EXPLORING PARADOXES OF POWER IN SMALL COLLEGE WRITING ADMINISTRATION

“The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.”

-Nils Bohr, quoted in Parker Palmer, The Active Life

Twenty years ago, as part of a learning community at the state university where I then taught, I participated in an exercise fondly nicknamed the “power game.” During a half-day simulation of a typical organization’s week, we ten faculty and twenty students were randomly assigned roles to play. I drew a Bottom. While the Middles, Tops, and Clients floated mysteriously in and out of the room, I sat at a table with three other Bottoms trying, amidst interruptions and conflicting orders from our Middle, to design a promotion for a new national holiday. In my position at the low end of a hierarchy, I resented the frequent demands to change gears, the need to ask permission, and the loss of individuality; I envied those with more knowledge, more mobility, and more authority.

During the six-hour debriefing, I found to my surprise that I was actually a winner in this game. Despite—perhaps because of—the inherent positional frustrations, my group had become unified and supportive of one another and had made some concrete progress in accomplishing our task. All

Libby Falk Jones is Professor of English at Berea College. At Berea since 1988, she served as director of the Center for Effective Communication and founding director of the Center for Learning, Teaching, Communication, and Research. She currently serves as a Faculty Associate with CLTCR as well as teaching a variety of writing and general studies courses. She has written and spoken on writing and teaching, teaching and learning infrastructure, women’s academic vocations and feminist pedagogies, writing centers, critical thinking, and workplace literacy. Currently she co-chairs the NCTE Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning and serves as Berea’s campus contact for AAHE’s Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Composition Studies, Volume 32, Number 2, Fall 2004
the players I’d envied had been miserable: they had experienced the Bottoms’ frustrations without the benefits of stability, support, and accomplishment. At least one interaction between a Client and a Top had reduced the Top to tears. The Middles had suffered perhaps the most, caught between two unhappy groups and relatively powerless, within the structures dictated by the exercise, to create satisfying alternatives.

At that time, my random assignment in this exercise replicated reality. Though empowered within that learning community, I existed only marginally, as an adjunct instructor, within the university structure. Sixteen years ago, however, when I came to Berea College as Director of the Center for Effective Communication/Communication Across the College Program and Associate Professor of English, I was challenged to understand and use power appropriately. In small college writing administration, our roles are typically complex: we can and usually do function as classroom teachers, writing consultants, supervisors of writing center peer consultants and/or composition faculty, directors of cross-disciplinary writing/communication programs, members of English or other departments, managers of budgets, scholars of composition and writing in the disciplines, and advocates of writing and faculty development in general studies and major fields. We are thus required to deal with many different people and interests. As Middles in our small college organizational hierarchies, we need strategies for creating power and using it effectively, both to achieve our purposes and to keep ourselves and our colleagues healthy. In this essay, I’d like to explore some perceptions, sources, and consequences of power, drawing on my own experience as a teacher-administrator in a small college as well as concepts and practices from the fields of communication, conflict management, leadership, and feminist theory. My goal is to increase both the effectiveness and the consequence of small college writing administrators, first on small college campuses and then on the national educational scene. Though the challenges we face at small colleges are to some degree unique, we have the opportunity, through our responses, to create new models of leadership in higher education for institutions of all sizes.

Conceptions of Power

Before we can use power effectively, we must first believe that power is available to us and that having it is a good. Achieving these underlying beliefs is no small feat. At institutions of all sizes, writing administrators may believe they lack power; many also feel a distaste for the concept. Hildy Miller points out that administrators generally feel powerless, while the actual power of writing administrators may be limited by their lesser status and blurred program boundaries (2-3). Yet conflict management scholars argue that most people underestimate the power available to them. The small college WPA has
an advantage in being able to see immediate effects of leadership, regardless of the way that leadership is expressed. At a small college, when a writing administrator helps a single writing teacher respond to student essays more effectively, a large percentage of the student population will benefit. In addition, the small college environment typically provides more opportunities for innovations to spread, as faculty dialogue informally across the curriculum. Similarly, curricular changes in small colleges usually occur more readily than in larger institutions. Finally, our smaller size makes it easier for us to understand the organizational structure—the players at all levels and their roles—and thus to effect visible change. For example, in exploring traditional campus channels a few years ago to find support for a new faculty development program, I encountered skepticism. The same day, happening to sit at a lunch discussion with our then-new president, I discovered his interest in my proposal. His support—financial and philosophical—helped overcome others’ hesitation and led to collaborative sponsorship for what turned out to be a highly successful new program. For all these reasons, we small college WPAs may be more likely than our colleagues at larger institutions to accept our leadership roles and turn our attention to using power effectively.

