAs are full of texts and tactics for effecting change in FYC and the broader institution. Thinking back to Chapter 4 on Negotiation and Collaboration, it is clear to see how involving others in the composition of these documents strengthens both the ideas in these documents themselves and the investment in those documents by those stakeholders; this comports with Chapter 5's observations about feminist administration and shared ownership. Collaboration and negotiation around program texts and practices supports an ongoing project of critical WPA reflection.

When, however, as in Chapter 5's observations about Owning Expertise, it is important for WPAs to assert their authority/expertise and push for better ways of doing things—transformative commitments grounded in the professional knowledge of our discipline—those toolboxes also provide WPAs with powerful levers, pulleys, wedges,

and fulcrums with which to do some heavy programmatic lifting. When negotiating differences with instructors, or the institution, or broader accrediting bodies, or parents, these texts and practices can provide a stronger base from which to push back against powerful forces..

## Chapter 7: Negotiating, Translating, and Generating: Theory and the WPA

*“I think it’s really interesting to be asked like ‘are you developing a theory,’ because you know, I think that most of us in whatever we do need to think about [it]. I think I am developing a theory...I teach a theory and pedagogy class every year. So...half of my teaching is focused on looking at writing programs as theory places...You asked about theory as something that’s kind of emerging and building...it’s only in looking back at what was I trying to achieve, [that I] see these patterns in the repetitions of principles and like ‘Why do I want students to reflect on their language use? Why is that so important? Why do we have to do it at another institution? Why do we have to do it in another course? What’s important about it?’ and then there’s the theory.” (Beverly)*

*“I’m really also embracing resisting the idea of WPA as service only. I’ve really thought of myself as a teacher, and really thought of myself as a teacher of my colleagues, and so I’m partially like a conduit, but then it’s also how can I see this as a course that I’m teaching, and what are my outcomes for my colleagues and what do I hope that they’ll be able to know and be able to do as a result of me being here...I think that might be that might be the answer your question about theory.” (Kay)*

As we arrive at this final “results and discussion” chapter of this dissertation, we have addressed conceptions of FYC (Ch. 3), work with other stakeholders (Ch. 4), negotiations of authority (Ch. 5), and the toolkits available to WPAs (Ch. 6). While each chapter addresses another practical “slice” of WPA life—yet another element of “doing the work” of composition—each also addresses theory to some degree: theories of what composition education should look like, theories of the workplace, theories of administration, and theories of what works to effect change in an institution. This chapter, then, seeks to focus more intently on the “theory” work that WPAs do.

When I was first conceptualizing this project and how it related to theory—as you can still see in the title of this dissertation—I was mainly interested in WPAs as translators of theories. Then and now, it has seemed to me that WPA work is often treated by others (even others in composition studies) as largely atheoretical, merely the practical work of managing an unruly mess of instructors, and scheduling issues, and admissions policies, and tuition-generating gimmicks. One way of highlighting WPA as theory work,

then, was to use this dissertation to show WPA work as composition studies praxis, the translation of theory into practical application.

Translating Language A (Writing Studies) into Language B (the local dialect of The Institution), the WPA in this conception was mainly just a conduit, maybe a bit of a cultural ambassador. As Brian Ray (2012) observes, though, “WPAs [are] not only translators of theory but makers of it,” engineering applications of scholarship from the field while also generating new solutions out of their practical, day-to-day work as they “negotiate institutional constraints” in ways that have meaning for the field (p. 15). WPAs don’t just take theories (polished, finished *products*) and shoehorn them into their programs; they are—even in their most “practical” moments—acting out theories (explicit or implicit, conscious or not) and discovering new situations which, in turn, generate new theories. Thus, WPA work is always a snapshot of composition theory and composition knowledge *in process*.

I asked the WPAs in this study about how they thought of themselves as “doing theory work,” and explained my journey from “conduits”/“translators” to “makers.” In response to that specific question, several of them lamented how much the practical demands of their jobs prevented them from thinking much about theory, while others like Kay felt that “I have not considered my WPA work as theory generating work...I do see what I’m doing as more like you said like ‘conducting.’” The interviews with WPAs in this study, though, were full of articulations of “theory work”—from the reflection on how theories of composition manifested in courses, to the exploration of pedagogical or language theory with others, to the balancing act of administering a program while wrestling with theories of power and expertise, to the use of a toolkit inflected by genre

and activity theories. Further, WPAs in this study described new ways of thinking about the work that they do, from provisional little-t “theories” to ones they had given formal names. It is with this WPA theory work, then, that I want to bring this dissertation to a close.

