Mentorship, Affordability, and Equity: Ways Forward in Writing Program Administration

Amanda Presswood and Virginia M. Schwarz
Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization (WPA-GO)

Introduction

The Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization's (WPA-GO) primary mission is to support graduate students at both the masters and doctoral levels as they prepare for careers related to writing program administration (e.g., curriculum revision, faculty development, program assessment). Throughout its ten-year history, many of WPA-GO's structures and operational norms have been designed to mimic the successful parent organization, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), while at the same time providing a fresh perspective with its own initiatives that the CWPA has in turn adopted. Year by year, these accumulated blueprints have provided guidance to a series of members and leaders who participate in the organization during their graduate career. However, WPA-GO's limited resources and rotating membership poses challenges for members to work towards growth and sustainability; in other words, WPA-GO and its members perpetually face a tension between navigating established organizational practices while continuously identifying and collectively finding ways forward.

To this end, we pose the following questions that we hope are productive for readers of this symposium: How does a graduate organization with practices reified over time respond meaningfully to calls for change? How might WPA-GO also advocate for change within the parent organization and the field at large? Finally, how might members interrogate their own practices and constantly push WPA-GO forward in developing new practices that serve a range of graduate students and interests? To explore these questions, we will give a brief overview of WPA-GO and then describe three areas of growth central to the organization that also reflect broader concerns of graduate students in the field of Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp): *mentorship and support*, *conference affordability*, and *equity-centered approaches to assessment*. We hope that the exchange provided by this symposium with other organizations and graduate students helps us grow and learn, and that the stories we offer are generative for others' thinking, too. The authors of this piece have both served as chairs of the organization (Amanda, 2019-2020; Virginia, 20015-2016); however, we want to clarify that we do not speak for all members of the organization.[1]

---

[1] The authors would like to thank past chairs Mandy Macklin and Clare Russell for their service and mentorship these past two years. We also want to thank the founders of WPA-GO, Megan Shoen and Cris Elder, and all former and current members. Without them this organization's work would not be possible.

In 2010, WPA-GO began as an activist space as founders Cristyn Elder and Megan Schoen wanted to connect graduate students to one another and professionals in the field, and further their opportunities to build a profile in writing program administration (Elder, Schoen, & Skinnell, 2014). The following year, Elder, Schoen, and Skinnell drew from a national survey with 227 responses and found that many graduate students in Rhet-Comp were interested in program administration as a specialization but "did not have access to professional resources" (p. 17). This signaled a gap in the field: a lack of WPA scholarship and guided mentorship in Rhet-Comp graduate programs. CWPA and WPA-GO aimed to address this educational gap by establishing a graduate student presence at the annual conference and by supporting graduate student participation in the organization and its community. This goal of changing existing structures for increased access and opportunity has influenced the efforts of subsequent WPA-GO chairs, including the two authors of this piece.

Because of dedicated Master's and PhD students who have served as members and leaders, WPA-GO has been able to continue and thrive. However, WPA-GO's limited resources and rotating membership can pose challenges for assessing and responding to emerging graduate student needs. We think barriers to enacting change are important to acknowledge, so that we can collectively brainstorm ways to move beyond them.

For example, CWPA and WPA-GO are both volunteer-run organizations limited in their capacities for partnership, mentorship, and coalition building by other, more immediate demands from individual institutions and programs. As the leaders of nextGEN (Kumari, Baniya, & Larson, 2020) and the Writing Across the Curriculum Graduate Organization (WAC-GO) (Polk, Russell & Sockwell, 2020) note in this symposium, we are in a field that requires service work, but graduate students are not always directly compensated for the time and resources required to perform service roles. Furthermore, graduate student members are often juggling the excessive work and emotional labor of graduate school, and many are still exploring and developing their own professional identities. As Miller (2020) also notes in this symposium, graduate students may face multiple challenges within both the university and their own personal lives. Thus, while WPA-GO has been relatively successful in maintaining operations and key partnerships for over ten years, innovations, pilots, and long-term changes are really complex and challenging for members to accomplish.[2] Additionally, some can take years and, as members graduate and leave the organization, require successfully documenting and transferring responsibility to incoming members.

