

## INTRODUCTION.

# “BEGIN AS YOU INTEND TO FINISH”: CONSIDERING THE MULTIPLE LIMINALITIES AND THRESHOLDS OF TASHIPS

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Just before Debi and I were married, I asked my father for marital advice. He and my mom had been together for 40 years by then, and they seemed to have worked things out together pretty well—though not always quickly, cleanly, nor quietly. Talking, especially answering questions, was a bit of a sport for my dad. When he answered questions at all, he would say very little, say things that could be taken seriously or not (It was my job to figure that out—I got it wrong a lot.), or say things he, just then, thought were clearly established facts. “Begin as you intend to finish,” he answered. I still wonder what that meant. Debi and I recently celebrated 28 years together.

When Leslie, Brady, Kat, Phil, and I began discussing the issues that have become this book, we really had no sense of where it would lead or where we would finish. Way back then, we were focused on the complexities of rhetoric and composition TAs within the confines of writing program reputations, and on how seriously writing programs might be taken, in no small part because we all shared the experiences of being TAs and all found ourselves on the receiving end of doubt more than once. We found a lot of studies that discussed and quoted TAs, but not many where the TAs were really speaking for and about themselves through their own scholarly voices as teachers, researchers, scholars, writers, or graduate students. We did confirm that others shared our developing view that TAs are so much richer than a simplistic but true trope of teacher-student. For all five of us there, then, the TAship felt more like a careening pinball than a gently swinging pendulum or steadily growing garden. We were all aware of our responsibilities and roles during our TAsing, and we all suspected that there were other considerations and permutations of which we were not nearly aware enough. We have come some distance since then, but we still have a way to go, I think.

We had a lot of common ground between us through our individual experiences, even though our TAs were separated by time, distance, configuration, and emphasis. For example, no matter where we are in our careers we never stop having a kind of awed reverence for our dissertation directors. Imposter syndrome is another shared experience we all continue to see pop-up from time to time. But, more than anything else, it is that liminality of TAs having a foot in two worlds and stability in neither. It wasn't just being "between" that we shared; it was the sense of moving back and forth continually within and between two primary roles/identities of inhabiting and reinhabiting a threshold between teacher and student. That is one thing we think is so important to capture and explore here, in a direct way. These experiential senses of our own rhetoric and composition TAs have been further informed but not disputed by this project.

We also saw that there were a number of significant and sometimes competing changes that happened to us as TAs. One example would be the shift from purely consuming or being a bricoleur of scholarship to a producer of it. Another is the threshold TAs must cross from working responsively as a student to working independently and confidently as a professional. We agreed that these changes were essential to our moving forward and that they informed everything that happened afterward. We now recognize these in-common, profound changes as "threshold concepts," as transitions that had to happen in order to move forward and to which we can never return (Land et al.).

In that spring 2015 graduate course where these conversations began, we had been exploring seemingly prevalent and poor opinions of writing programs on so many fronts. Working to understand such perspectives and their impacts, we were focused on identifying both sources of these views and experiences or lore that might encourage them. We noticed that there was very little literature that promoted sharing with those outside of writing programs the significant learning that instructors ideally accumulate during their TAs; that there is a body of knowledge in rhetoric and composition that is enacted by teaching writing; that it takes time and effort to transfer adequately that knowledge to high-quality writing courses and student writing. Some of this, we understood, was a question of circumstances. We also noticed that a lot of the literature on TA orientations and TA development programs seemed to indicate that a brief pre-semester teaching orientation for TAs was common practice, but that budgets and curricula, enrollments and any number of other factors often overran what WPAs thought was even minimally appropriate TA preparation. To be honest, it seemed as though a lot of WPAs have been in survival mode of one kind or another, as are the incredibly and increasingly numerous contingent faculty they employ. Couple that with what seemed in the literature to be overstuffed,

clipped TA preparation, along with powerful lore about what writing instruction should look like—and too few opportunities to explore or embrace that adequately—and we started to see a focus arising. In short, it seemed to us that a sense of pragmatism or functionalism related to rhetoric and composition TAs (RCTAs) pervaded the contexts described in these literatures—an emphasis on the function of TAs in programmatic settings and/or a separate/different understanding of these folks within graduate studies discussions—and an unintentional flattening of the work that RCTAs do in writing programs.

But explication was not the only complexity we needed to deal with. We were all struck by the prominence of research that actively represents the complexities of RCTAs and TA preparation without TA voices as researchers and primary speakers—as opposed to expository anecdotists or selectively quoted, discussed, and described research subjects. This seemed particularly curious in relation to our discussions of poor impressions of writing programs outside of rhetoric and composition, and sometimes inside writing programs' home departments, as well. We wondered, then, if there might be some association or correlation there. Deeper inquiry into the lived complexities of the RCTA might provide opportunities to respond to some of those critiques, supporting our continuing belief that the RCTA is unique in its relationship to multiple disciplines (because it touches so many other departments/programs, which probably cannot be said about TAs in other disciplines) and to the future of our field(s) (TAs are our neophytes, the next generation of teacher-scholars in writing studies, as opposed to other fields whose grads go into industry and commercial ventures). We never thought that empirical or ethnographic research on RCTAs would quickly change the working conditions of the TAs and WPAs we read about, or the minds of faculty in other departments, but we did speculate that our work here could begin to free-up rhetoric and composition research/scholarship from a seemingly static state of functional survivalism or simple habit, and potentially free TAs to speak with authority and expertise on their own behalf. We continue to find value in this line of inquiry and *Threshold Conscripts* takes up these concerns as its themes, focusing on RCTAs as a focal point and exemplar of what we have discovered are much larger issues.

## DEFINITIONS

Now, about the collection's title . . . TAs don't often get to choose a lot of what they do as TAs. So, in a lot of ways, they are conscripted into service valued by their employers in exchange for entrée into graduate school and their chosen professions. I would not suggest that so many RCTAs—more on this phrase in a minute—would choose not to teach first-year composition (FYC), at least

not those who are studying rhetoric and composition, but I do think it would be a reasonable assumption that many TAs pressed into service teaching FYC would most certainly rather be teaching or doing something else, something more related to their individual interests like teaching creative writing, teaching literature, exploring the stacks of some forgotten archive, or conducting empirical or ethnographic research. All of these TAs are at thresholds in the sense that they are crossing the threshold into their graduate programs and, potentially, their professional lives. They are conscripts in the sense that they are making a significant time commitment in exchange for the opportunities they believe they will have during and after grad school. Pragmatically, TAships are often the only way graduate students can afford grad school—and, in some cases, the primary ways that graduate programs attract and retain their grad students.

But threshold conscripts means more than that, too. RCTAships are rife with thresholds including, but not limited to, those included in the now very well-known collection *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle. There are five broad threshold concepts described in the collection, but they require 44 separate pieces in their articulations—and only one of those 44 actually focuses on TAships. TAs cross the threshold of teaching for their graduate universities and for programs unique to those institutions. They can be crossing the threshold of teaching in a less contingent way than they have in the past. They can be crossing the threshold into teaching for the first time, maybe newly at the post-secondary level. They may have been undergraduate writing tutors before they came to grad school. They may have been community literacy advocates. They may be accustomed to working in certain ways because of the populations or contexts of their teaching, tutoring, or advocacy before the TAship. They may have had to take deep dives into relationships with their friends, families, finances, or their own identities to become a TA. They are accumulating essential information about that particular institution in that specific program. And—because graduate school can be so different from what precedes or follows it, let alone contrasts between institutions and programs—because TAships make those experiences so different from those of non-TAs in the same programs (I am not even sure that happens as much anymore.); these TA experiences, concepts, transitions are both absolutely necessary to move forward and, potentially, definitive of so much that follows. So, “threshold conscripts” recognizes the immense changes that accompany TAships, that those changes are essential to what follows, and that those changes later be reconsidered, even if the TAship can construe graduate education in particular ways. If for no other reason than so many TAs teaching writing courses are pressed into that service without any other real option—other than to potentially not attend graduate school. So, threshold conscripts is a more than

apt title for our collection because it both acknowledges the significant changes that occur and argues that many if not most TAs are not in a position to pick and choose what changes they encounter.