Academics’ distaste for the concept of power—a second psychological hurdle that must be overcome—usually arises from viewing power as primarily destructive or oppressive. Such a perception of power typically underlies common metaphors for power derived from war, violence, explosions, and even games (winners and losers). And indeed, many of us know first-hand that oppressive power does exist. Certainly my education and work as a compositionist and feminist has led me to reject destructive power as embodied in standard hierarchies. As I learned in the power game exercise, being a Top or Middle rather than a Bottom is not a recipe for effectiveness or satisfaction. That others—particularly women—similarly reject oppressive power is documented in such studies as Aisenberg and Harrington’s Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove. Through their study of successful and unsuccessful academic women, the authors found that academic women not only lack knowledge of the “rules of the game,” but—more significantly—they typically refuse to learn or to play by those rules. Their findings have been echoed by other scholars as well (Chliwniak; Hartman).

Yet this type of power, which feminists often call “power-over,” does not have to be oppressive and may, in fact, be useful. Evelyn Fox Keller and Helene Moglen note in their book Competition: A Feminist Taboo? that “it is neither possible nor advantageous for women to avoid the dilemmas of power, be it power in the interests of another or power over others” (36). Describing various ways in which people attempt falsely to deny power, conflict management scholars Joyce Hocker and William Wilmot conclude that, even if we
attempt to reject power, we cannot escape the exercise of influence (71-72; 74). The question, then, is not whether we possess power, but how we can understand and make good use of the power we have.

A more positive way of viewing power is to understand it as the ability to act and to affect one’s environment, as in Nina Baym’s words, “the energy and control that gets things done” (66). Hocker and Wilmot cite Carolyn Heilbrun’s definition of power as “the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter” (69). Such a concept of power might be termed productive or constructive, as opposed to destructive (70). Even more positive is the conception of power as integrative—power used collaboratively and creatively (70). Surely our goals as writing administrators in small colleges should be to exercise these positive types of power. We are fortunate often to work within academic structures designed to foster collaboration. In the small college where departments may consist of one or two persons, collaboration beyond the narrow structure is essential. The small college writing program itself is more likely to be cross-disciplinary.

Working in integrative structures is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective use of power. To exercise power constructively, we must understand and use various sources of power, often identified in the conflict management and leadership fields as power currencies (Hocker and Wilmot 76). One widely-used typology was created forty years ago by Raven and French (Hackman and Johnson 76-79). According to this typology, there are five primary sources of power: coercive, reward, legitimate (or positional), expert, and referent (or role model) (76-79). Each has its own benefits and costs. How might writing teachers-administrators at small colleges access and use effectively these power sources?

