4

OVERCOMING DISAPPOINTMENT
Constructing Writing Program Identity through Postmodern Mapping

Sharon James McGee

Can the truth really be so hard to find? It all depends upon where you're standing.

—Denis Wood

Frustration. Disappointment. Anger. Exhaustion. Silence. WPAs often experience these emotions as part of their work as evidenced by frequent discussions on the WPA listserv and at conferences.[1] These negative feelings have even caused a backlash among some WPAs, who prefer only to talk about the "happy times" of being a WPA. Certainly, positive emotions are not antithetical to postmodernity; however, as Ihab Hassan (1987) notes, exhaustion and silence are conditions of the postmodern experience. Understanding potential causes of frustration, disappointment, anger, exhaustion, and silence can help us as WPAs find solutions to overcoming these feelings that creep into our jobs and identities.

In her March 2002 article in *College English*, Laura Micciche eloquently discusses the ways in which disappointment permeates the identities and work of WPAs. Central causes of disappointment, as Micciche and others have noted, is the devalued status of composition within English departments specifically and their institutions generally; the continued reliance upon exploitative labor practices in order to staff service courses; the constricted academic job market in other areas of English studies, which as a result inflames the disciplinary binaries and egos that already exist within many departments; and more recently the strained budgets, caused or exacerbated by the United States' recent economic downturn, resulting in WPAs waging bigger battles to secure fewer available financial resources. Certainly these factors affect our colleagues in other areas of the humanities as well; however, let us not belittle the fact that all of these conditions increase the pressures and disappointment felt by WPAs who must build or maintain writing programs. One way to

combat the feeling of disappointment, Micciche posits, is for WPAs to educate themselves "about the way work is organized in the university" (435).

Over the past few years I have been thinking both about the process of work in the university and how that cycle of work affects administrating a writing program. Pragmatically, I come to this topic through what I've learned in my academic service opportunities at two universities where I have been in tenure-track positions. A colleague calls me "The Queen of All Things Service," and while arguably service responsibilities may divert my time away from other academic foci, my service responsibilities have also afforded me the opportunity to view the workings of the university through a scholarly lens. Three important service responsibilities have shaped my understanding of how work gets done in the university: serving as a faculty senator at two universities, being a member of one university's general education committee, and participating in a very small role in my current institution's Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) accreditation process. What I have learned from these experiences continues to shape my thinking about politics, institutions, and getting the job done.

Several interpretative frameworks—postmodern critical theory, rhetorical theory, and the body of writing program administration theory—shape my analysis of the process of work in the academy. In this essay, I will map the way that WPA work proceeds at my current institution and discuss what this implies for the work of WPAs in general and the identities that they forge at their respective institutions.

THE ORGANIZATION OF ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Academic institutions are social and organizational places, and as such they rely on mechanisms of operation by which information, ideas, people, and work flow. Without thinking, we often say that these mechanisms "help work get done" in the university (when, in fact, that point is arguable). As a social and organizational space, the academy relies on power to control, direct, enhance, or limit the work. In other words, the amount and type of work that flows through the channels is determined by those in power. Turning to Foucault, we understand that power formations seek to fulfill three criteria:

> [F]irst to obtain power at the lowest possible cost . . . ; second to bring the effects of this social power to their maximum intensity and to extend them as far as possible, without either interval or failure, and third, to link this

"economic" growth of power with the output of the apparatuses [in our case educational] within which it is exercised. (1984, 207)

Within the academy, power must occur economically, certainly in monetary terms. For example, while a department has many faculty members, it has one chair; while an academic unit has several chairs, it has one dean; while a university has several deans, it has one provost, and one president or chancellor. Paying the salaries for a few deans is less expensive than paying the salaries of many deans. Further, power is interwoven into the fabric of the organization and because we wear clothes cut from this cloth, power then is somewhat invisible. To explain this point, consider an ethnographer who locates her research in a site with which she is very familiar—her own hometown, for example. Because she has been acculturated in this community, she may not notice patterns of behavior since she does not see them as unique or different. So it is with power: because power is interwoven into the system, it becomes unnoticeable. Spending years within the academy as undergraduate students, then graduate students, then as faculty, we have become acclimated to the loci of power. Because we become acclimated and power becomes transparent, that power then maintains the organization.