Additionally, what do we mean by the phrase “rhetoric and composition TAs”? We mean any TA who is teaching or tutoring writing as part of their TAs, especially but not exclusively those studying rhetoric and composition. Part of the challenge here is that the desire for a singular label is far outweighed by the variations among these positions. A primary argument for and within this collection is that such a singularity is not available and shouldn’t be artificially constructed given these real diversities. We are talking about TAs who are studying literature, creative writing, communications, STEM-focused writing, technical writing, multilingual writing, and sometimes even studying the teaching of FYC. We are talking about TAs who take on administrative roles in first-year writing programs, who work as writing fellows in other disciplines, who work in writing centers, and who teach FYC. One might argue that graduate students teaching FYC as adjuncts should be included here, too.

Initially, at least, we thought the phrase “rhetoric and composition TA” (RCTA) was an inclusive phrase that would allow us to discuss efficiently not only those who study rhetoric and composition as graduate students but those who end up teaching FYC courses and working in writing centers as part of a TAs, regardless of the academic home of that TAs. What we have found in building this collection is that, even within the narrowest definition of a TA teaching writing, there is incredible variation in both titles and responsibilities. While this can be read as testament to change and growth, it can also be understood as revealing little or no consistency. And this may be some part of a cause or an effect of RCTAs being locally defined.

TAs largely began when the people occupying such positions were much more homogenous in gender, race, socioeconomic status, career goals, and even focus of study. TAs teaching FYC are now much more diverse, not only in these terms of identity and purpose but also teaching experience, financial concerns, familial responsibilities, and material conditions, let alone professional presence. You will see that a number of our contributors articulate just how diverse! In fact, we have expanded this collection significantly just to take up more of these issues. So, to discuss these graduate assistantships that include teaching writing, we needed a touchstone, not a one-size-fits-all label. Thus, we have stuck with “RCTA” not because it is the most accurate or inclusive descriptor but, rather, because it is recognizable enough to serve as a point of intersection for the multiple, nuanced, and diverse discussions of these roles and positions. To preserve the genuine, lived diversities found in the field and in this collection, as well as within RCTAs themselves, we did not insist that our contributors use any

one term. A primary argument for this collection is that TAs should be able to speak for themselves from their own, real, lived experiences, which includes position titles that make sense to them.

We use here a number of other terms that we understand are fluid, not because we are lackadaisical but because we are trying to represent an extremely variegated landscape of TA roles and responsibilities. Like my earlier discussion of “RCTA” and its limitations, you will see throughout this collection that the terminology varies greatly from one context to another, one chapter to another, one set of experiences to another. We see this as a representational strength rather than a definitional weakness. We remain confident that readers will be able to handle that diversity.

## **TAS UNDER PRESSURE**

RCTAs are under significant pressure to perform in graduate school: to teach in programs, curricula, and institutions that are usually new to them; to begin and complete career-defining research; to professionalize within their studies and home institutions; and to ideologically locate and professionally define themselves as members of their field(s) both during and beyond their TAships—all on what is too often ridiculously low funding. These pressures are amplified even further for RCTAs whose identities and/or material conditions do not align readily with institutional habits and expectations. Even if the TA teaching in FYC is not pursuing a career in rhetoric and composition, these pressures remain—and some would argue are amplified by extra disciplinary dissonances. TAs swim in open seas of demands and expectations, which have the potential to define them for good or ill. From the new TA’s perspective, and perhaps even the perspectives of returning TAs, all of that working and trying-on and seeking of guidance and selecting of options and exploring of possibilities and performing against anxiety and imposter syndrome may seem scattered and tattered and unrelenting and at loose ends much of the time.

For those of us who have been through the process ourselves, and who have guided students through the process, that liminality is familiar because, from our perspectives, where it begins and ends remains relatively stable across individual cases. That kind of certainty would be invaluable to our TAs and graduate students, to be sure, but our certainty is not available in their experiences. TAs are encountering, inhabiting, and crossing new, unfamiliar, and significant thresholds before and between roles without experience or context to tell them how to do it or how it will work out. Some of why we, their predecessors and mentors, remember so well these processes is because of the intensities we experienced going through them. From the point of view of we who have guided many through

the process, a terribly reductive argument might be offered, that TAs are largely starting as students and ending as professionals, and their justifiable anxiousness is just some kind of natural feature of the process. These are similar experiences for most of us, too, after all. However, this oversimplification denies the impact of TAs' lived experiences even while it reflects the knowledge and experience of mentors who guide them, not to mention washing out the recursive and ongoing challenges TAs face. Both perspectives must be a part of any understanding of a RCTAship because neither alone represents it fully or accurately.

In some ways, this resonates with the descriptions in some of our survivalist and functionalist WPA scholarship. Focusing on pragmatic problem-solving can mean "putting out fires" and looking for any opportunity to take a breath. Catherine Latterell suggests that WPAs "often navigate a realm of compromise where we are asked to accept less-than-ideal circumstances and already blurred authority" (37). She goes on to advocate for:

. . . an ethics of action whereby people's identity and authority are based in their sense of connection to and responsibility for others. A key step in replacing hierarchical practices with this approach lies in rethinking roles and responsibilities graduate students undertake . . . in ways that are sensitive to shifting dynamics of power. (38)

This is a tall order for WPAs who are so often fighting for survival daily, as well as for our field and our programs. How reasonable is it then to ask this of neophytes who are not yet fully connected to their roles, and who don't know what to prioritize as they try to take on new and significant responsibilities for themselves and others? How likely is it that these opportunities have been or will be extended to TAs before those TAs are seen and heard in their own right?

And that is one of the major philosophical and practical points of this collection: it is simply not enough for TAs to be represented and selectively quoted by others. Those others, whom Elizabeth Rankin describes as always "colonizers," cannot be the colonized they seek to represent, which means that there is some chance that the representations will be about what is brought to the research rather than what is found in it (42). While these types of studies have done a great deal of work to explicate and understand TAs, TAs themselves who are smart enough and hardworking enough to become TAs are more than up to the challenge of speaking for themselves if given genuine opportunities to do so.

To reduce the experiences of TAs to distant and rote roles ignores the richness of TA experiences and individualities; it underserves our TAs and undervalues the importance of the RCTAship as well. And that is easy to do when those around the TA are working so hard to survive. Thus, this collection values

and examines TA experiences and knowledge as essential to understanding the RCTAship from close-up. But it also argues that the collection and interaction of these perspectives with WPAs and others enlivens these inquiries.

We, the editors here, see an abundance of scholarship available from the perspectives of directors, advisors, and mentors. We also now understand that there are still other questions and considerations that we can start to work through within this collection, but we can do so only by bringing TA voices and experiences more prominently into the discussion as the informed experts on these experiences and on these conditions. And we do so in ways that are not the norm, which would be representations of TAs and their perspectives through the eyes, experiences, and priorities of others who are not TAs or through narrative, anecdote, or exposition. This collection will do this important work from TAs speaking for themselves, and in the interests of WPAs who build, run, and assess rhetoric and composition programs that include TAs. We began this project with an interest in understanding the experiences and insights of RCTAs and intend to provoke a conversation about how that understanding can begin a larger envisioning of the TAship and its role in rhetoric and composition. Certainly, there are any number of other questions and concerns that this collection might have taken up, but we will focus on RCTAs for an audience of TAs and WPAs, and thereby begin discussions of what these TAships might foster, provoke, or ground for the TAs who inhabit them and the programs established to prepare TAs for their professional lives.

