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Context Matters: Centering Writing Center Administrators' Institutional Status and Scholarly Identity

Abstract

This article examines writing center administrators (WCAs) in relationship to conditions that influence their institutional status and scholarly identity. Drawing upon survey and interview data, we elaborate on four themes that shape WCAs' experiences: 1. education and training; 2. position and institutional oversight; 3. financial resources; and 4. sponsorship. While these factors do not impact all WCAs in the same ways, we believe they influence WCAs' empirical research production and their relationships with department-based colleagues in interesting albeit context-dependent ways when viewed across the experiences of the current study's participants and those queried in earlier studies. After examining the implications of these factors—factors that suggest a separate and unequal WCA experience—we first propose the need for more comprehensive study of current professionals in our field to determine the degree to which the themes that emerged from our sample resonate

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with other WCAs. Second, we ask readers to revisit the notion that all routes to and forms of writing center leadership are equally effective in preparing and supporting our members, in serving the writers with whom they consult, and for sustaining the field's knowledge-making capacity. Finally, we encourage our professional organizations to be more explicit about what writing center professionals need to know and to advocate for employment conditions that best allow them to provide research-informed services.

Institutional Status and Scholarly Identity

The field of writing center studies continues its movement from the margins to the center of academic inquiry. Its scholars increasingly produce empirical scholarship demonstrating the efficacy of writing center practices, and they publish it in writing center-specific, peer-reviewed venues, such as *The Writing Center Journal* and *The Peer Review*, as well as in rhetoric and writing journals. The International Writing Centers Association is now an assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, hosting both an annual conference and a collaborative as part of the Conference on College Composition and Communication; its regionals and locals have proliferated, offering members increasing opportunities to learn from and with one another; and it hosts a summer institute to prepare the next generation of writing center leaders.

Although a growing number of writing center administrators (WCAs) clearly have embraced their status as knowledge makers (Eodice, Jordan, & Price, 2014), WCAs were in the past, and remain today, a diverse cohort. With this study, we revisit their ranks, closely examining the role that institutional context plays in facilitating or impeding the individual WCA's development of a scholarly identity as measured by their relationship to empirical research.

Evolution of a Research Agenda

In 2012, we concluded a systematic review of 30 years of writing center scholarship within *The Writing Center Journal* with a conundrum: Most articles identified as research in the field's flagship journal did not meet the criteria for research as identified in most academic disciplines. That is, they were not replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) studies (Haswell, 2005). This finding was a disappointing response to over a decade of calls for more empirical research to promote writing centers as sites of academic inquiry, to recognize writing center practitioners as scholars, and to advance the field of writing center studies as a discipline.

While we understood that the field's RAD research production was low—only about 16% of research articles were RAD—we didn't know why (Driscoll & Wynn Perdue, 2012). To answer that question, we next queried WCAs about their research beliefs, education, and practices as well as about perceived barriers to their research, via a survey and interviews with a subset of survey respondents.

With the data collection and analysis done, we determined that we had uncovered enough material for more than one manuscript. The first, published in 2014, examined how WCAs defined research and described their specific research practices. Although those findings were rich and textured, they told only one part of an increasingly complex story. WCAs' research beliefs and practices do not occur within a vacuum. To better understand what WCAs produce and why they do it, the field of writing center studies needs to examine both how WCAs are prepared for writing center leadership and what they experience while serving in these roles. Therefore, we next asked the question: How do the conditions under which WCAs are educated, employed, and sponsored affect their production of RAD research? This manuscript shares what 15 WCAs told us about their 1. education and training; 2. position and institutional oversight; 3. financial resources; and 4. sponsorship. These conditions, collectively referred to as WCAs' "institutional status," appear to influence their data-supported goals and practices, otherwise known as their "scholarly identity."

The Literature: The Identity Crisis Refrain

To gain a better understanding of WCAs' RAD research production and its relationship to their institutional status, we turned to the extant literature. There we found discussions of WCAs' position within higher education generally and the disciplines of English and writing and rhetoric specifically as well as in comparison to department-based writing program administrators. As we traced this literature from 1985 to present, we found a striking refrain: WCAs face an ongoing identity crisis. Often present in how WCAs themselves conceive of their role, this ambiguity is always already present to some degree in their relationships with other compositionists and extra-disciplinary colleagues alike.

As early as 1985, after noting the strides writing centers had made, Jeanne H. Simpson (1985) argued that "[p]resenting writing center directors as professionals is, in fact, one of the most important tasks facing the writing center movement" (p. 36). Her "What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers" shared a "Position Statement on Professional Concerns of Writing Center Directors" crafted by the Executive Board

and Professional Concerns Committee of the National Writing Centers Association. In this document, WCAs were defined as professionals with “specialized preparation and administrative experience,” whose positions should be filled by candidates who enjoy “the same rights and responsibilities as other professional faculty positions” (Simpson, 1985, p. 36). These rights and responsibilities included professional development and travel funds, stability, competitive funding, promotion, and oversight and review by supervisors in the same field of specialization. The Board also recommended comprehensive coursework that included theory, research, and evaluation, as well as professional experience and training in such areas as accounting, psychology, information management, and grant writing. In other words, Simpson (1985) and her NWCA colleagues argued that writing centers and their WCAs should be central to the academic life of their institutions. To ensure this, Simpson (1985) implored WCAs to actively promote their role and its academic nature to other professionals, such as department-based writing program administrators (WPAs).

Unfortunately, the portrait of WCAs offered by Gary A. Olson & Evelyn Ashton-Jones (1988) four years later was not a fulfillment of Simpson’s (1985) goal. They drew attention to the ambiguity of the WCA, whose role “had never been adequately defined” (p. 19), even within the ranks of their own colleagues. When the authors surveyed freshman English directors to determine their perceptions of the WCA’s role, the results were discouraging to say the least: “Overall, what we found is that freshman English directors are more likely to view the writing center director simply as an administrator, not as a teacher, a scholar, or even a writing specialist” (p. 20). Olson & Ashton-Jones (1988) urged *Writing Program Administration* readers to reject these reductive notions of the WCA’s role. As a potential corrective, they argued that the WCA should be a rhetoric and composition specialist on a tenure-line appointment whose role in training consultants would be acknowledged as teaching and whose oversight of the writing center would be rewarded with release time. Most notably, they linked the WCA’s professional status to “the future of the writing center and the integrity of the larger writing program” (p. 23).