Before continuing I want to make clear that power is not necessarily malevolent, though the word's connotation often leads us to think of power negatively, as something that one person has and another doesn't.[2] Certainly in the academy, as in other places such as the business world, this notion of power holds true: some faculty have tenure-track positions and benefits while others do not. Some administrators use power to dictate courses of action. However, power is not always, nor even usually, malevolent. Consider the marathon runner who daily trains body and mind for the twenty-six-mile race; without powerful leg muscles, lungs, and mental focus, she could not complete the run. She does not harness her power to beat the other runners—for many marathon runners, success is not in beating others but in finishing the race—she harnesses it to endure.

For WPAs, understanding the way in which power is constructed and channeled within universities is important; however, it is often not something that WPAs are trained in or have time for, and they may forget about it because of its invisibility (as several of the essays in this collection attest). Too often WPAs cannot think much beyond the local—the operation of their own programs and departments—to the broader

issues of the way in which power is situated and dispersed within our institutions because WPAs have multiple identities and responsibilities within a department. First, WPAs are administrators who deal with programmatic issues such as building or rebuilding a writing program or who are brought on board to maintain the status quo—even if that status quo is not theoretically grounded. Further, WPAs maintain the daily operation of a writing program, a job that is often part firefighter—putting out the small brush fires that spark up in a writing program's day-to-day existence—and counselor. WPAs are also faculty members who often teach classes, mentor graduate students, participate in departmental service, and engage in their own scholarship. So it's understandable why WPAs become mired in the daily grind of administering a writing program, why ennui takes hold, and why in spite of all the great teaching and learning that takes place within writing programs, WPAs often find themselves beating their heads against walls of one kind or another. However, by thinking beyond the local writing program, we can become aware of the way that the university forms and organizes power both locally and institutionally. By doing so, we can begin to uncover ways to deal with the kinds of problems that often confront a writing program.

While Foucault and other theorists such as Bourdieu, Marx, and Althusser provide useful lenses through which we can explore the overarching concerns of monoliths and their power formation, realizing that Western universities are also modeled on the democratic process is also constructive; this recognition offers another way to view the process through which work gets done in the university. Democratic principles are exercised in faculty governance and its fraternal twin: shared governance. Faculty or shared governance structures the university so that faculty and often staff have voices in the decision-making processes of each institution, advising the administration about or creating academic policy within the institution. Faculty governance works much like the legislative and executive branches of our country. Certainly, faculty governance has its problems, especially within the last decade, causing the Association of American Colleges and Universities to devote the spring 2001 issue of its journal, *Peer Review*, to the problems facing faculty governance. Faculty governance, if working, is a way to oversee all aspects of academic decision making—budgeting and allocating fiscal resources, planning for facility and technological needs, overseeing academic and student affairs, and even managing public relations. Whatever weaknesses faculty governance may have, it *is* a primary way of managing work within the university. By recognizing faculty governance

as a way of managing work within the university, a WPA can begin to see ways in which work can be done—as well as understand how issues that affect the writing program may happen without much consideration of the WPA.