## **SQUEEZING IN THE STORY**

Hermione Hoby, a novelist, recently shared insights about delimiting relationships in her writing in order to make them seem whole for readers. She quotes Henry James: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.” In short, writers must create boundaries that would not exist in the world outside of their texts. Hoby explains, “What I love about novels is the way in which a web of refracted perceptions constitute meaning” (quoted in Carroll). In a lot of ways, researchers writing about RCTAships have to create synthetic boundaries to make the subject matter manageable, and they can do so through the prism of programmatic perspectives.

Like novelists and literary theorists, TAship scholars are trying to represent unbounded relationships and experiences in a bounded way. By doing so, however, they are deploying and revealing the constraints they have had to impose on their inquiries. And the repetition of those constraints across time, articles,



and specializations have generated a collective way of understanding, or at least representing, RCTAships. I would not go so far as to call this “groupthink,” but I do think it is fair to suggest that we may be seeing here, relative to TAs in writing, an example of historical normalization (“Groupthink”). This is a good example of what Amy Lombardi recently called our field’s tendency to “hyper-macro-ize” difficult topics and, by doing so, reduce or exclude the human experiences and conditions involved in tough topics like diversity, equity, and inclusion (Lombardi).

This is why it is so important to note the significant absence of TAs as contributing researchers and scholars in this body of research. They can and will speak to these issues from a totally different perspective, even while they deploy high-quality research, arguments, and evidence—the difference is they have a decidedly different perspective from the now familiar programmatic perspectives offered in most research in this area. TAs have not been sufficiently advanced beyond research subjects or, if they have moved into direct contributor roles, it is so often limited to anecdotal, expository storytelling as opposed to professional research and scholarly writing.

The resulting picture, then, is necessarily skewed. It is once removed. If we were to think of this in terms of Thomas Deans’ taxonomy of writing related to communities, this approach can only be “writing about” TAs; there really is no opportunity for the more engaged and engaging “writing with” or “writing for” this community (Deans). This is not a flaw in the researchers who are doing the essential work of explicating TA experiences and working conditions. Neither is it a flaw in the research and scholarship itself. It really is an issue of the culture in which this work is being done, the norms and practices that delimit the roles of graduate students, TAs, and neophyte teachers in our fields’ scholarship and research.

The building of this collection may be an apt example of the lore that delimits TA roles even in the work of understanding their experiences. More than one colleague warned me that building this collection would be difficult because the work involves a number of graduate students. I asked what graduate student projects provoked these warnings but specifics weren’t really shared. This warning, which I obviously did not heed, is problematic because it seems to indicate that TAs are not qualified to contribute significantly to our collective bodies of knowledge, which has not been my experience before or during this project. And how are they to learn to contribute significantly if we don’t include them in that work? This perspective is also problematic in that it represents a lore, trope, or convention. It is perpetuated not directly through trying and failing but through avoiding the possibility of problems preemptively—in other words, it is assumed that there will be problems, so better to not try it at all. Again, this has not been my experience.

This project has been challenging, to be sure, but no more so than other similar projects with folks not in graduate school. We, the other editors and I, agreed at the outset that a big part of this work was their learning how to build a project like this one. But the selection of editors and contributors was not wholly altruistic on my part (and I can say I have truly come to love and respect these folks even more fully than I could have imagined). It was also essential to the success of the project that the editors, as well as the contributors, have firsthand and recent experience TAing. To ensure that we included those most current and relevant voices and experiences, we needed editors who have RC-TAships in very recent memory. And, in building this collection, that has been the lens: to ensure that the lived experience of TAs is adequately represented and make sure we treat TAs as colleagues whose insights and analyses are valued appropriately.

As I discuss selected research and scholarship related to TAs in writing, my goal is to ask where the TAs are in those discussions and what impact their absence may have had on the deliverables. What is most important to understand here is not the flaws or limitations in the body of research to date but, rather, to question how the perspective is shaped and delimited by the glaring absence of those most directly involved and most immediately informed about RCTAships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the TAs themselves. What does it mean that they are largely included only as research subjects, to be represented and interpreted by others who are not in their roles, who are not having their same experiences? What does it mean that when TAs do participate in scholarship in this area, beyond the role of research subject, their roles are so often limited to expository writing that simply does not carry the cultural capital that other genres do, the genres so highly valued by faculty, directors, deans, and provosts, by the people who make hiring, firing, promotion, and tenure decisions, among others?

The richness and complexities of RCTAships are selectively represented in the literature, and TAships' importance as entrée into the profession is somewhat acknowledged in important ways. Rhetoric and composition literature could continue to discuss from familiar perspectives and positions the RCTAship and its relationship to priorities in the field and professionalization goals, as it has for 40 years and maybe as many as 90 (Brown and Conner). *Threshold Conscripts* hopes to contribute to a new approach to complement the extensive and important scholarship to date and seeks here to invite TAs as scholars towards those ends. Thus, part of the opaqueness of these TAships is a reflexive opaqueness—the kinds of questions and answers that TAs can express, explore, and answer are essential to a complete picture of those TAships, and they have not yet been fully available because the TAs have not been able to speak to them within the traditions of scholarly publications on this topic.

*Threshold Conscripts* cannot take on the whole of this responsibility, but it can bring much needed attention to the TAs as they exist now and, by doing so, open the door to new considerations from other perspectives, with other questions, and begin to address other purposes. A brief review of existing literature will help to illustrate both the promise here and the peril of continuing to ignore these challenges. The purpose in this review is to consider what is missing and what the inclusion of TAs as their own spokespersons might enable.

We are not the first to attempt such a project, although our purposes and foci are unique, I think. Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter's 1993 collection, *Writing Ourselves Into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies* is a good example of collections that work to include diverse voices and perspectives on our field(s). The collection includes several pieces on graduate education, too, but the gist of the collection is to represent those already working in the field of composition, not those who are working to make their ways into it. Within *Writing Ourselves Into the Story*, Chris Anson's "Rites of Passage: Reflections on Disciplinary Enculturation in Composition" discusses in some detail the seeming mismatch between the variegated field of composition and what seemed to him graduate student expectations of disciplinary coherence and stability. Would TAs, recent and/or current then, have told the same stories, in the same ways? Is it a kind of privilege that scholars like Anson can enjoy, publishing work like this? Michael Pemberton's "Tales Too Terrible to Tell: Unstated Truths and Underpreparation in Graduate Composition Programs" discusses at length the lack of appropriate graduate program preparation for the administrative roles so many new composition graduates were and are expected to take on, often their first jobs. I wonder what the discussion would have been like had recent and/or current TAs been invited to discuss and describe their perspectives. I am not complaining that these pieces are lacking anything. The fact that both remain recognizable and important is testimony to their importance. I am simply asking what graduate student and/or TA perspectives would have changed or included, with the idea in mind, too, that Pemberton and Anson were familiar voices back then, too, as they are now.

Scholarship from the point of view of TAs does exist. In 2000, Tina Good and Leanne B. Warshauer published *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing*. The collection brings together 30 short essays, mostly authored by current graduate students, on their work as TAs. The majority of those essays focus on the practice of teaching, on pedagogy, responding to student writing, grading, and the like. I wonder, if the TAs had been able to control the content of the collection, had been making the decisions about what their voices should be representing, whether they would have focused so much on practice and pedagogy. It is very possible that they would have because pedagogy and classroom practice are so much less risky topics than personal challenges in graduate school. When

we were building this collection, I was emailed more than once by friends and colleagues, asking me to remember that graduate students might not feel safe publicly discussing these kinds of issues. They might be reluctant to respond because the risks might just feel too significant.

