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Snapshots of #WPALife: Invisible Labor and Writing Program Administration

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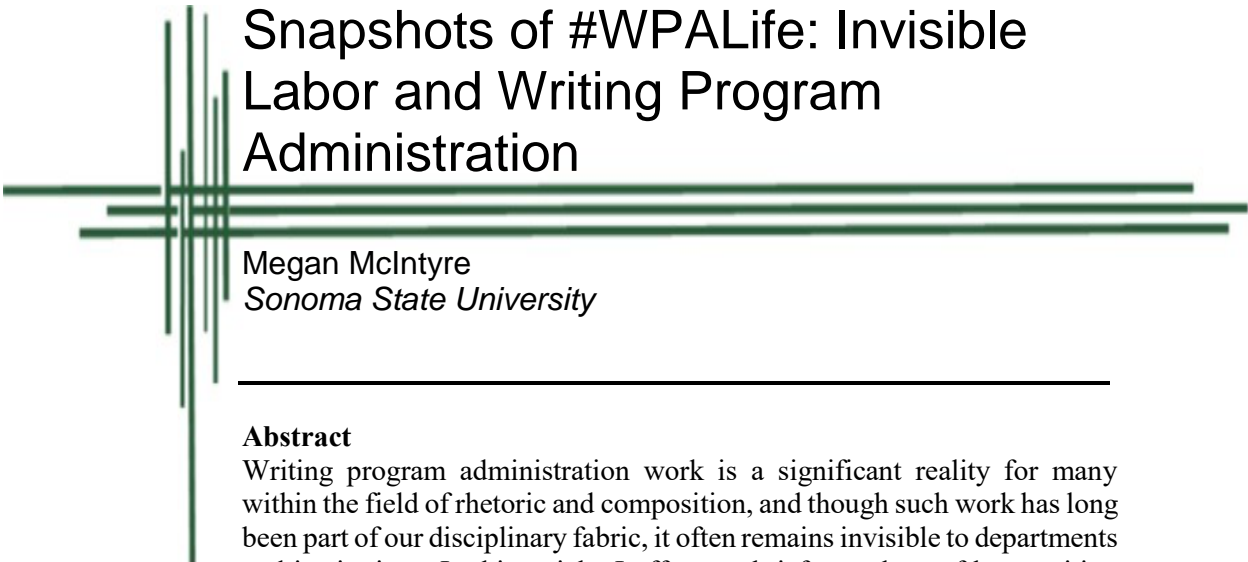
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A decorative graphic consisting of several thin, dark green lines. Some lines are horizontal, while others are vertical, creating a grid-like pattern. The lines vary in length and thickness, with some being more prominent than others. They are positioned to the left of the title and author information.

Snapshots of #WPALife: Invisible Labor and Writing Program Administration

Megan McIntyre
Sonoma State University

Abstract

Writing program administration work is a significant reality for many within the field of rhetoric and composition, and though such work has long been part of our disciplinary fabric, it often remains invisible to departments and institutions. In this article, I offer two brief snapshots of how writing program administration work is often obscured by seemingly brief documents or interactions, which elide the complex communicative and political work at the heart of program administration. I then offer a hashtag-based Twitter community, #WPALife, as one potential way of making this work more visible and of building the capacity to create more just, equitable, and anti-racist writing programs. Visibility can't be an end in and of itself; rather, making this work visible allows me to be a more effective advocate for equitable and anti-racist practices in my program, institution, university system, and discipline.

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MY first experience as a writing program administrator (WPA) was during the second year of my master's degree program in an English department at a large, research-intensive public university in the south. After teaching in the first-year writing program for a year, I joined the summer "curriculum developer" team. I had very little experience in theorizing or teaching writing, but I was interested in how the writing program worked and invested in my teaching. And I got incredibly lucky: the team I joined that first summer was mostly made up of advanced graduate students who were patient and kind mentors and teachers. They taught me about pedagogy, scaffolding, teaching and learning processes, and giving effective feedback. In short, that first summer was a master class in writing instruction.

There hasn't been a single year—in the twelve years since that first formative experience—that I haven't done some kind of administrative work in a writing program. I've served as a curriculum developer, textbook editor, mentor to new graduate teaching assistants, coordinator of the mentoring program, orientation leader, assessment coordinator, portfolio developer, writing center assistant director, writing center director, junior writing program administrator, assistant director of an independent writing program, and now writing program director. I've worked in writing programs at a large, public, research-intensive institution; a small, elite, private liberal arts college; and a midsized, regionally-serving, comprehensive university. These experiences were as different as they were influential, but they share something that feels close to universal for those of us who work as WPAs: so much of the work that I have done and still do was mostly invisible to my colleagues and to larger university structures.

This is no new state of affairs; nearly twenty years ago, Laura Micciche argued in the pages of *College English* (one of the flagship journals of the field of English studies) that "WPA work is largely invisible to many readers of *College English*, who may not even know what a WPA does, let alone why this position is so riddled with emotional angst" (234). According to most histories of writing program administration work, WPA positions date back at least to the 1940s (Charlton et al. 63). Yet, even in our own departments, our work as WPAs may go largely unnoticed except by those of us who do this or similar work. As the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the national organization of WPAs, says in the preamble to their resolution on evaluating the intellectual labor of WPAs, "administration—including leadership of first-year writing courses, WAC⁴ programs, writing centers, and the many other manifestations of writing administration—has for the most part been treated as a management activity that does not produce new

⁴ WAC is an acronym for "Writing Across the Curriculum," and it refers to the systematic inclusion of writing instruction in courses across departments and disciplines.

knowledge and that neither requires nor demonstrates scholarly expertise and disciplinary knowledge” (“Evaluating the Intellectual Work”).

