6 Tenure, Promotion, and the WPA

What Is Research and Writing?

Emily Isaacs

For the last six years I have functioned as the primary (and often sole) WPA at Montclair State University (MSU), a large (15,000 students) state university in New Jersey. As the WPA, I am responsible for the two-sequence first-year writing courses, the remedial program, and the writing center. The writing program, housed in the English department, includes forty or so part-time faculty (short-term half-timers and adjuncts) and a dozen graduate assistants. My status is peculiar: In my fifth year, I received tenure but, at my tenth year, I remain unpromoted and possibly “unpromotable”—an assistant professor to the end?

THE GOOD SIDE OF THE STORY

When I was hired in 1996, I arrived with a fresh dissertation on the development of writing teacher pedagogies, a good teaching history, and some experience with writing program administration—the kind of record that we see with many graduating composition students. As advised, I avoided schools that wanted to hire an assistant professor to run or assist in running the writing program. MSU placed an ad in the MLA that was, aside from a peculiar request for secondary expertise in Irish/British modern literature, entirely within my expectations and hopes. Within the department were a core of faculty with significant investment and interest in first-year writing, and there was at least one other person whose primary training and interest was composition. The department’s vision matched my own, as did the university’s. MSU was very clearly a teaching university. In 1994, under a model

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work as a day-to-day WPA seemed equally important: With energy and enthusiasm for the job, I had thrown myself into everything from observing and writing up faculty observation reports to running the writing center to designing model syllabi and revitalizing the dormant first-year writing committee. I was happy, my colleagues reported to be happy, and so apparently was the administration, as I was granted tenure without a hitch.

Up to this point, my story speaks to the advantages of putting a fresh and relatively young person (I was thirty-five when granted tenure) into the WPA position: I had lots of ideas and just as much energy and chutzpah to follow through on these ideas. There were long days and bits of anxiety, but I was so excited to be a professor and to be the WPA, too, that it was well worth it.

The Dark Side of the Story

Idiosyncratically, the eight state colleges and universities in New Jersey do not grant promotion with tenure, according to state law. Up until very recently, it has been common practice for faculty to apply for promotion after tenure and to be prepared to do so a few times before achieving success. But success was achieved by almost all. With this knowledge I waited a year, applied, and was rejected, but not by the upper administration, as had typically been the case. Rather, I was rejected by my own dean. It was clear, from his write-up and from changes in the administration's stance, that my administrative work wasn't relevant to promotion. I had a half-time administrative load, and by all reports my work was extremely well received, but it didn't matter. In MSU's quest to become some kind of a research university (Research II, or in the new parlance, "research-intensive"), the expectations for traditional research had increased, though my non-research responsibilities hadn't become any lighter. In fact, it had become harder, as it continues to grow so through today. (Currently, the administration is proposing that the equal split between research/ teaching/pedagogy/service be replaced by a model in which research is one-third, teaching and pedagogy is one-third, and service is a supposed one-third. By collapsing teaching into research, against Boyer's model, MSU divorces itself from the notion that teaching is not only something we practice but also something about which we reasonably and valuably can theorize and study.) For example, since 2001 I have had my WPA assistant position cut (and recently restored) while our
enrollment has increased by over 30 percent. In the midst of major and
successful initiatives, including a second general education course in
writing and a major revision of the other two writing courses, the un-
iversity raised class size and threatened to eliminate and then shrunk
the writing center staff.

All through these changes, I have gained no greater status, despite
being asked to run the university writing committee and, more brief-
ly, the university undergraduate curriculum committee. For example,
after a change from the graduate school nearly decimated our writing
center, rumors of the administration’s plans for an entirely new writing
center circulated. Yet through all of this, I receive no requests for
advice or participation from my dean or provost. I don’t think this is
because my work is judged as poor; rather, there is occasional evi-
dence that those above me want me to stay in my post. (On occasion
I’ve been given minor inducements to stay on in the position. Perhaps
more importantly, I have been asked by my dean’s office to advise
other faculty on creating faculty-development programs and graduate
assistant training programs.)

On dark days I alternate between feeling mistreated and foolish:
“They are horrible to treat me this way, or I have been a fool to get
myself into this predicament. Neither analysis is particularly helpful,
so these dark days don’t end very well at all.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

I offer three interpretations, all true, to my way of thinking.