### **Negotiating and Translating: WPAs as Conduits and Adaptors**

Most commonly, in response to the question about seeing themselves engaged in theory work, the WPAs in this study noted that they felt more like conduits or translators of composition theories. The majority of the interview built toward this sort of perception with questions about what commitments they had to big, named, theoretical bodies of knowledge (feminist, critical, antiracist, etc.), and questions about what those theories looked like in various types of practice. As a result, a lot of the answers to this question involved WPAs trying to think of “theories” (from composition and elsewhere) that they may have learned about in grad school or through their involvement in the circulation of professional knowledge, and then how they brought them into local practice. Rachel reflects:

Every time I go to [a faculty development], I'm reading back through theory out of a book, because before I do that, I have to remember what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. Sometimes just thumbing through—I don't know—something Asao wrote, or something Elbow wrote, or something like Haas wrote...I do have to go back to my roots.

These questions of “what am I doing and why am I doing it” drive this reflective process, as Alex explains in their account of how they approach their work:

I know what I know and I have my experiences, and then I try to use that information to do something, and then—just like you do in the classroom—I think about “how did it go? how can I do it better? how am I fulfilling my goals and my audience needs?” and stuff like that. And then thinking about—because my work is guided by like social justice and the transformative theories that you mentioned—[how]... my values...guide my work, and when I am not fulfilling them or upholding them, then I am really open to doing things differently.

Like Rachel, Alex goes back to their roots and their core values to try and answer the pressing questions of WPA work. When those answers are inadequate, Alex is “open to doing things differently” because “for these theories to effect any change, they have to be dynamic...we can be as well informed as ever, but if it doesn't work, then....” While Alex trails off, their strong implication is that WPAs always need to be ready to revisit their theoretical assumptions and change them. For May, this is the job of the WPA, a constant process of going back to the professional well to learn new things that they can bring to their program: “I'm always looking for, like, ‘Okay, what, you know, what do I need to be reading? Who do I need to be listening to? Who's doing interesting stuff out there?’” (May).

In Alex’s reflection on theory they wonder about how to “do it better” and “fulfill...my audience’s needs,” and then commit to “doing things differently.” This moves from “conduit” to “translator”—from a neutral “porting” of THING from Point A to Point B, to a political “trafficking” of “social, cultural, and historical meanings” with the intent to ‘to diversify meanings, point to the meanings not chosen, and bring to light other possible meanings that have been forgotten by history or covered up by politics’



(Pennycook, 2008, pp. 33–34). This is clear in Daniel’s account of their own “theory” work as a “translator”:

I think community college teaching is a really robust place to talk about not necessarily “wholesale like a brand-new groundbreaking theory,” but there’s so much out there that is written and published by people who have to write and publish as a part of getting tenure and getting promotion...from people who are teaching 1:1 and 2:2 loads at highly selective institutions. So, there’s so much out there that can be done at the community college level with a very, very different body of students—in open access institutions in general, but also community colleges.

Daniel then talks about their work with two grading theories—one from Writing Studies, the other from Sociology:

I drew on [another concept from sociology called] specifications grading to do a little bit of work with that, and I drew on the labor based grading contract, and I worked with it and I was pretty pleased with how it came out...there’s so much good theory that’s out there, but it hasn’t been applied in this context and sometimes it could work in this context wholesale with only minimum modifications, sometimes, it needs to be really heavily modified in order to adapt to this context, sometimes it wouldn’t work at all.

Daniel’s description here of wholesale (conduit) and modified (translated) also highlights the existence of a third possibility, which is the exigency for the rest of this chapter: what happens when the theory either doesn’t work or doesn’t exist?

### **WPA-Generated Theory: Theory of Pace**

When the theory doesn't work or doesn't exist, WPAs build their own theories. One place in particular where the WPAs in this study seemed to feel they didn't have a theory to bring with them—and thus had to come up with on the fly—was around the development of a healthy sense of “pace.” As May says, thinking forward in their career:

Am I WPA for life? Or is it five or six years and then I'm done? I can tell you right now: I don't want to be done after five or six years, especially after these five or six years, because I feel like I'm just figuring out what the hell I'm doing. Especially with the pandemic, I think this is just kind of a lost year, in some ways...but if that's the case—if I'm going to spend, you know, the next five to 10 years of my career as the WPA, or heck, even longer—I have to pace myself to do this work. It's a marathon.

Kay observes something similar, starting with conversations they had with other WPAs (also about pacing), but then grounding it in their experience and their envisioned future as a WPA:

your career is a book with many chapters...in grad school everything feels so urgent, but if things work out right I'm going to be here a while. Right. And so, if I don't have to do everything in a whole program at once, even though I know, like our, our online resource thing for instructors was terrible, and three years in now it's finally okay right but it took me three years to carve out the time to learn what I wanted to do, you know like, when I was like we need a new textbook year one, here it is year four, and you know, it's finally happening. And so that's one thing, one thing that I've had to learn is about the patience of how slow things are going to move, and how that's actually important for a more democratic process.

