PREPARING WPAS FOR THE SMALL COLLEGE CONTEXT

Newly trained Ph.D.’s in Rhetoric and Composition may seem irresistible to the small schools that seek new, inexpensive faculty who care passionately about teaching writing and administering writing programs. We approach writing instruction from many angles: historical, pedagogical, theoretical. When we agree to direct or coordinate a writing program at a small college, we can put all of our expertise to work—sometimes during a single day on campus. As a WPA and my small college’s only composition expert, for instance, I am consulted on a regular basis by deans and department chairs who must make decisions about changes to the curriculum, new technologies of literacy, best practices at other institutions, the relationship between standardized testing and admissions practices, and a host of other issues. I demonstrate, discuss, problematize, and promote particular pedagogical methods on campus. I serve on a variety of task forces, special advisory committees, and assessment teams each year. And when it’s time to imagine something new, I’m often invited to the brainstorming table.

And I’m not alone. In a post to the CCCC Small College Special Interest Group dated March, 2003, Paul Hanstedt of Roanoke College and Tom Amorose of Seattle Pacific University estimated that “somewhere between 20% and 40% of the jobs listed each year in the MLA Job Information List are at small colleges and universities.” Yet few of us are encouraged to imagine careers at such institutions when we are in graduate school. Indeed, my own graduate school professors and colleagues seemed puzzled when I accepted a position teaching and administering a writing program at a private liberal arts college. Only my dissertation director, a professor at Spelman College in her previous life, seemed enthused.

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What worries me here is not a lack of social support for those of us who choose such a career. My colleagues and professors weren’t opposed to my taking the position. Instead, they simply hadn’t imagined such a possibility for themselves or their students. I suspect most graduate programs ignore the small college context altogether, leaving that context out of seminar discussions, advising conferences, and workshops designed for job seekers. Those of us who hit the small school circuit when we leave are unprepared for the cultural and institutional shift from large to small institution. In particular, I was startled by the ways that writing program administration—much more than teaching—was vastly different in the small college context.

Fortunately, I learned that the CCCC Small College Special Interest Group provides a network of support for composition and rhetoric specialists and English studies generalists who join the small college community. That SIG helped me recognize that I was not alone out there in the land of liberal arts colleges. Still, our annual SIG meeting often begins with a group lamentation about our general invisibility within the Conference on College Composition and Communication. We then search the convention program for panels and papers about WPA work at small colleges. Needless to say, it’s a short list. The gap in our field’s general conversations about this topic threatens to leave new WPAs at small institutions largely unprepared for work in this context.

Doctoral programs in Rhetoric and Composition, the majority of which are housed within research universities, must prepare new graduates for the realities of administration within a variety of institutional contexts. Programs such as Preparing Future Faculty are already doing an admirable job of helping graduate students learn about the work of college professors. But this program does not speak specifically to small college professionals, let alone WPAs. Our discipline should focus more attention on how we train future colleagues to do administrative work by paying increased attention to where they will do their work.

Graduate programs at most large public universities cannot prepare students for administrative positions at small colleges unless they make a concerted effort to do so. The institutional cultures are vastly different, and would-be WPAs need to be trained to read those cultures rhetorically and develop strategies for leadership that are based on collegial, informal models of power and decision making. In this essay, I describe the ways that my own graduate training shaped my expectations about writing programs and institutional cultures and the rhetorical techniques we use to operate within them—techniques that are not always conducive to WPA work at a small college. I then analyze the ways I’ve revised those expectations and shifted my rhetorical practices. From that analysis a proposal for new directions for
training graduate students for writing program administration—particularly in small college settings—emerges.

**Life in the Big Pond**

Initially, I imagined myself well prepared to direct a writing program at my small, Lutheran liberal arts college in southern Minnesota. During my five years as a Ph.D. student at Ohio State University, I spent one third of my time on fellowship, one third in the classroom teaching composition, and one third doing administrative work. I was a graduate student WPA for First-Year Writing, as well as a graduate administrator for the Writing Workshop, a basic writing program. This administrative experience was an opportunity for professional growth and a way to study the pedagogical effects of disciplinary history. I learned a great deal about the nature of WPA work within large public institutions:

1. **WPAs direct what we call “writing programs.”**
   Writing programs are constituted of staff, teachers, faculty development programs, and curricular imperatives. A good writing program features at least one faculty member WPA, preferably someone with tenure, as well as an assistant director and an administrative assistant. Writing programs may also employ graduate student WPAs and undergraduate work-study students.

2. **The WPAs are composition experts.**
   Program directors, assistant directors, and graduate student WPAs study composition theory, pedagogy, and history. These experts are respected, necessary members of campus culture. They sit on important campus committees and help others understand the value and importance of writing instruction. The WPA and the teaching staff rarely share experience, expertise, or power. Many composition teachers are novices, particularly graduate teaching assistants; experienced teachers are typically part-timers and adjunct faculty.