Despite this advocacy, the great divide continued. In 1991, Virginia Perdue (1991) challenged WCAs to push back at the perception that they were little more than administrative record keepers: “For too long we have ignored our own rhetorical expertise and have tried to speak one register of an administrative language without checking first to see whether other registers are available to us and what we want to communicate” (p. 19). Noting that WCAs had failed to familiarize

upper administrators with their scholarship, she encouraged WCAs to use the data they collect in a systematic way to describe their teaching.

Documentation of the WCA's contested status continued in Dave Healy's (1995) "Writing Center Directors: An Emerging Portrait of the Profession." In it, Healy (1995) surveyed WCAs to learn who they were and how they felt about their roles. Many respondents reported being under-resourced, underpaid, untenured, and undervalued. While WCAs were generally satisfied with the relationships they honed with writers and their staff, they lacked "the supposed marks of professional status" (p. 38). Healy (1995) reiterated Olson & Ashton-Jones' (1988) call for a better understanding of the WCA's role and recommended future research into writing center oversight and funding as well as into the WCA's career trajectory.

The institutional status and professional identity of WCAs was taken up again in 2001 when Valerie Balester & James C. McDonald (2001) explored the status of and relationship between WCAs and department-based WPAs. They found that 86% of department-based WPAs had terminal degrees, whereas only 53% of WCAs had earned doctoral degrees. Almost twice as many department-based WPAs (71%) as WCAs (39%) claimed composition studies as their primary field. Both positions tended to be filled by internal promotions rather than national searches. While they did so in passing, the authors hypothesized that a national search might indicate an institution's commitment to "find someone highly qualified rather than simply to find someone willing to fill a slot" (p. 64). How WCAs come to occupy their leadership positions bears further investigation, particularly to determine if it explains Balester & McDonald's (2001) further finding that WCA employment terms varied greatly by position: 81% of department-based WPAs were in the tenure stream as compared to only 17% of WCAs, and 40% of WCAs occupied non-faculty roles. These staff positions were analogous to everything from clerical workers to upper administrators, which added to the ambiguity of WCAs' classification.

Although the gap between WCAs and department-based WPAs persisted, Balester & McDonald's (2001) respondents reported more collaboration and mutual respect between center-based and department-based WPAs than Olson & Ashton-Jones (1988) had found in 1988. These rather good relationships, however, did not ensure goal agreement or equity between WCAs and department-based WPAs. In the face of disagreement, Balester & McDonald (2001) found that the WCA was generally more vulnerable. To address these imbalances, respondents recommended that both WCA and department-based WPA positions be filled by composition scholars, and the authors proposed

that graduate programs include coursework in writing program administration.

Instead of the role clarity that prior researchers and respondents sought, WCAs faced greater ambiguity by 2006 when Melissa Ianetta, Linda Bergmann, Lauren Fitzgerald, Carol Peterson Haviland, Lisa Lebduska, & Mary Wislocki (2006) penned their “Polylog: Are Writing Center Directors Writing Program Administrators?” In it, they both acknowledged that “questions about the professionalization of writing center work are entangled more broadly with other kinds of WPA work” (p. 11) and conceded “the general difficulties resulting from positioning the writing center director in relation to other WPAs” (p. 12). As an attempt at mediation, the authors identified three models of writing center leadership akin to WCAs’ different experiences. They liken the first, the “Universal Professional,” to a department-based WPA by virtue of their training and credentials. This WCA, or center-based WPA, finds institutional agency via their “scholarly identity,” which they hone by conducting empirical research that justifies the center (p. 14). Conversely, they argued that the expertise of the second WCA, the “Local Professional,” is found in their practitioner role and honed in a local context (p. 16). Unlike the Universal Professional, the Local Professional is less concerned with sustaining a discipline or building a disciplinary corpus: Their campus’s writing culture is their laboratory, and their research is revealed in its daily application within the center. In their third model for a WCA, the authors introduced the “Administrative Iconoclast,” who finds their mission neither in the discipline nor in the institution: they thrive on serving individual writers in the margins and find little reason to seek disciplinary or institutional power (p. 16). This WCA frames their existence solely in terms of service. Rather than advocating for one model, Ianetta, Bergmann, Fitzgerald, Peterson Haviland, Lebduska, & Wislocki (2006) deferred to the institutional differences that inform WCAs’ employment stories and asked readers to “indicate solidarity among our differing perspectives” by picking “‘all three’ [models]” (p. 36). Such an approach, according to the authors and many WCAs with whom we have discussed this matter, is rhetorically sound. After all, context does matter. With that said, we ask readers to consider the degree to which our professional practices should shape the institutional contexts in which WCAs are prepared and work, a question implicitly posed in the work of Anne Ellen Geller & Harry Denny (2013).

In 2013, Geller & Denny (2013) revisited the WCA’s professional status. They described three WCA career trajectories: 1. a tenure-line faculty appointment, a position that parallels the Universal Professional;

2. an administrative professional route, a position that could range from clerical work to upper administration in the same way described by Ba-lester & McDonald (2001) and that is generally affiliated with the Local Professional; and 3. a non-tenure-line faculty position. Although Geller & Denny's (2013) respondents were less enthusiastic about the Universal Professional model than the WCAs we interviewed, we identified many similarities in participants' narratives, such as an Institutional Review Board (IRB) process that disallowed non-faculty primary investigators and a faculty review process that was ambiguous about the role writing center scholarship would play in tenure decisions.

The compelling portraits of administrative WCAs in Geller & Denny's (2013) study reinforced our own growing awareness that "[w]ithout material institutional support, individual encouragement, collegial exchange, or substantive requirements to take their expertise beyond the institution" (p. 116), many staff WCAs and others have concluded and will continue to conclude that published scholarship is outside the WCA's purview. We echo and add emphasis to Geller & Denny's (2013) caution that what their respondents are describing as satisfaction or freedom from the constraints of "publish or perish" may come with a hefty price: WCAs "may become agents in our own intellectual/disciplinary marginalization if we are not disseminating scholarly knowledge through publication and are instead mired only in everyday intellectual labor of the type described by our participants" (p. 120). With that said, we are hesitant simply to affirm their recommendation that the conversation over the WCAs' institutional status and professional identity should evolve into a "consideration of what institutional or departmental cultures will support and what WCPs [writing center professionals] need for individual, institutional, and disciplinary evolution" (p. 111). We appreciate the need to work within existing structures and understand that some employment conditions should be and are organic to a specific site, but we ask readers to consider the degree to which what an institution/department can and will support should be more directly shaped by the discipline(s), the curricula that prepares its future leaders, and the professional organizations that represent its membership.

