Forgotten Radicals: A History of the Term “Theory” in Three Decades of WPA Scholarship

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This article contests the prevailing assumption that composition scholarship has only recently begun to theorize the role of the writing program administrator. While many contemporary scholars accept the idea that the field mainly offered practical “how-to” articles early on in its history, the author rereads work from past decades to show otherwise. The recovery of these articles offers valuable insights into current debates about the place of theory in WPA work by strengthening the view that theory is a vital and inseparable element of intellectual inquiry. This article also strives to enable a more dynamic understanding of the ways that WPAs harness theory to articulate and accomplish their agendas.

WPA scholarship has directly engaged the theory-practice binary in recent years to empower administrators and promote their value in the academy. Notable contributions to this endeavor include Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser’s The Writing Program Administrator as Theorist, Donna Strickland and Jeanne Gunner’s The Writing Program Interrupted, Susan H. McLeod’s Writing Program Administration, Linda Adler-Kassner’s The Activist WPA, and a number of articles that have appeared in composition studies journals in the years following CWPA’s 1998 position statement “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration.” These works present theory as a way to “not only question the power, methods, and institutional function” that regulate the position, but also as an avenue “toward the disruption of those very powers, methods, and roles” in order to earn WPAs greater agency (Dobrin 70). However, they presume that prior to the last few years, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, WPAs struggled to articulate the nature of their scholarship while emphasizing conservative issues such as professionalization and institutional identity. I offer an alternative reading of scholarship from the past three decades to show that, from its inception, WPA discourse has theorized the administrative position while also embracing less conservative, more subversive ideologies. Recognizing this earlier discourse of theoretical self-reflection should provide an even greater rationale for the use of theory in WPA work by positioning it as internal and natural rather than alien and artificial. A realization of the theory-practice binary as a fiction also enables a more dynamic understanding of theory and its potential to help create and debate new directions for writing programs.
As John Trimbur notes, the professionalization of WPAs has recently led to “a troubled conscience, signified by the figure of the ‘boss compositionist’ and feelings of complicity in an exploitative labor system,” feelings that scholars in the recent volume *The Writing Program Interrupted* address candidly (“Introduction” ix). In the first article in this collection, Jeff Rice challenges what he sees as the conservative and anti-theoretical attitudes of WPAs who generally “reject [theory] out of hand as ‘impractical,’ opting to maintain conservative positions regarding their work in very public ways” (2). Rice finds the alleged absence of theorists such as Stuart Hall, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault from WPA discourse “suspicious” (6), and he goes on to ask “Without these or similar theories, can we think about programmatic moves without falling back on the familiar? How can we think about programmatic decisions in terms of those theoretical positions that have done much work to challenge status quo positions … Or can we?” (6).

Rice’s critique does effectively encourage WPAs to scrutinize the assumptions that underlie “the language, texts, and position statements that have given them strength as professionals and a feeling of academic legitimacy,” in order to “move away from the conservative tropes and values that have come to dominate our work” (12). These tropes include general appeals to stability, consistency, and pedagogical soundness, and can be seen in documents, such as the 2000 WPA Outcomes Statement, that speak to a broad audience by circumventing any need “for agreement on a single best way to achieve those outcomes” (White qtd. in Rice 11). At the same time, Rice and other scholars in *The Writing Program Interrupted* have constructed their own reductive narratives, essentializing theory as a concept that only disrupts and interrogates conservative foundations while offering the barest sketch of an alternative. For example, Dobrin challenges WPAs via Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Foucault to “create possibilities through disruption, or, at minimum, Foucault’s notion of thinking ‘differently’” (70). The liberal narrative possesses its own attractive tropes of disruption and anti-conformity that do not necessarily inspire the change it envisions. Just as we all tend to value consistency, we also tend to value thinking differently—regardless of how theoretical we might interpret our actions and situations. The liberal discourse merely creates a narrative of Us (free-thinking theorists) versus Them (anti-theoretical conservatives) that clouds, rather than clarifies, how theory informs writing program administration.