3. **Writing programs are necessary to the curriculum as a whole.**
   The universally required first-year composition course virtually ensures the continuing presence (even if not always a healthy presence) of the writing programs that administer those courses. When writing courses are graduation requirements, writing programs can depend upon a certain level of budgetary and staffing support.

4. **Writing programs are scripted through and by the documents that comprise them.**
   Writing programs send countless memos, missives, reminders, and flyers to teachers and students alike. Writing programs create handbooks and catalogs, policy manuals and curricular guidelines. Some offer a commonly taught core syllabus or sequence of writing assignments, helping to ensure that courses
taught by inexperienced teachers have strong theoretical and pedagogical scaffolding. We are what we write.

5. **Writing programs support the teachers who work for/with them.**
A good writing program provides workshops and professional development opportunities, as well as money for travel to professional conferences. New teachers may benefit from mentoring programs, examination copies of textbooks, and access to xerox machines and office supplies.

6. **Writing programs conduct systematic, ongoing assessment.**
Assessment strategies are often multilayered. WPAs and their assistants may observe and evaluate teachers, survey students, read student portfolios, and conduct focus groups with students and/or staff members. Mentoring programs for new teachers can also facilitate assessment.

7. **Writing programs should value and produce new knowledge.**
WPAs are scholars and researchers, and writing program administration is intellectual work. According to the position statement published by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration,” the work of administering a writing program “may be considered intellectual work when it meets two tests. First, it needs to advance knowledge—its production, clarification, connection, reinterpretation, or application. Second, it results in products or activities that can be evaluated by others” (http://www.wpacouncil.org/positions/intellectualwork.html). The document, revised in 1998, emphasizes external evaluation, suggesting that expertise shared with outsiders is most valuable.

8. **Writing programs must prove their intellectual merits to the English departments that either house or complement them.**
When graduate students are accepted into their programs, English departments budget little money for boot camp-style introductions to teaching composition. These workshops are designed to prepare new TAs to teach writing courses in only a few days or weeks, suggesting there must be little to learn about this kind of work. English departments create hierarchies for graduate teaching assistants, dangling opportunities to teach literature courses, rather than composition courses, as the ultimate reward for work well done.

**Welcome to the Small Pond**

When I interviewed at Gustavus Adolphus College in January of 1999, I wrapped myself in research university assumptions. As the department chair discussed the WAC program and Writing Center duties, for instance, I imagined directing both in a collaborative way, drawing upon the expertise of colleagues, the support of a secretary, perhaps even rotating the administrative work with another compositionist on campus. It didn’t occur to me to ask whether or not I’d be expected to go it alone—such an administrative model
was beyond the scope of my Big Ten imagination. Certainly I didn’t think to ask about secretarial support. Who ever heard of a writing program without a secretary?

When new Ph.D.’s in rhetoric and composition leave the suite of WPA offices at a large public institution for a position at a small college, our research university expectations may get the better of us. We may be disoriented by the scope of our positions. Consider the many hats suggested by the following advertisement for my current position, which was featured in the MLA Job Information List in 1999. The position was Assistant Professor of English and Director of Writing at Gustavus Adolphus College, a private liberal arts school of approximately 2,400 students located in rural southern Minnesota:

Seeking a tenure-track assistant professor, beginning Fall, 2000, to direct, promote, and advocate for the existing college-wide writing across the curriculum program; to teach a variety of writing classes in the English department (Research and Writing, Intermediate Composition, Reading and Writing Essays, etc.); and to teach courses in English teaching methods and adolescent literature. Requirements: Ph.D. in hand (dissertation in composition/rhetoric preferred, but other fields with extensive, focused experience in composition/rhetoric considered); teaching certification in English or Language Arts (any state); and college teaching experience. Experience in a writing across the curriculum program highly desirable. (JIL 1999)

Now I recognize the advertisement as fairly typical within the world of liberal arts colleges. Such schools must cobble together what we at my institution affectionately term “Frankenstein positions” for obvious reasons. When resources are scarce and faculty members must work as generalists within their fields of study, the composition scholar must simply become “the writing person,” which means that she is the “composition teacher,” the “pedagogy person”—and this ties in with the secondary education work described in the ad—the “writing center person” and the “WAC person.”

Back in 1999, however, I read the advertisement through research university eyes. I analyzed the advertisement’s language. I worried about the trinity—“direct, promote, and advocate”—related to the Gustavus WAC program. The word “direct” implied the community’s expectation that the director would actively shape the writing program, approaching her work with vision and knowledge. I assumed my expertise would be respected and the teachers who I’d work with would, in fact, know less about teaching writing
than I did. I expected the community would grant me the authority to make decisions.