POSTMODERN MAPPING

Postmodern mapping is a strategy to view organizational space. The activity of mapping is making its way from geography and cartography into other disciplines, including composition and professional writing studies, and is essential to the act of institutional critique (Porter et al. 2000). Recently, Tim Peeples made a case for using postmodern mapping as a way to "enable WPAs to investigate their own positioning in an institution as well as to investigate and analyze a variety of relationships among various institutional spaces within and outside the writing program" (1999, 154). Postmodern mapping, as Peeples posits, has two distinct uses: First, it allows representation of the "unsettled subject"—one whose identity, values, ideology, and perceptions are in flux. Second, postmodern mapping seeks to "unsettle static, structural conceptions of space and to represent its dynamic, socially constructed characteristics" (1999, 154). When using postmodern mapping to examine WPA work, Peeples argues that multiple, competing maps should be constructed within each case and then, once maps are constructed, those maps can be examined across cases in order to understand the complex endeavor that is WPA work. For Peeples, postmodern mapping allows the WPA to become an organizational planner.

Like Peeples, postmodern cartographer Denis Wood claims that multiple maps illustrate more than just a guide to get from one location to another or to locate particular points within a geographical plane. In his book, *The Power of Maps*, Wood (1992) argues that maps display for us representations of society and culture in terms of leisure (the map of a shopping mall), economics (the location of desirable real estate), values (the size of parks or green space), and more. When viewed together, multiple maps show us the best and worst of our culture; furthermore, maps display for us relationships. Importantly, maps do not show reified representations or relationships: they show only the geographic points or cultural ideas that the cartographer (whether professional or novice—Wood argues that we all draw maps) places on them. Wood states

> Maps are about relationships. In even the least ambitious maps, simple presences are absorbed in multilayered relationships integrating and

disintegrating sign functions, packaging and repackaging meanings. The map is a highly complex supersign, a sign composed of lesser signs, or more accurately, a synthesis of signs; and these are supersigns in their own right, systems of signs of more specific or individual function. It's not so much that a map conveys meanings so much as *unfolds* them through *a cycle of interpretation* in which it is continually torn down and rebuilt; and, to be truthful, this is not really the map's work but that of the user, who creates a wealth of meaning. (132; original emphasis)

Because maps are supersign structures with which users interpret meaning, they are rhetorical, both discursive and persuasive. Wood writes

In presentation, the map attains . . . the level of discourse. Its discursive form may be as simple as a single map image rendered comprehensible by the presence of a title, legend, and scale; or as complex as those in *The New State of the World Atlas*, hurling multiple images, diagrams, graphs, tables, and texts at their audience in a ranging polemic. (140)[3]

Taking both Peeples's and Wood's views into account, we can see that the act of mapping makes WPAs active as planners; the maps themselves become powerful rhetorical tools.

I turn now to discussing several alternative ways of mapping the WPA's position at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. I should add that I am only going to discuss a few of the possible maps that can be drawn to depict this situation. One of the valuable uses of postmodern mapping is that by drawing the map in different ways, the mapper can identify particular trends and alliances; of course, not everyone needs to know about all of these maps. Although this example is unique to one institution, I suspect that with a few slight modifications, these maps would detail the work of other WPAs at similarly sized public institutions.

Because I am taking this example from a specific institution that has a specific WPA, it would be easy to conflate the WPA position with the person who holds that position; however, I think it is useful to separate the two—the position from the person—in order to gain a fuller picture of the identity issues that arise.

Locating the Writing Program and WPA in the Organization

Figure 1 depicts one representation of the WPA's position within the university. The WPA is situated within an English Department whose Full Time Equivalent (FTE) is almost as large as some entire college's FTE
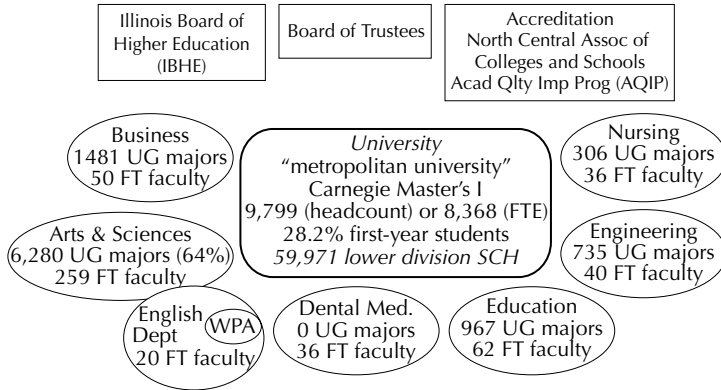
Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE)