My reading of WPA scholarship from the past thirty years, however, reveals a much wider diversity of theorizing than the current narratives acknowledge, and therefore offers a more nuanced approach that builds on Rose and Weiser’s inclusive definition of theory as “a general explanation of some phenomena” (“Theorizing” 186) that “do[es] not tell us what to do” but rather tells us “how to understand” and how “to think about how to act” (191). Their definition, drawing on Phelps’ view of theory and practice as “recursive and reciprocal” (qtd. in “Theorizing” 188), serves as a productive starting point. After giving an account of the conventional view of WPA
scholarship, I will map an alternative history of how theory has manifested in four distinct modes since 1979. These modes form a continuum of theoretical action rather than a series of dichotomies between practical and theoretical work. First, theory manifests as the analysis of an issue through an existing theoretical lens. For example, Dobrin uses Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Foucault to challenge conservative WPA narratives. Second, theory can manifest as the production of an original explanation or account of writing or writing program administration. Raúl Sánchez has advocated for more production of such original theories in the field of composition. Third, theory can manifest as the implementation of theoretical ideas through policies, curricula, and WPAs’ day-to-day decisions. Last, theory can manifest in acts (including scholarship) that blend the previous three modes of theorizing.

By exploring the early theoretical discourse, my article answers Jeanne Gunner’s call for scholarship that goes beyond the “conflict-free, apolitical activities” that an existing hegemonic discourse has already deemed appropriate for administrative work—namely professionalization and disciplinary identity (274). I see a crucial importance in following Gunner’s caution for WPA scholars to “remain mindful of cultural critiques of the position and its social functions” (264). However, this article also performs the critique of grand narratives that Dobrin encourages, not simply by overturning conservative values but by also resisting the counter-narrative that liberal WPAs have established. By interpreting this overlooked scholarship against polarizing narratives, I offer a third-way, a liminal space, of discussing WPA theory that moves between and across boundaries.

Remapping the Conservative Narrative of the 1980s

A distinct assumption in the field exists that WPAs have only recently turned from professionalization and praxis to theory as a resource for their work. Although CWPA was founded in 1976 at an energetic MLA Convention session, a national discourse crystallized in 1978 when the council began to publish WPA, an outgrowth of its newsletter. Susan McLeod discusses the struggle for professionalization during the 1980s, a time when “the position … became a revolving door at many institutions” (74) because administration was considered service rather than scholarship. McLeod emphasizes professionalization as the primary concern of this decade as well as the 1990s, citing the work of Christine Hult as invaluable in the drafting of “The Portland Resolution” in 1992 and “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administrators” in 1998. Both documents, McLeod writes, “have helped raise the professional status of the WPA” (77). As she looks to the future, McLeod also compares the broader, more theoretical questions of WPAs today with the “very practical, hands-on issues” in “the early issues of CCC and WPA” published thirty years ago (78). Her conclusion is that within the last ten years WPAs have developed much more sophisticated, theory-based foundations that legitimize their work. My reading of WPA scholarship suggests otherwise—that the 1980s did witness theoretical as
well as practical engagements of writing program administration. These theoretical positions have simply gone unacknowledged by both conservative and liberal WPA discourses that have accepted existing accounts of the position’s evolution.

In particular, these dominant discourses rely on a few retrospectives and other essays appearing during the 1980s that offered meta-commentary on WPA scholarship. One such retrospective was published by Kenneth Bruffee in 1985, claiming that WPA scholarship had evolved largely due to an increasing sense of identity and professionalization (see “The WPA”). A later retrospective by Christine Hult, “The Scholarship of Administration” asserts a similar paradigm, with an added observation that WPAs had begun to rethink the nature of their work as an intellectual endeavor. Considering trends in WPA’s volumes prior to 1985, Bruffee first observes that “the topics that concern WPAs have not changed very much in the past decade,” whereas the “sophistication and knowledgeability with which we are addressing [them]” had indeed (“The WPA” 5). He locates this increase in sophistication not within the development of theories for WPA work but instead within a shift from “how-to” articles to ones concerned with “professional identity” (7), and he praises the development as indicative of progress. The five articles Bruffee describes as addressing professional identity are of special interest to him because each one “helps us tell ourselves who we are” through self discovery and self-critique (7). But Bruffee’s idea of self-critique mainly involves the absence of “white wash” in describing a “program’s failures as well as its successes,” and responding intelligently to criticism—as he notes in the retrospective when discussing a review of Witte and Faigley’s Evaluating College Writing Programs (9). There is no indication that such self-critique goes beyond this sense of objectivity.