But, even then, more than 20 years ago when *In Our Own Voice* was published, the collection included discussion of working conditions and the experiences of TAs trying to negotiate their places in a context unfamiliar to them. Particularly, Brian K. Bly's "Uneasy Transitions: The Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Composition Program" discusses the realities of the hard turn TAs must often make as they enter their graduate programs as both students and teachers. Patrick J. Bettencourt's "Voicing Experience" discusses who speaks for our profession and that the voices of TAs are too readily washed out by them. You will see some of these same questions and concerns raised here, in *Threshold Conscripts*. One interpretation of this commonality is lending credibility to these concerns. Another observation might be that we are still dealing with these same issues 20 years on. Good and Warshauer's *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing* is an early and compelling example of the insightful value of TAs' voices in discussing and describing their experiences. In some ways, *Threshold Conscripts* seeks to complement that work by inviting the focus to shift to TA experiences and TA efforts themselves, topics that RCTAs now consider worthy of attention.

While Good and Warshauer's collection focuses on the pedagogy and practice of teaching writing, Jessica Restaino's 2012 work *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground* advances this more current type of inquiry by turning readers' attentions to the TAs themselves, as the experiencers of TAships, teaching writing and finding their ways in their programs and professionalization. The insights Restaino's four participants provide not only deepen understanding of the rhetoric and composition TAship but provide opportunities to further develop theory and pedagogy beyond the TAship. These kinds of inquiries and studies add insights and opportunities that are simply not possible from other perspectives. Work like Restaino's has already had an impact: "This study will profoundly impact the way I think about my work with graduate teaching assistants . . ." (Rose 227). But remember that all we hear from and about these TAs is through one researcher/author, not directly from the TAs. This does not call into question the veracity of what appears but, just the same, considers the purposes and lenses that the author brings to bare in her representations of her research subjects. Would the RCTAs have chosen the same topics? Would they have prioritized the same perspectives?

Within this current context and this collection—as you may have already discerned—the characterizations of the scholarship on TAships in writing seek to overtly generate a "slant" (Dickinson) that will eventually help to tie together

more varied perspectives to the RCTAship. In some ways, one slant must be a reflection or response to others. Fontaine and Hunter's slant was to focus on diversity among contingent teachers and where their attentions are focused. Good and Warshauer's slant was more focused on classroom practice and pedagogy. But what if TAs could choose their own slants? More generally, as noted earlier, many discussions of TAs really focus on programs, on writing programs, and grad programs in which TAs participate, usually focusing on those programs' peculiar programmatic interests while not surfacing TAs working so hard to negotiate among those too often competing interests. Some discussions are more historical in nature, taking broad views of our fields and professions. There is no question that TAs are there, involved, essential, but the TAs themselves are seldom a focus nor "the first voices we hear" (Royster). Seldom are those voices first heard from outside of dominant group identities. However, no matter which lens is evoked, the TAs are there working, studying, teaching, and trying to survive, and they are represented if only indirectly.

## **MICRO, MEZZO, MACRO**

I will use what I am calling micro, mezzo, and macro-level perspectives to help characterize current scholarship most engaged with RCTAships. Broadly, the micro level of research related to RCTAships focuses on the TAs themselves. Those at the mezzo level tend to focus on broader concerns such as programs, institutions, and/or field-level concerns. For our purposes here, these mezzo-level discussions will include and impact RCTAs to varying degrees, but they look beyond the individual, the case study, or the small cohort to broader concerns in terms of scope. Macro-level scholarship related to RCTAs at issues and challenges with the same scope as mezzo-level scholarship or larger, but it also adds in the perspective of looking at issues and questions over extended periods of time and contexts.

There is an irony here that is worth noticing. If you think about how RCTAs might be introduced to rhetoric and composition, it is often through more sweeping kinds of overviews of the field, its history, and trends over time. This makes good sense because one needs such a context in order to appreciate and understand current conditions, theoretical shifts, historical sequences, and the like. The irony is that this level of scholarship, at what I call the macro-level among the three categories I describe here, includes the least overt discussion of the essential roles and responsibilities of TAs in writing as a field. So, in some ways, the very introduction to the field that TAs get may actually exclude them. The mezzo-level scholarship will describe programs and contexts within which RCTAs are involved and acknowledge many of the conditions inherent in them but, still, RCTAs will not hear voices like their own, will not see a lot of RCTAs

like themselves speaking in scholarly ways through the field-defining work they read. It is not until they are reading and studying at the micro-level that they will begin to see themselves in any kind of active, overtly participatory way, if they see that scholarship at all. Many will not delve into these studies and articles.

So, the irony is that when RCTAs are least connected to their new fields, they will probably see themselves least in that field's literature. When they are most in need of touchpoints that help them to see themselves as part of writing studies, the literature they study will show them least as participants and contributors. As Anson pointed out, graduate students can often expect a unified and cohesive discipline; such an expectation relative to scholarship that does not really represent TAs overtly or significantly could indicate to new RCTAs that their presence is not essential. Another irony is that, in this particular construction, the RCTAs could potentially not find evidence of their roles' importance until long after they have found other motivations for continuing their studies and working at the too often conflicting responsibilities of TAs teaching writing.

As suggested above, the direct consideration of TA experiences within their TAships and/or as a result of their TAships could be considered a "micro-level" discussion. I would characterize this work in this way because it so often looks at one or a small number of TAs and focuses on those experiences specifically. Explicating TA experiences in this way is not an effort to minimize their importance but, rather, is a way to understand the rhetoric and composition TAship "on the ground" and to differentiate that perspective from others in terms of scope and experience. The studies and research found in this collection will typically represent this level of research in some part. This perspective is essential to any larger understanding because there has been relatively little work done here, and very little of the extant work is voiced by those directly impacted, meaning the TAs themselves. Scholarship in this general category might include qualitative approaches to TAs or small groups of TAs in a particular program or cohort, case study research focused on single TAs or small groups of TAs, or even longitudinal studies of rhetoric and composition TAs as they move through their graduate programs and potentially into their careers afterward. Certainly, research such as the work of Heidi Estrem, E. Shelley Reid, Jessica Restaino, and others have already demonstrated the power and importance of such inquiry.

The literature on TAs teaching writing that deploys such micro lenses is consistently sensitive and sympathetic to the challenges facing TAs who are learning to teach writing. There is abundant acknowledgment of the numerous and competing forces shaping the experiences and development of TA writing teachers (Restaino; Reid et al.). "The first semester is more of a day-to-day keeping afloat than it is a carefully constructed, planned course" is a familiar sentiment among these pieces (Restaino 1). These pieces acknowledge a number of essential

conditions that seem all too consistent for TAs who teach writing. Restaino points out two of these essential challenges, what she calls the “shaky foundation on which writing programs and scholarship rest” (2) and the dearth of TA voices on their experiences. She goes on to write:

While significant work exists on the preparation of new writing teachers—on topics ranging from mentoring programs to practicum courses—I want to argue that much of this work does not theorize the early experience of graduate students as writing teachers and its potential shaping of graduate students’ understanding of composition as a discipline, nor the relationships between how writing instruction has been theorized and how it is practiced in the classroom. (Restaino 2)

In some ways, Restaino argues that this research about an essential role and position in our profession gets short shrift, on the front end, by excluding the experiences of those who could most knowingly inform us. On the back end, the scholarship may not think through enough the outcomes of such introductions to our field. If TAs teaching writing are paying attention, they may see that their voices are not abundant, despite their empirical exigence, and that the field is shaky from the start. This is compounded by our knowing that “one graduate pedagogy seminar is not and cannot be a one-shot teaching inoculation” (Estrem and Reid 474). Estrem and Reid go on to say that “When we communicate to new instructors early on that they can fully learn to teach in a short period of time, we short-circuit their opportunities for growth” (Estrem and Reid 475). We may also, inadvertently, be suggesting to them that they are somehow substandard when they aren’t learning everything they need to know about teaching writing in a few days or weeks. The TAs in Estrem and Reid’s study—as well as Estrem and Reid themselves—acknowledge that learning to teach writing takes time, that it is recursive, and that it is difficult. Combined with TA voices being excluded, the impressions of the field they acquire, and that they are learning too slowly . . . no wonder TAs teaching writing experience such challenges, conflicts, and dissonance in their work. Meanwhile, how well can we who are not TAs understand the real lived experiences of those TAs in writing if we have to rely on memory of our own experiences and/or lore that is privileged by the publications in our field? What would those TA voices say that confirms what is already being said? How would they contest it? How much more informed could we all be if TAs were a direct and respected part of the conversation?