This lack of attention is all the more galling because of the breadth of the work and the variety of relationships necessary to effectively do WPA work (see McLeod, for example). The list of issues that a WPA must respond to is long and complex: “curriculum and pedagogy, assessment and accountability, staffing and staff development, and professional and personal issues of various stripes, including tenure and promotion” (McLeod 4). On a nearly weekly basis, I’m asked to craft policies, articulate programmatic positions, respond to crises, defend practices, and participate in the shared governance of my institution. The outcomes of these requests range from a two-paragraph email to a two-page FAQ page, from a twenty-minute phone call to a one-hour meeting. Sometimes, the deliverable is as deceptively simple as a single form and its appendices. What’s obscured by these often-brief documents is the hours spent researching, crafting, and intervening in processes that impact the program I lead.

During my first year in my current position, for example, I’ve:

- developed and shared policies governing how advisors should direct students who fail one of our courses,
- recreated our directed self-placement (DSP) because of a campus-wide Learning Management System (LMS) change,
- attended a half dozen meetings on how to bridge the gap between directed self-placement and pre-enrollment and helped craft language about directed self-placement for admissions, advising, and academic programs,
- navigated our two tracks (a one-semester, accelerated reading/writing course and a two-semester, stretch model reading/writing course) through recertification in response to system-level requirements and campus-level general education reform,
- created what I hope is a cohesive professional development program for our composition faculty, most of whom are lecturers,
- crafted and implemented a more specific hiring process for new teaching associates,
- taught a TA practicum and a graduate-level introduction to the field of writing studies, which is a prerequisite for working as a TA.

Each of these tasks involved research, message crafting/discipline, and an innumerable number of meetings and emails. And this list doesn’t account for the crisis moments or emergent challenges that come with working with a half dozen teaching associates, two dozen lecturers, and a dozen other tenure-line faculty members, all of whose experiences and

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impressions are vital to the success of our writing program. Our composition faculty are dedicated and experienced; they are also underpaid and overworked.⁵ Our students are bright and thoughtful; they are also navigating a set of systems that are working hard to interpellate them into very specific subject positions at the same time that these students are negotiating emergent and sometimes conflicting identities. Many of them are also working hard to support themselves and/or their families. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to both these groups, to make their working and learning conditions better and more equitable in whatever ways I can. This work, too, is mostly invisible. But it shouldn't be.

This article, then, has two related goals: first, to make the work of faculty-administrators like myself visible to those outside my small community and second, to advocate for a digital community of writing program administrators that exists outside official institutional and organizational channels and, therefore, may be able to respond more quickly and advocate more radically for our students, our colleagues, and our programs. Visibility cannot be an end in and of itself; rather, making this work visible allows me to be a more effective advocate for equitable and anti-racist⁶ practices in my program,⁷ institution, university system, and discipline.

⁵ This is, of course, not a new or unique situation; twenty years ago, in her history of the field, Sharon Crowley noted that, "teachers of the universally required [first-year writing] course are underpaid, overworked, and treated with disdain" (120).

⁶ I'm working here from Asao B. Inoue's work on anti-racism (2009, 2015, 2016, 2019) in writing programs as well as work on culturally sustaining pedagogies from Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) and Django Paris (2012, 2014). In particular, Inoue's (2016, 2019) argument for expansive, asset-based notions of literacy and labor-based grading in writing courses and Ladson-Billings' (2014) and Paris's (2012) calls for an evolving notion of cultural practice and a sense of the classroom as a space for students to build on existing literacies and practices as they develop additional classroom-based knowledge inform my sense of what an anti-racist writing program would look like.

⁷ Anti-racist writing programs should have particular concrete classroom, program, and labor practices. In the classroom, these include labor-based grading, diverse reading lists, and classroom community standards that foreground equity. Programmatically, anti-racism shows up in the content of TA training and faculty professional development, in outcomes and statements of programmatic identity that emphasize culturally sustaining practices, and in keen attention to equity gaps. In terms of labor, an anti-racist writing program attends to diversity in hiring, as well as equity and dignity in working conditions and workloads.

A Brief Note on Methodology: Counternarratives and Microhistories

Let me pause for a moment to note why I've elected to tell stories as a way of talking about invisible WPA labor. The history of the field of composition/writing studies/rhetoric and composition has sometimes been cast as a battle between lore on the one hand and theory/research on the other. Jeff Rice, in his counterhistory of composition in *The Rhetoric of Cool*, points to Peter North as the progenitor of this grand narrative of composition history. 1963, North argued, marked the year that Composition got its capital 'C': "We can therefore date the birth of modern Composition, capital C, to 1963. And what marks its emergence as a nascent academic field more than anything else is this need to replace practice as the field's dominant mode of inquiry" (15). Rice argues, however, that this tidy grand narrative heralding a shift from lore/practice on the one hand to theory/research on the other obscures a whole lot of messiness. And it misses the ways that microhistories (of 1963 and beyond) offer us a richer understanding of the field. Microhistory as a methodology (see Craig et al., for example), then, offers us all opportunities to consider our theory-in-practice and how that theory-in-practice complicates and/or affirms histories and current conceptions of rhetoric and composition/writing studies as a discipline.

More so even than this disciplinary desire for microhistories and counternarratives, though, the nature of storytelling as an activist methodology, rooted in critical race studies (Boylorn; Kybuto; Yosso) and feminist theory (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner; Ettorre), makes it a particularly useful approach for this project. For scholars, artists, and activists, storytelling is both a way of intervening in socio-political issues and problematic power structures and a way of claiming and/or making knowledge (Rice & Mündel); as Blair, Brown, and Baxter argue, autoethnography and feminist methods more broadly share a keen interest in "transformative or interventionist" work (386). Autoethnography offers vital ways of contextualizing institutional practices and humanizing resistance to such practices (Adams; Adams & Jones; Ellis & Bochner).