The word “promote” implied the need for hands-on leadership to raise the program’s status. But when a program requires “promotion,” I suspected, the institution must not be doing enough to sing the program’s praises already. Likewise, the word “advocate” was slippery. As a graduate student I read my disciplinary histories. I knew that composition studies had been constructed as the bastard step-child of literary studies; that composition teachers were feminized and their work undervalued; that ideological and political forces conspired to maintain the imbalance of power and prestige that separated literature teachers from composition teachers. So I assumed that a WAC program in need of advocacy required someone to “plead” on its behalf. When we plead, we imply that others hold the power to make judgment, and thus we are not quite in control of the persuasive situation. I assumed I would not be the primary decision maker at Gustavus, but a person hired to persuade those who could make decisions to make good ones for the writing program.

By the end of my first year on campus, I had learned new lessons about WPA work and revised many of my research university expectations:

1. Writing programs are hard to define. Some small colleges have actual first-year writing programs complete with a required composition sequence, an army of teachers, maybe even a smattering of adjuncts. Others, like mine, have Writing Across the Curriculum programs augmented by thematically organized first year seminars for entering students; tenure-track professors teach those seminars. Some writing programs have a tenure-track position associated with them. Some have a full time administrator. Few boast assistant directors, full time secretarial support, or student workers. In fact, at a small college, the WPA may simply be a faculty member—from any department—who keeps an eye on a particular curricular requirement. While a small college with a strong endowment and/or a particularly strong commitment to writing instruction may create an elaborate writing program, many small colleges deliver strong writing instruction simply because the faculty work hard one-on-one with the students. You might hear small college faculty members scoff at the “need” for a writing program altogether: “Students write plenty. It’s a liberal arts college, after all!”

2. The WPA may or may not be a composition expert, and the teachers are not novices. While an increasing number of Ph.D.’s in Rhetoric and Composition accept WPA positions at small colleges, in previous decades, English generalists have held these positions. And while most large public institutions depend on a huge force of novices (TAs) to teach composition, those who teach within a small college’s writing or WAC program are more often full-fledged faculty...
members. They may have more teaching experience than the WPA—though not necessarily more experience teaching writing.

3. Every course is necessary for the curriculum, and faculty members own every course.

Each element of the curriculum may be perceived as “owned by the faculty” at a small college. Programs such as WAC or First Year Seminar often grow out of campus-wide initiatives or faculty-led grass roots movements for curricular change. These are not programs created by “experts” and then passed on to a group of teachers who are hired to teach for/in the program. Small college faculty members pride themselves on developing their own curriculum; they are often loathe to discuss how College X or Y approaches a particular curricular challenge. Indeed, at my college, course proposals are reviewed by faculty members, and new courses must be formally approved by a full faculty vote.

4. There may be resistance to programmatic documents, policies, or other unifying measures.

Small college faculty may resist standardization of any kind, balking at anything that might erode their academic freedom or pedagogical decision-making. At Gustavus, we offer a few guidelines to help faculty plan their WAC courses (i.e. students need to produce at least 12 pages of prose per semester), but most faculty are not interested in uniformity of assignments. My most experienced colleagues send a strong message: Trust us to design our own courses, please. We don’t need a “composition expert” to design writing assignments for us, and those assignments needn’t all look alike. This is a liberal arts college, is it not?

5. WPAs should support the teachers who work with them.

Here we agree with our large school colleagues. All teachers of writing intensive courses need support. But that support looks different at a small college. First of all, those who have taught at the college level for twenty years or more certainly don’t require the same training workshops that TAs do. Second, small colleges face different budgetary issues than large ones. Many writing programs at small schools are dependent upon grant monies, “soft money,” or other forms of funding that simply aren’t constant from year to year. But when that money runs out, faculty development efforts continue—on fumes. Perhaps this is a related point: at large schools, WPAs are professionals. They are contractually obligated to do their work, and the Council of WPAs helps them to name, define, and delineate boundaries regarding that work and earn fair compensation for it. But at small colleges, WPAs are ethically obligated to help the campus community because they are community members.
6. **Faculty at small colleges prefer individual methods of assessment.** It’s our primary goal—to teach well. But small college teachers like to develop their own methods of assessment, which may or may not be augmented by the formal methods conducted through the Dean’s office or personnel committee at tenure or promotion time. At my college, we can administer student evaluations each fall in all of our courses, but it is not mandatory to do so. But this approach to assessment on campus means that programs such as WAC find it difficult to conduct assessment projects on a large scale. If I have a good relationship with the teachers in my program, I may be invited to observe classes or survey students. If I am perceived as “overseeing” in any way, I will not be invited in.

7. **Faculty at small colleges produce new knowledge for both internal and external audiences.** My college encourages scholarship from faculty, delineating “an emerging pattern” of scholarly development as the second most important criterion for tenure. But the realities of life at a small college—teaching loads of three to four undergraduate courses each semester, twenty to eighty student advisees per semester, and committee work—leave us with less time to devote to scholarship. When I was hired, I planned to conduct ongoing research as WAC director and Writing Center director and finish my book project. I had to cut that scholarly agenda in half. But I also learned that research leading directly to curricular or pedagogical innovation on campus is highly valued.