And while many readers will find solace in Geller & Denny's (2013) closing claim that WCAs are skilled at the art of "making do," we find ourselves ruminating on the implications of the separate but unequal WCA experience narrated by our participants for the field's ability to make knowledge and to operationalize that knowledge within writing centers. We ask readers to consider how "opting out" of scholar-

ly production not only affects writing center studies but also potentially shortchanges the writers we serve and the consultants we supervise.

Data Collection

This study drew upon two data sets: a survey distributed to three professional listservs to which WCAs generally belong and interviews with 15 WCAs, selectively sampled from survey respondents who indicated a willingness to be interviewed about their research beliefs and dispositions. After initial analysis of survey and interview data, we also employed member checking with a small focus group of WCAs who attended a national conference.

Survey. After gaining IRB approval, we constructed a survey consisting of closed- and open-ended questions. The questions were motivated by our earlier work and targeted WCAs' research practices, training, attitudes, etc., as well as perceived barriers to their research. During Fall 2011, we posted an invitation to our survey, hosted by Qualtrics, on three professional listservs—WCenter, WPA-L, and the Michigan Writing Centers Association. Two weeks later, we sent a reminder and left the survey open for one month (see Appendix A). Of the 133 WCAs who took our survey, 99 answered all questions. Although we did not exclude incomplete surveys, we did note the number of participants who responded to individual questions in our results.

Inclusion was limited to full- or part-time WCAs who play a leadership role in any writing center, even those subsumed within a learning center or an academic skills center. WCA respondents (n=133) were drawn from diverse geographic locations in the U.S.—Midwest (38.2%), Northeast (22.8%), South (27.9%), and West (11.1%)—as well as one from Europe. Because the survey was posted to the Michigan Writing Centers Association, Michigan was represented more than any other state (n=21), followed by New York (n=12) and Texas (n=8).

A wide range of institutions were represented in the survey: community colleges (10%), four-year private (22%) and four-year public (21%) colleges, doctoral private (8%) and doctoral public (33%) universities, and other types of schools (6%). Forty-seven (35%) WCAs were part of an English department, 55 (41%) were independent, 31 (23%) were part of a larger unit, such as an academic skill center, and 2 (1%) were located in high schools. The majority of respondents were writing center directors (68%), whereas 11% were associate/assistant directors, and 21% were directors of other kinds of centers (learning, communications, business writing, high schools, etc.), consultant trainers, and graduate students in administrative roles.

Most WCA respondents were trained within rhetoric/composition programs (44%) or English literature programs (24%); others came from creative writing (5%), education (10%), linguistics (7%), and other fields (10%). Of the 98 respondents who shared their degree status, 46 held PhDs, 9 were pursuing a doctorate, and 1 was a PharmD. Seven additional administrators classified themselves as “all but dissertation” (ABD), which means that at least in terms of their formal training, they have completed more coursework than peers who have earned MAs. Three had education-specialist credentials. Twenty-three had earned MAs or MFAs, whereas one was still in progress. One held a BA.

Interviews. Of that survey pool of 133 WCA respondents, over half were willing to be interviewed further about their responses. We used selective sampling—by region, Carnegie classification, geographic location, degree status and field, employment condition, and RAD research attitudes—to contact 20 WCAs of whom 15 agreed to be interviewed.

Our interview participants included six PhD and nine MA or ABD WCAs. Of those, six PhDs were employed as tenured or tenure-line faculty members and one MA served as a contract faculty member. All others held administrative professional positions.

We interviewed three individuals from community colleges; one from a technological institute; one from a specialized college; two from branch campuses; and eight from various universities, including research and teaching colleges. We also sought to represent regional diversity among our participants, with three interviewees from the South, four from the Midwest, one from the mid-Atlantic, and three from the West.

Interviews were conducted during Summer 2012 using Elluminate Live! and Skype, two voice-over IP programs. All interviews except one included both co-researchers. During each, one researcher asked the questions, while the other took notes; co-researchers took turns serving in both roles. These notes were used to draft a session commentary that was later compared to the transcript. The notes therefore served as an initial form of coding. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was professionally transcribed. In addition to the interview script (see Appendix B), some respondents were asked probing questions to extend their survey responses.

Data Analysis

Analysis took place in two stages. The survey and interview data were coded and recoded to identify themes, which were later shared with the focus group. Initial themes were revisited after the focus group. Our

discussion of the analysis process primarily concerns the interview data. However, we crystallized (Ellingson, 2009) our themes using survey data about WCA respondents' research practices, comfort with research, and explanations for why they do or do not produce research—much of which was discussed in a previous article (Driscoll & Wynn Perdue, 2014)—and focus group responses.

The surveys and interviews produced both qualitative and quantitative data. We calculated descriptive statistics using tools within the Qualtrics program and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 20. Rather than offer an initial theory to frame our analysis, we employed Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Holton, 2004) to explore the conditions under which WCAs work and produce RAD research (or not). This process of systematically and intuitively “fracturing the data” calls upon researchers both to trust their “sense of the conceptualization process to allow a core category to emerge” and to resist imposing desired outcomes on the data (Holton, 2010). To that end, and because qualitative researchers cannot escape their participant roles, we sought to mediate our own prejudgments in several ways. Following the Straussian Grounded Theory approach (Dunne, 2011), we consulted the literature only after we completed the coding. While it is not necessary to follow this protocol and in many cases the extant literature allows researchers to better shape their questions, we were particularly cautious not to confirm our anecdotal experiences with prior findings before analyzing the data. To further acknowledge the risk of bias, the lead author, a staff WCA, memoed extensively about initial codes, revised codes, and emerging themes, carefully noting each participant's experience and bracketing her own in a different column, which she shared with her tenured faculty co-author—who is not now and has never been a WCA—only after comparing our coding yield, a process that is documented next.