**Structural Power**

The first three powers depend largely on the structural position held by the writing administrator. In the small college, writing administrators typically do not head departments, nor are we likely to possess extensive resource control, and thus our ability to punish or reward the faculty with whom we work may be limited (Hocker and Wilmot 77). On the one hand, our lack of coercive power may be advantageous, since without it we are less likely to threaten others. Our interests may be best served when someone else—an administrative committee, a department head, a dean or provost—holds and uses coercive power on behalf of our programs. On the other hand, our lack of reward power may hamper us in gaining necessary participation and compliance from our faculty colleagues. We can benefit our programs by negotiating with upper-level administration and other sources to make rewards—stipends, course release time—available to participating faculty. We can also look for
ways, other than financial, to reward our colleagues: we can, for example, publicize their good work verbally and through newsletters, sponsor programs that showcase their effective approaches, write proposals for them to make conference presentations, and send letters of praise to their chairs and deans. The shadow side of rewards, of course, is that resulting inequities—among recipients, some of whom will be more deserving than others, and between recipients and non-participants—may give rise to envy and resentment. And at the small college, neither rewards nor penalties are hidden: everyone knows quickly who got what funds or perks. Public equity is a particular challenge. Thus we know firsthand what the literature on power suggests: neither coercive nor reward power is a particularly effective means of leadership.

The writing administrator’s legitimate or positional power arises primarily from the way the position is constituted. In small colleges, directors of writing centers, WAC, and writing programs may be housed within the English department, reporting to the department head. These directors are typically hired as faculty members, then given released time from teaching to pursue the administrative work. Such positioning works well when the English department includes supportive, knowledgeable colleagues and chair. With the current growth of writing concentrations within English majors, more English faculty may be teaching writing, increasing the likelihood of departmental support for the WPA. However, such positioning may impair the WPA’s power both within and without the English department. In a literature-dominated English department, the compositionist may be relegated to second-class citizenship, a lone voice asking for a share of often-scarce resources. In addition, the English department, needing to staff its curriculum, may not be able to provide sufficient release time for the faculty member/director to work productively across the curriculum. And the across-the-curriculum responsibilities may not be sufficiently credited at tenure and promotion time—though the work of the Council of Writing Program Administrators in defining the intellectual work of the WPA is helping with this challenge.

As an alternative to the English department, some writing administrators at small colleges report to a divisional head or to the dean or provost of the college. This structure endows the position with greater legitimate power and, provided the upper-level administrator truly values the program, ensures that across-the-curriculum work will be credited. In addition, appointment as an administrator with faculty rank usually ensures a lighter teaching load and possibly fewer department responsibilities, providing more time for writing program work. When my Berea position was instituted in 1988, the reporting line was moved from the English department to the Academic Vice President and Dean of the College—a necessary shift to support the expanded scope of the work—and I have benefited from the resulting positional power. However,
alongside the benefits are also vulnerabilities. For one, calling on the legitimate power of the position often emphasizes the administrative role with its familiar negative connotations among full-time faculty. In contrast to our administrative designation, it is usually in our roles as faculty colleagues, as teachers among teachers, that we do our most effective across-the-curriculum work. Thus it’s important that administrative WPA appointments also carry faculty rank, to confirm the WPA’s professorial foundation. A second vulnerability concerns visibility. While upper-level administrative support can provide the necessary freedom and authority for us to develop and carry out our college-wide work, emphasizing our positional power may result in what Daphne Patai terms “surplus visibility.” Visibility is a two-edged sword: on the one hand, it brings recognition and thus can lead to accomplishments; on the other, a highly-visible WPA, especially one expected to be a change-agent, can serve as an easy target for a variety of institutional complaints. Surplus visibility is a damaging aspect of the tokenism experienced by women that Rosabeth Moss Kanter explores in “Performance Pressures: Life in the Limelight” (70-75).

