

Don't Call It a Comeback: Two-Year College WPA, Tactics, Collaboration, Flexibility, Sustainability

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While R. T. Farrell was the editor of volume 1, issue 1 of the newsletter that would become *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, it was produced and distributed by Michael Joyce, working from the offices of Jackson Community College. And although Harvey Wiener, first president of the CWPA, was at Pennsylvania State University when that issue was published, by the third issue he was on faculty at LaGuardia Community College. The secretary of the organization at the time was Lawrence Kasden of J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, who took on the production and distribution of the third volume of the newsletter. We might say that, like many students in this country, both *WPA* and the CWPA, got their start at a community college.

That first issue of the newsletter noted that it was designed “to serve the needs of all those directly concerned with the administration of writing programs in the field of postsecondary education” (p. 2). It went on to state: “Whether we teach at two or four year colleges, at technical institutes or at schools for the liberal arts, we are faced with common problems” (p. 2). Being inclusive was an intentional part of the ethos of that founding issue. The issue’s “Statement of Purpose” noted that the newsletter’s house style purposefully elected to avoid titles whenever possible as a means of emphasizing shared concerns over differences in positionality.

As the publication shifted into a refereed journal, two-year college presence eventually receded. Somehow over the time since its founding, the emphasis on our common problems became less central to conversations regarding two-year college programs. Instead, a trend emerged wherein two-year college writing programs had to argue themselves back into existence. This work, we might suggest, echoes the moves that both rhetoric and composition and writing program administration writ-large had to make to professionalize their own respective standings as distinct disciplines within the field. It will be the work of another investigation to trace this evolution from shared ownership to arguments for inclusion and visibility, but as the pieces in this volume will demonstrate time and again, this evolution has had profound impacts on the work of two-year college writing program administration. We suggest here that it is high time that the field examine and elevate the writing program work taking place in two-year contexts.

To begin, there are more than 1,000 associate's colleges and special interest two-year colleges in the United States and they teach and are responsible for the majority of writing instruction—especially first-year and developmental writing (Hassel and Giordano, 2013). Therefore, the work of two-year writing programs is important because of how many students they affect. Just as important as that number though are who we affect at the two-year college. A quick look at the American Association of Community Colleges' annual "Fact Sheet" shows that two-year colleges teach a large number of historically oppressed and underrepresented students, including Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students (AACC, 2019). Two-year colleges teach the majority of Hispanic and Native American students. Four in ten Black students and Asian students attend these institutions. And two-year colleges serve perhaps the largest number of first-generation students; 39% of first-time students and 3 in 10 first-generation students are in our classrooms; we teach adult learners and students who identify as having a disability in high numbers as well.(AACC, 2019) Further, the reach of community college programs extends to many dual and concurrent enrollment students who complete their first-year writing courses before going on to four-year institutions. Writing courses and writing programs at two-year colleges therefore take on an outsize role, especially if we consider Duffy's recent claim that first-year writing is a site where students can learn the tools of ethical discourse which gird them to be able to wade through the toxic discourse in our culture (Duffy, 2019). So, what we do and who we serve make the stakes of two-year college writing programs high—we would argue essential—to American higher education.

In addition to the essential nature of first-year writing and writing programs, the mission of the community college as an institution makes programs there worth investigation and research. The community college is an access intensive institution meant to serve communities. The mission of two-year colleges is complex and contested. In our current environment, and really the environment that has developed during the conservative restoration over the last four decades (Shor, 1992), community colleges are positioned as sites of job preparation and entry into the economy. The current president of the United States has argued that the institution should be called vocational schools rather than community colleges—rejecting the notion of community altogether (Strauss, 2018). Meanwhile, the previous three presidents each highlighted the neoliberal function of the community college, thus narrowing and instrumentalizing the function of education for many of our most vulnerable students (Jensen, 2017). Recent schemes and initiatives aimed at student success and often led by foundations and envisioned by faculty at education departments at elite universities have

only helped strengthen that narrative. These “reform” initiatives fit the waves of the conservative restoration of education and are merely the most recent instantiation.