We used a multi-layer coding process adapted from the work of Johnny Saldaña (2009) to code our qualitative responses. Initially, we independently culled qualitative data from the survey and 8 of the 15 interview transcripts and inductively coded them—line by line—for conceptual emergence. We then met to discuss commonalities and differences in our codes, from which we developed a tentative list of new codes. While the terms we initially chose to represent the data varied by wording, we were struck by the degree of inter-coder agreement, so we moved from open coding to selective coding. The lead author memoed the process throughout, generating exhaustive lists of related concepts and representing them within conceptual schemes.

Next, we independently recoded all interview transcripts using our revised codes. We met again to discuss our responses and to finalize analysis of the interview data. We also compared our emergent interview themes to our survey results, and as we were finishing the analysis process, the lead author conducted a small focus group at the 2013 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, where she invited participants to comment upon our initial themes and our process. One of those participants was generous enough to read and give feedback on the manuscript that resulted.¹ In all, this coding and recoding process occupied the better part of three months and yielded six themes that influence WCA's research practices, four of which are discussed in the next section.

Results

This article unpacks what we learned about WCAs' position and institutional oversight, education and training, access to stable financial resources, and availability of sponsorship. Before discussing each, it is important to note that these issues do not impact all WCAs in the same ways. When we look across the 136 WCAs in general and the 15 interviewees in particular, however, these conditions appear to substantially impact WCAs' scholarly identity in interesting, albeit context-dependent, ways. All interviewed WCAs lamented a shortage of money, time, and support, but the findings we have chosen to discuss at length often are the “messier” ones, those where one theme overlaps with or influences others, sometimes in unexpected, less direct, less discrete ways. Further, even when faculty and staff WCAs confronted similar challenges, the effects often differed by position type.

Degree status and field norms. Although we did not ask respondents if they believed that having a terminal degree played a role in RAD research production—we thought doing so might be misconstrued as a bias or might plant a suggestion in the respondents' answers—most respondents addressed it in the course of answers to other questions. For example, Carrie, who teaches at a religiously affiliated southern university and earned a doctorate in applied linguistics, implicated the important role of degree status. She pointed to specific research training she earned during her PhD, training not available to those who end

1 Although many people contributed their time and expertise to this study, we particularly would like to thank Valerie Balester, Donna Kim Ballard, and Ben Rafoth for the extensive feedback and encouragement they offered us at different phases of this research.

their education with a master's degree, as an important factor in her and other's abilities to do empirical research. She further speculated that placing MAs in writing center leadership reinforced the perception that WCAs are managers or administrators rather than academics and researchers. In her view, WCAs must be faculty members if the field is to be research based. Likewise, Patricia, a regional writing center coordinator also from the South, opined that WCAs are too often seen as managers rather than as scholars, which presents a notable challenge to their research ethos. Echoing 30 years of WCA-focused research, Patricia argued that the field needs "to change the culture of what a writing center director is." For Carrie and Patricia, that transformation is depended upon to hiring people with terminal degrees.

Although Carrie's and Patricia's comments most directly linked degree status to research production, 13 participants referenced this theme as they discussed their relationship to research. Only one participant without a terminal degree suggested that her degree status was irrelevant to her research. Of those who discussed it, three WCAs whose education ended with an MA implicitly suggested that their education was incomplete, thereby challenging their efficacy as researchers. In the other cases, respondents implicated not their own but others' perceptions that research was the purview of those who had earned a PhD. Of these, many other non-PhD respondents inferred that degree status might play an indirect role in the omission of research from their job description or in the lack of resources provided to support research. As we looked more closely at the evidence they offered for being left out of research and research-related activities, such as serving on dissertation committees and obtaining IRB authorization to serve as principal investigators, however, we found that their comments tended to be connected more to position type, particularly tenure-line faculty versus everyone else, something we will return to shortly.

Research and training. Respondents also discussed an education and training gap that, upon closer analysis, appears unrelated to whether or not they have earned a PhD. Most (12 of 15) reported having a research methods class in graduate school but what it included varied. For half of them, it was a course in secondary-source review, such as how to write about the existing literature rather than specific instruction in empirical methods and diverse data collections. This research gap left many of these WCAs feeling unprepared to engage in data-supported research, especially to publish it. And while prior coursework in empirical inquiry was helpful, it did not ensure that the participants conducted research. Patricia, for example, learned about qualitative and quantitative study design in graduate school, but she has

never conducted her own empirical research in her role as WCA. She, like many of her cohort, gained most of her knowledge about and found encouragement to do research at conferences.

In some cases, interviewees filled education gaps with post-degree training. For example, Alice, a staff WCA at a Midwestern branch campus, attended a summer institute on writing assessment. Alice attended the institute at the insistence of her dean, who funded half of the fee, but her direct supervisor, not pleased that she was going to attend professional development, fought having to pay the other half. Still others, like Cody, forged research relationships with departmental or non-departmental others who had research acumen, which is similar to the collaboration of the current study's co-authors. He did this although research was not part of his job description.

Those who earned their graduate degrees in English some years ago were less likely to have taken courses in data-supported research methods, but the importance of RAD research was not lost on them, making these senior scholars some of the most ardent supporters of RAD inquiry. Lila, a middle-aged WCA and faculty member at a Midwestern research-intensive university, prided herself in ensuring that her graduate students are well schooled in the research methods that she herself neither learned nor typically employs. In general, however, courses in research methods that include specific attention to different kinds of data collection both contributed to a better understanding of empirical research and a willingness to conduct it, especially the recognition that both qualitative and quantitative research are “empirical.” Kelsey, a staff director at another Midwestern research-intensive university, had extensive training in research methods during her education program, knowledge that she regularly put into action despite having not finished her PhD. She did this, however, in addition to her job description. Her funding, staffing, and evaluation did not reflect her commitment to doing research.

Although the relationship between degree status and readiness for RAD initially seemed an obvious result of the more extensive training generally provided within a PhD program, what we learned about WCAs' education and training seemed to discount that conclusion. Degree status had a less direct influence on research. Rather than ensuring that WCAs with a PhD were better prepared for RAD research (something that may or may not be true), it appears to have influenced the type of employment contract open to WCAs with terminal degrees. WCAs with a doctorate appeared more likely to be employed in tenure-line or tenured faculty positions, whereas WCAs whose education stopped short of a PhD were more likely to be employed as administra-

tive professionals. In terms of our sample, six of the seven WCAs with earned doctorates were employed in faculty positions, whereas only one MA had a faculty position, and it was a contractual one. In many cases, the MA candidates we interviewed who had completed their education more recently noted taking several courses in empirical research during graduate school, but they had not been expected to use those skills in their WCA roles.