Several years ago, I encountered the fine line between enough and too much legitimate power. In negotiating for office space in a building where most faculty offices were small, I had to balance my need for administrative space for meetings, records, and resources against the resulting perception of privilege when my planned office was two or three times larger than the norm. At the small college, such negotiations and their outcomes are under the community microscope, impossible to hide. I found a balance by giving up a third of the space I could have had to create a kind of commons, with issues of The Chronicle and sitting space for faculty and students. I also made my office sofa available to colleagues who needed to rest during the day. Even so, some faculty still expressed envy of my space. Another example of the need to hold just the right amount of legitimate power concerns teaching load. Full-time teaching is clearly not compatible with successful writing administration at the small college. Yet the colleagues who know that we teach only half or even less of a full-time load may not realize all the “teaching” we do in our work with tutors, individual student clients, and faculty across the curriculum. The solution is not for us to teach more classes, but rather to be sure our colleagues understand all the ways—direct and indirect—we support their work. One way to do this is to include practical as well as theoretical help in our out-of-class consultations with faculty. For example, when I meet with a faculty member less experienced with students’ writing, in addition to talking generally about students’ needs and effective responses to writing, I offer to read an early set of essays from the class. Though I don’t give detailed feedback on students’ work, I do make notes about primary needs and suggest practical next steps, including referral to our writing center. This practice not only leads to a better
discussion of effective assignments and responses, it also eases my colleague’s workload. As another example, when colleagues ask for my help in initiating a writing assignment or organizing peer review, I typically ask if I can co-lead the class period—another means of providing concrete guidance for teacher and students that also helps lighten the teacher’s load. This practice, too, has its shadow side, of course: one term I ended up leading a communication session every week for one colleague. Small college WPAs who direct writing centers can also be sure that faculty regularly receive reports on visits their students make to the center—additional evidence of our concrete contributions to our colleagues. Our center issues a written report for each visit and also, at year’s end, publishes use data to the whole campus.

A second paradox concerns the legitimate power we derive when our positions are structurally separated from English departments. Not being owned by English frees us to give time and energy to communication needs in other departments. But this power is balanced by our loss of power within English and that department’s potential perception of conflicts between its role and ours in fostering good student writing. Early in my time at Berea, an English department member strongly urged me to hire as writing center peer consultants only English majors known to English faculty to have the writing and grammar skills needed to help writers in English classes. Though to adopt this hiring principle might have increased my power in the department in which I hold my faculty appointment, it would certainly have impaired the ownership of written and oral communication by the whole campus that I was charged to achieve. Studying Suzette Haden Elgin’s linguistic analyses (The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense) has helped me learn to attend to the underlying need rather than the expressed request. Rather than changing my practices of hiring good student writers from all majors, I have worked to provide English department faculty with more knowledge about student consultants’ abilities and more assistance for students in English classes.

A third dilemma of legitimate power concerns the structural isolation many of us experience within our institutions. As teacher-administrators of writing—neither fish nor fowl—we typically have few true peers, particularly when we report to an officer in the central administration. Who else at the small college shares our interests and broad institutional perspective? Who can mentor us? To whom do we turn for daily advice? Other program directors or coordinators at our institutions may understand the challenges of wearing many hats, but they often lack expert knowledge of the field of composition/rhetoric and its particular challenges. Our literature colleagues may be knowledgeable about the teaching of writing, but they may not be interested in the challenges students and faculty face in writing in disciplines outside English. Often, constituting an across-the-curriculum advisory committee may be an appro-
appropriate means of providing a sounding board to help set priorities and take the institutional pulse. Yet less empowered colleagues may see such a structure as empire-building. And how much power should be vested in such a committee: does it control budget or make program decisions? How and by whom are its members selected? Should it be part of the college’s formal governance structure? As an alternative to a formal committee, albeit a time-consuming one, we can informally identify and consult with a few colleagues we know have our work’s best interests at heart.

As a means of bridging structural isolation, our center has recently moved to a more formally collaborative structure, with a Steering Committee composed of several department chairs to assess campus needs and suggest directions, a team of Faculty Associates with expertise in communication and learning to develop and carry out programs and services, and a coordinator rather than a director to link the pieces.