8. **Small colleges value good writing; still, faculty may not recognize writing instruction as intellectual work.** The writing program at a small college may be considered a “college wide” program, one that does not “belong” to the English department. Indeed, any existing ties to the English department may be merely historical—the ghosts of a composition requirement from days past. And at a liberal arts college, most faculty agree: the ability to write clearly and gracefully should be a natural outcome of a liberal arts education. But my colleagues are still puzzled about what, exactly, I study. Is it grammar? Is it linguistics? Do I really publish essays about what it’s like to read students’ writing?

**Know Your Pond: Studying Specific Institutional Locations**

Back in 1999 when I was on the job market, I simply read job descriptions, eliminated the ones that didn’t appeal to me for geographical reasons, and hoped for the best. I didn’t realize that I had mixed up rural Saint Peter, Minnesota—where Gustavus is located—and the more densely populated Saint Paul until I arrived for my on-campus visit. As my soon-to-be department chair backed his red Dodge Dakota pick-up out of a parking space at the Minneapolis airport and headed southwest, I didn’t initially get suspicious. But then he kept
driving. Toward Iowa. The city lights of Minneapolis and Saint Paul dwindled in the rearview mirror as the Minnesota River curved along the sixty miles of fields that separate Saint Peter from the Twin Cities. Ah, I thought. Saint Peter.

The geographical mix-up is a good metaphor for so many of the misunderstandings that plagued me in the first few years of my job. I needed to orient myself to my new territory, revise my assumptions, and work with, not against, my new location. During my first year on campus, I experienced a great deal of cultural dissonance moving from public to private institution, from the East Coast to the upper Midwest, from a culturally and racially diverse campus community to a nearly all white, Scandinavian Lutheran one. I had to learn how to be a faculty member, a working mother, an academic advisor, and a colleague.

My difficulties reflected my cultural and disciplinary dislocation, as well as my gender, cultural background, even regional customs. But these difficulties also stemmed from my study of our discipline’s institutional history, as well as the position statements drafted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators and other professional organizations. At one very dark point in my dissertation writing, I carried a copy of Sharon Crowley’s Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays the way that teenagers carry Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar. I knew James Berlin and Susan Miller intimately, and I began my new job with the fairly commonplace disciplinary assumption that my English department colleagues wouldn’t fully value me or my work. In short, I entered my new position on the defensive.

Perhaps as a result, my email messages were perceived as abrasive; people heard questions where I intended statements and statements where I intended questions. I once prepared a four-page opus for the college’s curriculum committee—perhaps its most important and powerful committee, of which I was an ex-officio member—delineating in theoretical terms the difference between WAC and WID. That document ended, of course, with a list of what the college had been doing wrong and how I intended to fix it. I had been on the job for only six months.

My internal tenure clock was set for the context of a research university, so I worried about when my first book would be published, how many conference papers I delivered each year, and how to achieve an elected position within my national organization. During the first two years, my constant need for feedback, specifics about tenure, and institutional direction for my program puzzled my colleagues, who seemed happy to have me and couldn’t understand my mistrust of our tenure review system or my desire for more input about the program. But I wanted to know precisely what my job was, how much of it was administrative and how much of it was teaching. I wanted to account for
my work during tenure review, and ensure that I did not spend too much time on the administrative work to the detriment of my teaching.

Such questions are legitimate. Scholars in our field have documented the horrors of tenure review processes that do not value or validate administrative work. The Council of Writing Program Administrators has been a powerful advocate for administrators on the tenure track, offering guidelines to both institutions and tenure candidates to help them approach the review process ethically. But on small liberal arts college campuses, no two careers look alike. My colleagues had no more questions about my work than they did about that of the theatre scholar or the sculptor. Here colleagues make informed decisions every year about how to grant tenure to actors, potters, New Testament Greek scholars, medievalists, and chemists. Indeed, the process on my campus includes a full evaluation at the third year, complete with an outside reviewer, and a healthy system of mentoring and evaluation during each year prior to coming up for tenure. The college offers a kind of mentor-on-demand program to faculty who may feel uncomfortable with their own department’s mentoring process. But when we have been taught for decades that every tenure review process is a battle to the death for disciplinary legitimacy and authority, we may approach our own tenure experiences with dogmatic fanaticism—not a good idea on my campus.

I do not wish to suggest that the narratives of disciplinary battles are misleading or untrue. These narratives helped me understand right away that I had little interest in fighting to build my own career in such a context. But they did not introduce me to the other possibilities of life on a small campus—or on any kind of campus other than a large research institution, for that matter. Still, I believe that it’s important to recognize those aspects of our own professional discourse that may be counterproductive or inappropriate when applied to the liberal arts college context. While our histories may suggest compositionists begin every tenure review process from a position of disciplinary weakness, this is not the case in every institutional setting.

