

PROGRAM PROFILE 5.

**EQUITY THROUGH LEADERSHIP:  
THE GRADUATE STUDENT  
ADMINISTRATOR AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA**

**Khadeidra Billingsley, James Eubanks, and Luke Niiler**

University of Alabama

To better prepare graduate students for careers in writing program administration, many university English departments have created graduate student administrator (GSA) positions in first-year writing programs. There, the inequities already present in faculty WPA work (noted by McGee and Handa; McLeod; Micciche; and Adler-Kassner) often present themselves in even sharper relief. Peters argues that the GSA position can be characterized by inequitable, even inhospitable, working conditions, and suggests these factors can contribute to WPA spaces becoming “deeply entrenched system[s] of inequity” (133). Mountford notes that graduate WPAs often lack the political experience needed to navigate labyrinthine systems of power (51). In turn, Duffey et al. ask how we can help graduate students “understand and work for change in the material constraints of our local bureaucracies” (79). Navickas et al. emphasize the need for a support system for GSAs’ emotional labor (273), and Latterell centers the role of professionalizing, not “deskilling” graduate students as WPAs (23). With Latterell, then, we wish to argue that the presence of GSAs in writing program administration calls us to “move...away from continued reliance on hierarchical, fixed notions of administration-as-control and toward a view that is more dynamic and responsive” (24).

There are examples of writing programs committed to dismantling this type of hierarchical power structure and promoting equity among faculty, staff, and graduate student administrators. In this program profile, we will describe how the GSA has an established and integrated role within the administrative hierarchy of the first-year writing program (FWP) at The University of Alabama. We will demonstrate how the FWP GSA is perceived, by faculty and students alike, as an equal, not subordinate, of the WPA team: a move toward equity grounded in transformational leadership theory (TLT). This profile will illustrate how

equity is not treated as something that is being worked for; rather, it is something that is wholly present, ingrained in the daily work of the position. Here, we combine the voices, perspectives, and experiences of two former UA first-year writing graduate student administrators and the director who hired and worked alongside them. In collaboratively composing this profile, we reify the underlying principle of equity that contextualizes the relationships between WPAs and GSAs at The University of Alabama.

Each spring, a call for GSA applications is circulated on the English department listserv. A condensed version follows:

The Graduate Student Administrator is an administrative position that carries one course release. The GSA will work ten hours per week, reports to the Director of the First-year Writing Program, and works with the Associate and Assistant Directors, as needed. Responsibilities include:

- Attending and contributing to all weekly FWP administrative staff meetings;
- Completing semi-annual reviews of syllabi, book orders, and grade reports;
- Assisting with program initiatives (e.g. assessment, curating student writing);
- Co-teaching FWP spring and summer orientation sessions;
- Mentoring first-time-teaching GTAs; and
- Contributing to program research.

The GSA should work effectively and independently on all assigned tasks as they arise, and will be encouraged and supported as they pursue projects that coincide with their interests. Applicants must have completed UA's teaching practicum and taught the full First-Year Writing sequence.

As delineated in the above position description, equity is foundational to the GSA role: the GSA “assists,” “mentors,” and “contributes,” with nominal emphasis on clerical tasks. The FWP Director makes it clear in the search process that the expectation for GSAs is the same for the rest of the administrative team. As is the case with the associate and assistant directors, the GSA submits a vita and references, which are then shared with the entire administrative team, which then convenes to interview each candidate. Once in the position, the GSA is expected to contribute to discussions and decision-making as they would if they were a faculty administrator. The position engages students in various WPA work and tasks that many graduate students do not have the privilege to

experience while pursuing their studies. Once a graduate student has completed their one year of service in the position, they have *tangible leadership experiences* they can leverage as they continue their careers.

These leadership experiences are grounded in (TLT). As Dvir, Edent, Avolio, and Shamir have argued, and as Niiler has previously discussed, transformational leadership challenges and supports followers (in this instance, GSAs) to perform beyond expectations. By doing so graduate students acquire a stronger sense of self-efficacy, or the perceived ability to perform a task. Bandura terms such moments “mastery experiences.”