Research was rarely part of a staff WCA's job description; when it was, research was generally presented as synonymous with program assessment (evaluation research), which is less likely to be conducted for an outside audience. In only one case—that of Dora, a respondent from a Midwestern regional state university (not doctoral intensive)—did an administrative professional maintain that her staff status better enabled her to conduct research and to advocate on behalf of her center. This claim, however, might be explained by what we learned about expectations for faculty research at many institutions.

Double duty: The faculty WCA. Although WCAs with PhDs appear better positioned to do RAD research—given its requirements for tenure and promotion—some faculty WCAs noted that their dual appointment within an academic department dictated that their research would be devoted to the academic discipline (and would adhere to its research norms) rather than to writing center studies, which may explain Dora's earlier-cited belief that her staff status better positioned her to run a research-supported writing center. Writing center research was not universally accepted as appropriate for tenure and promotion, calling into question the academic status of writing center studies as an academic discipline worthy of study. Therefore, our tenure-line WCA respondents noted tension regarding research and promotion, and our tenured respondents spoke of the “double workload” they endured before obtaining tenure and turning to their “real” work in the writing center. Those who addressed this condition, such as Larry, lamented the lack of esteem their colleagues held for their writing center role. When and if these WCAs chose to conduct writing center research, they found themselves seeking collaborators outside their departments because the research methods required to study the center frequently were not employed by their departmental colleagues and therefore not accepted as appropriate research for the discipline.

In addition to uncertainty about the role of the writing center in their research agenda, these faculty WCAs described feeling isolated. The faculty WCA was often the only writing center expert in their department as well as the only full-time presence in the writing center. In some cases, this isolation was aggravated by an inadequate course re-

lease, resulting in the equivalent of two full-time jobs: one teaching two or more courses per semester as well as participating in departmental service responsibilities and a second in the center. Carrie, for example, spoke of receiving one course release each semester for her WCA role, but simultaneously she was given additional responsibilities for portfolio assessment because she was not teaching as much as her colleagues. In other cases, faculty WCAs were the public face of the writing center, as was the case for Lila, who was empowered to do research in and on the center because she had a staff WCA to oversee day-to-day operations.

One tenured faculty member raised yet another challenge for the faculty WCA: itinerant responsibility for the writing center. Two years into his WCA role and still new to writing center studies—essentially learning on the job without a guide—Larry, a tenured faculty member at a community college in the South, expressed appreciation for the important role that a writing center can play, especially at the southern community college where he teaches, but he acknowledged that his service to the writing center would be limited. His department assigns the writing center to faculty in the same way that other committee work and courses are staffed. He expected to fill the role for one more year, a situation that he admitted was not ideal for research-supported practices or to advocate for greater funding. He lamented that just as he was gaining an understanding of the writing center, his role in the center would likely end. Our concurrent examination of writing center job announcements over the last decade has uncovered similar itinerant arrangements whereby faculty members, usually visiting or adjunct, will administer the writing center for a set term or for one of their rotations within the department. This was the situation of Bonita, who was hired on a three-year contract. If renewed, she may or may not continue her role within the writing center.

A related issue (although one that some early readers encouraged us to omit) is the continued reign of the single-authored study within most English departments, something Neal Lerner (2014) discussed in “The Unpromising Present of Writing Center Studies.” Although members of the sciences and social sciences frequently co-author publications and this practice continues to grow within composition studies, we found some evidence that the products of collaboration remain undervalued within the humanities, perhaps with the exception of collaboration on an edited collection. Our WCA respondents who engaged in research noted that their ability to compose RAD scholarship generally hinged on a research partnership, sometimes with a collaborator who had a stronger knowledge of data-supported research. Unfortunately, several of these interviewees offered accounts of how this collaboration or

their specific role within it was discounted because their departments discouraged multi-authored works or disproportionately valued the first author's input. In the cases where the partnership occurred between a faculty member and a staff WCA, faculty authorship was overemphasized by the department/institution. In both cases, the staff member felt compelled to accept second-author status because she did not need to meet tenure expectations.

“Nobody cares if I do research”: The staff WCAs' professional identity. Like their faculty colleagues, staff WCAs cited many barriers specific to their position type. In addition to the greater likelihood that they have not earned a terminal research degree, staff WCAs were unlikely to find research included within their job descriptions. This finding was affirmed by our forthcoming content analysis of WCA job descriptions across a decade. And, as Geller & Denny (2013) have noted, some staff WCAs might find that omission liberating. In the case of staff WCAs who had not yet conducted research or who found few routes to doing so, however, we found a different explanation best articulated by Nathan, a tenured WCA who is concurrently a departmentally based WPA in a northeastern university: “There is an inertia barrier—an understandable defensiveness because many are positioned in a tenuous way. Their day-to-day survival comes first. . . . Also, research opens us up to that which we don't know, which makes us vulnerable.”

Unpublished staff WCA respondents described a thwarted effort to conduct RAD research that manifested itself in different ways. While all staff WCAs mentioned a job description that omitted research but was full of other obligations that demanded their time, only two cited their unfamiliarity with empirical research as the major reason why they did not have research efficacy. In the face of few voices encouraging WCAs to see themselves as knowledge makers and a daily schedule that called upon them to work one-on-one with students right beside their consultants, these WCAs reconciled themselves to their “service” role.