The solutions/responses to those challenging conditions and competing interests for the RCTA often seem to expect that the TAs themselves should work their own ways out of these circumstances. In Reid’s 2017 “On Learning To

Teach: A Letter to a New TA,” the solutions are all about what the TA can do, which can be empowering but also may indicate something about what can change and what cannot. While the spirit of the letter is to support TAs and provide them with guidance on how they can make it all work, the six strategies are all on the TA. In short, doing well is on the TA and—while there is ample acknowledgment across this scholarship that the circumstances and conditions within which TAs work and learn are significantly more challenging than they have to be—the responsibility comes to rest on the shoulders of TAs because they are “expert learners” (Reid, “On Learning” 140). How might RCTAs respond to this idea? We don’t know because their voices are not available in our scholarship, at least not fully and not yet.

Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir readily acknowledge that their “data strongly suggest that as a field, we all need to move beyond seeing the inoculation method as officially sufficient and need to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to realize returns on the intensive investment of our pedagogy education efforts” (62). However, in that same year and in another article, Reid advocates making more demanding assignments in our writing pedagogy courses to encourage exploration and critical reflection (“Preparing”). So, we should make it more difficult for TAs in order to confirm the goals of WPAs or graduate faculty? What would TAs teaching writing suggest as ways to encourage exploration and critical reflection? We don’t really know.

One reading of this body of relatively current literature is a clear awareness of the shortcomings regarding what is done to and what results for RCTAs, especially in terms of what happens to the TAs themselves as aspirants and neophytes to writing studies. However, so much of the change proposed seems to be on the parts of the TAs. Those TAs are engaged by programs based on unsteady foundations, which are too abbreviated in their trainings to allow TAs to really dig deeply into theory or practice, and not even our primary professional organizations are doing as much as they might to support these TAs or their teachers (Reid, “Teaching”). And yet it seems as though the remedies have to come from the TAs themselves. It would be so interesting and useful to understand these questions and possible solutions from the perspectives of the RCTAs themselves, to hear them speak to these issues, to see their reasoning and evidence.

So, at this micro-level, it seems as though we can see TAs, but only through the lenses of more established scholars. We can understand and articulate the unfortunate conditions within which RCTAs find themselves academic conscripts, making their ways through multiple thresholds of significant change and challenge, but we can’t really hear them speak to those conditions. We acknowledge their plight, but we seem reluctant to trust their voices as we might others living experiences we wish to understand.



Much of the scholarship that involves RCTAs has also been focused on what I would describe as a “mezzo-level.” This scholarship is produced by faculty and scholars tending to work in leadership roles with RCTAs, and it is often focused on programs for or involving TAs. This level also includes discursive practices and habits in segments of the field. In other words, mezzo-level scholarship is differentiated from micro-level scholarship because its scope is broader and it focuses much less on individuals or small groups of individuals. This scholarship’s focus can include TAs, but the emphasis tends to be on programs or curricula that include TAs. Program participants, like TAs, can be informed research participants, informants, or research subjects whose insights are essential to understanding what the programs do and accomplish, but these participants are not usually the focus of the research. Several contributions to this collection would fit into this strata of research, as well, even while they privilege the voices of RCTAs.

An example of this type of scholarship might be Mary Soliday’s *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments across the Disciplines*. This research focuses on doctoral students working as “writing fellows” alongside disciplinary faculty to support writing across the curriculum. Certainly, this work could be strategic in the development of the graduate students involved in and part of larger efforts in professional development and research for those students. Clearly, the fellows were essential to the program, but they were not the focus of the study. This is not a flaw but rather a point of discussion relative to TAs’ roles and participation.

Another example is Sidney I. Dobrin’s *Don’t Call It That: The Composition Practicum*. The composition practicum is so often a course that accompanies RCTAships and works to inform the practicalities of TAs teaching in FYC. Dobrin explains that the

... “practicum” more often than not serves as an introduction to composition theory, to research methodologies, to pedagogical theory, to histories of composition studies as a discipline, and to larger disciplinary questions about writing, not just to teach writing per se. (1-2)

It is telling that the title of Dobrin’s introduction is “Finding Space for the Composition Practicum.” One might argue that the disaggregation of rhetoric and composition graduate programs from FYC programs has led to competition between them, rather than collaboration. One might also argue that these competitive practices are represented in some part by the segmentation of the relevant literature. One might even go so far as to argue that a constant, such as the knowledge development and professionalization of RCTAs, could support now segregated programs in beginning to cooperate on larger agendas and purposes. One of the longstanding logistical challenges has been that, so often, RCTAs

are starting to teach well before they have had time to absorb much of what a practicum offers. There are programs that are structured to avoid this particular problem, but they are the exception rather than the rule, I suspect.

One of the more interesting questions at this level is the discussion of TA resistance. In 2019, Eric D. Brown and Savanna G. Conner published “Forty Years of Resistance in TA Education” in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* on the occasion of WPA’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The authors were careful to say that “most of the resisters were TAs outside of composition and rhetoric,” but they continued in the piece to treat TAs as a singularity (65). The authors did a very good job of surveying and summarizing *WPA*’s publications on this topic, but there were some curious dissonances within the three-and-a-half-page article, not including citations. This article provides a number of opportunities to consider just how differently these issues might have been discussed if the authors had sought to represent the perspectives of TAs rather than the journal.

Discussing Reid et al.’s 2012 article, the authors reported that “TAs ‘place more value on their own experiences or those of their peers than on the [theories] they are learning’” (66). Consider the numbers of new roles and responsibilities TAs are taking on in these positions. They have to be excellent teachers, excellent students, excellent readers and writers and thinkers and speakers and listeners. . . and their orientation lasted a week. They should have everything they need, or at least they as neophytes are led to believe so. Thus, could their relying on experience and one another be a function of what they might be encouraged to assume by their training and what they are expected to carry by their programs rather than a qualitative choice about sources?

Brown and Conner also quote a 1986 article by Diogenes et al. in which the writers say that “TAs were ‘the academic equivalent of truck stop waitresses’” (67), suggesting this as a way to discuss perceived resistance to professionalization. Not unlike a truck stop waitress, could it be that TAs just have their hands full and too many tables to attend to? Could it be that their work is undervalued and their skills unrecognized? Could it be that TAs are underappreciated and overworked? I bet that, if TAs were asked instead, that story might have come out very differently. The point here is not that these authors are wrong nor that the articles they cite are malicious or incorrect. Rather, what I am hoping to reveal is that there is a disciplinary perspective represented here, one with which the TAs themselves would not likely agree. What these researchers and writers see as resistance may, from the perspectives of actual TAs, simply be choices made in the interest of survival. What is construed here as resistance to composition theory may simply be out of step with the demands of being dumped into a FYC classroom after only a week or two of preparation—again, survival that calls for practical responses rather than theoretical ones. Could it be that what is called resistance to professionalization

is actually simply trying to survive what is happening now? I am sure that many RCTAs would agree with that analysis. Meaghan Brewer, in her 2020 book *Conceptions of Literacy: Graduate Instructors and the Teaching of First-Year Composition* suggests that the problem may be much simpler than resistance. Instead of resistance, she suggests, it may simply be that RCTAs are being asked to be something that they have never seen nor been before, among all of the other things they are being asked to be, do, understand, practice, and produce for the very first times. The simplest explanation can often times be the most likely.