Interpretation One: Too Much Too Soon;
or, It’s Not about You, Emily

With just three years under one’s belt, moving into a WPA position
doesn’t make sense at any school, and particularly not at a mid-sized
state university. The position is too political and too important. A
newbie PhD doesn’t have the authority and status necessary for that
position, regardless of the appeal and success of her faculty-develop-
ment workshops. Further, with all her new knowledge she, ironically
enough, is likely to spend more time on administration than the less-informed noncompositionist WPA she might be replacing—after all,
she knows what the program should look like and is going to be hell-
bent on bending her own program to approximate that ideal. All this

work may lead to some wonderful things, but if she’s not gotten an
awfully compelling research agenda and a strong composition faculty
mentor on or off campus pushing her forward, she’s likely to let that
research agenda slide. It’s awfully hard for any WPA, much less a new
one with little faculty experience, to resist putting down her research
when there’s a “real-life” task—take anything, for example, a teacher
in crisis over a suspected plagiarist, a request for ideas for what text
to choose, or a poli-sci professor who wants to know why the writing
center staff won’t fix his students’ papers—confronting her.

Graduate school can be incredibly infantilizing. After years of it,
the possibility of being in charge and making things happen is sed-
uctive, dammingly so. It takes a cool head to resist the staggering
workload that a WPA can take on (to certain addictive satisfaction)
and think instead of one’s own career and of the need to expect uni-
versity administrators to appropriately staff first-year writing programs
so that one person isn’t expected to do too much. This second point
is worth underscoring: Not only is it not personally wise to take on
so much, but it doesn’t work ultimately. Good programs need enough
staff, and while what is “enough” may be debatable, one half-time fac-
ulty WPA definitely isn’t enough.

Interpretation Two: Caught in the Crossfire of University
Change; or, It’s Still Not about You, Emily

From 1996 to 2005, Montclair State University changed dramatically
from a comprehensive university to, almost, a research-intensive uni-
versity. With that change came increased scholarly expectation and
decreased reward for faculty involvement with service and administra-
tion. As MSU pushes forward, there are growing pains. Most of the
faculty feel it; many are demoralized. Recent tenure cases have been
challenged with what just a few years ago would be a stellar candidacy.
Many mourn the loss of focus on teaching and underprepared students
in particular. Tenured faculty worry about untenured faculty and
wonder how a research-intensive university scholarly agenda can be
accomplished with a comprehensive-university schedule of early ten-
ure, no sabbatical before tenure, and a 3/3 load. Untenured faculty are
either cut of an entirely different cloth and are prepared to adjust their
teaching and service to accommodate the required research agenda, or
they are in a cold sweat. Increasingly, perhaps from changes in leader-
ship at the president and dean level (three deans in my nine years) the
work of administration—across departments—is not valued as it once was. While the tenured-but-not-promoted WPA might complain, her untenured colleagues may well envy her position.

Interpretation Three: We Need to Rethink What Research Is; or, It’s Not about You, Once Again, Emily

The question of my research is important: How has it progressed? From a look at my vitae, not particularly well. I haven’t published since 2001, though I have been active on the conference circuit. It’s hard to write those words—“I haven’t published since 2001.” I feel embarrassed and deficient and I’d better have kept it a bit of a secret. One part of my brain buys the critique that makes me embarrassed: I have been deficient; I have failed to live up to the faculty contract that gives us a loose schedule and (seemingly) a lot of time off in the summer in exchange for scholarly output. But another part of my brain can separate from myself and, I think, look at my state rather more critically, and replace the question, “What have you published?” with the questions, “What have you researched? What have you written? How have you used your expertise and research to further the interests of teaching writing to college students?”

To these questions I have answers that will, I believe, lead to much nodding of heads amongst WPA readers. Here are just three examples of dozens I could list:

Example: I researched the writing centers of the five universities that MSU’s administration cites as our target peer institutions so as to bolster an argument against crippling the writing center through reduction of graduate assistants.

Example: I wrote an annotated new course sample syllabus for part-time and other faculty to use. The annotations explain the pedagogical thinking behind each assignment so as to enable readers to understand how each component of the syllabus works to meet an objective of the course as stipulated in a much lengthier (and less frequently read) course proposal.

Example: I researched the subject of Accuplacer and similar essay-evaluation/placement programs when an administrator expressed interest in procuring the program to replace our system of in-house essay readings by human readers. I used my expertise to question the Accuplacer representative on the computer program’s capabilities in such a way so as to lead my administrator to entirely drop the subject of adopting Accuplacer.

I believe these three examples of how I used my research and writing abilities to help my institution provide strong writing placement, support, and instruction speak to the possibility that we—and here I begin with our own community of compositionists, and quickly extend to the entire academic community—are not thinking as smartly as we might about what kind of intellectual work universities might ask faculty to engage in. The Association of Departments of English, in recognition of its responsibility to guide chairs in evaluating faculty, disseminated the “ADE Policy Statement of Good Practice: Teaching, Evaluation, and Scholarship” (http://www.ade.org/policy March 1993). They put forth the following definition of scholarship:

Scholarship—the effort to advance knowledge—is a distinguishing feature of higher education. Knowledge can be advanced by the reconfiguring of previously established truth for different purposes or audiences, by the subtle altering of opinion about ideas long and securely held, or by a more effective explanation and dissemination of concepts, interpretations, and information that originated with other scholars.

