

# On the Front Lines: Graduate Student Roles in Shaping Discourse in Digital Spaces

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## Introduction

Like many graduate students in Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp), we follow the Writing Program Administrators Listserv (WPA-L), which had been described as “intended primarily for individuals who are involved in writing program administration at universities, colleges, or community colleges” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, n.d.). We learned about the listserv through our coursework and professors and were encouraged to join in order to see online scholarly conversations. What is not as apparent from our introduction to the list, however, is a certain silencing, hostile culture that many members perceive. This has long been a whispered gripe of junior members in the field; one of Mandy's mentors was advised to never, ever post on the list for these reasons, as an example.

Recently, scholars have more directly grappled with these issues in professional discourses. Mandy is an author in the “Building a Twenty-First-Century Feminist Ethos” symposium released in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* (Cox, Kumari, Manivannan, Olejnik, & Roundtree, 2019), where graduate students, junior WPAs, and senior WPAs collaboratively discussed the challenges of writing program administration work. Cara is a member of the WPA-L Working Group (n.d.), whose goal is to reimagine the infrastructure of the WPA-L, including adding moderators and behavior guidelines. These examples demonstrate how the field is reshaping professional spaces and discussion, and the ways graduate students have contributed to these transformations while also, as Polk, Russell, & Sockwell (2020) remind us, face “navigating the relationship between opportunity and exploitation” in the labor they contribute for better discursive spaces (Introduction).

This symposium piece works through our actions and reception during a series of controversial threads on the WPA-L, our social media presence, and the horizontal mentoring we've practiced. We engage in a dialogic reflection to challenge the status quo and reimagine a just, inclusive, and equitable field. In each section, we include guiding questions that shaped our responses. We encourage you to also consider these guiding questions and share your thoughts on Twitter under the hashtag #WPAListservFeministRevolution, or discuss them with your colleagues. By working together and extending these conversations, we can continue to make sustaining changes that extend across time, venues, and people.

## #WPAListservFeministRevolution

Guiding questions:

- Why did we participate in the #WPAListservFeministRevolution and choose to post on the WPA-L? What have we learned since?
- How does our participation impact our work and identities in the field?

**Mandy:** It was a normal day on my campus when the WPA-L began to explode on October 23, 2018. Throughout the day, I read with increasing alarm the *tone* present in the messages exchanged. I also noticed whose voices were being silenced and whose were being amplified. What was most disheartening to me was seeing several established scholars ignore the feelings and problems that women and other groups of people expressed. I also felt afraid to speak up and call this behavior out, as a first-year PhD student with absolutely zero clout in the field. But I posted anyway, because the kairotic moment was there thanks to the brave posts of others and because I wanted to remind everyone of how hard it is hearing and participating in these discussions as a graduate student.

**Cara:** I chose to post during the Heterodox controversy, in which scholars argued that the WPA-L and the general field of Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp) resemble an ideological echo chamber (my words); they advocated for a Heterodox Rhet/Comp group that welcomed diverse ideologies. Heterodox Academy defines itself as a non-partisan group of academics who want viewpoint diversity. They argue higher-ed campuses are facing a free speech crisis, but as Quintana (2018) points out, there is no data to support this claim. Several WPA-L members pointed out “heterodoxy” was code for the inclusion of viewpoints that are often harmful to or marginalize certain groups of people.

My first reply to this exchange addressed that partisan and polarized ideologies have always existed. For the second reply, I disrupted the conversation—a tactic suggested in the Hollaback! (n.d.) Bystander Intervention Training—because I worried the conversation was moving in a harmful direction, or had already hurt others. In order to better represent the diverse ideologies in the field as a direct response to the Heterodox Academy’s argument, I asked listserv members to start listing off particular frameworks that drive our research. I chose to post because the current political climate, the leaders of the #WPALiservFeministRevolution, and my colleagues inspired me, reminding me there are other scholars who deeply care about challenging injustice and damaging arguments.

**Mandy:** I think what the #WPAListservFeministRevolution brought to the table for both of us was a network of folks on Twitter and in the field who support the push for more inclusive discourse. It was through this that Cara, other graduate

students, and I met and started collaborating together—on this piece as well as a Computers and Writing 2019 presentation. Mentoring is an integral part of one's graduate education due to the de-centered nature of graduate study (Esposito, et al., 2017; Simpson, 2012), but it takes many forms and manifests in many ways. Cara's and my interactions relate to what VanHaitsma and Ceraso (2017) call horizontal mentoring, an "accompaniment rather than a replacement for formal mentoring" that focuses on peers coming together to discuss "making it" in the academy (p. 213). Cara and I "made it" through this vacillating experience together and with other graduate students. As Miller (2020) writes about in this symposium, we "care about one other" and thus help each other (Caring Methodologies). As our experiences demonstrate, the notion of a constellated, networked support system is crucial for graduate student survival in academia.

### Channeling the Back Channels

Guiding Question: How do we as graduate students negotiate our public posts as well as both public *and* private responses?

**Cara:** After I posted my response to the Heterodox Academy controversy on the WPA-L, I received a lot of positive support and feedback. The responses validated my choice to post, and reminded me why I love this field.