Remember, too, that these same neophytes will more than likely be reading scholarship that does not include them in overt ways, that does not sound like them or represent their work in recognizable ways. Early on in their TAships, everything is aspirational rather than empirical. They are expected to perform all of their roles with complete success, without fail or flaw. Who among them will likely ask for help? Where will they find the time to theorize deeply between classes they are teaching? How will they make room for recognizable professionalization? At the mezzo-level of RCTA scholarship, we may not see the most accurate and complete picture of TAs in situ, but we might be able to see the ways in which TAs are both relied upon and underrepresented.

‘Macro-level’ scholarship is the broadest in scope and range; it can be understood as meta-scholarship in many ways, which can include histories of the field or segments of the field, surveys of literature, and/or analyses of broad trends and movements. These are overviews. “Macro-level” scholarship could also include “state-of the profession” kinds of discussions, and/or sourcebooks or rhetorics for particular specialties. Again, these would be broad, meta-discussions in time, scale, scope, etc. As essential a role as the RCTAship has played in the development of so many leaders in the field, as well as TAs’ substantial contributions to programs that rhetoric and composition professionals so often take charge of (ESL programs, writing centers, WAC/WID, FYC, etc.), one might expect that TAs would figure prominently at this level of scholarship—at all three levels, for that matter. However, it is also fair to say that these texts are often so broad in scope that focusing on one type of participant, even if that one is extremely important, can be challenging at best.

A primary type of “macro-level” text is the history. Histories often argue for particular origins because those origins can then be understood as guideposts along the way to particular outcomes. Historical origin stories can frame understandings of the field in ways that explain and complicate, such as John C. Brereton’s *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History*. Others track movements and influences within the field toward arguments about why the field is what it is, such as James A. Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*

and *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* and Robert J. Connors' *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*. Still others look to complicate and challenge ideas about where the field comes from, such as in Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, or propose new conceptions of the field's history toward disrupting tacit theoretical assumptions and/or dealing with new challenges that former frames inadequately addressed, such as *A Counter-History of Composition* by Byron Hawk. Others can focus on one area alone, such as rhetoric (Gold; Kitzhaber), on particular time frames (Berlin; Harris; Tobin and Newkirk), or on particular sub-specializations (Palmeri; Strickland). These histories tend not to include discussions of RCTAships, despite these TAships' prevalence and impact.

'Macro' texts focused on writing programs, where TAships live, can be historical, too, such as Barbara L'Eplattenier and Lisa Mastrangelo's *Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration: Individuals, Communities, and the Formation of a Discipline*. Neal Lerner has done similar historical work regarding writing centers in *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory*—I mention this because many RCTAs do work in writing centers, as well as in FYC and/or WAC/WID programs. Few if any of these historical texts amplify the experiences of RCTAs.

Other "macro" texts on writing programs can do a bit more with RCTAships. Kelly Ritter and Melissa Ianetta's collection *Landmark Essays on Writing Program Administration* includes two pieces that discuss teacher education specifically—and certainly other contributions discuss it, as well: Micciche's "More Than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work" and Rachael Green-Howard's "Building a WPA Library: A Bibliographic Exploration of the Field." However, these essays deal with teacher education in broad terms, are not focused on the TAs themselves, and do not differentiate—and may not even include—TAs among the teachers they consider. Of course, and again to be fair, covering a field in a single volume or article means that a lot has to be left out, so the expectation of focus on RCTAships here should be tempered at least. However, where we might also expect to find some discussion of the RCTAships is in sourcebooks for WPAs.

A good example of these texts is Irene Ward and William J. Carpenter's *The Allyn & Bacon Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators*, where an entire section of the collection is devoted to TA training and staff development. In contrast, Stuart C. Brown and Theresa Enos' *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource: A Guide to Reflective Institutional Practice* contains two essays including direct discussions of TAs in rhetoric and composition to varying degrees: Louise Wetherbee Phelps' "Turtles All the Way Down: Educating Academic Leaders" and Meg Morgan's "The GTA Experience: Grounding, Practicing, Evaluating, and Reflecting." Of course, other inclusions in Brown and Enos are certainly related to graduate student education and WPA graduate courses, but these two essays are most

deliberate in considering TA experience. By and large, RCTAships are not prevalent in these “macro-level” texts and, when they are present, they tend to be discussed in brief and/or at some distance from those who actually occupy those TAships.

*Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context*, edited by Mary Jo Reiff et al., is one of a group of recent books to apply new lenses to writing programs. Seeing writing programs as ecologies affords a sensitivity to the interactions between constituencies within those ecologies. Included in *Ecologies* is Dively’s “Standardizing English 101 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale: Reflections on the Promise of Improved GTA Preparation and More Effective Writing Instruction,” which demonstrates both a strong sensitivity to the work and concerns of TAs participating in the FYC program at SIUC and a determined effort to include those same TAs in the discussion of program revision. In Rita Malenczyk’s *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators* second edition, TAs appear throughout the entire text and in many of the essays collected there. In Amy Goodburn et al.’s *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers*, TAs again appear throughout the text and within many of the essays included in the collection. Thus, it seems as though, in at least this latter segment of the “macro-level,” the presence and discussion of the RCTA seems to be increasing just as it is at the “micro-level” in studies of TAs.

I remind you that, as I stated earlier, these overviews are most prevalent at the start of graduate studies, in terms of assigned texts. Most programs and graduate faculty want students to have a strong sense of the field and the context for current work before they dive too deeply into specifics. And the voices of TAs are largely absent there, at the macro-level. The presence of TAs in writing programs and history is much more limited at this macro level than at the *mezzo* and more present at the micro-level than at the *mezzo*. And these texts tend to be read from macro to *mezzo* to micro, which it would seem is exactly the opposite of what new RCTAs need in terms of connecting with the field and in terms of seeing themselves as a part of that field.

TA voices and experiences seem to remain largely absent at all three levels. RCTA through-lines or throughputs across all three levels remain elusive. The effort to include the unique contributions of TAs more fully, explore representation of RCTAships more deeply, their liminalities and thresholds, challenges and rewards, must continue if we hope to better understand and more successfully develop those TAships for a changing world and employment market. I don’t think it an overstatement to say that rhetoric and composition relies on bringing into our field neophytes who see the work as valuable and valued; the absence of direct TA voices and perspectives may foul those purposes.

Clearly, there is room for further research on RCTAships at all three levels. There is certainly reason and opportunity to pursue research that works to build

from RCTAships to impact writing programs and the field, as well. Even more broadly, a generative emphasis on the RCTA as a substantial programmatic contributor has the potential to create a conceptual through-line that aggregates significant areas of rhetoric and composition as a field, both in practice and in the preparation of its future leaders. These are worthy outcomes of such a beginning as has been gathered here.

In light of these conditions, we have asked our contributors to first help in articulating and explicating liminalities and thresholds within RCTAships in relation to writing programs. Two purposes drive this request. First, the research and scholarship of this kind is still too limited, and we clearly need to know more about the lived experiences of these TAs. The work done by scholars cited in this introduction is insightful and revealing, but there simply isn't enough of it yet. We need to know more about what RCTAships *are* for those who participate in them and those who interact with them, beyond the constructed, anecdotal, or recalled. Second, the work of more overtly connecting RCTAships to writing programs and other, larger purposes in rhetoric and composition graduate education and professional preparation must build from what *is* rather than assumption, nostalgia, or fiction about what *was* or *might have been*. Starting from an informed perspective about what RCTAships are as experienced and researched, rather than what they might be, what we remember them as being, or what we would like them to be, provides opportunities to not only make informed adjustments as priorities are identified but also build on possibilities that extant conditions make possible. In other words, knowing what there *is* allows for changing what doesn't work in TAships and writing programs and building from what does.