To make my WPA work more visible, following calls for microhistories (McComiskey) and counternarratives (Rice) and indebted to the history of narrative and ethnographic methods in critical race studies and feminist theory, I offer two brief vignettes from my first year as Writing Program Director at my current institution—a midsized, regionally-serving, comprehensive university on the West Coast. I think these two brief stories might be useful in helping to clarify what I mean when I say much of my labor as a WPA is invisible, so let me tell you the story of "moving" our directed self-placement from Moodle to Canvas and of recertifying our two first-year writing tracks/courses. Each one begins with an email from someone outside my department. The projects were framed as fairly straightforward: copy a course from one LMS to another; fill out a form. Neither was straightforward in application, though. Each one was politically delicate, time sensitive, and work intensive.

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“Hi, Megan. We need to get DSP over into Canvas.”

Early in my first year, my department chair emailed to suggest we meet to discuss the specifics surrounding a few of the things I was responsible for in my position as writing program director. Throughout the interview and hiring process, the department had (thankfully!) been clear about the major things the writing program director would do: provide a vision for the program and draft policies/documents to support that vision, host professional development, supervise teaching associates, run directed self-placement (DSP), and consult on program hiring decisions. My chair, who was in his last year in that role, wanted to make sure I had a hand in crafting a document that more specifically enumerated expectations in each of these areas. I was very grateful, and since we agreed on so much about the future and character of our writing program, the document was fairly easy to draft. But as any WPA can tell you (and probably any administrator of any stripe), bullet points tend to obscure the hardest and/or most complicated parts of what we do.

Among the bullet points we crafted in that meeting was “Responsibility for Directed Self-Placement: administration, communication with other campus offices, modification (as necessary), and assessment.” I was happy to be responsible for DSP; in my previous position at a small, elite, private liberal arts college in the Northeast, I hadn’t been the one primarily responsible for DSP, but I’d watched admiringly as the administrators who were responsible for its revision made it more thoughtful and accessible. I’d done research on DSP to help support that revision, and I was excited to work more directly with an approach to DSP that had already been fairly successful in supplanting problematic placement tests⁸ and in eliminating barriers to success for students of color⁹ (Inoue; Inoue & Poe).

⁸ According to the Legislative Analyst Office’s report on the 2012 first-year class, for students who took the California State University (CSU) system’s English Placement Test, there was a stark racial disparity for students of color: 57% of those deemed non-college ready (and therefore required to participate in the remedial “Early Start” program) were Latino, compared to 41% of the first-year class that year. 8% of those deemed non-college ready were Black, though only 5% of the incoming class was Black. And 65% of the non-college ready students qualified for need-based financial aid, compared to 51% of the class as a whole. The CSU moved from EPT to multiple measures, which combines high school GPA, test scores, and high school difficulty measures in 2018, but many campuses (like mine) have elected to stick with directed self-placement.

⁹ As Welton and Martinez note, structural barriers for students of color include lack of access to college preparatory courses and programs at the secondary level (p. 198), which leaves students with a “college readiness debt” (p. 208). But even before that, during their elementary and middle school years, students of color are less likely to be encouraged to build aspirations for college (p. 199).

What I didn't know at that time was that a seemingly unrelated change on campus was going to make my work with DSP much more challenging. The year before I arrived, the information technology services on our campus advocated for and won a change in learning management systems. Despite a somewhat contentious debate among faculty, the campus voted to move from Moodle to Canvas. The 2018-2019 academic year would be a year of transition, and support for Moodle would officially end in May 2019. All courses would be copied into Canvas, and by the beginning of the Spring 2019 semester, faculty began preparing to run their courses exclusively through Canvas.

That January, I got an email: the previous coordinator for DSP (one of my amazing English department colleagues who had been acting as an unofficial but wonderful mentor to me) wanted to let me know that what was billed as an easy copy from Moodle to Canvas had not been easy on DSP. The copied course simply didn't work. All the linkages and the progression necessary to get students through the various activities that comprise our directed-self placement approach were broken by the incompatibility of the two LMS formats. I quickly logged into Canvas to find that she was exactly right, and I decided fairly quickly that I was better off starting over. And so began a months long process of creating and recreating DSP in Canvas. By the first week of April 2019, when we were supposed to be ready to enroll the first newly admitted and matriculated students into the Canvas course, we were still doing accessibility checks and fixing bugs.

All told, I have dedicated more than 100 hours to "moving" DSP to Canvas. I spent ten or so hours creating the first draft of the course, twenty or more hours in the Canvas forums and with staff from our center for teaching and learning trying to understand how to address usability and accessibility problems, and at least thirty or forty hours in meetings and on email participating in conversations about how to ensure that (1) DSP works, (2) it's accessible, (3) the content of communications to students are clear and precise, (4) we all agree on the process for communication and enrollment, (5) academic programs (the office responsible for pre-enrollment, admissions, and campus-wide curricular policies) and I are on the same page about how we get the information from DSP to the campus

However, as Yosso notes, students of color are also often adept at finding and building social networks to support their academic achievement, so any attempt at address structural barriers should attend, too, to supporting the social networks students of color build to "survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression" in their pursuit of higher education (Yosso 77). As Ladson-Billings, Paris, and Inoue note, however, the monolingual and monocultural approaches to teaching and learning in most educational institutions also present significant barriers to success for multilingual students and students from diverse backgrounds.