A rereading of the WPA archives between 1978 and 1985 reveals a handful of articles that explicitly engage theories not only of writing but also, as Elaine Maimon states, “its place in the curriculum” (11). My reading of WPA’s archives prior to 1985 show at least four articles that conceive of theory as a vital component to a WPA’s goals and responsibilities. These articles share a common concern with the need for consistent program philosophies, grounded in theory, to design coherent course sequences while articulating their value to the larger university. For these authors, theory becomes a means of reflection and action, and also of enhancing the WPA’s agency. Each of these articles theorizes according to Rose and Weiser’s definition: either by analyzing problems through a theoretical lens, presenting an original theory to account for WPA work, describing ways to implement theories through program design, or a combination thereof.

The first of these articles, Greg Larkin’s 1979 “The Essential Unity of Language Arts Programs,” presents a theory of writing and its role in the university in order to assist WPAs in constructing a coherent course sequence. Larkin does not cite theorists by name, as Rice would require, but rather offers an original explanation of writing program administration to address
a set of problems. Rather than discuss professional identity, Larkin theorizes solutions to what he calls “conceptual fragmentation,” which he defines as the lack of a guiding philosophy for the construction of writing courses (25). To untangle the “contradictory premises, methods, and materials” of a fragmented program, Larkin proposes “theoretical and practical” steps for bringing “units into a larger whole” (25). For Larkin, “The theoretical ground of all the courses which we as language program administrators supervise is that all lasting language products are the result of conscious, consistent, and purposeful choices by their creators” (26). He goes on to suggest that, “If we accept this basic theory underpinning all the language arts, we can refer to it as we define the specific language skills sought in our various courses” (27). Larkin's theory identifies three major components of writing: thesis and support, expectations and fulfillment, and the idea of order. These three theoretical concepts provide a foundation for coherent program structure, as opposed to a seemingly random sequence that students complete merely to fulfill degree requirements. Consequently, this theory for curriculum design provides a guide to action for WPAs, which is intended to raise the value of composition courses among students and, by extension, university officials.

Although Larkin's framework seems to promote some of the commonplaces about order and consistency that Rice critiques, he nonetheless clearly enunciates a theory to support his agenda. Advocates of poststructural theory will likely disagree with conceptions of writing founded on the fulfillment of expectation, given that postmodernism relies on a conceivably infinite deferral or frustration of that fulfillment. But this does not render Larkin’s position anti-theoretical or strictly practical. Here we merely see conflicting theories about the function of language.

The theoretical attention to how writing programs function within the university also serves as a precursor to WAC movements that began taking shape in the mid-1980s. Thomas Dunn’s 1980 article “Writing in the Sciences” theorizes similarities between writing in the humanities and the sciences, where “the nonverbal nature of much scientific thought” requires writing mainly as a mode of transmission (12). Although this view of writing is no longer tenable in our field, Dunn nonetheless clearly offers a theory to support a claim that science programs need to develop writing courses at the introductory and upper levels. Dunn’s theory of writing holds that “literature [as opposed to scientific articles] ... seems to me to serve four functions” that consist of conveying perceptions, analyzing such perceptions, evoking emotions, and finally synthesizing the first three components to “leave the reader with an added dimension of understanding, an overall or gestalt sense of the subject at large” (12). Dunn very clearly offers a theory of writing’s purpose, and he uses these four criteria to argue that writing in the sciences aims for the same purpose, albeit through “logic and precision” (13). He goes on to argue that “scientists do seek to evoke excitement and even wonder and awe in their work” in a manner similar to literature in that both forms of writing “transmit experience” (14). Although contemporary
WPAs will likely dismiss Dunn’s use of the term “literature” as an umbrella for all non-scientific writing, the article is historically relevant. Like Larkin’s piece, it resists any of Bruffee’s three categories of how-to, how-to in context, and professional identity.