However, that isn't the only narrative for the community college. Many teacher-scholar-activists (Andelora, 2013; Sullivan, 2015) at two-year colleges take the 1947 Truman Commission on Higher Education as their rallying cry and ideological underpinning for their work in the two-year college. The Truman Commission argued that two-year colleges were meant to have a democratic purpose and were there to help develop an educated citizenry (Zook, 1947). The vocational and transfer functions of the community college are meant to be part of the development of people so that they can act as change agents in their community—an idea that is more than becoming a mere economic cog in the late capitalist system

This tension plays out in writing classrooms and in our interactions with other academic disciplines and (unfortunately) some misguided and unknowing administrators. We don't know many community college English faculty who haven't been asked by a colleague or an administrator at their institution about how we are to ensure the correctness and grammar of students' writing. And we have seen writing situations and tasks dangerously narrowed—do students only need to know how to write a resume? And even more distressing is the constant refrain calling for standardized English, even though decades of research shows this frame to be racist and classist. Many English faculty trained in writing studies in their graduate programs or who have become aficionados of writing studies in the two-year college classroom work against these reductive and damaging notions to help students begin to understand the cognitive and social nature of writing using pedagogical strategies ranging from post-post-process to genre based teaching. At the same time, these faculty work to center critical and ethical thinking in their courses through deep engagement with reading and writing (Sullivan et al., 2017). Many engage in the teaching of critical literacy and anti-racist pedagogy. Obviously we're describing extremes, but we argue that each of these curricular models can be found on almost every two-year college campus.

Two-year college faculty are often characterized as practitioners who apply knowledge rather than as knowledge producers (Griffiths & Jensen, 2019). This idea has been challenged by those examining the contributions of two-year college faculty to the field of writing studies over the last two decades (Reynolds & Holladay, 2005; Rodrigo & Miller-Cochran, 2018; Jensen, 2019; Sullivan, 2020). Holly Larson (2018) asked how we can better recognize and value the epistemic authority of two-year college faculty and their role as makers of knowledge within the field. This special issue seeks

to extend this conversation into the domain of writing program administration. Echoing the approach taken up by Jonathan Alexander (2017) in “Queer ways of knowing,” where he explored the perceived “relative irreconcilability” of queerness and WPA work, these articles examine “the relative irreconcilability” of the two-year college context and WPA “while also, perversely, maintaining an eye on both for any generative tensions that might yield useful insights” (p. 137). The authors in this issue push beyond lore about two-year college writing programs, applying theory and presenting thoughtful case studies to highlight careful research examining how two-year college writing programs make meaning and shape knowledge within and beyond the WPA community.

More than the context, professional status, and institutional identity of the two-year college is at play here. In particular, how does writing studies work within that context? Louise Wetherbee Phelps and John M. Ackerman (2010) argued that writing studies is a field “that practices alterity”; in other words, we have developed a tradition of defining ourselves by how we are different from or “other” than other fields, particularly literary studies (p. 201). This contrastive frame is especially prevalent within the domain of two-year college writing program administration. While much of the discussion regarding two-year college writing program administration has emphasized how such programs differ from conventions often observed in research institution programs (Holmsten, 2002; Klausman, 2008; Calhoon-Dillahunt, 2011), fewer contributions seek to make the writing program work in these contexts visible or to understand best practices within them.

In Klausman’s (2013) work on defining a two-year college writing program, he made the argument that a pattern is emerging in these programs; they are: “collaborative, needs based, and decentered” (259). He also used the word flexible. And, to an extent, that is exactly what this issue demonstrates—the continued development of writing programs in an *ad hoc* fashion manifesting a continued flexibility. The articles in this issue form an important cluster of praxis—the bringing together of theory and practice—alongside case studies presenting the lived strategies and tactics faculty undertake to create programs which reach for the higher ideals of the community college mission and which serve to empower students to move their lives and their communities forward.