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offices responsible for advising and enrolling first-year students, and (6) I've allayed fears about whether DSP is compatible with system-level requirements about how placement works for first-year writing and math courses.

I'm not complaining; I'm pretty proud of the DSP process that our newly matriculated students are engaging with for the 2019-2020 academic year. Rather, I'm detailing the time spent to make visible all the labor hidden by a seemingly simple request. Any WPA who has implemented or supported DSP can tell you that it's more complicated than simply building the questionnaire or the instrument. Integrating DSP into a set of already complex conversations and systems around enrollment and placement is difficult and time consuming. The technical challenges are complex and challenging. So are the political ones. And all of them take time.

“Hi Megan. It's time to recertify the stretch courses. We'll need the ENGL 101 materials, too.”

The complex challenges of WPA work are further complicated by university- and system-level changes that have profound impacts on the writing program. In the summer of 2017, the California State University System, Office of the Chancellor handed down two new executive orders. EO 1100 governed the transferability of general education (GE) courses and laid out specific requirements related to unit hours, content criteria, and recertification processes for all CSU campuses. EO 1110 governed placement and remediation processes for first-year writing and math courses and effectively ended the practice of requiring non-credit-bearing courses as prerequisites for first-year writing or math courses. Both EOs had a significant impact on first-year writing programs across the CSU system, but on my campus (because we'd long ago moved from the placement test to DSP and from a remedial model to a stretch composition model¹⁰), our program was fairly well positioned to implement EO 1110; in fact, we were already largely in compliance with the EO.

¹⁰ Remedial models of composition require students to complete non-college-credit bearing courses before they are allowed to enroll in a college-credit bearing writing course. Stretch models of composition, on the other hand, include multiple classes that all confer college credit. In most cases, stretch models run parallel to one-term courses, and the stretch courses have the same outcomes and requirements as their single-term counterparts but “stretch” those outcomes and requirements across two terms instead of one. For example, my campus's one-semester writing course requires four major projects and 4,500 written words. (Students receive three units of college credit, which count toward student's general education requirements.) Our stretch courses have the same requirements, but students have two semesters to complete those requirements. Students in the stretch courses receive six units of college credit (three units of these count toward student's general education requirements and three count as elective credit).

EO 1100, on the other hand, had some surprisingly earthshaking consequences for us. Since the creation of our stretch composition program, around 2010, we had also been running a 4-unit, one-semester composition course that fulfilled the written communication general education requirement. Though one semester of writing is insufficient to help students develop transferable writing and reading abilities, the composition faculty on my campus had done a great job of building courses that served students well by using the additional hour (most GE courses were 3 hours instead of 4) as a way to give students additional practice, time for revision, and individualized attention. According to EO 1100, though, these 4-hour courses were no longer permissible.

The writing program response to the EO was further complicated by large-scale, campus-level changes to GE. The EO had caused our campus to rethink the entirety of our GE program, and so a special working group assembled at the end of the 2017-18 academic year to draft an entirely new GE sequence. The new GE proposal did little to articulate a new vision for the written communication requirement, but it did integrate the Chancellor's Office 3-unit requirement for GE classes. There would be no special dispensation for our writing courses; our 4-unit writing course was dead.

This required change would, of course, have an effect on our students; as I made clear in the documents I crafted related to this process, the loss of one hour per week of instructional time means that students are likely to get less specific feedback and less one-on-one time with their instructors. But the bigger impact was on our composition faculty: with caps of 25 (which represents a reduction of two students from our previous caps) for ENGL 101, composition faculty teaching a full 12-unit load of ENGL 101 courses will see an increase of one course and 19 students, which is the equivalent of approximately 1,500 extra pages of student writing to respond to over the course of the semester. Our faculty are being tasked with significantly more work with no increase in compensation.

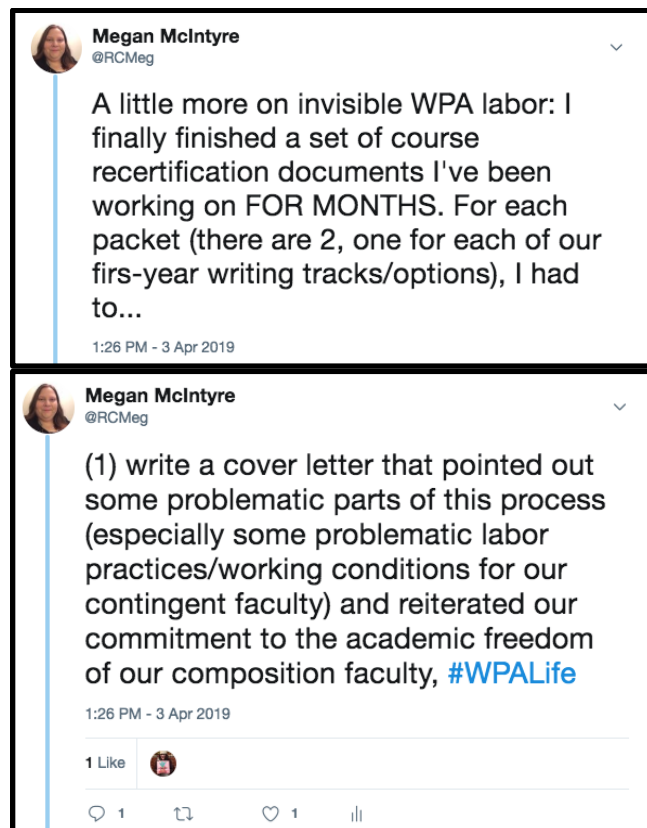
For the most part, my approach to this process has been to note, loudly and frequently, what is being required of writing program faculty and to ensure that affected faculty are invited to every meeting I'm in regarding these changes. My department chair has been similarly committed to ensuring that composition faculty have a voice and a seat at the table as these decisions get made by faculty committees outside our department. And the composition faculty have responded with thoughtfulness and care, but all of these changes ask for something they have very, very little of: time. As Jesse Priest convincingly argues in his examination of how time factors into material working conditions for writing teachers, "time is inseparably connected to labor in a variety of ways: we spend time, we engage in work while also engaging in time, and our institutions, our students, and ourselves put pressure on us to mediate our time in certain and specific ways" (42). And for those in contingent positions, time is in quite short supply. This process has taught me a lot