Those staff WCAs who expressed the internal efficacy to conduct research confronted barriers notably different from those of their faculty colleagues. First, as already noted, research (beyond assessment for some) was strikingly absent from the job description of all staff WCAs we interviewed. Perhaps more disconcerting, some staff participants confronted policies that explicitly discouraged their research efforts, relegating them to the role of knowledge consumers or practitioners, even if they had the training and made the time to conduct research. For example, Nan, a busy staff WCA at a Midwestern, private, four-year university who has no support staff, is entitled to “relief time” to participate within professional activities, such as serving on the

International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) board or attending a conference. She is not, however, allowed to use this time to conduct research. Another respondent shared her experience with an IRB that refused to grant her principal investigator (PI) status. Although she is the only writing center expert on her campus and holds the research credentials to conduct her own studies, she is expected to enlist the signature of a faculty colleague who does not understand her research methodology or the field of writing center studies. This situation is not uncommon. By looking at the IRB requirements at several universities and speaking to many colleagues across the country, we learned that staff members—despite their degree status or research credentials—are generally excluded from serving as PIs. The WCA co-author of this study had to petition for principal investigator status, which was only granted after gaining authorization from her department, dean, and the institution's provost, an approval process that reminded her at every step that she was the exception, not the norm. Research is also discouraged when campus-based research stipends or grants are limited to full-time faculty, a barrier that Bonita found when she sought money to support researching her center's activities. In other cases, outside analysts were employed to conduct the writing center's assessment. This scenario was primarily limited to WCAs whose writing centers operated within "big tent" tutoring units, something we address next.

A question of oversight: Or, the big tent tutoring problem. Although many WCAs cited problems with the writing center's placement in the university's organizational chart, we were not able to clearly determine whether or not placement at the department, college, or provost level was more likely to facilitate access to and support for writing center research. With that said, we did identify a notable difference in the experiences of WCAs from "Big Tent" tutoring centers, those where tutoring for various subjects are housed in one location and overseen by one director. First, such centers appear more likely to employ staff WCAs. Second, they are often located in student affairs and administered by other administrative staff members who neither understand how writing tutoring differs from other subject tutoring nor appreciate the specialized writing knowledge needed to effectively facilitate tutorials. We believe this is an important theme that deserves more thorough examination, but space constraints do not allow us to elaborate this issue beyond connecting it to the dual burden of being overseen by an administrator who fails to understand the writing center's role and being employed within a staff role, which often obscures the pedagogical and scholarly nature of WCA work.

Although this oversight problem can confront faculty or staff WCAs, we chose to introduce it within our discussion of staff WCAs. Perhaps the experience of Kelsey, a staff director at a Midwestern, state, doctoral-granting university, best demonstrates why. Each time her reporting unit changed, Kelsey was called upon to court a new supervisor and to educate them on the role of the writing center all over again. She recounted the example of a new administrator who, not understanding the writing center's pedagogical role, thought she should reduce consultation times to 10 minutes to increase the numbers of writers served in a more cost-effective fashion. This administrator reasoned that such a change would increase the writing center's visibility, positioning it for more resources. Kelsey was able to reason with this well-meaning administrator, but in other cases her pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge were ignored. And while such anecdotes are not uncommon, we think her role as a staff WCA made the situation more complicated because she does not have the same level of academic currency as her faculty colleagues.

Time and money. Interviewees, both faculty and staff, had much to say about how funding affected their status and scholarly self-efficacy. Notably, funding sources varied from the college level to department level to the Provost's office, etc. These funding sources were not always the same as the writing center's institutional placement or as the WCA's oversight. Some directors did not even have a line-item budget. Funding source and levels were often inconsistent from year to year. As such, WCAs cited financial limitations to conducting research because they were often called upon, as discussed above, to handle the day-to-day operations of the center rather than to research its practices. This funding limitation not only hindered their ability to access further training and to attend conferences, but also it prescribed which activities were most deserving of their time. Certainly funding and resources are salient to all WCAs, but staff WCAs were more likely to express them as challenges to their scholarly identity than faculty WCAs. For evidence of this problem, we need to look no further than the experience of staff WCA Kelsey, who has funded travel to professional meetings by organizing bake sales or writing grants for other departments, who repay her labor with travel funds.

Discussion

The great divide. Like many researchers before us, we found that WCA respondents' experiences and scholarly efficacy seem most shaped by whether or not they inhabited tenure-line faculty or staff positions.

While both groups articulated challenges to their knowledge-making roles, for adequate resources, and with colleagues' understanding of their roles, these challenges often were manifested in very different ways and in combination with other factors, such as degree status, education, and training.

Overall, both faculty and staff WCAs described experiences that recall a biblical notion of being in the world but not of it, although the reasons for their alienation differed by position type. Tenure-line faculty WCAs more often than not expressed frustration about a double load, which called upon them to produce scholarship that looked like that of their departmental peers as well as to conduct research on the efficacy of their writing centers' practices, even if that research required a skill set quite different from their training and from their discipline. Staff WCAs, on the other hand, found themselves generally excluded from their institutions' definitions of a scholar despite a movement within writing center studies for more RAD research. When viewed in relationship to one another, the faculty and staff WCAs in our study appeared to occupy separate and unequal institutional spaces, a situation that leads to a separate and unequal scholarly identity. Although faculty WCAs are more clearly recognized as scholars in the eyes of their peers and themselves, the form and substance of their knowledge making was not consistently connected to their writing center role. Staff WCAs, on the other hand, increasingly articulated a disconnect between writing center studies' calls for more RAD research and institutional policies that exclude them from a knowledge-making role.

Closing the great divide. As we have demonstrated, many WCAs work within environments that ignore their expertise, challenge their status as educators, discourage their research, and under-resource them to boot. If this were a novel, we might call it *Bleak House Redux*. Rather than leave our readers with the news that little has improved since the last discussion of WCAs, we would like to close by discussing the power of sponsorship, the fourth theme present in our findings, and by affirming the importance of advocacy.

Whether or not respondents were actively pursuing writing center scholarship, most acknowledged the important role that mentors, collaborators, and co-authors could play (either because they had them at their place of employment or they once had them during graduate school). Notably, however, WCAs were more likely to find these resources in other disciplines than in their own disciplines. Although one faculty WCA who had also served as a department-based WPA spoke of collaboration with colleagues with similar dual roles, she was the only one to mention a fruitful collaboration with a department-based

WPA. Participants also mentioned mentorship as something they lost when they left graduate school or finished their dissertations. In their new role as WCAs, they felt isolated from the support network they once enjoyed in graduate school, as was the case of Katrina, a community college WCA in the Midwest. In other cases, participants sought collaboration across campus. Kelsey, for example, found support and collaboration within the education program, but she generally felt that her own department did not welcome her. We heard that sad refrain over and over again.