The collaborative, decentered, flexible and, ultimately, tactical (à la de Certeau) negotiations exhibited by the authors in this volume, in many ways, reflect the call Spiegel (2020) made for teacher-scholar-activists to take up the guerrilla moniker. From her own position at an institution without a centralized writing program, Spiegel argues for home-grown

guerrilla practice within writing programs. She notes that, “Teacher-scholar-activists can have influence, but our approach must pivot away from the strategies most recognized as driving the future of education. We need our own tactics. We need our own metaphors” (p. 10). Knowing that more classic models for writing program leadership tend to fall short within our two-year college settings, this issue aims to present exactly that which Spiegel has called for: the articles provide sustained insight into the tactics and metaphors that have proven generative to programmatic theorizing, development, and implementation within two-year college writing program contexts.

In “Am I a WPA? Embracing the Multiverse of WPA Labor in Community College Contexts,” Nicole Hancock and Casey Reid examine the identity of two-year college WPAs. The authors offer a reimagined version of an old metaphor from WPA scholarship: that of the hero. They engage and play with the metaphor of the superhero to problematize the idea of the hero. Even though the identity of the WPA is problematic, tension filled, and split, the authors work to examine the power and agency in that identity. They note “the liminal nature of two-year writing program administration makes distinguishing boundaries between roles particularly difficult . . . While these decentralized labor models facilitate doing the labor, those performing it have to navigate fulfilling their official responsibilities along with performing the tricky dance of collegial collaboration without having formal claim to being a writing program administrator.” For the authors, the split identity of faculty and administrator may afford a kind of resilience. In fact, this resilience, which comes from a conscious use of tactics and guerrilla rhetoric (Spiegel, 2014) may offer a kind of sustainability in the two-year college writing program context.

Rather than directly arguing for structural change as Steve Accardi and Jillian Grauman do later in this issue, Hancock and Reid embrace the conflicts and affordances of the double identity of two-year faculty-administrators. Like many of the authors in this issue, they emphasize the shared, decentered nature of WPA labor in two-year contexts and argue the work of ordinary faculty encompasses and embodies the heroic. However, they push back against the invisibility of the work and warn against burnout, arguing faculty-administrators can build sustainability through rejection of the lone hero title of WPA and instead jump into the multiverse, where many parallel (super)heroes make use of their individual skills, backgrounds, and institutional roles to do the work and make it more visible within their own institutions and the field of writing program administration. In essence, the authors provide an important corollary and nuance to Klausman’s definitional work.

Next, Allia Abdullah-Matta, Jaqueline M. Jones, Neil Meyer, and Dominique Zino's "Departmental Democracy and Invention in Two-Year College Writing Programs" builds upon their experiences re-inventing their writing program. They ground their understanding of program building in Louise Wetherbee Phelps' concept of "institutional invention," blending both conceptual work as well as the practical work necessary to re-see the needs within their context. They frame their own experiences and advocate that other programs might discover new ways to build and reimagine their own programs by using similar tactics.

Specifically, they narrate the ways in which the faculty at LaGuardia Community College harnessed the powers of assessment and reimagined their leadership structure through taking advantage of the "climate of invention" present at their institution. Taking advantage of top-down initiatives, they effectively employ tactics to bring research-based professional practices to bear. They describe methods they took to foster a culture of a writing program with a cohesive professional development plan, and intentional efforts to build bridges between their program and other institutions.