Also like Larkin, Dunn does not analyze situations through existing theoretical lenses but proposes an original idea that pushes on the boundaries of then-conventional purviews of WPAs—the staffing and oversight of programs whose policies and curricula, as Gary A. Olson and Joseph M. Moxley observed in their 1989 “Directing Freshman Composition: The Limits of Authority,” were decided by department chairs. The article theorizes in only one of the four possible manifestations, since Dunn does not offer specifics regarding how to implement such courses. Its relevance to WPAs lies in an orientation to writing from a wider institutional perspective. Dunn encourages administrators to think beyond the first-year writing course as a field of reflection and action.

Elaine Maimon’s 1981 article “Writing in the Arts and Sciences” theorizes WPA work in all four of the possible modes by offering a theory of administration that also promotes the execution of existing composition theories. This article also makes the first clear call for administrators to “think differently,” as Dobrin paraphrases Foucault (70), in writing program administration’s scholarly history. Maimon addresses the importance of theory in regard to the development of writing courses that prepare students for a university’s broader curriculum. Advocating an early version of WAC, Maimon asserts that “A consistent theoretical formulation [of a writing program] requires many English teachers to break old mind-sets and to reflect seriously on unexamined prejudices about teaching composition” (9). In Maimon’s view, theories of writing are not only relevant to teachers but to WPAs, who must integrate these theories into their work as administrators.

Maimon maintains that the success of a writing program hinges on “a consistent philosophy of writing and its place in the curriculum” (11). She speaks specifically about the design of writing courses that engage a university’s entire curriculum and cooperation with faculty across the disciplines to do so. The formation of a consistent philosophical or theoretical base for the purpose of writing is essential to this task. She even encourages administrators to read James Kinneavy’s A Theory of Discourse “for a theoretical perspective that allows us to value styles beyond the belletristic” (11). Maimon identifies theory as the core element of a WPA’s resources. Perhaps most importantly, this theoretical position on WPA work does not draw a binary between the conservative commonplaces of consistency and pedagogical soundness on the one hand and radical critique on the other. As the liberal discourse currently advocates, Maimon envisions a community of WPAs who value diverse writing styles, implement new theories about writing (Kinneavy’s theories being new in 1981), and develop their own philosophies about the function of writing instruction in their institutions.
Finally, William Gracie’s 1982 article “Directing Freshman English” further blurs the contemporary divide between theory and practice, as well as the divide between conservative and liberal. Gracie defines WPAs as agents of change who “translate theory into practice” (21). But he also recognizes WPAs not only as translators of theory but makers of it. As he says, “It is by making this knowledge” of composition’s place in the “institution’s curriculum as a whole” that “WPAs are most likely to make an impact on their institutions” (24, emphasis mine). He goes on to say that “However pure and theoretical their own research and that of the authors they read … WPAs have to be engineers. They have to make their own thought, and the thought of others, practical, applicable, efficient, and effective” (24). This articulation of the WPA recognizes both liberal and conservative values while asserting their interdependency. For Gracie, as well as Maimon, successful WPAs are well-versed in pure theory, they possess the capabilities to make their own pure theories, and they also know how to convey and implement those theories as they negotiate institutional constraints. Furthermore, the analogy of WPAs to engineers embraces theory in a way that subsequent analogies in the 1990s to dancers and musicians do not. While a talented musician may not necessarily be informed about the latest theories of music, engineers must by necessity know how to develop and apply theories to their work. And while performers may engage theories of their arts, they do not necessarily themselves theorize. Meanwhile, engineers are likely not only to draw on others’ theories but to imagine their own.