This point—about the feeling of urgency, but the importance of patience for a more democratic process--appears to be a key one for the theory of pace, and Kay reiterates it later on in the interview:

in the urgency of everything that's happening right now--with what I want to do for myself, for anti-racist work, and for what I want my colleagues to hopefully also think is a good idea—I...have to be patient about that, I have to be purposeful. I have heard about and seen people who didn't have that luxury to take the time—or who chose not to take the time even if they could have—and for my style and how I want to be like I don't...I'd rather do a different kind of conflict resolution than that, if that makes sense.

The theory of pacing thus seems to be about having the long view, tackling one issue at a time, and dedicating the time to building democratic consensus.

### **WPA-Generated Theory: Theory of Survival**

Related to the Theory of Pacing is a theory I'd call the Theory of Survival, which is more focused on what is sustainable or healthy for a WPA's work/life balance. Julia describes the problem that leads to the theory, noting that as a WPA it seems they're:

being asked to work all the time, like responding to emails at 2am and 6am, all hours of the day. If an instructor's dealing with hardship, we really bend over backwards to make sure that they're covered. But like that [isn't] afforded to me as the WPA so...the WPA work's just endless...a harsh experience... talk[ing] about care and self-care and providing care for others [to instructors, but not doing that for ourselves].

Having experienced something similar, Kay describes their way of thinking about WPA work and survival:

what I've been thinking a lot about is the position of WPA and what to keep perspective on...what I'm asked to do, versus what I'm willing to do, versus what the institution will suck out of me if I let it...The institution's demands are so great, right, and the people that this institution serves all want something and need something, so I've been trying to be mindful about protecting my labor, protecting the emotional work that's required, protecting the intellectual work that's required.

Without perspective and boundaries—a firm sense of what one can (or is willing) to do, and what is survivable—the work of being a WPA could easily become too much to handle. May notes how disappointing this can be—"the motto was like survive this year, which makes me sad [because] in my first three years I feel like I've spent the majority of it in survival mode"—but also how important it is to address:

I don't have the [energy] that I used to have. I see my colleagues who work an insane amount of hours, and who publish...so much. I just I can't, I can't...I use my [energy] up to get through the day [and] I don't have any left at night. Especially now...It's hard not to feel like I'm failing because I can't do it all. You see the mythos of the WPA who can do it all, and even though, on the one hand, like, I know that that's crap, it's a seductive narrative...I understand why even WPAs themselves buy in to that mythos and like promulgate that narrative, but it's really destructive and frankly counterproductive particularly for WPAs who

for many different reasons, cannot do it all, let alone, maybe we just don't want to.

In this way, it's important to these WPAs that we transform the narratives/mythos surrounding WPA work; without such a transformation, the work is too draining, leaving WPAs burnt-out and short circuiting any other transformations they hoped to achieve through WPA work.

### **WPA Generated Theory: Theory of Multiplication**

During my interview with Beverly, at one point, they talk about a transformative project that they developed and how the rollout for it is going. Sounding wistful, Beverly says "I don't get to teach this project, I only get to teach the teachers who teach this project." It made me sad, too, because it seemed like something that Beverly should be proud of, so when their reflection on the project concluded, I responded:

I know you were saying "I don't actually teach the students but I get to teach the teachers." In another way, though, is that exciting because it's got like a multiplication effect? Like, you could only ever have that interaction with so many students, but if you're able to sort of impart at least part of this sort of transformative theory that you're thinking about to enough teachers...they're going to reach out to way more students than you ever could.

Beverly then responded:

this is the first [dissertation interview they've experienced] that's been about transformative theories and pedagogies and the work as transformative...I think you see it [talked about] less in the admin work because it's so practical...I didn't expect to... be a WPA--I never took a class on it, and I always thought of myself

as a writer and a teacher and. And then, what's been really interesting about it, I think, is that you can make—like you're saying “if you teach the teachers, you're also teaching...you get through a lot of students”—you can make changes that are good changes that really help people on big level, and that's been really, I think, really special.

Kay also said something along these lines, and distinguishes “being a teacher of teachers” from the process of “being a conduit”:

I've really got thought of myself as a teacher, and really thought of myself as a teacher of my colleagues, and, and, and so it's partially like [being a] conduit, but then it's also like “how can I see this as a course that I'm teaching? what are my outcomes for my colleagues? what do I hope that they'll be able to know and be able to do as a result of me being here?”

Teaching (or mentoring, or supporting) the teachers, for so many of the participants was an extension of their teacherly selves in the classroom with undergraduate students, and often then manifested as both a core perk of the job and a way to bring about important change. As May says:

so much of my job really is rooted in being a teacher of teachers; [it's] what drew me to WPA work. This is my favorite part of the job, this is what I love the most. This is what I'm the most passionate about...the part of my job that I just *love* is that being the ‘teacher of teachers,’ of the mentoring, the supervising...I just find that really, really satisfying that honestly like...it's hard for me to put into words how satisfying that is for me. But yeah, I just I love it. I love it.