In short, all WPAs must study their institutional settings if they are to do their work effectively, particularly those of us who work on small college campuses. Just as one of my first moves as a new homeowner in Saint Peter was to peel back decade’s worth of powder blue carpet to reveal the treasure of hardwood flooring underneath, I learned quickly as a new WPA to dig through the layers of files—old committee reports, curricular language, department meeting minutes, and so on—to uncover the treasure beneath. I began to read and to listen with more patience. I learned that our program has historically required only one person to “coordinate” its various components and serve on the requisite committees. I learned that the WAC program and Writing Center have shared a combined budget of $2,275.00 per year for each of the last five
years; this continues to be my budget today. The program has never had an administrative assistant or regular secretarial support; the program has never depended upon adjunct labor. Our WAC program, firmly in place since the early 1980s, simply seeks to ensure that all 2,400 students take at least three writing-intensive courses from visiting, tenured or tenure-track professors before they graduate.

I studied our college’s institutional history in order to learn more about the ways that the WAC program did—and did not—reflect the values of the college. I had to treat my job as if it were a graduate seminar. One of my experienced colleagues once noted that our college really has a WAC requirement rather than a WAC program. I have never forgotten this astute observation, and I began to question my continuing insistence upon thinking of the WAC program as a program, complete with faculty development opportunities, an active teaching community, a sense of shared commitment. Make no mistake: I do not suggest that my institution does not need faculty development opportunities for WAC teachers, or other features of a writing program. But I do need to analyze, not simply dismiss, what the community is telling me when it sends a strong message: We value this writing requirement. We’re not so sure we need a program.

My analysis of documents such as the mission statement and curriculum committee records, as well as my interviews with experienced faculty who had participated in our WAC program, was instructive. In January of 2001, I interviewed three experienced faculty members who had enjoyed a long relationship with the WAC program, dating back to its inception in the 1980s. In an introductory memo to these colleagues, I suggested that I was worried our history as liberal arts college professors might be lost. These three colleagues helped me to learn that one of the faculty’s primary values is collegial trust. Colleges like Gustavus have traditionally operated under the assumption that colleagues should trust one another to teach courses well, imposing few, if any, measures for ensuring or measuring the quality of writing instruction. Hence the resistance to my proposals for more systematic—or programmatic—assessment. I learned also that I should not depend upon reams of documents to declare my authority and expertise. No wonder my WAC/WID opus had so little effect on my colleagues’ thinking about our WAC curriculum. Moreover, the huge number of memos that I had generated in my first semester as WPA only reinforced some faculty members’ sense that I didn’t understand the way things worked around here. I needed to learn that I was considered a teacher first, not an administrator, and that I should behave that way.

Finally, I recognized a strong institutional commitment to apprenticeship or mentorship models of education. For many faculty on campus, the most fulfilling educational experiences seemed to be those where novice students
became increasingly expert through close contact with professors. This was true for faculty regardless of the number of years on the job. In my first year, then, I focused not on faculty development for the WAC program, but on the unrealized connections between WAC and the college’s Writing Center, which was staffed by some remarkably talented undergraduate writing tutors. I piloted a new program, WAC-UP (Writing Across the Curriculum Undergraduate Partnerships), which put undergraduate student tutors in charge of outreach and information gathering. I wanted to foster relationships with both older and younger faculty, capitalizing on the faculty’s desire to help students who themselves were learning valuable skills: writing, reading, thinking, listening, speaking. The first year, the program fizzled, however, as busy teachers claimed that they were simply unable to stop long enough to meet with the tutors to discuss disciplinary conventions.

I had misread a crucial part of our institutional culture: the faculty’s desire to foster the distinction between mentoring and collaborating with students. My colleagues were not yet ready to label undergraduate students “WAC consultants” and resisted meeting with those consultants to share assignment prompts or resources. Indeed, I learned that our faculty requires and respects a fundamental distinction between “student” and “teacher” while simultaneously valuing student-centered, exploratory experiences in the classroom.

In my second and third years, then, I continued to focus on undergraduate tutors at the writing center, but linked them with interested teachers of WAC courses across the curriculum in a mentoring model that we call the Designated Tutor program. I paired faculty members with tutors who were particularly interested in their disciplines and/or teaching styles. In turn, many of these faculty members developed strong mentoring relationships with the tutors, which translated into good will toward the Writing Center and the program. Then these faculty participated in a series that we called “WAC Nights at the Center,” opportunities for interdisciplinary panel discussions about reading, responding to, and evaluating student writing across the campus. This way, the work of faculty development gets done, but not when it is labeled “faculty development.” Instead, these teachers are merely helping to mentor the students who are their primary concern.

**Know Yourself: Studying Ethos Construction**

Once we understand our institutional contexts, we may be better able to construct authority for ourselves as members of a campus community. In other words, when we know where we are, we can begin to pay attention to the ethos that we project to others. Constructing ethos for ourselves within an institution involves considering how we authorize ourselves in conversation with others—others from outside our academic discipline, our age or experience.
level, our gender, our race or ethnicity. It also means paying attention to the ways that we as individual faculty members are positioned within our departments, writing programs, and institutions. Contemporary rhetorical theories, particularly feminist rhetorical theories, teach us how women rhetors negotiate ethos, constructing authority for themselves in situations where their texts may not be recognized as authoritative, and their voices may not be acknowledged.

