

Opportunity/Exploitation

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Writing Across the Curriculum Graduate Organization (WAC-GO)

Introduction: Navigating Roles as Graduate Students

The Writing Across the Curriculum Graduate Organization (WAC-GO) began just a few short years ago when its founding members saw the need to formalize the professionalization and integration of graduate students interested in writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines (WAC/WID) studies. As a relatively new organization, we are still finding our feet, understanding how to operate, and developing a voice to support and advocate for graduate students in the field. Based on our own experiences, and in line with the work of other graduate organizations like nextGEN and the Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization (WPA-GO), part of our work as WAC-GO officers is to provide the support and structures for graduate students that aren't necessarily guaranteed in other spaces. We originally wanted to use this piece to advocate for those structures and explain why they're so important, but we weren't certain where to take the conversation until we saw this recent post from Dan Libertz (2019) (thanks, Dan!) on the nextGEN listserv:

I think service work can be a tricky problem for rhet/comp because so much of our research and professionalizing relies on service opportunities. I don't think programs in literature or other English/Comm-adjacent disciplines have the same issue that we do. We NEED this experience, but it also opens us up for exploitation (and that exploitation need not be intentional by the higher-ups, though, of course, it could be very intentional, too).

It's this post that organized our thinking, sparked our writing, and inspired the title of this piece. As graduate students, we are constantly navigating the relationship between opportunity and exploitation. It reminds us of Schell's (1998) discussion of "psychic income": Since graduate students want and need a variety of research, teaching, and service experiences, and because those experiences are often fulfilling in non-monetary ways, those in power can ignore the structural factors that put graduate students in these unpaid and undervalued positions (p. 41). As WAC-GO officers, then, we want graduate students interested in WAC/WID to know how and when to parse out the difference between opportunity and exploitation based on their own goals and identities. While there are essentially endless factors that contribute to this confusion between opportunities and exploitation, we'd like to center our discussion on two: (1) the high service and teaching demands across Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp); and (2) the challenges of enculturation—not just into disciplinary ways of *knowing*, but also ways of *doing*. In this short piece, we explore these two factors

and offer recommendations for how the field can continue to work toward more equitable labor expectations and more accessible professionalization for graduate students. We, too, echo the important question posed by WPA-GO's Presswood and Schwarz (2020): How do we as graduate students advocate for change?

As our field's history reveals, service and teaching are often at the heart of what we do in Rhet-Comp. Graduate students across Rhet-Comp are exposed to numerous opportunities to serve their department and writing programs, and WAC/WID especially relies on cross-curricular work and thus further extra administrative and service requirements. Related to service, the teaching aspect of Rhet-Comp also differs from many other fields because teaching first-year writing is fundamentally tied to our discipline; for WAC/WID scholars, these teaching demands fan out even further across disciplines. And, of course, most of the labor these first-year writing courses or WAC/WID programs draw on comes from adjuncts and graduate students acting as instructors of record. In short, because of Rhet-Comp's precarious positionality within academia, and because of how much energy it takes to not only run a WAC/WID program but to convince others around us (e.g., deans, other departments, colleagues in other departments) of why it's needed, graduate students can slip through the cracks of mentorship, and even worse, begin carrying that emotional labor load on their own so that the line between opportunity and exploitation becomes rather muddied.

That line becomes further muddied by the complex enculturation processes into disciplinary ways of doing. Enculturation, understood as the adoption of the norms and values of a community, remains a cornerstone (if contested) interest for WAC/WID scholars. In particular, recent studies have revealed the importance of mentoring for graduate student enculturation, and some researchers have called for better training around faculty mentoring practices and for expanded mentoring structures that reach beyond the dyadic advisor-student model (Tarabochia & Madden, 2019). The absence of support structures from programs signals to students that their needs are non-normative, and thus advocating for ourselves and peers within this framework can often place us in direct conflict with faculty who wield much power over our lives.

This conflict is why so many students form their own informal support groups (e.g. Alvarez, Brito, Salazar, & Aguilar, 2016; Bell & Hewerdine, 2016). Often, these peer networks serve as the primary means by which graduate students—particularly for populations traditionally marginalized by the academy—make sense of the daily work in which they engage, the feedback they may or may not receive, and their relationships with faculty, advisors, and mentors. Though many of us find meaning in these efforts, they reflect the need for more intentional structures that might best be delivered, supported, or coordinated by programs. These are the realities that led to the development of WAC-GO and other graduate student organizations that coordinate events and networks to support

our mutual development across institutional boundaries. Our hope is that we create meaningful relationships between peers and professionals, but of course our reach can only extend so far.