Other articles in WPA theorize writing program administration through one or more of the four modes while advocating for changes in program design from clearly articulated socio-political positions. They also eschew the typical activities of professional developments such as grand-scale conferences and keynote speakers. For example, John Trimbur’s 1983 article “Students or Staff: Thoughts on the Use of Peer Tutors in Writing Centers” reflects on the administrative practices of writing center administrators, asking “what happens when we institutionalize practices that previously emerged spontaneously, outside of the conventional academic structure,” adding that the question is especially important for “those of us who administer writing programs and writing centers” (33). The liberatory elements of Trimbur’s article are clear, although he uses theory implicitly, as when he critiques the academic hierarchy for exploiting undergraduate writing center tutors, thereby “alienating tutors from their own activity” and “making them part of a division of labor they neither design nor control” (36). Trimbur proposes that WPAs should see their tutors not only as employees but as students and partners. The article does not focus on the “how-to” aspects of organizing or running writing centers, nor on the professional status of administrators, but instead on the political and ideological reasons for, and consequences of, decentering the administrator’s power and sharing it with tutors.

In fact, some trends in WPA discourse actively resist some of the conventions of professional development. A 1985 conference report, titled “Writing
“Composition Studies and Undergraduate Education,” also by Trimbur, describes the first meeting of the New England Conference of Writing Program Administrators as a venue where “There were no major speakers, no call for papers, no formal presentations which would cast conference participants in the role of spectators” (59). Instead the conference was devoted exclusively to group discussions and workshops, such as “a fictional case-study of ‘Platonic College’” (60). This workshop presented participants with the task of writing a program philosophy and curriculum to guide staffing and training decisions for a hypothetical college. Thus some of the markings of professionalization and status—calls for papers, keynote speakers—were not only neglected, but devalued. That Trimbur would praise the lack of these status markers reveals a set of values that conflicts with the dominant story of WPAs becoming more professional in order to combat their marginalization in the academy. For certain WPA scholars, the path to increased authority and agency did not lay in apolitical activities of professionalization. Instead, academic spaces and cultural forms such as the conference provided opportunities to subvert the status quo.

This conference report also illustrates a unified understanding of the complex relationship between theory and program administration. As Trimbur writes,

“One of the prevailing undercurrents that surfaced periodically ... sometimes quite sharply ... was the tension between theory and practice, between the desire to articulate a theoretical underpinning for what we do and the daily practical need to put a program in place and make it work.”

(60)

The conference participants situated themselves as both theorists and program administrators. They were aware that they generated theoretical understandings of their programs and their pedagogical missions, and then implemented them. The importance of theory in WPA work, in all of its manifestations, is clear here.

Despite the complex and sophisticated awareness of theory and practice among many scholars in the 1980s, an ambivalence about theory’s importance evolved in the late 1980s and 1990s as WPAs struggled to define research and scholarship in a way that legitimized their work. The struggle is not only evident in WPA but also in other journals. For example, two important articles appearing in 1989 speak to the unease among WPAs about their status within the academy and the intellectual value of their work. Wendy Bishop and Gay Lynn Crossley’s article “Doing the Hokey Pokey? Why Writing Program Administrators’ Job Conditions Don’t Seem to Be Improving” describes the insurmountable workload of WPAs despite their recognition as specialists by other faculty department chairs. The other article, Gary A. Olson and Joseph M. Moxley’s “Directing Freshman Composition,” notes that while WPAs were over-tasked they were also paradoxically “administratively constrained” (56). According to their survey, many English department
chairs unfortunately still saw WPAs as supervisors, unqualified to engage in activities such as curriculum reform or program development. In other words, WPAs could carry out the policies of department chairs but did not necessarily possess the authority to re-vision their own writing programs. The oncoming decade would see a definite increase in the attention to the perception of WPA work and scholarship, including debates on how to appropriately define such work.