Ethos has shifted in meaning historically. The term has been associated with either the actual character/person of the speaker (Plato, Quintilian), understood as constructed within the text itself (Aristotle, Augustine), or viewed as a process of negotiation among speakers, writers, audience members, and texts within specific contexts or locations (sophists; contemporary feminists). I rely upon the third category of definitions in order to highlight that the work of the WPA at a small college involves functioning in a variety of contexts and representing herself and that work in several different ways within those contexts. While classical rhetoricians disagree about the degree of correspondence between the ethos of the speaker and his actual moral character, all associate ethos with issues of character, credibility, and authority. These issues are of primary importance to contemporary feminist rhetoricians such as Nedra Reynolds, Susan Jarratt, and Krista Ratcliffe, who have reread and redefined the term by returning to a more sophistic definition.

In “Ethos as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority,” Nedra Reynolds points to the Greek roots for ethos, “habit, custom, and character” (327), and she expands the term to include “the individual agent as well as the location or position from which that person speaks or writes” (326). This way, Reynolds is able to consider the character of the rhetor as a construction that shifts according to context, and she is able to include the context itself as a kind of character-maker. Given this feminist redefinition of ethos as a location occupied, a construction that encompasses both the speaker and the position from which she speaks, it is clear that the notion of ethos is quite important for WPA work in general, but it’s crucial for WPA work at small colleges.

First, consider the ethos I constructed as a WPA at Ohio State. That ethos reflected my institutional context, my authority as a composition expert, and my position as a graduate student. As one of three graduate WPAs who assisted the tenured Director and non-tenure track Assistant Director of First-Year Writing, I found our authority alternatively complicated and enhanced by our status as peers of the teaching assistants. That authority was also linked to those programmatic documents that the WPAs wrote, revised, and edited. Some introduced new teachers to the writing program; others demanded compliance with its peer mentoring group structures. All documents featured the names and titles of the WPAs prominently. The documents suggested a metonymic
relationship between the WPAs and the program; the “we” constructed within all of these documents became the program; new teachers were thus invited to read “us” as the program itself. The dual nature of our identities—we were their peers and also imbued with institutional authority—both enhanced and complicated our work.

Our most significant publication, *Starting Places*, introduced new TAs to the first-year writing program and its personnel and curricular goals; it featured examples of student writing from first-year composition classes, as well as graduate student-authored literacy narratives and teaching philosophy statements. The manual ended with a selection of readings and a bibliography of relevant composition scholarship. We included our own literacy narratives and teaching philosophy statements in the collection. Thus we could construct ourselves as members of the community of graduate students, TAs ourselves who understood the demands of teaching writing while simultaneously writing as students ourselves. My two graduate colleagues and I were the “we” of the Writing Program in statements like this one: “*Starting Places*... asks you to think about how you conceptualize yourselves as educators. We see this issue of instructor identity as vital; our identity as instructors radically affects our expectations for our students, our ways of valuing their writing, and our understanding of what it means to be a teacher of college composition” (“A Personal Welcome” 1997).

By including our work in *Starting Places*, we depended upon that dual identity, which in turn helped to construct a kind of ethos for our writing program: we were the peers of new teaching assistants and authoritative representatives of the first-year writing program. We exhibited a willingness to allow our work to be read and critiqued along with that of our peers, and we—rather than the faculty director—assumed responsibility for assigning such readings prior to our Pre-Quarter training workshop. Our “Personal Welcome” statement worked hard to enable new TAs to identify with us—and by extension, with the program itself, which we personified:

As Writing Program Administrators, we look forward to working closely with you at the Pre-Quarter Workshop... All of us have been where you are now—contemplating a move to a new city (or new country!), frantically trying to secure a home, figuring out transportation, and negotiating the multiple demands of being both a teacher and a student...
posting pointed (or seemingly innocent) questions at opportune moments. But we lacked the power to do any more than that. And when it came time to work with the adjunct faculty members—many of whom were clearly senior to us in age and experience—we were rather ineffectual. Clearly, WPA power at this institution was all about forging connections with new teaching assistants, legislating curriculum, and urging compliance with programmatic policies and procedures. Our rhetorical strategies were intended to forge an atmosphere of general goodwill so that teaching assistants would respond to our ethical appeals and comply because “they” wanted to join “us.”

Here at Gustavus, there is no “us.” There’s only me: a lone WPA working to harness the energies and talents of veteran and new professors and to share that expertise across the campus. But I believe it’s important to create an “us” to help ensure the continued livelihood of our writing requirement, as well as our writing program, no matter what shape that program may take. When I first arrived, our campus recommended the use of a writing handbook that I hated; we had used the same book for ten years. I knew that I could easily make that decision for our campus; instead, I decided to make the decision with our campus. In the fall of my second year, I solicited volunteers for a handbook selection committee. I began with my friends, who in turn recommended me to their friends. I constructed a committee of seven readers, representing each of the seven academic divisions on campus.