Then, I received a longer, private email from a senior scholar.<sup>1</sup> He began by complimenting my response, stating that he had originally been interested in the heterodox group, but after reading some posts, grew wary of its purpose. He also asked me to rethink my perspective on "believ[ing] the voices from the margins" because people who do not immediately accept these perspectives are villainized.

Before I responded, Mandy messaged me; he emailed her, too, and mentioned me. She warned me about his past indiscretions that are infamous through whisper networks. Suddenly, his critique of listening to marginalized voices—to people who have been discriminated against—seemed more calculated; his choice to email two women graduate students, asking me not to forward the email to the WPA-L, felt sinister. His email reminded me of what I already knew: certain harmful behavior patterns are reinforced because those committing them do not face consequences.

With words of wisdom from advisors and colleagues, I told him not to privately email me. Establishing boundaries, however, does not always stop people. And not everyone is privileged enough to have the same personal and professional support I have. Creating infrastructure for support and accountability, whether in

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using intentionally vague language, for the reasons made clear in this symposium and on the WPA-L about graduate students' hesitancies to speak up.

our local institutions or online, is a necessary step to protecting each other, especially people in more vulnerable groups.

**Mandy:** I want to thank Cara for her courage. I also want to point out, again, how difficult it is for us to write so publicly and honestly about these experiences, but we choose to do so because we want to enact real, meaningful change and share our lived experiences to help start that change. I talked to my advisor during this situation, asking what I should do and if I did something wrong, and her response to me was one we all as graduate students should take to heart: Chin up. You are the future.

### Moving Forward in the Field

Guiding questions:

- How can we embrace conversations about racism, misogyny, and ableism in our professional discourses instead of dismissing these concerns or using loaded terms?
- How do we find allies in our local contexts, be it graduate students, faculty, or other people?

**Mandy:** First and foremost: these discussions must not end as quickly as they have in the past. As people in the listserv noted (and used to disregard the conversations happening in the #WPAListservFeministRevolution), people get “fired up” about things and then conversation wanes. And nothing happens. But this time, it can be different. It already has: this symposium, LaFrance and Wardle’s (2019) symposium, recent conference presentations, and more all speak toward building a better field. And as graduate students throwing ourselves directly into this change as we are entering the field, we hope to keep up this pace.

But we cannot do this alone. As the backchanneling on Twitter demonstrated, we need the support of more senior and established scholars to help make this change. We need more journal editors like those here at *Xchanges* to carve official, professional spaces for these conversations. We may be the future, but our present is still very much impacted and influenced by those who are here to guide us.

**Cara:** A user named “Grand Scholar Wizard”—a signaling of the Ku Klux Klan “grand wizard”—posted in the WPA-L during a debate on Asao B. Inoue’s (2019) 2019 CCC chair’s address. Although people were quick to condemn the anonymous poster, the poster’s presence illustrated the lack of moderation and safeguarding on the WPA-L. Several WPA-L members began collaborating on a Google Doc to establish ethical guidelines and potential consequences to breaking these guidelines, an effort following the “Listserv to Listserv” email response Kumari, Baniya, and Larson (2020) discuss in this symposium. This

collaboration helped lead to the creation of the WPA-L Working Group (n.d.), which is transforming the infrastructure of the listserv.

Condemning hateful rhetoric and dog whistling campaigns is necessary in Rhet-Comp. What is even more important, though, are the structural changes that dissuade this type of rhetoric in the first place. Establishing moderation boards, ethical guidelines, and infrastructural boundaries can lead to better overall practices. While many scholars will have moments of ignorance, moderation boards can intervene and practice calling *in*, inviting scholars to think through some of their unintentionally harmful actions and discussing methods to avoid harm in the future. These infrastructures exist to protect vulnerable groups in the community when these mistakes happen, and, more importantly, during rare moments when harm is intended.

## Conclusion

We urge the field—those who are publishing, Tweeting, posting on Facebook groups, and commenting on WPA-L and other listserv threads—to define, implement, practice, and enforce ethical guidelines. As Colton and Holmes (2018) argue in their defense for collective rhetorical digital ethics, “we might think of the various shared ethical commitments in the fields of rhetoric, including the advocacy of inclusivity, respect for difference, and critique of injustice” (p. 13), and how to implement these ethical commitments in *all* of our digital interactions, including in our everyday interactions with our colleagues, students, and mentors.

The challenge, then, is implementing these commitments. How can all of us in the field practice respect, equity, and justice? We emphasize the need for community creation in existing spaces, and within this community creation, we look to current examples of community creation practices as seen in the #WPAListservFeministRevolution, nextGEN, the NCTE Jewish Caucus, and more. How can we bring these ethical commitments to mainstream communities?

As the WPA-L Working Group demonstrates, *policy* changes and *infrastructure* to enforce those policies are necessary to transform existing spaces. As we and so many of our graduate colleagues have shown, horizontal mentorship is necessary not only for emotional support, but to collectively stand up against unjust practices and treatments in order to strive for an inclusive, equitable field. We end this essay again with a request for our audience to read through the guiding questions in each section and then bring these to your local institutions, across the field, and in digital spaces to create communities and better improve the overall infrastructure, policy, and mentorship opportunities—for graduate students and for everyone.

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