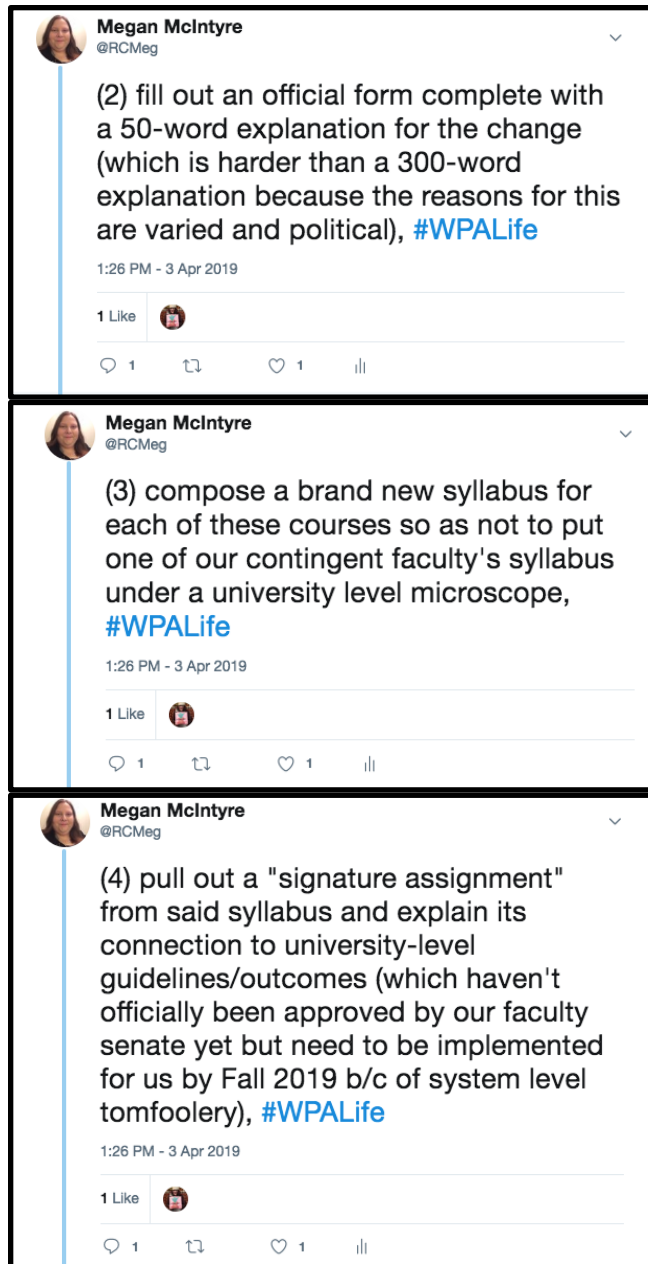
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about myself and my institution. Among the most important lessons is this: it's not enough to make space for our contingent faculty; I also have to find ways to center their voices and facilitate their participation in ways that don't require time they simply don't have.

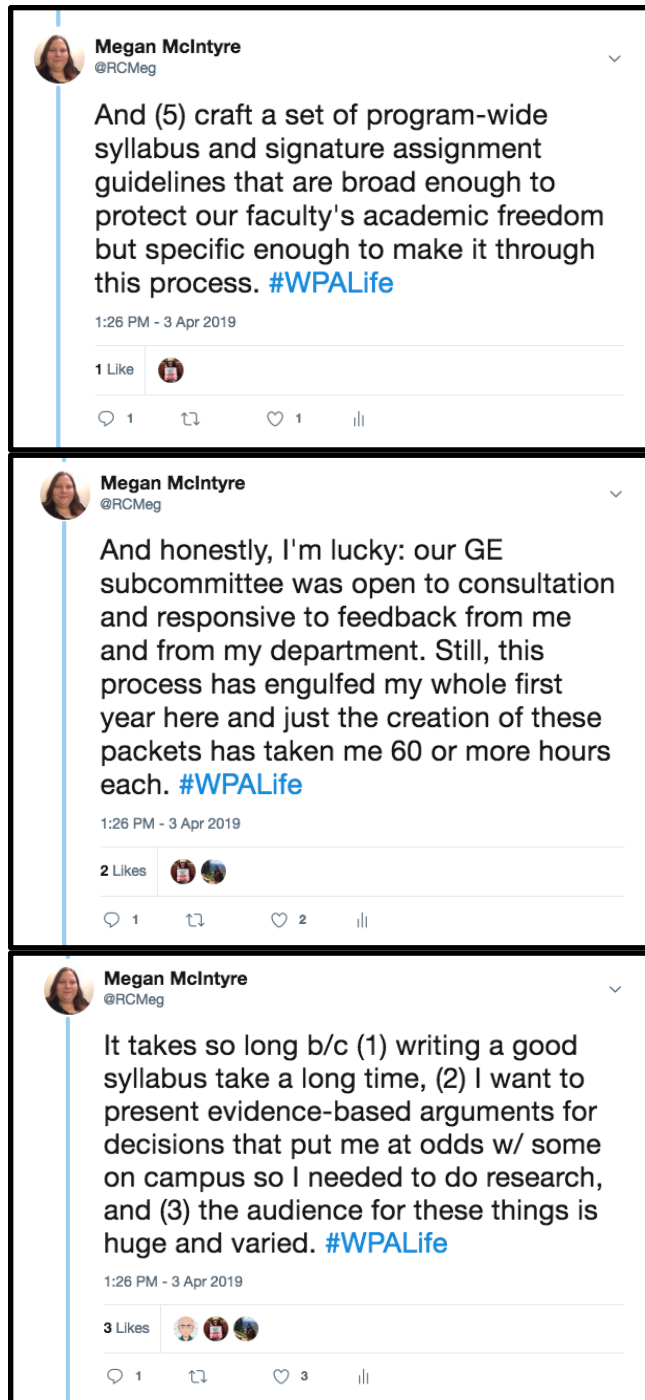
Ultimately, our department was faced with the choice to refuse to participate in the recertification of our courses within the new framework, and put our contingent faculty in an even more uncertain position with regard to their course assignments for the academic year, or participate in what we saw as a flawed process so we could make good-faith offers of work. We've chosen the latter course, for better or for worse. But I've taken every opportunity in the recertification documents I've crafted to reiterate the labor and pedagogical concerns that the process is largely ignoring.