A final paradox concerns the scope of our work at the small college. That written communication is our focus is a given. Where does oral communication fit? And what about broader teaching-learning issues? Instructional technology with its impact on communication, learning, and teaching? While larger schools may develop separate structures, creating the writing center, the speech center, the center for teaching and learning, and the technology center, at the small college an integrated approach is both practically and theoretically sound. Connecting written and oral communication is especially appealing. Despite the hundred-year separation of written rhetoric from speech communication, practitioners of both are aware of the many ways written and oral discourse inform one another. To incorporate oral communication expertise into our work, we small college writing specialists can collaborate with speech communication colleagues as well as extend our own knowledge through resources available from the National Communication Association and the International Listening Association. In my work at Berea, I’ve found that coupling oral with written communication provides both faculty and students with more entry points into communication development. Oral communication is also likely to spark interest among co-curricular educators, such as staff of student life or campus activities, thus providing an additional arena for supporting students’ communication development. Similarly, WPAs may benefit from connections with instructional technology and with the growing movement toward establishing teaching-learning centers. Our backgrounds in rhetoric, our experiences with faculty development through WAC, and the necessary college-wide perspective we hold make us likely agents to lead such integrative efforts on our campuses. In 2002, Berea’s Center for Effective Communication formally became the Center for Learning, Teaching, Communication, and Research. Providing more comprehensive services has many advantages; however, such
structuring may also overload our positions, as well as endanger the emphasis on writing we in rhetoric/composition have worked so hard to achieve.

While structures offer a range of possible legitimate powers, small college writing administrators are more likely to draw on sources of power attached to the person rather than the structure. Expert and referent power sources fall into this category, as do two other power currencies described by Hocker and Wilmot: interpersonal linkages and communication skills (77-78). These power sources are especially important in achieving creative, integrative power use, the power that does not depend on individual might but instead emerges through our recognition of mutual obligations (Estevo 166).

**Personal Power**

Expertise as a source of power depends on two things: our possession of knowledge and/or skills and others’ valuing of those skills and knowledge. We may demonstrate our own knowledge base through formal and informal discussions, through newsletters from our centers and programs, and through publication and participation in the national discourse on composition.

Another important piece of our work in small college writing administration is to make sure others recognize the necessity and value of the across-the-curriculum programs we lead. The argument that all faculty need to know how to help students write better is easier to make at the small college than at the large university. No matter how desirable it might seem to our faculty across the curriculum to enroll every student in an English department writing course, our small college English departments are not likely to be large enough to handle such a responsibility. Further, in the small college when professors regularly teach the same students in several different courses, faculty are more likely to acknowledge that one course in writing will not address all a student’s writing needs. Despite—or perhaps because of—the small college’s general acceptance of WAC, we may have to make good arguments for establishing formal WAC programs and writing centers. Our faculty as well as our administrators may assume that informal dialogue among instructors teaching writing-intensive courses and informal tutoring for students are sufficient support for students’ writing. One mechanism for ensuring continuing structural support for faculty development in helping students write well is to house the small college writing program within a general studies curriculum. General Studies will virtually always include opportunities for faculty development, and General Studies leadership can become a strong advocate for on-going faculty work with writing. Regardless of where our cross-curricular work is housed, our role as writing administrators is to make clear that expertise in the teaching of writing is both necessary and achievable by colleagues outside our field. While our colleagues do not have to return to graduate school to
acquire doctorates in rhetoric, they do need ongoing education and support to become effective teachers of writing. Such support is best provided through formal continuing programs and structures, as our experience as well as WAC scholarship demonstrates. Contributing our expertise ad hoc and only one-on-one can exhaust us. To achieve college-wide writing goals, we must extend our expertise to develop the abilities of our colleagues and undergraduate peer tutors. Formal structures that give us continuing voice and leadership help us to maximize the power currency that flows from our expertise.

Our referent power—the power we draw from serving as role models—is also a function of our personal expertise as compositionists and teachers. To heighten our referent power, we can make visible our good teaching of writing by discussing and publishing our teaching approaches, by team-teaching or guest-lecturing in others’ classes, and by mentoring new faculty in their teaching. We must make sure, of course, that our good teaching is a model of inquiry, not a template of success; rather than dispensing static truths or “oughts,” we need to demonstrate a continued thoughtful pursuit of effective teaching and leading. When we consult with individual faculty, partner with them to conduct classes, or lead groups in summer workshops or through the year, we need to listen more than we talk. Our power and effectiveness depend on our abilities to listen to our colleagues’ needs and respond appropriately, building on their strengths and suggesting options for improvement. Were we to attempt to impose a “right” way to teach, our power would be considerably lessened.