Those who do cultivate their roles as writing center scholars often do so in spite of barriers that include resistant colleagues and restrictive institutional policies. Sometimes these collaborations facilitated knowledge of assessment or data collections methods with which the WCA was not familiar. In other cases, these collaborations were necessary because the WCA could not be a principal investigator. And in still others, it offered an incentive for the WCA to participate in scholarship despite a heavy workload.

As discussed earlier, the products of such collaborations are not equally valued across departments. In his foreword to Janice M. Lauer & J. William Asher's *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*, Alan C. Purves (1988) characterized the humanistic researcher as a single author sitting alone, in contrast to the group-oriented social scientist. He encouraged writing instructors and administrators (and by implication WCAs, whom he does not address) to embrace "new cultures" of knowledge production (p. vi). Almost 30 years later, this undervaluing of co-authorship appears to persist, albeit to a lesser degree despite numerous and well-touted multi-author studies. We encourage all readers to embrace a concept of authorship and reward that will facilitate more replicable, aggregable, and data-supported research, a sentiment affirmed by Lerner's (2014) earlier cited findings.

Additionally, faculty members are sometimes advised not to collaborate with their staff colleagues, as was the case for the faculty co-author of this paper. When we won IWCA's Outstanding Article Award 2012, our department asked the faculty to congratulate Dana, the tenure-line faculty co-author, without mentioning Sherry, the staff corecipient who also teaches within the same department. Upon learning about the award, a departmental colleague, a full professor at that, warned the faculty co-author not to share the spotlight with a staff member if she wanted to advance in rank.

The most cited sites of sponsorship for WCAs' and their consultants' professional development were state and regional conferences as well as the IWCA conference and collaborative. Some respondents

mentioned attending IWCA's Summer Institute as well. And while these resources were appreciated, respondents noted that participation in these venues required a substantial monetary investment, which meant that they needed travel funds. Faculty WCAs found themselves having to choose between disciplinary and writing center conferences. Staff WCAs had to justify their participation as scholars and often confronted a system that does not allocate travel for staff. These conferences were the most cited resources for collegial interaction, scholarly exchange, and learning about research methods that encouraged WCAs to exercise their scholarly identity. Additionally, these conference presentations often led to publications and/or collaborations as well as to multi-institutional research opportunities.

While sponsorship (or lack thereof) appears to play an important role in WCAs' relationship to research, WCAs have unequal support as a cohort, and they do not enjoy the same status and sponsorship opportunities as most departmental-based writing program administrators. We therefore encourage the IWCA to leverage Geller & Denny's (2013) and these findings about WCAs' separate and unequal circumstances to sponsor further research about its members' employment status and scholarly identity. As our literature review has demonstrated, however, prior studies have regularly called for changes without effect, so we advocate doing so now for the explicit purposes of drafting employment standards grounded in the knowledge and practices needed to lead a research-informed academic service. And while we applaud the IWCA's policy on the use of graduate student labor within the writing center, we encourage the organization to draft policies that more directly outline what courses the graduate curriculum should include and why. Our flagship professional organization and its regionals and affiliates need to send a strong signal to the institutions that employ WCAs and the graduate programs that prepare them.

Like Geller & Denny (2013), we also believe that IWCA should explore the extent to which the Council of Writing Program Administrators' (1998) policy position, "Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration," could guide WCAs' professional advocacy on campus and within the disciplines. The cited literature and our own anecdotal experiences suggest that departmental WPAs often don't see WCAs as WPAs—even when they share the same credentials. With that in mind, we need to define the WCA's work—the employment conditions and preparation necessary to do it well—from within rather than by trying to make it fit a model that isn't organic to writing center studies and writing center practice.

The promising and rigorous work done in writing centers across the country—often in less than ideal circumstances—confirms that WCAs truly are skilled in the art of “making do.” But, we should not have to claim this as our mantra. WCAs need to compose guidelines that clearly define the nature of the work that they do: the importance of research to sustain their activities, the education and training necessary to do it, and the importance of dialogue with other professionals at conferences and via the academic literature. This claim will make some WCAs uncomfortable—perhaps because their degree, training, or current purview differs from the guidelines that may be developed. Although we understand this response, we counter that if WCAs don’t drive our professional and scholarly narrative, academic and professional administrators, HR professionals, and even well-meaning departmental colleagues who do not understand what we do and/or who are not inclined to see our work as scholarship will continue to make these decisions for us. Unless writing center professionals compose these job descriptions and promote them as expectations for best practices, some institutions will continue to devalue WCA scholarship and the great divide will continue.

In sum, colleges and universities are bureaucratic institutions. WCAs must be conversant in the language of administrators, so we can have greater say in writing center administrator position lines and job descriptions. Our professional organizations must send a firm and unified message to institutions of higher learning. Before we can do so, however, our members and our allies must be willing to revisit the notion that all routes to a writing center and writing center leadership are equally legitimate. If we lack consensus on the basic conditions needed for effective writing center leadership, we concede these important issues to sundry others who lack the vision, training, expertise, and/or good intention to make equitable, sustainable, and data-supported decisions.

Limitations and Implications

As is the case with much exploratory research, we determined numerous areas where refinement of our survey and interview questions could have yielded better results. For example, our survey respondents were generous with their time, but our instrument was exhaustingly long, reflecting our enthusiasm to “learn everything.” Future researchers should also seek other ways to reach WCAs because our reliance on three listservs potentially restricted our respondent pool. And, despite our effort to gain a representative sample of WCAs, it is likely that

there is some self-selection bias present in our results. Further yet, we acknowledge that our research suggested tangibly different perspectives about staff WCAs' desire to conduct research than Geller & Denny's (2013), the only other recent study we found that addressed this issue. We therefore need more and larger scale studies of WCAs' institutional status and scholarly identity, so we may determine if the themes present in our sample are characteristic of WCAs widely.

Despite the noted limitations, this research offers the field of writing center studies as well as the larger field of rhetoric and writing an opportunity to assess the past and to envision the future. One way to do so would be to conduct a linguistic analysis of our own or others' survey data. While we opted not to add this layer to the present study, we suspect that our theorizing about the divided WCA landscape and WCAs' scholarly efficacy might benefit by looking at the use of qualifiers and specific words like "should" and their proximity to what the participant was/was not doing or what the field "should" value in contrast to the participant's preferred practice, etc. We also would like to track how the words "qualitative" and "quantitative" occurred within WCAs' definitions of research and what they revealed about WCAs' sensibilities as scholars.