Remapping the Tensions of the 1990s

In the 1990s, a narrative of the WPA as scholar developed that limited the potential of theory. At times, this narrative even appears to go beyond ambivalence about theory into active resistance toward identifying scholarship as such. When describing the value of writing program administration, WPA’s second editor, Christine Hult, offered a position on the nature of WPA work at the end of her editorship in 1994—appearing not in WPA but a separate collection entitled Theorizing and Enacting Difference. Hult sees WPA work as applying theory via the creation of dynamic programs, rather than generating theories of the position or its functions. For Hult, administration is “theory-based” (126). WPAs apply theory, but they do not produce it. In addition to drawing on Ernest Boyer’s Scholarship Reconsidered, Hult’s article echoes an earlier 1987 piece by Richard Bullock, “When Administration Becomes Scholarship,” in which WPA scholarship is described in terms of “an architect’s erection of a building or a playwright’s successful direction of his or her own play” (14). Hult’s piece forwards this analogy as she describes the evolution of scholarship from “how-to” and “professional identity” articles to ones characterized by “systematic, theory-based production of a dynamic program” (126), rather than the conventional texts of scholars in other fields.

Neither Hult nor Bullock recognizes the important distinction between “theory-based production” of a writing program and scholarship that theorizes the roles and actions of the WPA alone. Essentially, Hult only sees WPA articles engaged in describing the shape and design of living writing programs. Hult’s metaphors for WPA scholarship—music, dance, and theatrical productions (126)—seek to define administration through alternative forms of applied intellectual work. This definition overlooks the fact that WPA scholars such as Dunn, Larkin, Maimon, and Gracie had in fact constructed theories of writing program administration itself, rather than simply applying ready-made ones. While these retrospectives situate theory-based administration as a pragmatic and often creative enterprise, similar to playwriting and musical performance, they paradoxically cast WPAing in terms that make it seem expressivist, non-critical, or non-theoretical.

Meanwhile, major voices in WPA discourse discouraged theorizing as a means to enhance legitimacy and agency. Kenneth Bruffee’s keynote address at the 1998 WPA Summer Conference in Arizona (published in 1999) represents the most overt resistance to theory in WPA work and scholarship,
the type of resistance that might warrant Rice’s criticism of conservative ideologies. Here Bruffee states that “To theorize a boundary practice like WPAing is … more likely to cauterize that practice, codify it, and conceptualize it—in short, bureaucratize it,” (“Thoughts” 63) than to strengthen it. The narrow representation of theory given here limits the agency of WPAs by perpetuating an image of the position that can only implement theories of writing in a manner similar to Hult’s. Bruffee widens the theory-practice binary by casting theory as a codifying practice rather than a flexible mode of analysis and reflection. The difference between Bruffee’s significant use of theory to explore collaborative group work and his denial of theory in 1998 drives a wedge between teaching and administration, labeling them as distinct activities. This statement does not indict Bruffee so much as it illustrates the state of affairs by the end of the decade. Liberals and conservatives in Composition Studies had battled on many fronts ranging from social constructionism and the abolition of composition to language diversity and also (evidently) writing program administration.

But Bruffee’s remarks also anticipate a significant shift in the discourse about theory during the late 1990s, as WPA scholars sought greater recognition for their scholarly contributions. To dissuade a large audience from theorizing suggests that attitudes and perceptions had already begun to move in that direction. Although the late 1990s marks a turning point in the recognition of WPA work, it was less a sudden turn to theory than a strengthening interest in what some WPA scholars had been asserting for at least a decade. In addition to the 1998 statement “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administrators,” articles began to appear that defined WPAs as theorists in their own right. Donald Bushman’s “The WPA as Pragmatist,” for example, defines administration and its scholarship as “a complex, experimental activity” and “an intellectual undertaking that is concerned with action and reflection” (40). Although such articles did not always invoke the word “theory,” they no longer made efforts to avoid couching WPA work in theoretical terms. The next decade would bring about the publication of several titles disregarding Bruffee’s warning.