Each chapter in this collection will also explore what its research into RCTAships may imply or suggest in relation to writing programs, larger rhetoric and composition curricula, and/or TAs' professional development. So, the result is more insight into RCTAships as experienced, a necessary "micro" step made toward mezzo (program) and macro (field/history) reconsiderations of a long-valued and seldom-appreciated professional milestone. Looking at RCTAships from the perspectives of those who experience them sets a strong foundation for what that TAship could be/come in writing programs, rhetoric and composition graduate education, and graduate student professional development. That is what *Threshold Conscripts* begins, as well as where it intends to finish.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed primarily for graduate students studying writing programs and for writing program administrators and others whose programmatic work impacts RCTAs, first and foremost to provide insights into TA experiences,

challenge assumptions, and increase understanding of those TAs as they matriculate through writing programs, their own studies, and the evolving roles and negotiations of identity, location, and stance. As TA roles and opportunities continue to evolve and grow—especially in relation to writing programs—insights into their lived experiences will become increasingly important. WPAs starting programs, revising programs, researching programs can all use this collection to gather insights into the experiences of RCTAs to both embrace opportunities and avoid pitfalls.

Readers can also use these chapters to generate new ideas for programs and TAs, as well as discard features of extant programs unlikely to accomplish intended outcomes. A primary hope for this collection is that readers will be able to use these pieces focused on RCTAs as foundational discussions toward more integrated and collectively organized writing programs that can work to strengthen those programs and provide comprehensive preparation and professional development for neophytes in our field(s). This wish applies to the individual, working to make the most of her own opportunities, as well as those who have opportunities to bring programs, curricula, and professional development into contact with more fully developed RCTAs. This collection only begins this important work with RCTAs.

There is another reader toward whom this collection reaches, and that is the TA studying in a rhetoric and composition graduate program and/or teaching/working in a writing program. We, the editors and contributors, hope that these readers can make direct and productive use of this collection in understanding and productively engaging with every opportunity in a RCTA and the programs where those TAs are active. This book can be used by TAs to understand more deeply what the TA can be, to see how TAs fit into the work and cultures of writing programs, to prepare for the ambiguities inherent within these roles and programs, to think critically about how the TA can be understood as a component of deliberate and comprehensive professional development within and between writing programs, to avoid some of the pitfalls of imposter syndrome and/or self-doubt, and to otherwise appreciate the opportunities a RCTA affords beyond simply covering tuition and providing a little stipend. Even if a TA is not going into rhetoric and composition, this collection can be useful in revealing the opportunities that TAs in writing programs can offer, as well as understanding more about teaching writing and FYC, which very well may be part of most professional teaching careers in English Studies and other allied fields.

So, reader, use this book to participate in deepening understanding of RCTAs in itself. Use it to explore that TA in relation to writing programs. Use it to consider RCTAs as foundational to integrated and vertical graduate

curricula, writing-related programs and centers, and professionalization in rhetoric and composition. Consider, reader, the experiences and challenges that RCTAships have and what those experiences might provoke, enable, cut-off, construe, predict, produce for the graduate students who participate in them, the writing programs that complicate them, and the graduate programs that provide them toward producing the next generations of rhetoric and composition professionals. Talk about “gettin’ in on the ground floor!” Begin here and see where you finish.

## HOW THIS COLLECTION IS ORGANIZED

This collection is organized in a roughly chronological order based on what RCTAs might experience: approaching the RCTAship, inhabiting the RCTAship, and transcending the RCTAship. This organization makes sense because it allows a representation of TA experiences while it creates an impression of a vertically structured RCTAship. The first section of chapters focuses on approaching RCTAships and looks at what TAs bring to the table, on where they start. The second section focuses on beginning RCTAships, on the FYC TA orientation, on the ways that TAs are prepared for their work as teachers and participants in writing programs. The third and final section focuses on understanding the RCTAs at work, on what these TAs do and how they do it. The chapters in this section work to dig more deeply into the experiences of the TAship in order to understand the complexities and complications that it includes. We have been describing these sections as approaching, inhabiting, and transcending the RCTAship, respectively. Organized in this way, the chapters contribute to an exploratory and accumulative experience that mimics and reflects RCTAships. In each section, Brady Edwards and Phil Lovas will introduce you to the theme and contents of the section. You will find four to five chapters interspersed with brief narratives from current and recent TAs. Each section concludes with a word cloud for that section that creates a visual representation of the primary themes and concepts within that section.

The Foreword and three sections of chapters, narratives, and word clouds is followed by a section we are calling “Program Profiles.” We included these profiles because we wanted to show that there are ways of dealing with TA experiences effectively from a programmatic perspective. These profiles show a range of creative and successful approaches to meeting the needs of TAs teaching writing. We invited contributors to describe programs that are working well to support TAs teaching writing through various means and combinations of efforts. As you will see, we have ten profiles that describe programmatic, social, and work culture responses that work.



The collection is organized in this way: Laura Micciche's foreword opens the work with connections she makes to the present collection. Following my introduction, the work is divided into three sections : approaching, inhabiting, and transcending the RCTAship. Each of these three sections includes four to six chapters and narratives. I describe these sections in more detail below. Dylan Dryer provides a provocative afterword for the collection, which is followed by our "Program Profiles," and the author and editor bios.

## APPROACHING RCTASHIPS

This first section is largely about new graduate students making their ways into RCTAships and recognizing the diversity of TAs. Rachel Gramer opens the section with an essential overview of TA research and then a detailed discussion of new possibilities for that research and what would change with shifts in our thinking about that research. Chapter Two is Jaquelyn Lugg's "The Gift of Authenticity: Writing Center Pedagogy and Integrated Identity Work in TA Education." Lugg examines the identity work TAs must do individually both before and early on in their TAships as part of acclimating to the demands and opportunities encountered there. The third chapter in this first section is Kali A. Mobley Finn's "Adapting, Not Resisting: A Preliminary Understanding of TAs' Relationships with Writing Pedagogy Education," which acknowledges the work that individuals do to prepare for their TAships, as well as the awareness that programs must build from this work and recognize their TAs' varied backgrounds and existing relationships with writing pedagogy. "Coming to Teaching: Moving Beyond a Blank-Slate Model of Developing Pedagogical Expertise" by Kathleen Blake Yancey, Rob Cole, Amanda May, and Katelyn Stark adds significantly to this section and complements Lugg's piece by presenting a careful programmatic consideration of the wide array of backgrounds with which TAs come into such programs. This piece also connects to Finn's chapter that focuses on what TAs bring to the table when they join a program. The section closes with Emily Jo Schwaller's chapter that studies the first two years of new RCTAs' teaching and graduate studies. This chapter gives a good overview of what happens with and to RCTAs as they make their ways into their studies and then onto inhabiting their roles and responsibilities.

The chapters in each section, including *Approaching the RCTAship*, are complemented by a selection of brief narratives from current and recent RCTAs that provide insights and discussions from "where the rubber meets the road." In other words, we complement the chapters with brief narratives because it is so important that we see people and positions in immediate as well as more elaborated ways. Narratives appear in this section, each one taking up a different

perspective and question but all grounded in the direct experiences of RCTAs: “First Day of Class” by I-Hsien Lee; “Locating Sound While Learning How to Teach” by Janelle Chu Capwell; “More Than My Teaching” by Eliza Gellis; and “Back to the Start: The Transition from Adjunct Professor to Ph.D. Student” by Matt Shering. We feel that these TA voices best portray the feelings, contributions, and struggles that RCTAs have as they *Approach* the field of rhetoric and composition as more than just students, and begin their evolution to teachers, researchers, mentors, etc. within the field.