From this teaching, mentoring, and supervising, WPAs in this study found that they were able to extend their ideas of transformation beyond their immediate reach (in their classrooms, in their institutions). After reflecting on the joys of teaching the teachers, Beverly then recounted how their former students had gone on to write theses and dissertations which built out of that “transformative project,” and were now bringing versions of it to other institutions.

### **WPA Generated Theory: Theory of Scale**

Daniel and Alex articulated a fourth WPA generated theory in their interviews, which I am calling a “theory of scale” after Irving and Gal’s theory of “fractal recursivity” in which “a phenomenon at one scale might be projected onto another level” (O’Connor, 2016, p. 131). Throughout WPAs responses in the study they often referenced work at different scales (for example work in an individual classroom between a teacher and students, and work in a program meeting between an admin and teachers). In Daniel and Alex’s responses, however, this took on new meaning as they thought about how their “transformative” work was then replicated at other scales in their institution.

After responding to the idea of the WPA as a conduit through which WPAs funnel knowledge from the field into local practice, Daniel flipped the concept around and attempted to approach it from another angle:

I’m sort of interested in how the WPA role acts as a conduit into other administrative roles at the college, because that’s part of the reason why I was selected for this interim position [additional and superior to the WPA role]. I’ve got a budget in the multi-hundreds of thousands of dollars...like that’s a budget

that I never had anywhere close to as WPA, of course. But the fact that I dealt with personnel, I had dealt with budgets—small though they may be—I had dealt with training people and faculty development, and I had that faculty background. If you look at all of the WPAs across the country who are experienced WPAs who have stepped into Associate Dean or Dean or director roles, I think there's a real way that the activism that can happen sort of downward into the departments as a WPA...[also] allows you to step into other roles and continue that kind of activism from a broader scope.

Daniel's observation that WPAs might—because of their program practices and perceived management of a large bit of curricular real estate—become attractive candidates for promotion or filling interim positions then led them to observe that the transformative practices they enact within their program might spread more broadly at their institution. Quite a few WPAs reported affiliate roles with Center for Teaching and Learning-style programs, service on core curriculum committees, or dean-level engagements with institutional planning. As Alex describes:

I should I should say that I was also the co-chair of our institution wide Academic Affairs Assessment Council, so I was able to implement some more innovative and general assessment practices across all the departments, as well as on the GenEd committee, where, where I got to do that with the, with General Education learning outcomes assessment...so it's been yeah I think it's super exciting to be able to like, expand our, our experience and our knowledge across the college.

Both reflections here reminded me of my job interview at Metro State in St. Paul, where the committee was comprised of the WPA, the SCWA department chair, the Dean of the



college, and the head of the Center for Teaching and Learning...all four of whom had been WPAs of a FYC program during their careers. Clearly, there is potential for WPA transformative professional knowledge to replicate at other scales within an institution.

### **WPA Generated Theory: WPA Rhetorical Theory**

The final type of WPA generated theory is not really new, but I felt like naming it was important. These WPAs—coming from backgrounds in rhetoric and composition—clearly envisioned the WPA situation as a rhetorical situation, and WPA work as rhetorical work. Because rhetoric is situated, kairotic, doxatic—the available means of persuasion in a given time and place, specifically persuasive to a specific type of audience with specific shared beliefs and values—each WPA laid out a unique rhetorical sense of how to do WPA work in a way that was rhetorically successful.

### ***Ethos***

Whenever WPAs in the study were talking about their authority and expertise in the program, and how they built rapport with their instructors, *ethos* became an operant concept, even when not mentioned. Two WPAs did mention *ethos* in their accounts of the work that they do, and each in a unique way. Alex discusses it as a particular stance that they take relative to their colleagues:

Thinking about equitable WPA or WPA adjacent work is...I guess, like, thinking about my own *ethos*, my own credibility with my colleagues and kind of...taking a really, maybe not a humble approach but just like you know “we are colleagues and I am not judging you” and...shifting the conversation to “what are our students experiencing, and how can these practices facilitate their success.” I

think that that has been the best way for me to negotiate all these different expectations or requirements.

Speaking also to the kind of stance they take, but even more in the vein of tropes/conceptions of the WPA, May talks about strategically assuming identities (*ethos* as mask) before expressing a version of *ethos* that they feel is more “authentic” to them:

we just talked about this in [the grad pedagogy course] yesterday, we talked about teacher ethos. For me that this is very similar to my WPA ethos as well. We use that book *Informed Choices* by Tara Lockhart and some others where they talk about...they give them options like, you know, “are you a coach? or are you this? are you that?” We were talking about the idea of being a coach, and I said, “I tend to use more the metaphor of the midwife.”