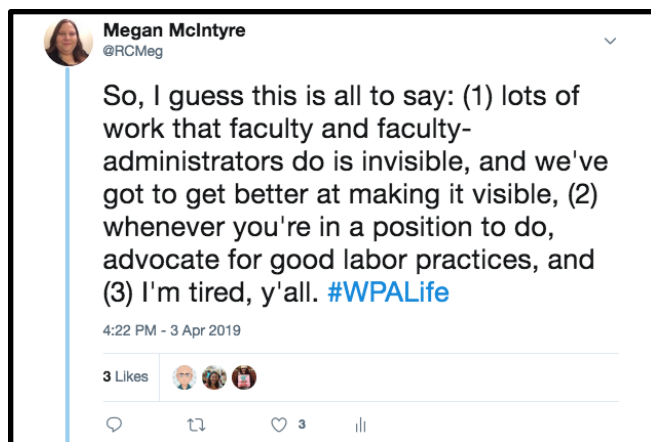
Here's how I recently described this process on Twitter:





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Figures 1-9: Tweeting on My Experience with the Course Recertification Process

It's not lost on me that, as both a woman and a junior faculty member, I'm putting myself in a somewhat precarious position by working through these situations so publicly (both on Twitter and in this article). The work I'm discussing at length here often stays invisible because it feels politically dangerous to call too much attention to it, to spotlight the delicate work at the center of these negotiations. But I also recognize my privilege: at my institution, my administrative time is part of my teaching load. In the tenure process, I narrate that administrative work as part of my yearly self-reflection and (try to) enumerate it on my CV. I get credit in the tenure process for WPA work.

I also recognize the privilege of having a department and a set of a university-level committees that were open to my input and recognized my expertise. Throughout both the DSP and the recertification processes, my colleagues in the English department and on faculty senate committees and subcommittees have been open to questions, asked for feedback, respected my disciplinary expertise, and generally done what they could to support my work. I'm in a supportive environment during a complicated moment on my campus.

Not everyone is so lucky: as long as there have been WPA positions, there have been warnings about when/how/who should occupy them. In 1991, Ed White cautioned against untenured faculty accepting WPA positions since the job comes with "large, unmanageable responsibilities and very little authority" (8). Michael Pemberton, writing two years after White, called the expectations for administrative work that come with many tenure-track positions in rhetoric and composition "the tale too terrible to tell" (156). Thousands of posts on the WPA-L, the listserv frequented by writing studies scholars and teachers of all stripes (but initially created as space for isolated WPAs to ask questions and build community), confirm the myriad challenges and controversies that come

with WPA work. Even in more official spaces, including journals and books in the field, there's a sense that our working conditions are consistently unhealthy: "We all feel overwhelmed and in unfamiliar territory on any given day" (Charlton et al. 62). The history and narratives of WPA work that pervade disciplinary spaces are most frequently bound up with "reluctance," "defeat," and exploitation (Charlton et al. 172).

And it's even more difficult for WPAs of color. Many of the narratives of WPA work (from Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals* to Theresa Enos' and Shane Borrowman's *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*) fail to acknowledge the work of WPAs of color, let alone, as Sherri Craig, notes "fully encapsulate the complexities of identity, power, politics, and socialized histories for people of color in (and entering) administrative positions, especially at predominantly white institutions" (16). Further, Collin Lamont Craig and Staci Maree Perryman-Clark note that race and gender are "intersecting paradigms" that inform one another and shape the "investitures around identity that align relations of power to representation" within institutions (39). All of this puts WPAs of color in increasingly precarious positions, as Craig and Perryman-Clark note in a follow-up to their 2011 piece. Even when engaging in seemingly standard WPA work (mentoring graduate TAs, advocating for students, mediating grade disputes), Perryman-Clark found herself forced into a "balancing act of advocating for racial and other marginalized minorities while ensuring a commitment to faculty and students across racial and gender lines," noting that the predicament "can be a tricky one" made trickier by her intersectional identity as a woman of color (21).