## INHABITING RCTASHIPS

In the second section of the collection, the focus shifts to how RCTAs work within their TAships. The collection’s sixth chapter starts off this section with Leslie Anglesey’s “‘Survival is Insufficient’: Reimagining TA Orientation as Meaningful Threshold Boundaries.” Focused on TA preparation as an essential early step in TA preparation, Anglesey argues that listening is an essential means of shifting away from conveying information to coproduction of meaning at multiple levels. But the orientation and TA courses are only one part of these beginning experiences. Madelyn Pawlowski and Brad Jacobson’s “Shifting Roles and Negotiating Identities: TA Learning in Landscapes of Practice” responds to the challenges of practical demands made on TAs by suggesting communities of practice as useful means of handling the cacophony of demands. Chapter Eight, Zack K. De Piero and Jennifer K. Johnson’s “Doorways to Disciplinarity: Using Threshold Concepts to Bridge Disciplinary Divides and Develop Theory-Practice Praxis,” provides a rich discussion of threshold concepts as metaphorical supports for dealing with the increasing complexities inherent in adding multiple disciplines to TA development. Soha Youssef’s Chapter Nine, “International Teaching Assistants (ITAs)’ Needs and Undergraduate Native English-Speaking Students (NESS)’ Expectations: Meaning Negotiation as a Rhetorical Strategy” does a deep dive into the particular needs and challenges of TAs for whom English is not a first language. One of the challenges faced by many TAs is the contrasting genres and practices encountered as they move along in their experiences and development. This section concludes with Trixie Smith and Rachel Robinson-Zetzer’s work “I Feel It in My Body: WC and Administration as Embodied Praxis,” which explores LGBTQIA+ identities in writing center TA work.

*Inhabiting* also includes five brief narratives that complement the chapters in this section and help us to remember that lived experience is so important, especially when grad students are trying to survive and thrive. The narratives interspersed throughout this section include: “Student, Teacher, Teaching Assistant: Janus and Institutional Identity” by Jonathan Marine;<sup>37</sup> “Teaching Rhetoric

without a License” by Megan Friess; “IGTA” by Thir Budhathoki; “Always Beginning: Inhabiting the TAs hip after a Career” by Elizabeth Topping; and “‘Who is that Girl I See?’ Navigating the Identities of Student and Administrator as a Graduate WPA” by Analeigh Horton.

These narratives help us to understand the lived conditions of inhabiting RCTAs hips.

## TRANSCENDING RCTASHIPS

Our 11th chapter is Courtney Adams Wooten’s “The Pursuit of (Un)Happiness in Composition and Rhetoric TAs’ Experiences.” This chapter seeks to explore and understand more thoroughly the emotional and affective labor of TAs learning to teach writing. Melba Vélez Ortiz does a deep dive into language and identity to relate past experiences as a graduate writing tutor to current theory and teaching of writing in communications. Nicole Warwick’s “From Deficit to Asset: Rethinking Graduate Student Narratives” makes an argument for narratives and narrative research as ways to understand and explore more deeply the development of RCTAs, as well as give voice to the emotional and affective facets of TAing. Meghalee Das, Michelle Flahive, Jiaxin Zhang, and Michael J. Faris’ “Integrating the Marginalized and the Mainstream: Women of Color Graduate Instructors’ Experience with Identity, Difference, and Belonging” closes out the section with their careful discussion of identity and TAing, focusing on the process of reconciling identity and role in the TAs hip and beyond. The collection includes Dylan Dryer’s “Afterword: The Elephant in the Room,” which explores the very real questions and conditions of programs within which WPAs and RCTAs exist and work. And he even offers some solutions. The collection closes with a selection of “program profiles” that discuss a range of approaches to writing TA support systems.

*Transcending* also includes five brief narratives focused on how RCTAs thrive and transcend the boundaries of their TAs hips. These narratives testify to the creativity, endurance, and persistence of our RCTAs. The narratives in this section include “Collegiality as Transcendence Beyond the TAs hip” by Matthew Sansbury; “Worth” by Sarah Lonelodge; “Multiple Atypical Identities” by Gitte Frandsen; “Mom, Cancer Patient, Doctoral Candidate, TA” by Megen Farrow Boyett; and “Teaching is Physical, Emotional, and Intellectual Labor” by Charlotte Kupsch. Each of these pieces exemplifies what it takes to not only be an RCTA, but what it is taking for these individuals and those like them to inhabit the RCTAs hip effectively.

That’s how this edited collection does its work. *Threshold Conscripts* is a collection focused on the liminalities and thresholds of RCTAs hips, writ large and small. It works to question and amplify the unclear relationships between these

TAships and the too often tacit assumptions of professionalization, toward careers in rhetoric and composition in higher education. This edited collection is also about the thresholds that the RCTAship is, that it includes, that it introduces, and the thresholds and liminalities that can so often threaten to overwhelm our TAs. It is about institutional, disciplinary, and programmatic boundaries experienced by those newly (usually) in our field, about practical and pedagogical third spaces that are inhabited by rhetoric and composition professionals (Soja), and about theoretical, intellectual, and rhetorical crossings that are necessary even while dramatically disruptive to neophytes' understandings of rhetoric and composition in higher education (Land et al.). And the overarching challenge is questioning and clarifying what these RCTAships are beginning and what kind of finish they are intending. We hope, also, that RCTAs now and in the near future will be able to use this edited collection to critically prepare for their own participations in the future of rhetoric and composition, toward a deliberately integrated understanding and richly developed integration of RCTAships as one of several key moments in careers in this field.

For now—for this collection—we set our sights modestly. A strong start is important—small successes accomplish so much more than big failures. What RCTAs are being prepared for, what their liminal experiences and multiple threshold crossings contribute to, and the un/intended outcomes are important ends in themselves and should not be undervalued. They can be important parts of answering more global questions about these TAships even while they serve essential roles in answering more localized ones. However, I would ask that we think more broadly than that here:

When we think about the task of presenting this “world” of composition and its positioning in the university to a new group of graduate student writing teachers, we must contend with our relationship to all that defines composition and its positioning in the university today. The preparation of graduate students to teach writing needs to be continuously immersed in what we know about our writing programs, our undergraduate students, the ways in which writing pedagogy has been researched and theorized, and—I would argue—this still murky story of first-year writing's conflicted relationship to the larger university, to the existence of WPAs, and to what it means to make “knowledge” in this field. When we can prepare new writing teachers with an honest consideration of “what we are doing,” we are [. . .] equipping them to one day join this world, more fully, as change makers. (Restaino 112)

Amen! And, in order to present that more accurate and less murky story, we must first clarify for ourselves what RCTAships are in lived terms, with all of their liminalities and thresholds, and understand them within the contexts where they live and breathe—in fact, where they are lived and breathed from. To do so, we start here, with research that seeks to elucidate from inside the TAship what that experience and role are and could be, as a starting point for a more coherent conception of preparing our future colleagues. Nearly 30 years ago, Fontaine & Hunter wrote in their collection a way of understanding their important work, a framing that remains relevant today and for RCTAs and *Threshold Conscripts*, too:

Real changes in the way the story is unfolded, then, will not come from our simply being included or alluded to in the current narratives. To become heard does not mean to become part of the center or to move away from the borders . . . the voices gathered together here may not be raised again next year in another collection. And then again some may be. As we write ourselves into the story of composition, our unheard voices will not necessarily become tomorrow's heard voices. There's no guarantee. (15)

Let's hope that TAs' voices here and elsewhere do not simply pop up here and there and then simply fade away. They are too important for that.

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