While members may face these challenges, particularly in redesigning organizational structures and sustaining long-term projects, there have been

---

[2] Here we want to give a shout out to the Labor Task Force, who is in the process of publishing data on graduate student labor conditions. Their project started in a WPA-GO committee and took five years to coordinate and complete. For more information see WPA-GO (2019).

areas of growth in terms of mentorship and support, conference affordability, and equity-centered approaches to assessment. These innovations offer a way forward in thinking about how graduate organizations can continue to supplement educational and professional experiences during graduate school.

The WPA-GO (2015) bylaws articulate a commitment to working "with the CWPA to support graduate student WPA preparation and strengthen connections between graduate students and professional WPAs" (p. 1). We see this as one of the central functions of the organization, and we are deeply grateful for the time that the members of WPA-GO's parent organization, CWPA, have invested over the years in meeting with graduate students and offering their perspectives. We believe that through mentorship from those who are more experienced in the field, graduate students can learn from the trials and successes of those who are further into their careers.

One way that WPA-GO helps facilitate student-faculty mentorships is by providing graduate students with opportunities to meet those more seasoned in the field through its Breakfast Buddies program. This program matches mentors (experienced scholars) with mentees (graduate students or new WPAs) and offers these pairs or small groups a space to meet and enjoy a complimentary meal together during either the Conference on College Composition and Communication or CWPA Conference. Our hope is that the connection made between mentors and mentees will remain after the conclusions of the conferences.

WPA-GO members have made important additions to mentoring programs in the last few years. For example, WPA-GO has developed an online mentoring option for those who want to participate but are not able to attend these conferences. Additionally, members can participate in other mentoring activities that are more instructional in nature. These vary by year but have included the Research Writing Group (RWG), individual lessons led by senior scholars in the field, and antiracism workshops that are developed with and hosted by local organizations in the cities where conferences take place.[3] Finally, WPA-GO has also developed community calls on various topics, such as contract grading, in order to invite more people into the organization and establish circles of peer-mentoring around a topic.

Graduate students often struggle with the expenses associated with conference travel, and graduate organizations have the capacity to advocate for reduced costs. For most conferences in the field, not only are there travel expenses but also registration and membership fees that typically range from $50 to $400. As leaders in WPA-GO, it has become a challenge for us to promote these professional conferences when we know how much money graduate students are being asked to spend and how much money graduate students typically

---

[3] RWG was developed through committees led by Al Harahap, Brian Hendrickson, and Laurie Pinkert in coordination with the CWPA Mentoring Committee.

make. For example, the chart below illustrates typical costs associated with traveling to a conference in 2020:

Registration Fees	$50-$400
Events (workshops, dinners, social hours)	$25-$200
Plane Tickets	$300-$600
Hotel Costs	$200-$300 (when shared)
Total cost not including meals and transportation costs	about $600-1500

Table 1: Typical Costs of 2020 Conference Travel

Food at the conference, usually located in an expensive, downtown area, and transportation raise these costs. The total above also varies greatly depending on where graduate students live and their access to major airports. If they attend two conferences per year, that would mean spending at least $1,200. Thus, graduate students are being asked to spend between 8-10% of their income on conference travel when the average stipend is between $15,000-$20,000. While some have funding, reimbursement typically covers only a part of travel costs and can be distributed a full year after the expenses were incurred.

One of the ways that WPA-GO seeks to help graduate students attend these professional conferences is through travel grants. Each year WPA-GO offers three travel grants to WPA-GO members who wish to attend the annual CWPA Conference. These awards help to cover the cost of conference registration. This past year, WPA-GO collaborated with CWPA's People of Color Caucus (POCC) to offer two additional grants, one research and one travel. Although these grants help offset the cost of attending conferences, the organization can only offer them to a small number of people. Thus, travel awards, while important, do not solve the underlying issue of conference expenses. Having attended board meetings, we know why conferences can be so expensive and understand some of the challenges associated with organizing them. We know that conference hotels and their food minimums can be expensive. WPA-GO members have advocated for other venues, such as local universities, and for supplementing these conferences with more online, distance options. Ultimately, conferences remain an issue we need to work together to address as individual organizations but also as a field. If graduate students are expected to present work at professional conferences, then everyone is responsible for critically addressing the affordability of these conferences.