Whether strategically donned or an authentic reflection, WPAs are thinking about their *ethos* and how it impacts how others perceive them and their attempts at transformative work.

### ***Pathos***

WPAs in the study often talked about tapping into audiences’ (teachers’, students’, administrators’) affective and emotional responses to things—a campus-wide enthusiasm for an initiative, or a visceral rejection of racism as wrong, for example. Perhaps owing to a popular perception that *pathos* arguments are manipulative, though, few WPAs explicitly referenced emotion as a key part of the work that they do. At the same time, WPAs in the study *did* often talk about the “emotional toll” of their work, and one comment by Kay suggested a way that such emotions might serve as a basis for more identification/communion between WPAs and instructors:

In my position...I still have to do research, and I still have to teach my own courses, and I have to do this service...and that really became clear with the pandemic shut down last March. What I was being asked to do, out of, out of everyone's desperation—with no acknowledgement of my own desperation right—you know, when everyone came to me and was like “I don't know how to teach writing online,” and I was like, “I don't either I've never done it.”

Beyond tapping into stakeholders' emotions about hegemony and structural inequalities (providing a rationale for transformative composition work), it seems that *pathos* might also play a role in transforming the roles/relations between WPAs and instructors.

### ***Logos***

Whether describing how they negotiate methodologies for approaching assessment with the HLC, or how they lay out the case for new course outcomes by gesturing to national standards, or how they argue for the appropriate content of a course, WPAs in the study are constantly talking about the logics they employ to get things done. Kay talks about this in two ways: one, the logic that they present to the student government, and two, the ambient logic that circulates on campus:

Every three years we're making the case to students vote on. There's a student panel that votes to keep the funding going and it has to be approved...I think that part of what that makes me do is to always be accountable to different stakeholders on campus in a way that's maybe different from other programs...we're lucky here at this institution that making the case for equity, diversity, and inclusion is expected.

Kay uses this construction “making the case” multiple times throughout their interview, always gesturing to the role of the WPA to provide “logical” reasons for people to see things in the same light, and accept their transformative aims.

### ***Kairos***

The kairotic moment to introduce transformative knowledge from the profession about anti-racist language practice was something mentioned by multiple WPAs in the study. Kay presents it as the rationale for developing new outcomes and program commitments, observing “at least we can’t pretend that it’s not a kairotic moment to [discuss] what we can do within this writing program to say that Black Lives Matter.” Rachel says something similar, talking about how “after George Floyd was killed this summer the amount of anti-racist teaching resources...bubbled back up. I was like ‘oh my god...like, thank god this is all coming’ because it felt like [anti-racist pedagogy] had like fallen to the background in some conversations.”

### ***Endoxa/Identification/Communion***

*Endoxa*, in Aristotle, refers to a shared community belief which then often serves as the missing part of an enthymeme, the bit that the audience can supply because it’s something they all tacitly accept. The function of operationalized *endoxa* appears in Burke’s concept of “identification” and Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept of “communion”—a viscerally emotional reaction as an audience recognizes itself in the speaker, feels “consubstantiality” and thus develops trust in the speaker, and finally accepts that speaker and audience share a logical view of the world. While I may someday seek to put this into conversation with Graff & Winn, for now I’ll leave it at:

these three concepts are connected, powerful, and go beyond simplistic understandings of the rhetorical appeals as isolatable effects.

First, WPAs in the study were keenly aware that their audiences might not always “identify” with concepts/approaches that they felt were alien, and, as a result, often chose to avoid or reframe instances in which they felt a lack of identification might be a risk. Roxanne, for example, observes “I think initially we had something about a translingual approach [in our outcomes], and I put...and we got some pushback for from people about, people might not necessarily identify with that, named approach.” In response, Roxanne kept the approach, but re-couched it in ways that better demonstrated shared understanding with instructors.

Second, WPAs recognized that their position might be perceived as “boss compositionist” by instructors, and therefore sought to re-frame themselves as engaged in the same enterprise as their instructors. May describes this, explaining that “in terms of my ethos with the TAs, it really helps that I'm teaching [the first year writing course] myself this semester...it definitely helps, for lack of a better term, it gives me a lot more street cred with the TAs.” While nominally about producing a sense of “ethos” and “credibility” for themselves in the minds of the instructors, these effects are *achieved* through a demonstration of sameness which May dramatizes as a practice of shared suffering (through pandemic teaching, through a underdeveloped course shell, through changes in modality, etc.).

Third, identification and communion—like sense of belonging—operate in something like a rhetorical version on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. As rhetors, a sense that we argue from a position of *arete* (virtue) and *dikaiosyne* (justice) and that we share

common ground with those around us gives us the confidence to begin to work on/with the world around us. Rachel speaks to the rhetorical value of finding communion with others throughout their interview, particularly in how it gave them the confidence to act authoritatively and accept the value of their own expertise: “I found allies and really like individual people that just like speak the same language as you like, at a small institution, you just gravitate towards one another.”