The Past Decade

Following the 1998 position statement on the intellectual work of WPAs, more scholarship about WPA work began to appear in other journals. This wave of scholarship signaled a return to the embrace of theory evident in articles from the early and mid-1980s, except that these articles gave little indication that writing program administration had ever been theorized. The field’s flagship journal, CCC, began to publish a number of articles about writing program administration. Prior to then, CCC had published very few. Richard Bullock addresses the trend in his 2000 review of Diana George’s edited collection Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours and Rose and Weiser’s The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher, noting the appearance of “isolated essays in other journals” than WPA
Bullock declares that “an outburst of scholarly activity occurred in 1999 with the publication of no fewer than three book-length collections on writing program administration” (673). This outburst has been followed by the regular appearance of articles and reviews concerning WPA work, including at least a dozen in *CCC* alone. Additionally, *Composition Studies* has published at least three articles on WPA work in addition to ten reviews of books such as Adler-Kassner’s *The Activist WPA* and Barbara L’Eplattenier and Lisa Mastrangelo’s *Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration*. Other journals that have published articles on WPA work for the first time in the last few years include *Rhetoric Review* and *JAC*.

Over the last ten years, then, WPAs have theorized their positions with increasing frequency across the field’s major publications. Although analysis of administrative issues through literary and cultural theory does not overwhelm the field, there is not exactly a vacuum that would indicate a conservative agenda to silence or exclude dissent. Rather, the past decade reflects not only a resurgent interest in WPA scholarship but also a wider healing of the tensions between theory and practice that characterized the 1990s. This trend is evident early on, as in Lauren Sewell Coulter’s 2000 *WPA* article “Lean Mean Grading Machines,” which provides an excellent case in point with its subtitle “A Bourdieuan Reading of Novice Instructors in a Portfolio-Based Writing Program.” Coulter applies Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, “the ability of dominant members of a field to wield their cultural capital as a kind of weapon” (36), to portfolio assessment groups in which experienced instructors’ interventions “frustrate efforts to help new graduate instructors feel authoritative about teaching writing” (36). Her theoretical analysis of first-time graduate instructors at her institution challenges the conventional wisdom that scoring groups reduce grade inflation and lead to fairer portfolio evaluation. Rather than confirming Bruffee’s fear of theory codifying knowledge, this kind of theorizing enables new perspectives on common administrative practices and speaks back to the discursive authority of existing scholarship.

As another example, Tarez Samra Graban and Kathleen J. Ryan explicitly theorize WPA work in the 2005 *WPA* article “From ‘What Is’ to ‘What Is Possible,’” in which they assert “a particular theoretical understanding of curricular reform and document revision” via *techne*, a term which the authors adapt from Atwill’s discussion of Aristotle in *Rhetoric Reclaimed* (90). The authors’ definition of WPA work as *techne* recasts curriculum reform as an act that forms “dialogical sites that reflect and construct the programs they represent” and so “become[s] a means for changing that system” (90). For the authors, theorizing does not lead to the formation of inert bodies of knowledge but instead toward the recognition of writing programs as complex, evolving systems that require flexible strategies for knowledge production. The use of Aristotelian terminology might strike some scholars as traditional or conservative, but it might seem revolutionary to others. Either way, it certainly synthesizes existing and original theories in a manner that
fulfills the liberal agenda of changing or subverting dominant paradigms. Like many of the essays I have considered, then, Graban and Ryan’s work resists easy categorization as conservative or liberal, theoretical or practical.