Equity-Centered Approaches to Assessment

Another continuing possibility for not only challenging structures but making structures more challengeable to begin with is related to organizational elections, the process of voting in leaders who serve as chairs or graduate council members. This elected group is responsible for setting WPA-GO's priorities and agenda for the academic year and organizing committee labor. In the past, WPA-GO elections have disproportionately benefited members from well-resourced or well-funded programs who already have the most on their CVs (and the time, financial means, energy, and resources to add more). These processes reveal graduate students' problematic assessments of one another, reflecting biases in what/who we value (and in turn, devalue). For example, as discussed, graduate students have unequal access to opportunities at their home institutions (e.g., not all departments offer graduate WPA [gWPA] positions and not all gWPA positions are themselves distributed equitably). WPA-GO's membership, representing a diversity of identities, scholarship, programs, and institutional types, should all feel they have a clear path to leadership and access to multiple means of challenging and changing organizational structures that are unjust. Otherwise, WPA-GO is reproducing existing inequalities in the field.

In 2012, WPA-GO implemented the first Diversity Task force, and members made recommendations explicitly addressing elections, including language to address diversity of intellectual labor. In 2017, the organization built on this previous work by collaborating with Asao Inoue to create an antiracist assessment workshop specifically for WPA-GO. Held at the CWPA Conference, this event was open to all graduate students and conference attendees, whether or not they were affiliated with WPA-GO. Together, this room of 40 members and outside readers engaged with organizational documents, offered thoughtful responses, and suggested possible revisions for future practices.

Moving Forward Together

As we conclude, we'd like to return to the questions we posed at the beginning of this piece that we hope can be productive for readers:

- How does a graduate organization with practices reified over time respond meaningfully to calls for change?
- How might graduate organizations also advocate for change within the parent organization and the field at large?
- Finally, how might members interrogate their own practices and constantly push their organizations forward in developing new practices that serve a range of graduate students and interests?

For WPA-GO, identifying openings for incremental change in the following areas has improved the organization and partially addressed, however incomplete,

inequalities in Rhet-Comp graduate programs: *mentorship and support*, *conference affordability*, and *equity-centered approaches to assessment*. These have been areas of growth and growing for the organization and for many of its members. Change requires elected leadership and members to identify and challenge processes that are no longer (or never have) served them or the organization. And moving forward—that is, moving forward *differently*—can be complicated, uncomfortable, and risky. One takeaway for Amanda is that while change may be risky, new practices are necessary if we are to meet the needs of the graduate students that our organizations are there to support. Advocacy and equity-centered approaches need to be woven into the fabric of our organizations, not mere afterthoughts. Virginia believes that change needs to be planned for and facilitated through organizational documents and structures, and organizations should have frameworks for accountability. Advocacy and equity work also need to be transparent to all members, and everyone should be included in decisions about where the organization grows, moves, and changes.

References

Elder, C. L., Schoen, M., & Skinnell, R. (2014). Strengthening graduate student preparation for WPA work. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *37*(2), 13-35. http://associationdatabase.co/archives/37n2/37n2elder-schoen-skinnell.pdf

Kumari, A., Baniya, S., & Larson, K. (2020). The necessity of genre disruption in organizing an advocacy space for and by graduate students. [Symposium on the status of graduate study in rhetoric and composition]. *Xchanges, 15*(1), 1-8. http://www.xchanges.org/the-necessity-of-genre-disruption

Miller, L. (2020). Mental health in a disabling landscape: Forging networks of care in graduate school. [Symposium on the status of graduate study in rhetoric and composition]. *Xchanges, 15*(1), 1-7. http://www.xchanges.org/mental-health-in-a-disabling-landscape

Polk, T., Russell, A., & Sockwell, A. (2020). Opportunity/exploitation. [Symposium on the status of graduate study in rhetoric and composition]. *Xchanges, 15*(1), 1-5. http://www.xchanges.org/opportunity-exploitation

Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization. (2015). *Constitution and bylaws*. http://wpacouncil.org/aws/CWPA/asset_manager/get_file/350190?ver=587

Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization. (2019). *Report on graduate student instructor labor conditions in writing programs*. https://csal.colostate.edu/docs/cwpa/reports/wpago-gsi-2019.pdf