Finally, after treating identification as a way of developing adherence in different others (instructors, grad students), and a way of developing confidence in the self, identification and communion fulfill one final role in WPA work; it is the one way that a writing program actually becomes—or approaches becoming—a unified whole that can be referred to confidently with a collective noun. It is through processes of identification that “the program” which is composed of many individuals with different backgrounds, lifeways, values, and goals finally come together and see each other engaged together in a shared enterprise.

## **Conclusion**

While the WPAs in the study agreed about the practical demands of WPA work, and the degree to which that made it hard for them to see their work as “theory work” on a day-to-day basis, many of the WPAs in this study agreed that they saw their work as functioning as conduits and translators of transformative theories, bringing the best knowledge from our field into local practices. WPAs in the study saw their work as *generative* of new theories less frequently or explicitly, but—as an interviewer—it was easy to see theory generation in their descriptions of their day-to-day work. WPAs could and did explain what they thought were healthier ways of doing WPA work, what they

felt solutions to ongoing hegemonies might be, how they felt WPAs were engaged in an ongoing replication and development of composition knowledge, how they envisioned transformative change radiating out from their programs (or specific elements therein), and many more. These “explanations” are, themselves, theories—developed in action, incomplete and imperfect, still in the process of being refined and tested, but nonetheless potentially valuable to other WPAs as they think about their own grounded theory production.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

A central tenet of this dissertation has been that it seeks to avoid tidy conclusions or proclamations of “best ways,” and that, instead, the aim is to share the breath of others and let readers react and articulate their own visions of transformative FYC and WPA work relative to the narratives of these 9 WPAs. At the same time, I understand that it’s important to make some concluding gestures and approach some sort of exit, and to that end, I provide the following reflections and affective responses to this whole experience. Like Sid Dobrin (in Strickland & Gunner, 2009) I am interested in the “Becoming of Composition” rather than the “standardization and homogenization of composition,” with the same sort of impulses to decentering and de-territorializing; at the same time, I recognize how WPA “spaces” are unstable sites where hegemony is always trying to happen, and that such hegemonies will occupy a vacuum—as Bruce Horner (also in Strickland & Gunner, 2009) argues—if we don’t use them to do the ongoing work of counterhegemony, emancipation, and transformation. These concluding sections—about “FYC as an Important Site,” the importance of “Transforming Conceptions,” “WPAs as Important Agents,” and the difficulty of WPA work—attempt to keep both Horner and Dobrin in mind as I share what I see to be important takeaways.

### **FYC is an Important Site**

Studies of writing and rhetoric look at crucial issues of social, cultural, political, commercial, scientific, and medical importance, and do so through mixes of theory production, scholarly research, teaching, and application. While the work of writing studies and comp/rhet is broad and important—looking at every facet of our lives where we use communication to get things done, or where meaning is made—no site involves



such persistent and widespread contact between members of our profession and the public as first year composition. It is clear from composition's history in the US that FYC is a site of great potential for transformative change, and it is why the "powerful work so persistently to conscript and ration" it (Brandt, 1998, p. 169), and why it has been such a central site in the ongoing culture wars.

It is possible to see these attempts at conscription and rationing in the interviews with these 9 WPAs, as well as to see—in their work with others—how composition spaces can be sites to collaborate, negotiate, and transform. FYC is the contact zone in which all these different stakeholders and conceptions of language meet. WPAs are not just there as conduits through which our professional doxa enters local FYC practice, but also as the means by which our professional doxa is challenged, modified, and produced:

1. To translate something is to change it. Translation of our professional knowledge into local FYC practices then highlights possibilities, diverse interpretations of what that "knowledge" means.
2. To negotiate something is to be prepared to make concessions about it. Negotiations of our professional knowledge with others—who have their own knowledges—in the FYC space necessarily opens up our field to new ways of thinking about writing and pushes us to reflect critically on what we know/value and how we know/value it.
3. To do something is to develop theories about it. FYC is a site of actions. Doing FYC pushes instructors and WPAs to steep in conceptions of writing, communication, education, and society, and to embed in a large

and continuously shifting community of writers. Necessarily, then, FYC generates new theories.

In these ways and more, FYC is important to our field, while also being a site where the “work” of our field enters into broader circulation and practice.