To small college writing administrators, the power of interpersonal linkages is evident. Networking is our middle name. At small schools, no department or structure is big enough to be a law unto itself. Working across traditional disciplinary boundaries is not only necessary but desirable, as work in any field—and especially in ours—is enriched by multiple perspectives. In addition, the change process at a small school is likely to be informal, accomplished through strategic conversations as much as through formal legislation. While campus connections are essential to the small college writing administrator, we may also find great value in extending our networks beyond our campuses through regional and national associations and special interest groups. In these larger networks we may find understanding peers missing from our own campuses, and our exchanges can help us build self-confidence as well as bring fresh approaches to our campus work. And given that most small colleges value research and professional activity as well as teaching, regional and national connections can increase our power currencies at home.

The power of interpersonal linkages is fueled by another power, that of our communication skills. We can draw on our skills power in several ways: through personal communication, newsletters, website development, presenta-
tions on and off campus, and publications. A less-emphasized but important way to increase our communication power currencies is to develop our abilities to listen and to lead groups in effective decision-making. As writers and compositionists, we have learned to listen to our texts and to various kinds of feedback, abilities we need consciously to carry into our work as writing administrators. Investigating the field of listening through texts (Roach and Wyatt; Borisoff) or through resources provided by the International Listening Association can strengthen our listening abilities.

Developing our personal power becomes the base for the exercise of what Hocker and Wilmot term relational power (78), what feminists call power-with. Much contemporary scholarship in the field of leadership suggests the value of the sharing of power, whether among teacher and students, directors and staff, or colleagues. In fact, failing to share power may limit our own power (Hocker and Wilmot 78). When we use our power to create space in which others may increase their power, we share in that newly-created power and experience more power ourselves (Estevo 154). As compositionists, we typically experience our best teaching and leading when we step out of the center and use our energies to create conditions supporting the emergence of the writers in our classes and the teachers of writing in our colleges.

**Collaborative Power**

To appreciate the value of sharing power, we must be able to envision power through a lens of abundance rather than scarcity. If we believe that power is scarce, a fixed quantity, we will be hesitant to surrender any portion of it. And, in fact, traditional thinking on power presents the exercise of collaborative power through the metaphor of loss. In *Leadership: A Communication Perspective*, empowering others is called “giving power away” (85-89). Such an action may constitute effective leadership, the authors recognize, but they argue that this approach should be used only as a last resort. This value system is reflected as well in these authors’ discussion of powerful versus powerless speech. Powerful speech is defined as direct, knowledgeable, and authoritative, while powerless speech is hesitant, hedged, and question-tagged. Linguists such as Robin Lakoff have long recognized the existence of these typically male and female styles of speech. Other researchers, however, have argued for valuing them differently. In *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule present “powerless” speech as an important means of staying open to others, of inviting others into dialogue. And if we view power as abundant, potentially ever-increasing, and synergistic, we affirm the value of the paradox that by sharing power, by inviting others to become empowered, we increase the whole group’s ability to act and achieve.
At the small college, enacting this conception of power is both easier and more desirable than at larger institutions. Our size leads naturally to faculty and program interdependence, and the public eye makes hoarding of any sort unlikely. Opportunity to use power collaboratively at the small college is not only more likely but also more desirable. Our engagement in collaborative activities such as advising, mentoring, and college governance generally gain us credit at tenure and promotion time. In addition, collaboration is the most effective means of achieving the holistic educational outcomes to which our schools are committed. Our small college writing programs may thus become models for schools of different emphases and sizes.

