

Introduction: Rhetoric and Composition Graduate Students Define Their Identities Against Dominant Narratives

Al Harahap and Brian Hendrickson, Symposium Coeditors

Welcome to the *Xchanges* Symposium on the Status of Graduate Study in Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp). We are proud to present to you this collaborative effort by current and recent graduate students who identify as members of the Rhet-Comp community. To ensure that we foreground the voices of the authors over our own, we'll begin our introduction with a synopsis of their contributions.

The Authors

Given the liminality of graduate study in general, the concerns of this symposium's authors are immediate and pressing, as evidenced in Mandy Olejnik and Cara Marta Messina's contribution, which opens the symposium by calling on the field to create policies and infrastructure to ensure more equitable discourse in the digital spaces that are so important to graduate students' enculturation into Rhet-Comp. Despite these barriers to enculturation, Andrew Bowman and Bruce Kovanen demonstrate a deep awareness of our field's history of labor activism in their recommendation that graduate students practice direct collective action to address the labor inequities that they and other contingent faculty increasingly face. Liz Miller meanwhile draws upon disability studies to critique neoliberal notions of wellness destructive to graduate students' wellbeing and advocates for Rhet-Comp to instead integrate networks of care into the fabric of graduate study. Alexandria Hanson, Alejandra I. Ramírez, April M. Cobos, Heather Listhartke, and Skye Roberson then extend Miller's critique to neoliberal notions of productivity that disadvantage single-mother graduate students in Rhet-Comp.

All of our authors took pains not just to critique but recommend strategies to actualize a more equitable field, frequently through the lens of their own encounters with inequity during the course of their graduate study. Caleb Lee González explores how counter-storytelling can function as a powerful scholarly endeavor through which graduate students of color can critique and transform graduate study in Rhet-Comp, while also rendering its mechanisms of marginalization more visible to their more privileged colleagues. Sherwin Kawahakui Ranchez Sales provides his own counterstory to draw our attention to the ways in which graduate students of color enrolled in predominantly white programs and institutions can disproportionately suffer from imposter syndrome,

which is why the community cultural wealth that affinity groups provide is so invaluable.

Lida Colón then focuses on the unique challenges of Black graduate students in Rhet-Comp and how Digital Black Lit and Composition (DBLAC) provides a model for contributing to their success. Amanda Presswood and Virginia M. Schwarz of the Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization (WPA-GO) call for equity-centered approaches to assessing programs and professional organizations. Thomas Polk, Alisa Russell, and Allie Sockwell Johnston of the Writing Across the Curriculum Graduate Organization (WAC-GO) caution against the ways in which our attempts at enculturating graduate students into Rhet-Comp can actually play out as exploitative. Bringing us full circle, Ashanka Kumari, Sweta Baniya, and Kyle Larson of nextGEN detail the formation of their own initiative in direct response to incidents on the Writing Program Administrators Listserv (WPA-L), and how graduate students will need to transform outdated discursive structures or invent new ones in order to address structural inequities in Rhet-Comp.

Our Exigence

Aptly enough, the idea for this symposium arose partly in reaction to the series of racist and sexist incidents on the WPA-L--arguably Rhet-Comp's largest, most public online discursive space--and the outsized role graduate students played in protesting and enacting change. For those of us who have been discounted, marginalized, and oppressed in these volatile spaces, neither the fact that these incidents occurred nor the subsequent groundswell of digital activism by and for graduate students is as explosive or shocking as some have framed it. Instead, we see these incidents and graduate students' reactions to them as more visible iterations of longstanding inequities in Rhet-Comp and student-led direct action against them.

Although the scholarly conversation within Rhet-Comp has rightly acknowledged the importance of graduate students' enculturation into the field, we contend that the conversation has traditionally, narrowly focused on graduate students' utilitarian function as teachers in training, only further reinforcing their status as cheap, disposable labor (e.g. Anson, 1993; Macrorie, 1963; Nyquist, 1991; Williams, 1949). And when we have talked about graduate students' scholarly development, both historically and more recently, we have often employed the deficit model of the Other, the alien, the foreign, non-native, immigrant, or international student who "needs help" assimilating to the hegemony of formal academic discourse (e.g. Abasi et al, 2006; Ackerman, 1991; Alvarez et al, 2017; Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Berkenkotter et al., 1988).

The work collected in Anderson and Romano (2005) and Baliff et al. (2008) signaled a culture shift within Rhet-Comp toward including current or recent graduate students' own voices and experiences, but structural change in higher

education is slow going and hard won. It was not long before that the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) (2001) issued the field's first position statement specifically aimed at graduate student professional development. It would take nearly a decade for the Council of Writing Program Administrators to establish WPA-GO (Elder, Schoen, & Skinnell, 2014), a graduate student organization whose success in providing visibility and voice were subsequently emulated in IWCA-GO, WAC-GO, and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Committee on the Status of Graduate Students, the latter of which consisted only of faculty and had no graduate student representation at the time. And it would take nearly another decade for CCCC (2019) to issue their own graduate student-centered position statement. Meanwhile, graduate students' own concerns related to the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that affect their development remain primarily relegated to informal spaces such as teacher-training colloquia and social media. And although several special journal features arising from the recent WPA-L incidents have appropriately highlighted graduate student perspectives (Cox et al., 2019; Baniya et al., 2019), Rhet-Comp has yet to produce a scholarly publication devoted to graduate students sharing their own visions of the current status and possible future of graduate study in our field.