As Asao B. Inoue reminds us, we're not just talking about racism at the level of interaction but at the level of institution and of language itself: "I'm talking about our programs and organization being racist" (135). A recent survey confirms Inoue's argument: Genevieve García de Müeller and Iris Ruiz's survey-based study of perceptions of race in WPA work suggests that WPAs of color find themselves more isolated than their white peers: "When it comes to the consideration of race and writing program administration, participants argued that scholars of color often work in isolation, recognizing that programs lack effective strategies to systematically implement race-based pedagogy or examine specific institutional resources to help combat racism on campuses" (36). Anti-racism, then, seems particularly vital for WPA work, which requires relationships with faculty, students, and staff across universities. As Craig and Perryman-Clark note in their introduction to *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration*, "WPA discourse, [is] an amalgamation of experiences, bodies, labor, policies, rules, departments, and documents, is always and already race work" (10).

Making WPA Work Visible Online via #WPALife

Even under the very best and most privileged of circumstances, WPA work can be lonely. I found my answer to that loneliness online. And in the process, I found a community of WPAs dedicated to making their work visible, at least to their Twitter followers. #WPALife, whose exact origin is a bit of a mystery to me, but which was popularized by Bradley Dilger's sustained use of the tag, has offered an outlet and a community.

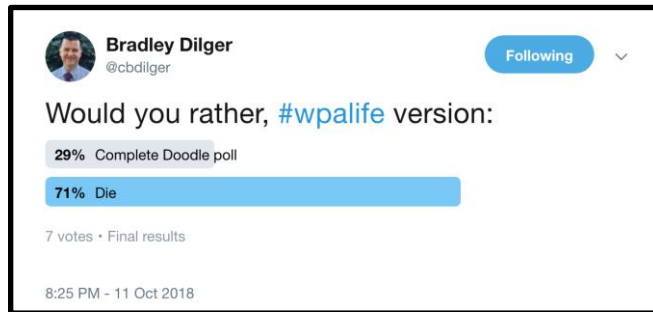


Figure 2: Example #1 of a #WPALife Tweet

The hashtag is home to a few WPAs who, like me, are doing the hard and often invisible work of running writing programs and advocating for best practices on their campuses. We talk about class sizes:

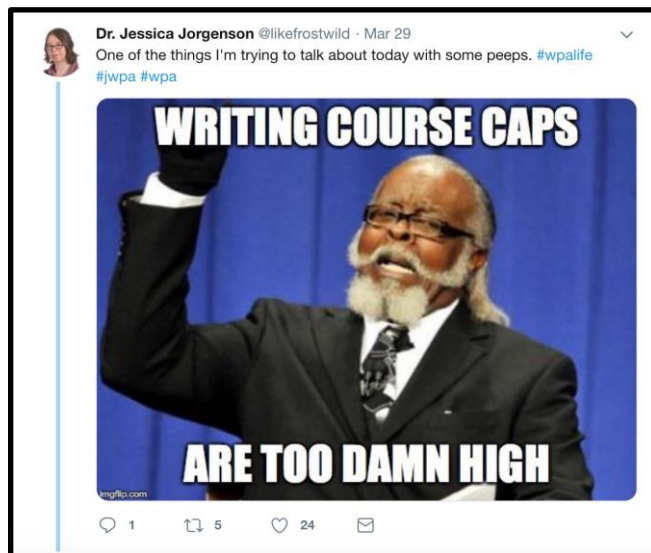


Figure 3: Example of a #WPALife Tweet About Class Sizes

We talk about labor practices:



Figure 4: Example of a #WPALife Tweet About Labor Practices

We talk about the big events that we're responsible for:



Figure 5: Example of #WPALife Tweet about Orientation, One of the Significant Events that Many WPAs Plan and Execute Each Year

And how the various parts of our jobs impact one another:

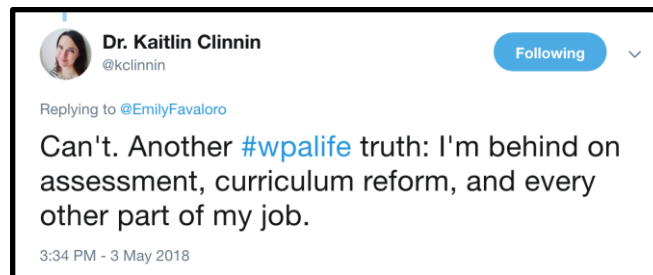


Figure 6: Example of a #WPALife Tweet about How Big Projects with Overlapping Deadlines Make it Difficult to Keep Up or Catch Up

We also share our mundane experiences, which take as much time and require as much labor as the more sustained endeavors that make up the majority of the discussion in the first half of this article. Members of this hashtag community tweet about office drop-ins from publisher reps:



Figure 7: Example of #WPALife Tweet about Speaking to Publishers' Book Reps

And meetings:



Figure 8: Example of #WPALife Tweet about Meetings and Time

And email inboxes:



Figure 9 Example of a #WPALife Tweet about the Volume of Email WPAs Wade through Each Day

And phone calls:

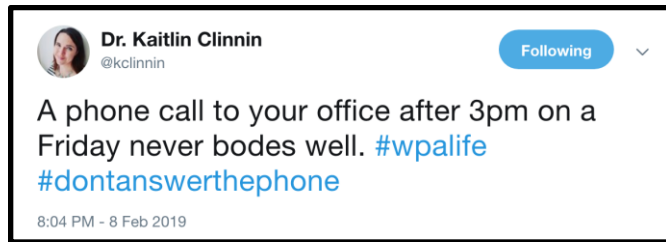


Figure 10: Example of a #WPALife Tweet about Dealing with Phone Calls and Crises

Basically, on a regular basis we articulate our labor in a public, semi-permanent space. We “heart” and share and respond to one another and in the process, for me at least, feel a little less isolated in our work.