Board of Trustees

Accreditation
North Central Assoc of Colleges and Schools
Acad Qlty Imp Prog (AQIP)

Business
1481 UG majors
50 FT faculty

University
"metropolitan university"
Carnegie Master's I
9,799 (headcount) or 8,368 (FTE)
28.2% first-year students
59,971 lower division SCH

Nursing
306 UG majors
36 FT faculty

Arts & Sciences
6,280 UG majors (64%)
259 FT faculty

Engineering
735 UG majors
40 FT faculty

English Dept
WPA
20 FT faculty

Dental Med.
0 UG majors
36 FT faculty

Education
967 UG majors
62 FT faculty

Figure 1

appointments. The department is housed in the largest college on campus. While the WPA is just one appointment within the department, the WPA is responsible for overseeing approximately two hundred sections of first-year writing each year through which nearly every first-year student passes. Therefore, the WPA and the writing program have contact with every student in every college within the university, even though the position is localized within one department.

At first glance, this map appears to show a static representation of the university and the WPA's position within it; however, as a map of an organization, nothing is in fact static—what happens in the first-year composition sequence and what students learn (or do not learn) in it have an impact on almost every unit on the map. (These units are represented by circles on the map to suggest interconnection and motion.) Collectively the students who pass through first-year composition take what they learned about writing to subsequent courses in the university.

Furthermore, the writing program is not just part of this map, but of other maps. As noted in figure 1, there are other bodies to which the university is responsible (and even others such as legislators that aren't mapped); these stakeholders are represented by boxes on the map. These bodies include the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), which oversees all public colleges and universities in the state and serves as a conduit to the governor and legislature, the Board of Trustees, and accreditation boards. Although the WPA does not have regular contact with these bodies—in fact may never have direct contact—typically the WPA must address issues or implement changes as directed by these agencies. One of the problems faced by the WPA in this map is that

some units within the university, let alone some outside stakeholders, do not in fact realize that the position even exists.[4]

This map is *my* rendering of the organization where I have been able to locate the WPA as part of the institution. By positioning the WPA on the map, I have made a significant change from a map that others within the organization might draw. In fact the WPA, who is a program director, is not recognized as a program director in the same way that, for example, the director of the women's studies program is. The women's studies program is an interdisciplinary program not housed in any one department; however, the director's position would likely appear on a map of our college's organization: the director is invited to the Chairs and Program Directors meeting with the dean of Arts and Sciences while the WPA is not. Why the WPA is not represented on the map is of course a complex question, having as much to do with institutional history as with the value placed on writing or the intellectual labor required to teach it.