My direction of across-the-curriculum work at Berea has operated within two structures I have founded on the concept of integrative, abundant power. With student staff at the Center for Effective Communication and faculty/staff in the Communication Across the College program, I have worked to share power, to use my structural, referent, and personal power to increase others’ power. I begin by empowering participants: student staff development, including our internal peer consultant certification process, is planned and led by senior student consultants. Two former faculty/staff participants have helped to guide each two-year cycle of our CAC program. With both student and faculty groups, planners design minimal agendas, leaving space for the groups themselves to propose topics and activities. These efforts have resulted in some dramatic successes: a workshop series for new students developed and led by peer consultants, research and new courses in writing and in listening by faculty in the disciplines, and the use of journals and reflective writing among student life and student work staffs, to name a few accomplishments. In helping participants to become empowered, providing support for risk-taking has been key. As a senior chemistry professor who incorporated writing and art into his course in natural science noted, “I would not have been as daring to try something new for Natural Science had I not been in CAC. The group provided a diverse audience of supportive colleagues that might not have been available had I tried things on my own.” Yet even a strong commitment to sharing power has its challenges.

**Confronting the Challenges of Collaborative Power**

Challenges come from both external and internal sources. External forces that push us to keep power include people who believe the recipients of shared power—for example, students—are unqualified or in other ways unworthy of holding power. Those with this view are likely to invoke the analogy of “the blind leading the blind,” a misleading (and demeaning) depiction of collaborative learning. A second external force pushing us to keep power includes those who believe themselves unworthy to hold power. Faculty in
the disciplines, for example, may not believe themselves to be ready to wield expert power in an unfamiliar field such as communication, even though they are using communication assignments successfully in their classes. A third group who won’t take power includes those who don’t want to violate what they see as a necessary—even desirable—hierarchy.

I came to a fuller understanding of the thinking of the third group when I encountered a colleague in our WAC program who insisted on calling attention to my role as program director. The first time, I felt flattered; as he continued to push me to be “in charge,” I became frustrated, then unable to act naturally, and finally quite cautious in acting at all, since any action I took seemed to confirm that I alone had the power I was trying to share. Though his responses came, I believe, from a genuine desire to improve the program, they worked to reduce the collaborative power I generated for the whole group. In turn, he was equally frustrated by my refusal to exercise power. Our dance is well-described by Deborah Tannen in *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Drawing on Goffman’s concept of message frames, Tannen argues that men typically communicate from within a hierarchical frame, while women communicate from within a frame of desired connection. In a hierarchical frame, only two positions are possible: one up or one down. One up is the preferred position, but a one down position is preferable to a position of equality that would undercut the hierarchical frame itself and the potential one-up position it offers. From this conflict, I learned to be more direct about the power I do have and to move more carefully in sharing it, not assuming that others automatically understand my approach or are ready to share power with me. Resolving conflicts that result from different frames often involves a reframing. Helping my colleague to ask not “Who’s in charge here?” but “How can we all together get the most new learning accomplished?” led us to a more cooperative exercise of our different powers.

A second set of challenges is internal, and paradoxically, the hardest and easiest to confront. Internal challenges include our internalized expectations and even desires for traditional hierarchical structures, the difficulty of giving up control, and our fear of invisibility. In “Feminist Writing Program Administration: Resisting the Bureaucrat Within,” Amy Goodburn and Carrie Leverenz analyze the expectations that led them to resist opportunities to transform traditional power structures in a first-year writing program. These expectations included desires for clear authority, efficiency, and autonomy. Goodburn and Leverenz’s frustrations as they coped with divided loyalties to traditional expectations and to change recall the experiences of the Middles in the power game exercise I described earlier. Another internal challenge is giving up control. Never easy, relinquishing control seems to betray our often hard-won achievement of power as well as fly in the face of others’ expectations.
of us. After all, we are asked to be change agents, and reason and experience suggest that to make change, we must use our power directly. Though our deepest knowing suggests that lasting change must be generated from within, not imposed from without, we often fear to trust in such a mysterious process. Finally, there is a fear of losing credit, of becoming invisible, while working to empower others. Choosing to step to the sidelines in the interests of one’s own and a larger good is different from undesired marginalization at others’ hands, of course. And at the small college, when we empower others, we are usually given credit for being team players. Yet our unique positions as writing administrators, operating among and across structures, may diminish our visible consequences. Because we belong to no one, we lack cheerleaders. Thus our own self-esteem as well as political realities pushes us to be sure our good work—even our self-sacrifice—is recognized. As Goodburn and Leverenz note, the lack of individual ownership of collaborative work can be problematic for WPAs who need to justify their accomplishments to outside audiences (283).