Hashtag-based Twitter communities like this one are built around a set of shared interests represented by a specific hashtag; the shared interest is often but not always identified by the content of the hashtag. In her discussion of the #YouOkaySis hashtag, Paige Johnson argues that hashtags can serve as both a “rallying cry and gathering place” (57). Hashtags are also, as linguist Vyvyan Evans notes, a “linguistic marker of emphasis” (“#Language: Evolution in the Digital Age”). In the case of #WPALife, we can see all these traits at work simultaneously: the messages shared using the hashtag call for attention to invisible but necessary work, emphasize those parts of our jobs that feel most important or least likely to be seen/understood, and offer a space for commiseration, support, and advice from others in similar circumstances.

There are, of course, limitations to a community like this and to this community in particular. There a number of pre-tenure women participating in the hashtag community, but so far as I can tell, all but one of the WPAs tweeting using the #WPALife hashtag are white. This speaks, to return to an earlier refrain, to the precarious position of faculty and WPAs of color, especially those who are pre-tenure. Public conversations in social media spaces can be dangerous, especially to women and people of color. For this to be a community dedicated to equity, we must find ways to center those voices here as well.

As one of the more prolific users of the tag (a title I share with Brad Dilger, I think), there are concrete steps I can take to promote more diverse voices among this community of administrators. First, and most basically, I can start by tweeting the work of scholars and WPAs of color into the tag. Recognizing the foundational contributions of women, BIPOC, disabled, and LGBTQ+ scholars to rhetoric and composition as a field and to my work as a faculty-administrator is quite literally the very

least I can do. Secondly, I can begin using additional hashtags (alongside #WPALife) to connect to ongoing conversations around equity and diversity, especially hashtags celebrating achievements of diverse scholars. There's danger here, though: hashtag spamming (the practice of using many popular tags as a way to draw attention to your own tweet) is widely seen as manipulative and, for folks within the community represented by the hashtag, exploitative.

Thirdly, it feels important to acknowledge, in the #WPALife space and elsewhere, the continuing lack of diversity in WPA positions. As a WPA who has significantly benefitted from the amazing work of scholars, teachers, and WPAs of color as I work to build an anti-racist practice and program, I owe an enormous debt to scholars like Asao Inoue, Christina Cedillo, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Django Paris, Staci M. Perryman-Clark, Collin Lamont Craig, and so many more. Finally, members of this community should specifically invite WPAs of color into the community. This final action, though, must be preceded by the others. Before I ask scholars of color to do the work of participating and strengthening #WPALife, #WPALife must become a space that is proactively welcoming to those scholars.

Conclusion: So What Do You Want?

What is it, then, that I want? Following Paula Patch, I want a revolution. I want a program built on empathy and equity, recognizing that “equity is generous and does not look like withholding things from people who are doing good work just because the way they do it or the way they arrived at it looks different” (“Academic Fragility/Academic Imagination”). I want better ways of advocating for the contingent faculty that make up the vast majority of faculty in our program. And I want their work (and mine) to be visible and rewarded by institutions. I want to be, as Inoue has called us to, anti-racist in my teaching and administration practices. I want to decenter whiteness and center marginalized voices. I want to make space in our program for polyvocality, equity, and multiliteracies. This is the better writing program—and the better world—I’m fighting for in these small skirmishes marked by course change forms and learning management systems.

I also want accessible communities for those of us sometimes overwhelmed by the enormity and mundanity of our work. In one of the recent kerfuffles on the WPA-L,¹¹ a few long-standing members of the list

¹¹ WPA-L is a listserv that began as a way to connect writing program administrators from across the U.S. At that point in the history of the discipline, many WPAs were the only writing faculty in literature-focused English departments. Additionally, most faculty in WPA positions at the advent of the WPA-L were not specifically trained for WPA work, so the listserv allowed faculty to request and share resources and knowledge and forge much-needed relationships with others in similar positions. As Craig notes, though, faculty of

waxed nostalgic about how WPA-L, at its inception, was a supportive, generative space when most WPAs worked alone inside hostile departments of English. Many other members of the list (including colleagues of color, graduate students, and women) noted that WPA-L had never been a welcoming space for them, marked as it is by coded (or not so coded) racism, mansplaining, and general hierarchical nonsense. What I want is a space that actually enacts community in the way a select few on WPA-L once experienced it. I've found a bit of that in #WPALife, and I see it happening, too, in spaces like the NextGen listserv, and in Feminist Caucus workshops, and meetings at the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Visibility can't be, for me at least, a goal in and of itself. Visibility has to serve a larger purpose, one rooted in equity and social justice for exploited, under-supported faculty and underserved students. For now, what I most need is a space where I can build the capacity for such work, where I can make the managerial work that takes so much of time visible to others in ways that allow us to strategize about how to do that seemingly mundane work in service of those larger purposes. That's the heart of it for me: I need a community that can help me be better at the hard work that might help me create a more just future. For me, that's #WPALife.

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color have long been underrepresented in official WPA positions and in histories of WPA work. Given that historical lack of recognition and support for faculty of color, and ongoing problems with sexism and mansplaining on the WPA-L (see "The Idea That Was a Forum" from the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition), in fall 2018, a movement to acknowledge this problematic history and to find a better way forward emerged on Twitter, mostly around the #WPAListservFeministRevolution hashtag. At the risk of overgeneralizing a diverse set of issues that emerged under the umbrella of #WPAListservFeministRevolution, there were generally two camps: one that argued for the reform of WPA-L and one that called for its abolition. On the listserv itself, a third group, disinclined to support any change at all, also persisted.

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