What is the value, then, in mapping this space? Creating this map has resulted in several important consequences. First, when I initially drew this map of our institution, we (the WPA and Expository Writing Committee) were feeling beleaguered. In an effort to develop a cohesive program, we developed goals, outcomes, and objectives for our first-semester composition course. Over the course of two years' work, the committee negotiated, discussed, and worked toward retooling the First Year Composition (FYC) sequence to enhance student learning and attain program unity while still maintaining faculty's academic freedom within their classrooms. Throughout the process, the committee was very aware that whatever changes we made to the program would be viewed critically by some of the faculty who teach FYC. During the process, we became overwhelmed with the work and with our own impending sense of confrontation. The map allowed us to see an obvious point that we had known but overlooked—FYC, while taught by English Department faculty and administered by the WPA situated within the English Department, affects the entire university—students, faculty in other disciplines, and accreditation. Faculty across the university expect that students leave the FYC sequence prepared to write in other courses and that by having a cohesive program with clearly articulated student expectations, faculty in other departments gain a better sense of what happens in FYC. Because we teach almost every first-year student in the university, we have an obligation to students, parents, the provost, the Board of Trustees, and accreditation agencies that we have a clear vision
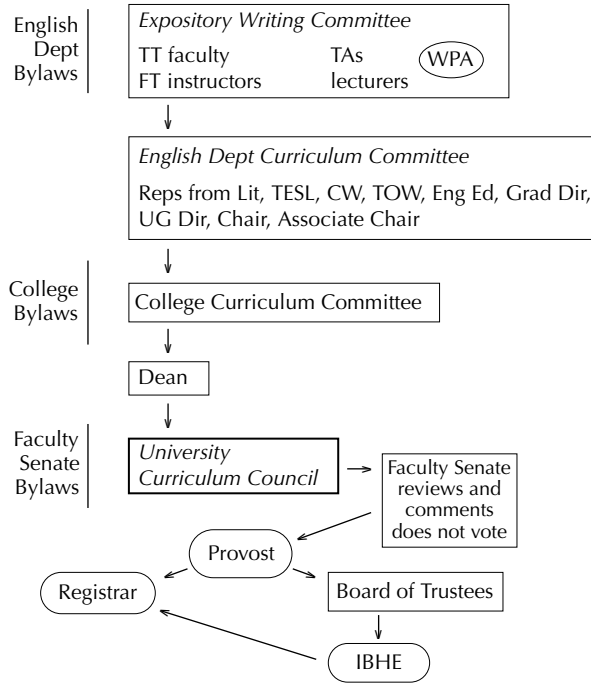
Figure 2

of FYC with an articulated set of student learning outcomes and that we are working to ensure a quality experience for each student. When we began to see the representation before us and the multiple stakeholders in FYC, the committee became—to use the overwrought term—empowered to create a program that would do all of these things, even if it meant that not everyone would agree with the changes.

Mapping the Flow of Work

Using another map, I will demonstrate the flow of work at my institution to highlight sources of potential problems and alliances for the WPA.

Work within our institution follows the cycle outlined in Figure 2. At each level of work, a particular set of bylaws codifies the procedures for channeling the work to get done. Notice that the WPA is missing beyond the first level of the map, which is perhaps more common than not on other campuses. For various political reasons, to have the WPA be a decision maker beyond the local level is precarious. When trying to institute change within a writing program, however, building alliances within the

framework is essential, especially at key levels in the cycle (in our case University Curriculum Council, as indicated by italics).

For example, major changes to the writing program curricula (including course descriptions, credit hours awarded, and the like) typically begin with the Expository Writing Committee, which generates a plan, writes the proposal (following approved university procedures), and approves it. The proposal is then sent through various overseeing channels: the Department Curriculum Committee, the College Curriculum Committee, the dean, and the University Curriculum Council (which is part of the Faculty Senate structure). At any point, committees can approve, deny, or request changes to a proposal. Once the proposal is approved by the Curriculum Council, the Faculty Senate at large reviews the proposal and then forwards it to the provost for final approval. (Any new program, such as a new graduate degree, would go beyond the provost to the Board of Trustees and the IBHE.)

Because FYC affects every department and college within the university, certainly few courses would receive as much scrutiny as the FYC sequence. Does this mean that WPAs should be on Faculty Senate and key committees in the faculty governance process? Not necessarily. But it does suggest that having strategic alliances and advocates on those committees is important.

Furthermore, as Porter et al. argue, "[T]here is not one holy map that captures the relationships inherent to the understanding of an institution, all of these relationships exist simultaneously in the lived—actual and material—space of an institution" (2000, 623). By examining figure 2 in relationship to figure 1, we can see that power resides in multiple locations—within the geographic space of the institution (campus) but beyond that physical space as well (the state capital, the Board of Trustees, and the IBHE). To understand where power is located allows us to see how to use alliances to get work done. For an example, I turn to my service experience as a faculty senator, which has allowed me to examine the role of the state board, the Board of Trustees, and accrediting agencies in a much different way than I had ever really thought about as a faculty member. Serving on the Faculty Senate Executive Committee at one university, I witnessed firsthand the importance of these groups to the faculty. During our Executive Committee meetings, the officers discussed strategies to work with, reach out toward, and build connections with these groups to work toward several much-needed fiscal and labor changes. Knowing that the faculty needed a voice beyond the local