The most important work we do as leaders is to confront and overcome these fears, as well as other monsters that Parker Palmer details: our insecurities, intolerance of chaos, and inability to let go of that which is no longer functional. Palmer, along with leadership gurus like Stephen Covey and Scott Peck, urges us do the inner work necessary to become leaders who cast light rather than shadow. Further paradoxes surround this work: though it is personal, it is not private, and if we come together in community not to fix each other but to let one another’s inner selves emerge, we can achieve effective leadership (Palmer 16-17; Peck). The outcome of our inner work is also paradoxical: by changing ourselves, we change the world. Carol Pearson writes of the new world we discover “when we stop wasting time on futile attempts …to force social change and focus on fully claiming our own lives and integrity” (267).

Claiming our own lives may be done in isolation, of course. We may choose counseling, spiritual direction, or meditation; we may explore new sources of creativity through the arts or community service; we may journal to engage in the critical reflection Goodburn and Leverenz advocate (288-90). Moving beyond our individual selves, we WPAs may also choose to draw on our power to include opportunities for inner work in our WAC and writing center programs for faculty and for students. The recently-completed seventh cycle of Berea’s CAC program, for example, included two different retreat days in which faculty and staff participants hiked, canoed on a local lake (only one canoe turned over!), and walked a labyrinth. Asking participants to engage in creating time-lines of personal and professional development or maps of the term or the year, and scheduling silent periods for reflection and journaling, followed by voluntary sharing, are other ways within WAC to open space for
self-discovery. Stephen Brookfield’s “Learning Audit and Critical Incident Questionnaire” (in *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*) provides good prompts for individual reflection that can deepen when shared with supportive colleagues. Another kind of self-discovery comes through encountering new learning experiences. Our CAC program always includes sessions where each of us teaches the others, typically by asking the group to become active learners in new fields. In any interdisciplinary faculty group, at least some will be challenged in trying to solve the four-color problem, classify insects, sing, translate Old English, or survive a judo fall. Stretching ourselves, often with pleasantly surprising results, is a fine means of strengthening our inner confidence and our willingness to trust others. As an even more comprehensive means of engaging deep leadership challenges, we may help design whole programs which foreground inner development. At Berea in the mid-1990s, I collaborated with colleagues in General Studies and Campus Ministry to plan and lead a program for faculty renewal titled “The Inner Landscape of Teaching and Learning.” Drawing on the work of Parker Palmer and of resources from the NCTE Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, our group of sixteen faculty explored ourselves and our callings to teach through art, poetry, sound, story, and appreciative inquiry. In the years since the completion of this program, faculty participants have demonstrated varied kinds of effective leadership.³

Let us in small college writing administration take leadership within the academy in modeling such approaches to understanding and using power. Let us celebrate the fact that our institutions’ small size and our multiplicities of individual roles render us communities of persons, “knots in nets of concrete relations” who can together articulate and achieve “personal and collective hopes” (Estevo 157, 174).

_Berea, KY_

**Notes**

¹For an analysis of this structural shift, see Jones, “Launching a Center for Learning, Teaching, Communication, and Research.”

²For more information on these programs and activities, see the websites for Center for Learning, Teaching, Communication and Research and Communication Across the College, as well as Jones, “Creating Partnerships for Literacy in the College Workplace.”

³For a full description and analysis of this program and its effects, see Jones, “Exploring the Inner Landscape of Teaching: A Program for Faculty Renewal.”

**Works Cited**


---. “Launching a Center for Learning, Teaching, Communication, and Research.” *Campus Progress: Supporting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. 90 *Composition Studies*


