

Rachel Gramer
Writing Program Administrative Philosophy

As a writing program administrator (WPA), I am committed to feminist mentoring, pedagogies, and interactions that articulate and expand, rather than flatten or conflate, the complex intellectual activities we perform when composing texts, teaching college writing, and advocating for first-year writing (FYW) programs, instructors, and students. As a feminist WPA, the following principles ground my administrative activism both within and beyond the bounds of a writing program.

Capaciousness

Contemporary writing program administrators need capacious, robust definitions of vital disciplinary concepts and practices, in order to articulate and enact them in program practices and other institutional interactions. Our capacious definitions of writing allow us to build program outcomes and curricula that activate and value (rather than suppress or marginalize) the complexities of literate activity, including the systems, processes, and materials that mediate how we learn and what we compose. Further, our capacious articulations and practice of teaching and administration as scholarly activities fortify our positions as faculty-administrators who create new knowledge in the field and on our campuses, in addition to enacting contemporary research-based approaches to teaching college writing. This principle undergirds all of my principles and practices as a WPA who can articulate, in any situation, a broad definition of what counts as writing and, therefore, what counts as a vital part of writing education.

Visibility

As in my teaching, I make my capacious definitions of writing and of teaching writing visible within and beyond our FYW program in order for others to see what diverse composing practices look like in contemporary rhetorical education. As a matter of daily practice, I model multimodality and visual rhetoric in professional development, program materials, and data representations for multiple audiences. Currently, I am also receiving compliments on the multimodal breakdowns of our program outcomes posted on my office door, which spark collegial questions about teaching writing and the value of seeing our own outcomes mediated by different materials (in this case, highlighters, post-its, paper, pen, and markers). This principle can also be seen in my teaching and feminist mentoring of graduate student instructors (GSIs). Not only are they tracing their teaching identities in progress via multimodal reflections; they are also making visible what counts as within the scope of teaching writing at a regional comprehensive university with a diverse student population. Recently, they compiled research on diverse college student populations into slides that included academic and scholarly research (and institution-specific statistics) on students with disabilities, with children, with chronic illness, with jobs, with long commutes, and so on. And I will make their work—and the students represented in their research—further visible by sharing with all writing instructors and faculty in the department as a model of asynchronous multimodal research presentation from a stance of valuing and understanding diversity.

Transparency

As a feminist WPA, I am committed to transparency as a vital activist tool to work toward program and institutional change. As incoming Director of First-year Writing, I have continued established practices of data transparency surrounding, for instance, DFWI rates and student enrollment, which we share both within and beyond the program with all instructors and other college- and university-level administrators. I have also exercised consistent practices of process transparency about schedule forecasting, professional development, and assessment emerging from student needs, instructor requests, and previous program evaluations. I put this principle into practice daily, in efficient communication with instructors by appropriate groups (e.g., by institutional position, by shared classroom or office space), as well as other times throughout the year (e.g., in communicating updates to curriculum and other online materials); and transparency is vital to my identity as a feminist WPA working within byzantine institutional structures whose practices are oft-occluded and whose values are too often assumed as invisible norms rather than explicitly articulated as motivated decisions by those in power.

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Collaborative learning

In my administrative practice and mentoring of other instructors, I also value peer collaboration as a more productive and sustainable learning model that I encourage others to enact—and then model with students in their first-year writing classes. In professional development, I structure workshops that facilitate instructors learning together from each other, grounded in guided questions about their experiences and desired teaching identities rather than in my attempt to transmit a standardized set of practices. To establish peer mentoring relationships, I also introduce new graduate student instructors to current and former GSIs in low-stakes Q&A sessions, during happy hour events, and virtually through spaces for sharing materials. And within our graduate pedagogy course, GSIs teach program outcomes to each other in small groups, curating and contributing to an archive of collective texts and resources. Even in something as small as desk assignments—pairing up GSIs new to our institution with those who are more familiar with it—I create explicit structures of support that not only acknowledge everyone as social beings invested in learning with and alongside a community of others, but also positively impact our program culture by modeling and making visible how learning works and how we benefit from peer collaboration in and over time.

Rhetorical listening

As a feminist mentor, I believe it's vital to ground WPA interactions in rhetorical listening, trying to “stand under” other discourses and others' stories in order to better understand the positions and perceptions from which people are acting (a definition adapted from Krista Ratcliffe's monograph *Rhetorical Listening*). To begin individual conferences and student grievance meetings, I ask questions that create space for students to voice their perceptions of and struggles with writing, with college, with education historically, with learning to be an adult in the 21st century. And I do so as a matter of principle each time in order to better understand and put into context the difficulties they are experiencing in—and bringing with them into—the college writing classroom. While I have an evolving understanding of our writing program, department, and institution, I do not have access to how new students and new teachers are experiencing first-year writing, if I do not ask and listen rhetorically to people's responses. I have learned, for instance, that many students direct frustration at individual instructors when they are largely struggling with our established program practices, because we make visible that writing is a social process in ways that conflict with their previous experiences and understandings. Further, I have also begun the work of mentoring graduate student instructors to treat students as complex audiences for the teaching genres they compose. During the peer review process of teaching materials, everyone gives and receives feedback on project prompts, schedules, and rubrics—with guiding questions from me about what is assumed in their texts and how they might better design documents for students as an actual audience of readers to “stand under,” in order to understand how we perceive documents from situated positions.

Advocacy

Ultimately, I am dedicated to using my administrative power to advocate for—and enact—more equitable practices in interactions with students, instructors, and other administrators. In addition to being visible in practices of transparency and rhetorical listening, my activist commitment to advocacy is also clearly illustrated in my current approach to teaching and mentoring our cohort of new graduate student instructors: foregrounding equity and framing the teaching of first-year writing at our institution as a matter of social justice in the education of marginalized and historically underrepresented student populations. Foregrounding equity is not a practice emphasized in disciplinary research on college writing teacher education, yet it should be one way that we, as a field, support *all* students as one potential means of fulfilling the historical promise of egalitarian U.S. education. Further, rooting new writing teacher enculturation in educational equity is also replete with longer-term possibilities for cultivating activist teacher dispositions beyond a single course, term, or institution. As a feminist WPA, foregrounding equity in interactions with students in my courses and instructors in our program also reminds me to articulate and emphasize issues of educational equity in conversations with other administrators. And grounding myself in principles that matter to me, to students, to our field, guide my daily WPA decisions.