current rhet/comp theory

current-traditional theory

assessment as
student learning
and program
development

Writing Program
WPA and Expository Writing Committee

accreditation

assessment as
gatekeeping

university mission

Figure 3

institution, the officers knew that while powerful in some ways, the Faculty Senate body could not get the kind of change needed without the help of these other groups.

I offer one final map that locates the places at which institutional critiques can and are taking place at my institution. As Porter et al. challenge, "[I]nstitutional change requires attention to the material and spatial conditions of disciplinary practices inside a particular institution," (2000, 620) and "[i]nstitutional critique is, fundamentally, a pragmatic effort to use rhetorical means to improve institutional situations" (625).[5] Postmodern mapping illuminates the conditions where institutional critique can occur, and such critique can happen at micro or macro levels and its results may or may not immediately resonate.[6]

This map depicts the tensions at play when we were making changes to our FYC sequence. Prior to hiring an outside WPA, current-traditional pedagogy and theory primarily informed the writing program, and in most years a "common final"—in which students wrote an in-class essay over a common reading which was then scored by a faculty committee—served as a gatekeeping mechanism. These two concerns served as points of tension for the committee as it struggled to change the writing program. As is typical, old habits, pedagogies, or theories die hard, and as the committee and WPA were working to make these changes, we found ourselves occasionally banging our collective head against a wall. Recall that we operated under an umbrella of worry—How would faculty react? How could we make this change happen? Would resistance make all of our changes futile?

At the same time, our institution had become part of the AQIP accreditation process. AQIP requires that universities make student learning visible and have assessment plans in place. Coincidentally, our WPA had gone to the associate provost to ask for money to support the Expository Writing Committee's work to develop goals, objectives, and outcomes. The associate provost realized that our activities would feed directly into his desire to have examples of e-portfolios that made student learning and assessment visible for accreditation. The Provost's Office provided funding for a Web designer (another English faculty member) and small stipends for the initial group's work. We saw this opportunity as a chance to use this power to make needed changes in our program and assessment, although it took the committee nearly a semester to see how the various goals (our goal for program consistency and the provost's goal for visible documentation of student learning and assessment) meshed. Since we would be hard-pressed to show student learning without being able to define what students were supposed to be learning, we were able to develop goals, objectives, and outcome statements that reflected current theories in composition and were aligned with national benchmarks such as the Council of Writing Program Administrators'. To skip to the end of our story, we accomplished what the Provost's Office had hoped, thus making a useful ally. Understanding the points of productive tension on the map, we were able to connect these multiple influences to make a change at the micro-level of our writing program.

INSIGHT LEADS TO MORE SIGHT

What insight does postmodern mapping offer us of WPA work and overcoming the negative emotions of serving as a WPA? First, WPAs may experience negative emotions when they feel they are powerless or are not represented within the university structure. Therefore having a visible representation of the WPA on these kinds of maps gives the WPA a sense of place, a way to view the cycle of work and the WPA's place in it. Just as having a map is comforting and useful when trying to find one's way within a city, having an institutional map—or maps—is useful to the WPA. Being able to navigate within the map is very powerful. Second, mired in the daily grind of administering a writing program, WPAs may sometimes sense that power is located somewhere else, beyond the WPA. As these maps have indicated, though, power does not have only one or two loci, as we may often think; rather, it is webbed within multiple sites throughout the cycle of work within an institution. Postmodern mapping, as Peeples suggests, leads to engaged, active planning. By using

these maps to visualize webbed sites of power, WPAs can forge an iden-
tity that alleviates the feeling of disappointment, the sense of not getting
things done that often permeates the WPA's identity.