Embracing Opportunities, Managing Exploitations

To illustrate some of these tensions between opportunity and exploitation that we've explored thus far, and to imagine what creative solutions to these tensions might look like, we would like to offer an anecdote: When Alisa was asked to evaluate a book proposal for a major publisher, she was flattered and rather excited to add this significant line to her CV. She could deduce from the proposal that the publishers specifically wanted a graduate student's opinion and was impressed that they were valuing graduate student voices in this decision. As Alisa and her faculty mentor began to discuss how she might approach her response to this book proposal, her excitement quickly turned to anxiety: Like many graduate students, she had never seen a response to a book proposal, much less knew how to write one. Apparently this response had to end in either an acceptance or rejection of the proposal—talk about power that felt unearned or undeserved! And this response would also take a great deal of time to write—thus pulling resources and focus away from Alisa's research projects.

We share this anecdote to demonstrate the rub that we, and no doubt many other graduate students across Rhet-Comp, consistently face: While we are grateful when our voices and opinions are valued or sought out, sometimes that "valuing" equates to dumping complex work on our plates that we don't know how to navigate or handle. And with the almighty CV breathing down our necks, it's very difficult to say no to any opportunity that crosses our paths. Additionally, graduate students are often sought out to provide fresh and diverse perspectives, but we are in a rather precarious position, especially if we plan to go on the academic job market: It costs something to be the "fresh" (re: non-mainstream) perspective. Is the solution, then, to stop granting opportunities or seeking out the voices of graduate students? Please, no! Instead, these opportunities should be couched in formalized support and mentorship practices. What might it have looked like if Alisa's recruiter had sent some sample book proposal responses, explained what was expected of her as a graduate student, and prepared her for the amount of time this kind of project takes? Going one step further, what if the recruiter had also described the benefits and drawbacks of taking on this project so Alisa could evaluate its usefulness in terms of her own goals? These moves in making the implicit explicit, and in offering structural support and mentorship, could help graduate students parse out the difference between a beneficial or exploitative opportunity for them at that moment.

These are gaps, then, that WAC-GO has attempted to fill by creating a peer network that makes explicit the tacit practices of our field. As some examples, we offer annotated conference proposals so graduate students know what moves they should be making; we host a Post-Conference on College Composition and

Communication webinar so graduate students can capitalize on the energy from the conference to start or complete their projects; we circulate a semester newsletter so graduate students feel connected to others in WAC; and we facilitate a cross-institutional mentoring program that pairs graduate students interested in WAC with faculty mentors at other institutions. While we believe this kind of structural support and mentorship are an important start, we also recognize that our organization works best as one form of graduate student support among a complex network, so graduate students can consistently and reliably examine the relationship between opportunity and exploitation as they move among their varied spheres. As nextGEN (2020) moderators Kumari, Baniya, and Larson (2020) recognize, having one disruptive space where graduate students are supported cannot "encompass the totality of a movement necessary for graduate students to achieve equity" (Introduction).

Conclusion: Increasing Graduate Student Agency

What we are ultimately arguing for here is for Rhet-Comp programs to consider how they are shaping future disciplinary practices as they shape the lives of their graduate students. Perhaps a better vision of enculturation for graduate education, then, might be one of co-development. As Lawrence and Zawacki (2018) recognize, "Enculturation must be a two-way street, as . . . not only are graduate students enculturated into disciplinary communities; they too should transform the local academic communities in which they participate . . ." (p. 11). While this framing might require some labor from graduate students, it also posits a reflexive praxis that give graduate students more agency over their "opportunities."

Now that we've come to the end of our contribution to this symposium, we are hyper-aware of how it perfectly reflects the tension between opportunity and exploitation this piece explores. We've received this opportunity to speak out on behalf of graduate students, but we have also had to manage complex labor and enculturation issues tied to the task. Thankfully, the editors of this symposium have demonstrated the exact kind of structural mentorship we are advocating for: They provided clear timelines at every step of this process; they asked writers what would be most beneficial for them to write *before* drafting the call; and perhaps most impressively, they sent detailed advice on how to divide labor as co-writers and how author-order affects CVs and citation practices. WAC-GO seeks to mirror these important moves in its ongoing projects and as a visible peer network. However, maybe supporting graduate students interested in WAC/WID first means re-evaluating what kinds of productivity are reasonable to expect from graduate students so that the line between opportunity and exploitation becomes more manageable.

References

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