Even more recently, Debra Frank Dew directly addresses the change in material conditions that result from theorizing WPA work and writing instruction in her article “WPA as Rhetor: Scholarly Production and the Difference a Discipline Makes.” Describing the implementation of theories in the execution of daily program activities, Dew goes beyond the conservative narrative of professionalization and emphasizes the use of theory to realize her goals of greater agency and legitimacy at her institution. Although Dew does not apply specific theorists to her situations, she nonetheless frames program administration as a series of rhetorical strategies worthy of intellectual merit. In this sense, her work meets Rose and Weiser’s definition of theory while also complicating the narrative of conservative versus liberal WPAs. For example, Dew describes the transformation of “monthly norming” meetings into “curricular review and development sessions” (50). Accordingly, “As the new theoretical work arose faculty rightfully expected institutional support” and over the course of five years salaries gradually increased by thirty percent (50). While this strategy ostensibly plays to the conservative tropes of consistency and professionalization, Dew has also answered the persistent call of The Writing Program Interrupted for scholarship that unifies program development with the alleviation of material conditions.

Salary increases did not follow solely from professionalization, but also through Dew’s strategic theorizing of her role as a WPA. Another example involves an annual brunch held at the university chancellor’s home. Theorizing this brunch as one of many “zones of ambiguity” (56) where critique becomes possible, Dew employs theory and action when she rehearses a proposal with several faculty and deans at the brunch and then finally appeals to the chancellor for help addressing low salaries and high faculty turnover. The actions taken at the meeting perform the conservative role of the WPA as a central “boss compositionist” who uses institutional authority to speak for all employees. Simultaneously, however, Dew satisfies the liberal call to “think differently” about conventions—such as the appropriate time and place where WPAs can make their arguments for better funding. Dew attributes such gains to “aligning our claims with the theoretical foundations and values that sustain our field” (58). Theory becomes a valuable tool to help WPAs attain pragmatic goals and to alter material conditions, not by combusting our conservative values through theory but by putting the two in sync.

**Conclusion**

It is tempting to say that WPA work has been theorized only in the last ten years, but my reading of prior articles shows that WPAs had theorized their position well beforehand. Such theorizing has simply gone unacknowledged because contemporary scholars have accepted as given the meta-
discourse regarding WPA scholarship. My hope is that this reconsideration of the past three decades will encourage further use of theory as a valuable resource by situating it as a practice organic to administration, rather than a new development. We should certainly embrace Rose and Weiser’s definition of a theory as “a way of conceptualizing, organizing, explaining, analyzing, reflecting on, and interpreting experiences and specialized knowledge gained through experience or observation” (Researcher 2). We should see this definition as inclusive of such theorists as Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Bourdieu, and therefore accept their potential relevance to WPA work. However, we should resist the tendency to see theory exclusively as a dialogue with these figures. Work by Judith Butler or Susan Bordo can illuminate aspects of writing program administration, but that does not make them the best or only ways to theorize our situations. Even more importantly, we should recognize that WPA scholars have theorized administration and offered administrative theories of writing since the discipline’s foundation thirty years ago. If we have been theorizing program administration for this long, then any allegedly conservative position against theorizing has no substance.

While administrators must theorize and have theorized, it is still worth recognizing a risk outlined by Gary Olson, who warns that if “theory becomes so capacious that it embraces everything,” including WPA work, “then it no longer serves any descriptive purpose” (501). Olson cautions all scholars to exercise precision when defining the theoretical aspects of their research. While administration draws on theory as a guide for reflection and action, and can generate theories, administration itself is not theory. Olson’s fear is that administrators might diminish their own uniqueness—and institutional value—in their rush to identify the similarities between their methodologies and those of other disciplines. Fortunately, the works discussed here avoid the pitfall of overly capacious terminology. They promote theories unique to writing program administration and possess an awareness that while administration is not itself theory it does, like any discipline, benefit from theoretical groundings of action.

To close, I would like to point out that Bruffee, even when advising against theory, does himself theorize WPA work as “inherently a boundary negotiating job” (“Thoughts” 62), which echoes cultural as well as post-structuralist theory’s recognition of context and contingency. Bruffee goes on to say that “The boundary and the hyphen are where I believe the focal unity of writing program administration lies and what make it educationally and institutionally unique” (62), meaning that WPAs are always engaged in interdisciplinary efforts. WPA scholars have always theorized, sometimes even despite their intentions. The embrace of this intellectual practice means continued growth and change.
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