If the ADE can define scholarship as “reconfiguring” truth for “different purposes or audiences,” and as providing “more effective explanation” of information, why can’t the academy—both university administrators and faculty—really come to embrace these aspects of scholarship?

If we don’t expand our notion of scholarship, good WPAs at universities like mine—and certainly I’m not alone—are going to become mediocre ones. Working as I do now, to seemingly good effect, precludes extensive scholarly outcomes. However, it is possible that I could, to the disservice of the program, figure out how to do much less and thereby gain the time for the level of scholarship that appears to be expected of me. But is that in the best interest of the university? The students who attend it? The people of the state of New Jersey?

Clearly, I would argue that such a method of practice isn’t in the best interest of any of these stakeholders. I want to argue for light formal scholarship and extensive work in scholarly practice: in providing
scholarly research and expertise to addressing and seeking remedies for problems that arise in respect to the effective teaching (and learning) of college writing. An effective WPA in the course of her work will be obliged to research and renew her research to answer pressing questions. Questions about the new SAT Writing test, class size, plagiarism prevalence and prevention methods, best writing center organization, and on and on. These questions are asked in local contexts with particular constraints, and they need to be addressed by those who have expertise, research skills, and the local knowledge required to propose changes in local practices.

Perhaps the least-understood part of Ernest Boyer's work is his discussion and explanation of the scholarship of application. He defines the scholarship of application as "serious, demanding work, requiring the rigor—and the accountability—traditionally associated with research activities" (22). This scholarly work, he notes, is not simply application of theory or research. Rather, he says, when engaged in the scholarship of application, "theory and practice vitally interact, and one renews the other" (23).

This choice to become a reflective, research-practitioner, Boyer's approach is typically seen as a non-choice, a kind of de facto path for those who are weak scholars or simply overburdened administrators. What would it take for academic stakeholders to seriously confront the very limited definition of scholarship that currently rules the academy? What would it mean if not just I, but serious stakeholders—college presidents, deans, department heads—argued for the intellectual value and even necessity of teacher-scholars providing, and being rewarded for providing, the scholarship of application?

A New WPA at a Small Private School with Large Public(ation) Expectations

Camille Langston

The Invitation

My dream job boasted a lighter teaching load, a commitment to family and the community, time for scholarship, and an office with a spectacular view of downtown San Antonio. Anxiously, as a new, tenure-track St. Mary's University assistant professor of English and communication studies, I began writing syllabi for my four classes, discovering the needs of the students, meeting faculty, and completing the seemingly simple tasks of obtaining a parking tag, a campus ID, and an e-mail address. But in the back of my mind, I knew that this blissful time was short. During my hiring interviews, I caught on to the repeated questions about composition and my past administrative roles; I knew I would eventually become composition director; I just didn't know how soon.

So, after my first semester of unofficially acting as composition director by offering solicited suggestions, meeting with the chair and dean, and locating adjunct faculty, my "honeymoon," as Mary Pinard calls the first few months of a writing program administrator's first year, ended (56). The invitation, although a bit premature, arrived at my office door. In her pithy way, the department chair notified me that I would direct the composition program the following fall. It wasn't too much of a surprise. I knew I was hired because my new diploma, which so starkly hangs on my office wall, reads "PhD in Rhetoric." I knew that someday I would be asked to direct the composition program. The immediacy, however, astounded me.

I convinced myself of my preparedness. In the past I coordinated a community college English program, worked as assistant to the composition director at Texas Woman's University, and had plenty of training from my dissertation director, Dr. Suzanne Stroebek Webb. Without too much hesitation, then, overlooking John Schilb's warning that "one should never direct a writing program before tenure," I took the position with the allure of a one-course reduction and the benefit of defining a program in which I intend to teach for the remainder of my career (176).

I was handed a writing program of two core curriculum classes, rhetoric and composition for first-year students and advanced composition for third-year students, and nine or ten adjuncts and a tenure-track assistant professor to teach the average of twenty sections of writing, a total of approximately 420 students, per semester. After managing almost five times as many adjuncts, sections of writing and literature, and students at my previous place of employment, I thought I had found the time I needed to meet publication requirements. I envisioned that the most difficult task would be transitioning from the previous WPA, a departmental darling, to my differing style. I would