As we gain a better understanding of conditions that best promote scholarly identity, we must be willing to change. It is clear that all graduate students in composition and rhetoric need training in diverse methods of data collection, which may mean that the faculties who prepare them need more access to supplemental training. If further investigation more strongly demonstrates that staff contracts discourage scholarly efficacy and production, then perhaps we need to better characterize the WCA's expertise and responsibilities to resist job descriptions that flatten this role. In the interim, we can advocate for increased research collaboration and sponsorship. These activities may increase WCAs' research momentum, thereby enhancing the credibility of our field and its claims for "best practices." Most importantly, such strides could yield better-supported writers, the ultimate goal of the writing center community and its scholarship.

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Appendix A: Writing Center Survey Questions

Please note that in the interest of space, we've only included the questions, not the close-ended response categories. If you would like a complete copy of the survey, including the response categories, please contact the authors.

1. What is your role in the writing center? (select response)
2. Which classification best fits your institution? (select response)
3. In what geographic location is your writing center located? (select response)
4. Please describe the nature of your writing center (e.g., part of an English or Writing Department, Independent, Part of Academic Skills Center)? (select response)
5. How many student tutorials do you typically serve in a year? (numeric answer)
6. How many consultants do you typically employ? (numeric answer)
7. In which of the following ways are your consultants trained for employment in your writing center? (select response)
8. How do you define "writing center research"? (open-ended)
9. What do you think are the most important features of writing center research? (open ended)
10. Which of the following statements describe your relationship to writing center research? (select response)
11. What do you see as the relationship between empirical research, assessment, and program-based reporting for an external audience, such as university administrators? (open-ended)
12. Please respond to the following questions, using the following responses: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)
 - a. Empirical research is important to Writing Centers.
 - b. Research is useful to me only for reporting purposes.
 - c. I conduct empirical research frequently.
 - d. I wish I knew more about empirical research methods.
 - e. I am confident in calculating statistics.

- f. When I am confused about research, I seek out help from colleagues.
 - g. I believe that we have enough evidence-supported best practices in writing center scholarship.
 - h. I don't see why we need more research on writing centers.
 - i. I am familiar with the concept of RAD research.
 - j. I wish I had more formal research training.
13. On a scale of 1-10, how important do you believe it is to conduct research on writing centers for the purposes of expanding the field's knowledge of research-supported practices?
 14. On a scale of 1-10, how important do you believe it is to conduct research on writing centers for the purposes of reporting to administrators/stakeholders?
 15. If you conduct any kinds of primary data gathering for your center (for research or assessment purposes), can you please describe what you collect and how it is used? Primary data gathering can include: surveys, interviews, observations, ethnography, tutor intake forms, etc. (open-ended)
 16. Do you typically seek Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for any research you conduct? Why or why not? (open-ended)
 17. What is your highest level of education?
 18. What is your degree field? (e.g., rhetoric and composition, literature, secondary education) (open-ended)
 19. Have you ever completed coursework in research methods/methodology? If so, how many courses have you taken? (Answers: No, Yes – 1 course, Yes – 2 or 3 courses, Yes – more than 4 courses)
 20. Which of the following software packages, if any, have you employed in your own research? (select response)
 21. Is there anything you wish you had been taught in graduate school that would have better prepared you for research and/or assessment? (open-ended)
 22. Have you published in the field of writing center studies? (select response)

23. Have you published outside of the field of writing center studies? (select response)
24. If you have published research articles on writing centers, what motivated you to do so? (open-ended)
25. Do you have anything else you'd like to discuss concerning writing center research? (open-ended)

Appendix B: Writing Center Director Interview Script

Opening Question: Can you tell us a bit about your institution and writing center?

1. How do your research practices relate to your work in the writing center?
2. As we've been coding the survey data, we found the word "empirical" seemed to be a loaded word. What is your reaction to this term? Follow-up: What is the place of empirical research in writing centers?
3. Are you familiar with the concept of Replicable, Aggregable, and Data-supported (RAD) research? If no, explain and move on. If yes, ask: What do you see as the value of RAD research in writing centers?
4. What do you see as the relationship between research and assessment and/or program-based reporting? Follow-up from Q3 and program goals, if necessary.
5. Some of our respondents indicated that writing centers could learn more from qualitative data than quantitative data. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? Follow-up: How do you define qualitative research? How do you define quantitative research?
6. One of the things we are interested in is the role of sponsorship and support of writing center research.
 - a. What support resources, such as funds, release time, and mentors/collaborators, have been available for your research at your home institution? Follow-up: Have you sought or received any of this support?
 - b. What kinds of support are available for research in writing center studies? Follow-up: Have you sought or received any of this support?
 - c. What kinds of disciplinary support are available for your writing center work? Follow-up: Have you sought or received any of this support?
7. What kinds of training, if any, have you received in research methods (methods including qualitative or quantitative research techniques, statistics, etc.)? Follow-up: In what context—professional coursework, professional seminars, or on-the-job training—have you

- honed these methods? Have you worked to increase your knowledge in research methods in any other ways (such as partnering with those in research-focused disciplines, etc.?)
8. Do you seek Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for your research? Why or why not?
 9. What do you see as the greatest barriers to writing centers conducting more RAD-based research?
 10. What can we, as a field, do to better support writing center research?
 11. Is there anything else you want to add about writing center research?

About the Authors

Sherry Wynn Perdue is a writing center director and writing and rhetoric instructor at Oakland University, where she has returned to the other side of the desk to earn a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. Her current research queries dissertation supervision, the subject of her own dissertation, an instrumental case study of a fellowship program she created for doctoral supervisors. Her work has appeared in such journals as *Education Libraries*, *The Writing Center Journal*, and *Perspectives in Undergraduate Research and Mentoring*. In 2012, she and her coauthor Dana Lynn Driscoll won the International Writing Center Association's 2012 Outstanding Article of the Year Award for "Theory, Lore, and More: An Analysis of RAD Research in *The Writing Center Journal*, 1980-2009." In addition to researching the center, she serves as president of ECWCA and as a co-editor of *The Peer Review*.

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