Bass notes that a transformational leader is an *idealized influence*, or role model. Such leaders provide *inspirational motivation* by communicating a vision and making sure that followers are committed to shared goals. Transformational leaders provide *intellectual stimulation*; they’re creative, and they continually seek out new ways of solving problems. In addition, transformational leadership involves *individualized attention*, as per Northington. Drawing upon Bass, Northington finds that highly effective collegiate athletic directors make a practice of “mentoring others, respecting the needs of individuals, respecting the differences of individuals, practicing two-way communication, and developing the potential of one’s followers” (“Transformational leadership behaviors”). Such leadership is key to creating equity in GSA roles. WPAs who employ transformational leadership principles themselves can encourage and enable graduate students to employ those same principles and practices in their administrative roles, which can lead significant transformations within a writing program.

In the GSA position at The University of Alabama, graduate students have the opportunity to experience multiple aspects of WPA work. Over the course of a work week, they might bring the concerns of a graduate student to the administrative staff as an advocate, work with the coordinator of online studies on the curriculum, work with the administrative assistant on an issue with textbooks or classrooms, and do research on other writing programs to present to the rest of the administrative team. This role contributed to both James and Khay’s meaning-making of what writing program administration really looks like and all that it entails, particularly behind the scenes. The GSA receives physical space, which we know is oftentimes limited for graduate students, in the office to complete job duties and responsibilities. In addition, there is also a mental space of encouragement that allows the GSA to cultivate his/her own professional WPA identity. This may perhaps be one of the best benefits of the role.

As a GSA, James created an initiative in which incoming GTAs were invited to a social event near the end of the semester before they assumed the role of instructor of record for a composition class. During this event, they had the opportunity to interact with experienced GTAs and instructors in order to have their questions

about their duties or teaching in general. In planning this initiative, James was able to pinpoint an exigency and bring it to the rest of the administrative group without the fear of being shut down. This was of particular interest and value to James, a Black man who has felt that his perspective has not always been welcomed in academic spaces. This difference of perspective was welcomed and encouraged. He drafted a proposal, which was approved; the logistics of the event were his to plan. Per Bass's conception of transformational leadership, James enacted a mentoring role (idealized influence), provided his GTA colleagues with individual attention, and assumed a greater sense of self-efficacy. Of the experience, James notes, "I benefited greatly from the experienced teachers around me in my early teaching, so I felt it was important to provide that. The fact that, in this case, the mentoring was between GTAs, made for a more relatable situation."

While serving as GSA, Khay was also able to develop a workshop-based GTA training program. In addition, she created a student writing showcase with the authors featured in the program's annual anthology of student writing. After approaching Dr. Niiler with a written proposal for each and receiving the green light, she put these plans into action. In this moment, Khay recalls how she felt "empowered as an agent of change." Both initiatives demonstrated her role as a mentor (idealized influence), her ability to give individual attention, and her willingness to serve as a source of intellectual stimulation. The FWP staff trusted both James and Khay's ability and knowledge to design and implement these programs with little to no faculty interference. However, the collaborative support that Elder, Schoen, and Skinnell argue is necessary for one to handle the challenges of WPA work was always in place in the case that they needed it. Although James and Khay were strongly supported throughout the process of building these initiatives from start to finish, both of them were able to take ownership of their initiatives, showcase their professional agency as trusted members of the FWP administrative team, and lay claim to powerful mastery experiences.

The co-existence of the GSA as an equal member of the FWP staff is not only observed in the English department; it extends to other spaces on and off-campus. During the Spring semester, the GSA travels with the staff to a regional WPA conference. This role is changing the narrative of overworked, exploited GSAs and highlighting that these graduate students can be integrated into an institutional structure in an equitable and advantageous manner. Niiler notes that this position is created to be mutually beneficial for both the FWP and the applicant. The GSA role could be considered a form of experiential learning; one that allows its inhabitants to experiment, observe, and begin to grow as a professional.