Indeed, much of the exigency in providing this space and moment is directly in response to how neither academia in general nor Rhet-Comp specifically knows how to conceive of graduate students as a defined group or category of experiences. In our programs and professional spaces, graduate students are usually, and often awkwardly, treated as "undergraduate students with more motivation" or "baby faculty," as if they don't have their own identity but merely exist in a fleeting cocoon stage before some mythical, ultimate transformation into their final form. This simplistic construction perpetuates a liminality/transitional narrative that subversively denies graduate students their own unique identity and justifies the precariousness of their positionality within inequitable disciplinary and institutional structures.

We therefore committed to co-creating this symposium in *Xchanges* with leaders of graduate student organizations in Rhet-Comp to give more visibility to graduate students and the scholarly conversations and structural transformations that they want for our field and its approach to graduate study. Though the precarity within which Rhet-Comp graduate students find themselves at present is not new (WPA-GO, 2019), it has definitely been exacerbated by a global pandemic presently plunging the economy into recession and amplifying the financial hardship of already underfunded public and under-enrolled private colleges and universities (Flaherty, 2020). Even before this crisis, however, graduate students were at the forefront of developing innovative ways to resist and transform structural inequities, so that the critical analyses and recommendations collected herein only become that much more significant now, and the need to pay attention to them all the more pressing.

Our Background and Process

Symposium Co-Editors Al Harahap and Brian Hendrickson had held leadership positions in a number of graduate student organizations, and had been interested in finding ways to recognize the intellectual labor that graduate students were putting into their organizing and activism on behalf of supporting one another and contributing to a more equitable, inclusive, and intellectually rich field. In the spring of 2019, *Xchanges* Managing Editor Brian Hendrickson pitched the idea for this symposium to Rhet-Comp graduate student organizations DBLAC, nextGEN, WAC-GO, and WPA-GO, inviting them to brainstorm the structure of the symposium and identify its thematic keywords, yielding the word cloud included below as Figure 1:



Figure 1: Symposium Keyword Brainstorm Word Cloud

The three most central themes to emerge from the thematic keyword brainstorm were inclusivity, mentoring, and support, followed by accessibility, antiracism, equity, guidance, justice, labor, network, precarity, and sustainability.

Al Harahap then joined Hendrickson, shaping the vision for the symposium through the call for proposals and implementation of equitable editorial practices. For both of us, it was important that from start to finish, the symposium embodied the themes of inclusivity, mentoring, and support as identified by its graduate student authors. The call for proposals was distributed across a range of listservs and online forums, with a particular focus on recruiting graduate student members of the CCCC caucuses.

We received more proposals than we could showcase, but because the submissions represented such a broad range of perspectives and concerns under-addressed in the literature, we opted to include as many voices as possible. We also wanted to encourage conversation across symposium pieces, so we asked authors to read one another's early drafts and integrate references to one another's pieces into subsequent drafts.

Our Takeaways

One current running through all the symposium pieces is the emphasis contributors place, not as much on their experiences within Rhet-Comp graduate study specifically as on their experiences as graduate students along demographic lines of identity, such as class, dis/ability, ethnicity and race, sex and gender. This emphasis should come as no surprise as the demographic body has more and more won the visibility and attention it needs in and beyond Rhet-Comp, and with increasingly nuanced acknowledgement of our differences. One takeaway, then, is that our graduate degree programs are far from being the great levelers of inequality that we might sometimes wish them to be. What's more, graduate degree programs in Rhet-Comp could more explicitly take up consideration of our students' identities, the cultural and linguistic assets associated with them, and the differences in need between them. One identity axis that we are particularly glad is represented here is perhaps the least talked about in graduate student professionalizing literature: motherhood and its associated caretaker status. As well, we see our contributors speaking about these axes intersectionally, for example, in how single-mother graduate students are excluded from extracurricular activities and inadequately accommodated in their teaching schedules and modalities, reminding us that our programs must be as nuanced as our scholarship in taking identity into account.

Furthermore, we notice that our authors draw as much if not more from literature outside of Rhet-Comp, and speak as much if not more to their status as graduate students in general, than they do literature and identities specific to our field. This tells us that our field as perceived by the authors collected in this symposium still represents a capaciously interdisciplinary terrain; that the experiences of graduate students in Rhet-Comp are likely more universal than we might tend to perceive through our tribalistic frames of disciplinary specialization; and that there is something visceral and palpable about one's status as a graduate student that carries deeper material, affective, embodied, and discursive connections to one's demographic body than one's disciplinary identity, and than recognized by our limited conceptions of the place of graduate study in Rhet-Comp.

It is due to this very visceral and palpable nature of those connections that our symposium authors are able to so incisively define their identities as graduate students against particular problems, with consideration toward specific needs, and with an eye toward concrete solutions. More than any of our other takeaways, we hope you'll pay careful attention to their eloquently stated ideas. All eleven pieces make calls to action, whether to change the very material conditions of graduate learning, teaching, and training, or to substantially shift the mindsets and behaviors of graduate students' peers and mentors, or as is often the case, a combination of both. In some way, by choosing the traditional discursive framework of the symposium through which to amplify graduate students' calls for radical change, we are capitulating to the hegemonic forces

within academia responsible for the very problems graduate students are now speaking up about, and indeed, we risk perpetuating them ourselves. Yet, as an open-access journal with a longstanding tradition of mentoring emerging scholars in Rhet-Comp and showcasing their innovative contributions to the field, *Xchanges* has always been a site of pushing back against conventional thought and ideas. We hope, then, that this symposium will serve multiple audiences: those who would benefit from reading their peers articulate their experiences and visions for a more equitable field; and the faculty members, mentors, administrators, and others in positions of power, who can help to effect the changes that these authors and their contributions so urgently and astutely demand.

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