Annie Del Principe's article "Cultivating a Sustainable Two-Year College Writing Program" makes two important thinking moves—examining a strength in two-year college writing programs, namely collaboration, and a challenge, the disparate disciplinary identities that make up two-year college English studies. First, she offers readers a retrospective on a special WPA issue on collaborative work from 1998—written almost entirely by four-year-college and university WPAs (only one author was at a TYC college and they had the role of dean). She examines the particular conditions of one TYC writing program to argue that collaboration is equally valuable and vital in TYC programs but for different reasons than it is in other types of institutions. The specific material conditions of TYC writing programs—including the diversity of disciplinary expertise among the faculty, and complex power dynamics—create a setting in which WPAs must build deep and wide collaborative structures that are both strong and radically inclusive. Her work helps to flesh out the definition of the two-year college writing program and the issues with designing resilience and "buy-in" from fellow faculty. She argues that "the combination of the diversity and ambiguity of disciplinary expertise plus a relatively flattened hierarchy of power" in two-year college writing programs "create an environment in which consensus is not easily reached" and wherein "collaborative decision making is simply necessary to create what might be recognized as a 'writing program.'"

The second move is a sustained examination of the transdisciplinary knowledge base of two-year college English departments. She finds that, in

contrast to the writing programs in the 1998 issue where “the faculty and teaching staff share the same (or close to the same) knowledge base and disciplinary identity” that her two-year colleagues do not “share the national, scholarly knowledge base of the field of writing studies.” She finds that lack of shared disciplinary knowledge creates difficult situations within departments which impede communication and a cohesive pedagogy. Faculty are often quietly doing their own thing in their own classrooms, and seek out other faculty who share their teaching philosophies, thus creating factions within the department that undermine true collaboration. This research resonates with other recent work on resilience and professional identity in writing studies (see Griffiths & Jensen, 2019; Suh & Jensen, in press). Del Principe hypothesizes that “deep disagreement” in her department might stem from the fact that they do not share a homogenous disciplinary home or knowledge base. This article concludes with a list of design principles to guide the ongoing work of creating sustainable collaborative TYC writing programs which take into account the transdisciplinary identity of two-year college English faculty, the particular circumstances of the institution, and notions of resilience.

Accardi and Grauman’s article “Structural Barriers and Knowledge Production at the Two-Year College” takes up similar issues as both Hancock and Reid and Del Principe’s articles. Rather than seeking to reframe the identity of two-year college English faculty, the authors push against “those identity-defining structures to enable scholarly knowledge production about their writing programs.” Here again, we see work that seeks to recreate or redesign the material conditions of the two-year college and two-year college English programs so that resilient structures which support professionalization and disciplinary knowledge become normalized. The authors provide a case study of their own work which details how they managed an internal promotion structure, “which requires curriculum development and committee work, to remake English at College of DuPage” to create a “space for academic projects and scholarly work, allowing for the production of knowledge and contribution to the field of Writing Program Administration and Writing Studies.” We see the authors deploying tactics within extant structures here as they collaborated with one another and made their work feasible.

Their example demonstrates how using located agency (Jensen & Suh, 2020) and tactics can create change. The authors “manage up” to have agency in how faculty job descriptions are written—which forms an interesting baseline for how disciplinary knowledge in two-year colleges is created and valued. They take advantage of a coordinator role—a kind of faculty administrator role that isn’t a WPA, but which has some of the

functions and power of one. The authors manage to tactically co-opt the language of Guided Pathways—one of the most recent reforms in the conservative restoration and one that can significantly narrow curriculum and student choice—to create a professional writing pathway for students. The moves in this article provide a model for flexible adaptive management of material and ideological conditions in the two-year college to create and sustain writing programs. It is a theme that continues in other articles.

Brett M. Griffiths’ “Reinventing the Spiel: The Context and Case for Interinstitutional Collaboration in an Era of Education Austerity” is striking as it significantly reimagines the role of WPA as a Writing Instruction Administrator. Her article shows how the scope of WPA work can intersect faculty development, inter-institutional collaboration, and the sustaining funding of a reading and writing center all while serving students. This article is important because it demonstrates the breadth of the institutional hustle (see Kynard, 2017) required to have an extant program in two-year colleges.