One such transformation occurred within Niiler's graduate seminar in writing program administration. Niiler asked his students to write extended reflections on the course in the form of administrative philosophies, in which they

would articulate the principles and practices they would use to direct a writing program. As he reviewed them, he was struck by how much those philosophies demonstrated Bass' four principles of transformational leadership.

James was a member of that class and shared a vision that drew directly on transformational leadership practices. In the excerpt below, James expresses his wish to communicate program goals and build and nurture relationships (note, too, his use of the present tense to indicate how closely he identifies with the role of WPA):

As a WPA, I believe in developing clear, achievable programmatic goals, building strong relationships in order to accomplish these goals, enhancing departmental assessment practices, and implementing multimodal instructional practices.

James gives considerable attention to the kind of inspirational motivation and individualized attention he can provide to graduate teachers. He repeatedly notes that he wishes to place these teachers within his program within areas that “best suit their [individual] talents and interests.” “I think that the way we teach and guide new teachers should be wrapped up in how they see themselves as people, and how they want to develop as teachers.”

Long, Holberg, and Taylor attest that “the best professional development programs... demonstrate a more dynamic and equitable form of administrative collaboration between peers” (76). At The University of Alabama, through their leadership philosophy and collegial actions, the FWP team strives to ensure that the GSA acts and perhaps most importantly feels as if they are an integral member of the organization. Despite the institutional, departmental, and disciplinary hierarchical structure that may typically separate the WPA from a typical paid faculty WPA role, the GSA is viewed as an equal within the FWP at The University of Alabama. GSAs are given responsibility and autonomy, both in the projects they undertake and in how their personal goals, interests and sensibilities align with their developing administrative ideologies. The transferable knowledge and experience that James and Khay acquired during their time as GSAs have concretized into a strong foundation on which they will continue to catapult their careers, both aspiring to be future WPAs who will embody and uphold the same standard of equitable partnership, collaboration, and empowerment with their future GSAs.

## WORKS CITED

Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Utah State UP, 2008.

- Bandura, Albert. *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, W.H. Freeman/Times Books/ Henry Holt & Co, 1997.
- Bass, Bernard M. "Leadership: Good, Better, Best." *Organizational Dynamics*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1985, pp. 26-40.
- Duffey, Suellyn, et al. "Collaboration, Conflict and Authority: Graduate Students and Writing Program Administration." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2002, pp. 79-87, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/466116>.
- Dvir, Taly, et al. "Impact of Transformational Leadership on Follower Development and Performance: A Field Experiment." *The Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2002, pp. 735-744, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3069307>.
- Elder, Cristyn L, et al. "Strengthening Graduate Student Preparation for WPA Work." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2014, pp.13-35.
- Latterell, Catherine. "Defining Roles for Graduate Students in Writing Program Administration: Balancing Pragmatic Needs with a Postmodern Ethics of Action." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 27, no. 1/2, 2003, pp. 23-39.
- Long, Mark C, et al. "Beyond Apprenticeship: Graduate Students, Professional Development Programs and the Future(s) of English Studies." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, 1996, pp. 66-78.
- McGee, Sharon J., and Carolyn Handa. *Discord and Direction: The Postmodern Writing Program Administrator*. Utah State UP, 2005.
- McLeod, Susan H. *Writing Program Administration*. Parlor Press, 2007.
- Micciche, Laura R. "More Than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA work." *College English*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2002, pp. 432-458, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3250746>.
- Mountford, Roxanne. "From Labor to Middle Management: Graduate Students in Writing Program Administration." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2002, pp. 41-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/466112>.
- Wooten, Courtney Adams, et al., editors. *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor In Writing Program Administration*. Utah State UP, 2020.
- Niiler, Luke. "The Writing Center, Transformed." *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2013, <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/t5400z3.pdf>.
- Northington, M. "Transformational Leadership Behaviors of Winning College Athletic Program Directors: A Qualitative Exploratory Study." *The Sport Journal*, vol. 21, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/2p83sw8u>.
- Peters, Bradley. "Enculturation, Not Alchemy: Professionalizing Novice Writing Program Administrators." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 21, no. 2/3, 1998, p. 121.