### **Transforming Dominant Conceptions of Composition/Language is Important**

While WPAs do important work to decenter writing programs, question professional doxa, and hold “space” for a diverse range of ways of knowing composition and language, they do that work within a history and present in which dominant/hegemonic language values circulate widely in the populace and seek to reassert themselves in the powerful site of FYC. The imperative to address how language inscribes and perpetuates social injustices—racism, classism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, queerphobia, etc.—makes acts of critical reflection and transformation necessary if we seek to realize a more just, equitable, and radically democratic future. The WPAs in this study talk about the importance of this transformation constantly: where and when it happens, who it happens with, how WPA power factors into it, with what tools and strategies, and to what ends. While their visions of what those processes of transformation should/might look like differ, they all seem to agree that it is of central importance to the work that they do, and I share that conviction with them.

### **WPAs are Important Agents**

I feel privileged, as a teacher of FYC, to be able to do the work I do with so many students on an ongoing basis. Teaching a 4/4 load this past year, I had nearly 150 students with whom I got to explore issues of language and power. In each class I translate, negotiate, and create conceptions of language with my students, and the hope is that each

student leaves the class with a transformed sense of how they might think about the politics of language. I think that I do good work, and that—without compromising my ideals—I am able to work with students toward a pluralistic range of “better ways” of thinking about writing and language and power.

Before I began this dissertation, I had my own “Theory of Multiplication”...that if just 1 in every 150 students develop shared visions of the better life with me, then we will have multiplied our potential impact in the world (both I with them, and them with me). Over time, over a life or career, that multiplication has the ability to extend our reach much further than we ever could as individuals. As a teacher of FYC, I get to be part of welcoming people to an ongoing conversation about language, a conversation which will continue well after I have departed Burke’s metaphorical parlor.

WPAs are facilitators of this ongoing conversation on even more levels, and the WPAs in this study talk about how they engage in and tend to that conversation as members of the profession, as administrators, as teachers of teachers, as colleagues, and as teachers themselves. Counter to the idea that every classroom is an instructor’s own fiefdom, the WPA is tied to the idea of a program, which then becomes the formal “parlor” into which every instructor must enter, opening up the practices of their classrooms to broader discussions, critiques, and reflection...and also providing avenues through which their individual classroom practices might be taken up by other teachers in other classrooms. The WPAs in this study weighed different conceptions of their position, struggling with different roles they might fulfill—boss, mother, coach, midwife, conduit, activist—but often also yearned to be seen as a colleague and fellow traveler. Unlike their colleagues, though, WPAs have been given a mandate, time, space, and

resources that other colleagues have not; they bring their own expertises and knowledges, and are expected to use them in the constitution of (and coordination/guidance of) a program. These program constructs are then the sites in which dominant conceptions can and must be transformed, in which the important work of FYC (and our field more generally) is done. However they felt about it, the WPAs in this study were keenly aware that it was a major part of what made their work so important.

### **Transformative WPA Work is Not Easy**

What was abundantly clear from the interviews with these WPAs is that this work is not easy. The work is difficult—coordinating between disparate stakeholders, wrestling with authority, exhausting the toolbox, keeping the ship afloat—and manifests strongly in the theories of pace and survival that WPAs in this study articulated. WPAs are human, and experience burnout, exhaustion, depression, uncertainty, and failure. The working conditions and expectations—though more stable and better compensated than the contingent workers WPAs so often were concerned for—are often not ideal. One WPA described themselves as “a punching bag,” another as a “hypocrite” about “work-life balance,” and yet another just cried. In order to do transformative work, WPAs often need to develop coping strategies and boundaries, which speaks to how much WPA work, itself, is in need of transformation.

Beyond the conditions of the labor, WPAs are tasked with reckoning with deeply entrenched histories and politics of language, knowledge, and power. In each chapter of this dissertation, WPAs articulate even more dimensions of the work that need to be considered during the negotiation, translation, and transformation of those histories and politics; broken into discrete chapters, it can be hard to convey how often these

participants appeared to be describing delicate, critical, and recursive balancing acts—exercising and abdicating power, holding and giving ground, valuing and devaluing their own expertise, asserting and questioning values, etc. The work they described was at once painfully thoughtful, deeply theoretical, and powerfully practical...and they seemed to feel it often needed to be that way to have a chance of achieving some modicum of transformation that might have a lasting and good impact.

Without perpetuating heroic myths of “The WPA” as self-sacrificing, then, that’s where I hope to leave it. The work is hard, sometimes unrewarding, sometimes impossible in that institutional context and moment; at the same time, there are contexts where transformative change is possible, there is a growing sense that these transformations are necessary, and WPAs are finding ways to make it happen (in part or in whole) in programs across the country. They face obstacles—overcoming some, but not others—and are thoughtful problem solvers, theorists, and people. I’ve found that they’re often open to sharing their experiences, and that I have been enriched and energized by hearing them do so. If you are an aspiring or current WPA, I hope that you’re able to find that “breath” as well.

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## Appendix A

### **CFP: Negotiation & Translation in First Year Composition WPA Work: Transformative Professional Knowledge to Composition Practice**

My name is Alexander Champoux-Crowley, and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota in Writing Studies/RSTC. I am reaching out to ask for your participation in an interview and some limited data collection as a part of my dissertation research.