The second important argument in Griffiths’ article is one for visibility through institutional tactics, adaptation, and flexibility. She asserts, that faculty work for “disciplinary validity” by advocating and negotiating with and within “professional and institutional boundaries”. While acknowledging austerity and other external pressures, Griffiths concludes that real progress cannot be made in addressing deprofessionalization if we do not “attend” to “self-imposed barriers to communication, collaboration, and advocacy, even within our discipline.” Her vision of transprofessional and interinstitutional collaboration along with rhetorical tactics to achieve visibility present a powerful lesson in our exigent moment, especially as our institutions deal with pandemic austerity and other new and continuing pressures.

Finally, Sarah Snyder’s article is a response to her experience of becoming a WPA at a two-year college. This article is especially important as a call to action to graduate programs. New WPAs must be prepared to enter two-year colleges. The author’s examination of the TYCA guidelines and other literature is a response to the guidelines themselves and a specific call for the kinds of knowledge WPAs at four-year institutions need to begin conversations about two-year college work with their graduate populations. Snyder’s experience of being dramatically unprepared for two-year college WPA work, despite the well-developed body of literature, shows an ethical failing on the part of graduate programs (Calhoon-Dilhunt et al., 2016; Jensen & Toth, 2017). This article is a much needed synthesis and reframing of a vision for graduate education. We see this piece as a “must-add” starting-place selection for WPA course syllabi that aim to represent two-

year college labor, help students begin exploring two-year literature more fully, and investigate career paths within these contexts.

This symposium makes a sustained case for the continued development of writing programs in the two-year college. Together, the authors in this issue make a case for the collaborative and broad nature of writing program work in this institutional context. In particular, they address the transdisciplinary nature of two-year college English programs, the tension in their missions, as well as the external pressures, and incomplete professionalization many two-year college faculty face. These case studies provide a set of specific and discrete tactics where faculty members and writing instruction administrators engage in tactics to adjust the strategies of their institution so that writing instruction is research-based and serves to provide students with powerful rather than domesticating literacies (see Finn, 2010). None of the authors claim perfect success. However, they are asserting their epistemic authority (Larson, 2018) and are working to create professional autonomy (Griffiths, 2017) under exigent circumstances—circumstances which are likely only to become more difficult as we reimagine education in the age of a pandemic and continue to wrestle with anti-racist pedagogies and how to make our institutions and the work they do more just and equitable.

Klausman (2013) claims that we can offer a definition of a writing program at two-year colleges. These articles continue to define and bring that definition into focus. We offer these to our colleagues in solidarity and hope as we continue to build sustainable resilient writing programs which enact the best of what we know for our students. Yagelski (2011) asked, “How can we teach writing so that we stop destroying ourselves?” (p. 32). To that, we add this question: how do we build and support programs wherein colleagues can “sustainably teach and profess in the associated disciplines of English,” especially in environments which instrumentalize education and take up the neoliberal logics of education (Griffiths & Jensen, 2019, p. 302)? There is a need to ensure that two-year college writing instruction, writing program administration, and field-facing work are all driven by sustainable practices. These articles attempt to define that sustainable work—it is work that is collaborative, flexible, and tactically agile.

We wish to make a final argument for the importance of the articles in this issue. As we said early in this piece, two-year colleges are important for what they do and for who they serve. The two-year college is a site for social justice. Carter et al. (2019) make the claim in *Writing Democracy: The Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era* that composition and rhetoric needs a political turn. This political turn is part of the social turn (Jensen, 2019) and makes the students served at community colleges a nexus for our

attention as teacher-scholar-activists (Andelora, 2013). The public facing activism of two-year college WPA work as it negotiates the institutional and political contexts necessary to serve our students should not be invisible, especially to graduate programs in writing studies who are often steeped in the rhetoric of social justice. Attention to two-year college writing programs is an ethical issue. The practical and material concerns of these programs and the students they serve cannot wait.

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