I designed a survey instrument for the faculty and invited all teachers to respond. In early fall, I read and reviewed likely handbook candidates, selecting a slate of possible books for our campus. Subsequently, I met with publishing representatives, arranged for free lunches and demonstrations, and then invited committee members to simply read and respond with an evaluative rubric. I wanted them to understand that I valued their time, that I knew they were too busy to meet with the representatives themselves, but that I needed the disciplinary expertise each one could bring to the table. However, I also needed them to recognize my expertise, which authorized me to select the initial batch of handbooks from which to choose. These seven faculty members found the entire experience remarkably pleasant, well organized, and useful. We agreed easily on a new book (the one I would have chosen myself), and then my colleagues helped me to draft a letter to the faculty as a whole explaining the process and justifying our new choice.

Still, when it was time to inform the whole faculty of the change, I was reluctant to use the word “I” to describe my role in the process. Instead, the memo I circulated to the faculty was firmly rooted in the third person and utilized the passive voice:
In spring of 2001, Rebecca Taylor began to meet with publishers and review possible handbook choices. She then composed a survey instrument to gauge faculty members’ satisfaction with our handbook. In October of 2001, the Writing Program—assisted by the FTS Director’s staff—conducted a full faculty survey about the handbook, which has been used at Gustavus for more than ten years.

The memo then describes our deliberation and names the newly chosen handbook. This memo didn’t at all capture the collaborative spirit of the selection process. I chickened out, contructed a kind of ethos that was far more formal and formulaic than I should have. Needless to say, few faculty members read the memo. When the new books arrived at the bookstore the following fall semester, several called me on the phone. “What’s with the new books?”

Since that time, I have referred to the program consistently in writing as “we.” Thus, “we” at the Writing Program have sponsored workshops, “we” have invited teachers to submit writing assignments and sample syllabi, “we” have requested that they order the recommended handbook (never, ever a requirement) for their students each fall, and “we” have thanked the faculty for their support of the Writing Center each year. But that “we” is different than the “we” I helped to construct as a graduate student WPA. While that former “we” was an attempt to forge connections with a fairly disempowered group of teaching assistants, this new “we” is an effort to create community of faculty already committed to the teaching of writing, to bolster a program where only a requirement exists.

But maybe creating this “we” still isn’t the solution to my ethos problem. In fact, maybe I don’t have an ethos problem at all. Instead, perhaps it’s time to reconcile myself to the fact that we may never have a “writing program” like the one I left behind in Columbus, Ohio. Maybe there’s another way to do this work. My dean and colleagues have offered little programmatic direction to me, trusting instead that I will guide the Writing Center and WAC program as I see fit, with the help of a small advisory committee—an outgrowth of the handbook review committee experience I describe above. Trust. This is the key term, the term that perhaps most signifies the leap of faith I need to undertake in order to be an effective WPA in the small college context. I must trust that the lack of interest in the writing “program” does not signal a lack of interest in writing instruction itself or in the curricular “requirement.” Indeed, on my campus, the distinction between a program and a requirement is an important one. The program is all about faculty development efforts, speakers and events, the WAC web pages, the bookmarks and brochures and posters and email messages and memos—all things that our faculty views as “extra.” But I can trust that colleagues value good writing and want our students to write well. It is clear to me now that the faculty has historically taken a great
interest in the curricular component of the Writing Program, ensuring that the curriculum committee as a whole, rather than the writing director, makes the ultimate decisions about which courses receive WAC or “W” status and what the WAC criteria should be.

I am grateful for that. It’s a relief that nobody expects me to ensure the success of the requirement alone—we all take responsibility for it. My role, then, is to guide us along as we continue to work toward a common goal: making sure that our students have opportunities to write often, to revise their work, to write in different disciplinary contexts. In doing so, I must construct the kind of ethos that suggests we are all in this together, working hard to help our students, but that I expect colleagues to trust me to make good decisions. I have tried to let go of my fear that colleagues will not find me authoritative, and I have begun to use a more natural, collegial voice and style in all of the documents I share with the faculty. In my most recent fall faculty meeting memo, an opportunity to share with the faculty my goals for the WAC program and Writing Center each year, I even use the pronoun “I”: “I’m pleased to announce a full slate of events and activities offered by the Writing Center and/or Writing Across the Curriculum Program this fall.” I acknowledge that this is, in fact, my program. I am making decisions, I am setting the course for its future, and I am evaluating its success in the ways that I see fit.

**Suggestions for Graduate Training**

New WPAs at small colleges must study our institutions’ culture(s) and rhetorical practices. Then, we can make more appropriate choices as we perform—daily—our precarious relationship to the writing program, the institution, our colleagues, and our students. How might graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition prepare us for this work and acknowledge that we will, in fact, administer writing programs in a variety of institutional contexts when we graduate?