#### **The Study**

The requested interview and limited data collection (key texts identified by the participant) are IRB approved (exempt) and part of my dissertation, “Negotiation and Translation in First Year Composition WPA Work: Transformative Professional Knowledge to Composition Practice.” The research is focused on the negotiation of institutional realities by WPAs in First Year Composition as they seek to translate transformative (e.g. feminist, critical, antiracist, de-colonial, queer, translingual, etc.) theories into professional practice; in particular, I am interested in how WPAs negotiate their own positionality, grapple with institutional realities, collaborate with others, and introduce/curate/compose certain texts or genres to support their transformative work. The research will incorporate data from First Year Composition WPAs at a range of US postsecondary institutions to investigate diverse and situated acts of negotiation and translation.

#### **Participants**

WPA research often casts a wide net and captures WPAs who think about their roles in multiple and different ways. Because of the focus of this study, I am seeking to solicit the participation of WPAs in First Year Composition programs who identify in some way with Adler-Kassner’s concept of “The Activist WPA,” likely through commitments to feminist, critical, anti-racist, de-colonial, queer, translingual, or other liberatory theories in composition. In Adler-Kassner’s (2008) *The Activist WPA*, she defines activist WPAs as “change agents” who engage in “strategic action” (p.7), “drawing on best practices, position statements . . ., or from research in composition” (p. 13) to shift dominant narratives and transform composition program practices.

#### **Getting Involved**

If you are interested in participating in this research, please complete this, at the top of which you will find a link to the study’s Information Sheet. The form should only take 5-10 minutes, and will help me to set up the subsequent interviews at a time that works for you.

## Appendix B

1. What is your name?
2. If you would like to suggest a pseudonym for the study, please do so here:
3. What is an email address that would be convenient for us to us to set up an interview?
4. At what institution(s) are you currently employed?
5. What department(s) or program(s) is the First Year Composition program housed in?
6. Approximately how many sections of First Year Composition does the program offer each semester?
7. Approximately how many instructors teach in the First Year Composition program?
8. What is/was the title of your WPA position in the program or department?
9. How long have you been at your current institution, and how long have you been in a WPA role?

## Appendix C

1. Tell me a bit about the FYWP at your institution.
  - a. Setting (department, unit)
  - b. Size (instructors, students, sections)
  - c. Admin (where housed, administrative structure)
  - d. Courses (different classes, W requirements, placement)
  - e. Assessment (of students, of instructors, of the program)
  - f. Outcomes (how determined?)
2. When you took on the WPA role, were there any elements in particular about the program or the approach to courses within it that you were unsure about or thought needed to change? If so, what were they?
3. In the “Negotiation” element of my dissertation title, I’m interested in how WPAs do transformative work in the presence of other stakeholders and colleagues, as well as institutional expectations. Would you mind talking a bit about
4. In my dissertation, I’m referring to a cluster of theories—including but not exclusive to critical, feminist, anti-racist, de-colonial, and translingual—as “transformative.” As a scholar, what “transformative” theories most powerfully influence you? To what extent have these commitments inflected or influenced your approach to directing the FYW program as a WPA?
5. One thing I’ve noted in the literature around WPA work is an occasional anxiety about administrative authority and professionalization, and tensions that might exist between these and a WPA’s existing transformative commitments. As an open question, I’m wondering what thoughts you might have about this, either more generally or specific to your own experiences.
6. As you considered potential changes that you might want to be involved in initiating or joining in the program, what concerns did you have about enacting those changes? (Institutional resistance, department goals, your own position/tenuousness, feasibility, etc.)
7. Could you walk me through some examples of changes that you were or are involved in?

8. When I first started this project, I was mainly interested in WPAs as conduits for theories from the field, through policy development, and course outcomes, and teacher training, and hiring, and things like that. As the project has continued, I have become increasingly interested in how WPAs are involved in the production of theories. To what extent, I guess, do you think about your WPA work as theory work? What does “theory development” as a WPA look like in process for you?
9. One element that I’m maybe interested in exploring in this dissertation is the role of key texts or genres in the translation of “transformative” theories into practices. These could be texts (or types of texts) that you created in-program (individually or collaboratively) to support transformative change, pre-existing documents in-program that inhibited attempts at transformative change, or texts external to the program. As you think about your work in translating transformative theories to program practices, do any texts or genres stand out as being particularly impactful?
10. Reflecting on your time as a WPA, are there any things you feel you’ve learned about doing transformative WPA work that were unexpected or important? What was the process of learning and growing like for you?
11. As a final question, I’m interested in any things that you feel that I, as an outsider, might be neglecting to ask or focus on in regards to the transformative work of WPAs.