1. **Study Institutional Documents Rhetorically.**

   In many history of rhetoric seminars or survey courses, students study texts from a variety of historical periods from ancient Greece to the present, considering textbooks, dialogues, and extant fragments of the pedagogical materials that have been used through the ages to teach the ancient art of rhetoric. Why not use actual writing program texts from multiple institutional contexts to consider contemporary rhetoric? Graduate students might study web pages, in-house publications, or curricular documents from different institutions. They might be encouraged to document and analyze the relationship between particular rhetorical theories, pedagogical outcomes, and institutional locations.
2. **Conduct and study ethnographic research stemming from diverse institutional settings.**

Graduate students could benefit a great deal from participant-observation at small colleges, HBCU’s, community colleges, and tribal colleges. They might be encouraged to consider how specific writing programs reflect geographical, cultural, racial, ideological, economic, and institutional differences in complex ways.

3. **Require or encourage off-campus institutional experiences.**

The Preparing Future Faculty Program has taught us a valuable lesson: nothing helps a graduate student understand the nature of academic work quite like an extended series of visits to a specific institution. Graduate programs might identify students who are interested in small college careers early on, and encourage or require those students to spend time at a small institution, perhaps as part of an administrative, research, or teaching exchange program.

4. **Create administrative fellowships.**

Provide graduate students with an opportunity to devote their full attention—with compensation—to learning about administrative work in various settings.

5. **Include small college faculty in job training efforts.**

When it’s time to conduct the annual “how to get an academic job” workshop, invite faculty members from small institutions to participate. Include sample c.v.’s from faculty members who work for small colleges. Let graduate students hear firsthand about the possibilities of academic life outside the research university context.

I hope that those who prepare new WPAs will recognize how disconcerting it is to step for the first time into a role as WPA at a small liberal arts college. The sudden responsibility for such a fundamental part of the curriculum can be overwhelming. It can also be challenging, rewarding, and frustrating. We need rhetorical strategies to help us face our work with energy and commitment. Graduate students who study comparatively the institutional cultures of various writing programs and the rhetorics that sustain them will learn to consider the ways that speakers and writers construct ethos within different institutional cultures, the professional documents of such cultures, and the formal and informal ways that power and responsibility are wielded. This kind of multifaceted rhetorical study could help students to consider how our emerging—and always changing—sense of authority may shape the rhetorical approaches that we employ, approaches that can limit subtly or make possible our communicative success within specific writing programs.

*Saint Peter, Minnesota*

70 *Composition Studies*
Appendix A
WAC History Project
Interview One


2. What was the WAC program all about? Courses? Faculty development? Who funded it?

3. What brought you to WAC in the first place? Why were you interested in participating?

4. At what point did you cease to participate, if at all? What led you to that decision?


6. How do you interpret the words “Writing Across the Curriculum?” What values are inherent in that definition? In other words, do you think the project itself speaks to/reflects/contradicts the “Gustavus values” as you understand them?

7. What do you think our students want from WAC? What do you think they get?

8. If you had to offer me one bit of advice as a new WAC director, what would it be?

9. If you could have offered one bit of advice to the last WAC director, what would it have been?

10. Could you direct me to some other resources—people, archives, documents? Where are the official administrative records?

11. Would you be willing to share your own WAC resources with me for the sake of research? Would you share syllabi, assignments, memos, etc.?

12. Would you be willing to (or interested in) being interviewed again, this time with a tape recorder, in order to participate in this research project? (I would use a release form and go through Institutional Research Board.)

Notes
1 See flyer: Preparing for a Career at a Small College or University: A Workshop for Graduate Students and the Faculty Who Mentor Them; posted to SMALLCOMP and WPA-L on Monday, February 3 of 2003.

2 For that matter, we’re not prepared to make the jump from publicly to privately funded institution, or from secular to church-affiliated, or from research to teaching-focused institutions. Certainly there are research-focused private schools,
teaching-focused public schools, and so on. The important issue here is that we need to imagine multiple institutional contexts and multiple career alternatives for students when they leave graduate school.

According to the Preparing Future Faculty web site (http://www.preparing-faculty.org), of the initial 295 participating institutions (Phases One and Two), sixty-five were defined as baccalaureate institutions (http://www.preparing-faculty.org/PFFWeb.History.htm). The program is now in its fourth phase, with a focus on developing programs in the humanities and social sciences. In the area of English Studies, the following institutions have been selected as participants in Phase Four: Howard University, Michigan Technological University, Washington State University, University of Illinois-Chicago, and University of South Florida. For more information about Preparing Future Faculty, see the summer 2002 issue of Liberal Education: “Changing Course: Preparing Faculty for the Future,” which features several articles about the PFF program.

My twenty to twenty-five undergraduate writing center tutors are funded through college work-study; their salaries do not come from the $2,275.00 per year.

I include a copy of the interview agenda and questions as Appendix A of this essay.

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The Association of American Colleges and Universities. Special Issue: “Changing Course: Preparing Faculty for the Future.” Liberal Education 88.3 (2002).
