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Collaborating Toward Intellectual Practice: Re-imagining Service in English Studies

Amy Goodburn and Joy Ritchie

Sometimes when traditional arguments cannot be effective because what's at stake is too threatening, all we have left to achieve common ground are our narratives, our identities. If we know and can understand our history more comprehensively by our stories, we can begin building a better vision.—Theresa Enos

This essay chronicles the story of our collaborations as scholars, teachers, colleagues, friends, and co-coordinators of the first-year writing program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Like Enos, we believe our narrative can lead to an expanded vision of service in the profession by illuminating how ongoing discussions about collaboration can help us construct and imagine service as intellectual work. As two faculty members (one assistant and one associate professor) responsible for collaboratively coordinating a first-year-writing program, we hope to question what it means to do administrative service collaboratively, to examine this hydra-headed authority that we wield and attempt to implement within our program, and to consider the consequences of how this service is constructed, perceived, and sometimes ignored by faculty in English Studies and in the academy at large.

Recently the service of writing program administration has come under intense scrutiny. What was once relatively invisible work (except to the WPA engaged in it and the many graduate students affected by it) is now being defined with resolutions and statements as a means of claiming value (and promotion and tenure) for WPAs. At the same time, writing programs are being defined as sites critical to graduate students' professionalization and intellectual inquiry. For instance, Michael Pemberton argues that composition programs need to professionalize graduate students by providing courses and experiences in program administration because “program administrators are the primary agents of curricular and theoretical change” (164). And the recent attention to collaborative teaching practices and collaborative authorship in research have led

some to explore the implications of collaboration within writing program administration. Jeanne Gunner argues that models of writing program administration need to resist investing authority within a single WPA and instead to adapt a collegia! model that invites faculty and staff participation as a means of giving “all instructors a voice in program governance and professional responsibility for the program” (14). Carrie Shively Leverenz and Amy Goodburn describe issues they faced in attempting to enact feminist principles of collaboration in their WPA work as graduate students at Ohio State, while Louise Weatherbee Phelps describes her attempts to be a feminist administrator in charge of the Syracuse writing program. And Mark Long/Jennifer Holberg, and Marcy Taylor, all of whom served as WPAs at the University of Washington, call for writing programs to utilize collaborative administrative structures as a means of transforming “the intellectual work of the WPA by decentralizing and delegating day-to-day tasks of the program” and creating professionalization opportunities for graduate students “to learn the practices of composition studies by actually finding themselves in a position to shape those practices” (67). In sum, many within composition are calling for the work of administrative service to be redefined as something other than service, and collaboration is increasingly touted as one means of accomplishing this task.

In *Gender Roles and Faculty Lives in Rhetoric and Composition*, Theresa Enos’s analysis of her national survey of how “writing faculty in a variety of contexts actually manage to make sense of and meet the complex, changing demands upon them” illuminates how WPA work traditionally has been viewed apart from current scholarship devoted to collaborative inquiry and learning. While Enos’s survey contributes a wealth of information regarding gender disparity in the lives of male and female rhetoric and composition faculty, the relationships among gender, collaboration, and the “lower status work” of the WPA are never clearly established. Indeed, although the two top calls for change resulting from Enos’s survey are (1) the valuing of WPA service as an intellectual form of scholarship and (2) the valuing of collaborative work among colleagues and graduate students for promotion and tenure, there is little discussion of how collaboration might be more explicitly connected to the ways that “[w]riting program administration should be counted as a form of scholarship. . . [and] should be granted legitimization as knowledge-making inquiry” (89). In describing the need for collaborative work to be valued, then, Enos’s respondents emphasize co-authored scholarly texts rather than the ser-

vice work of the WPA as a collaborative *site* of inquiry and praxis. Perhaps because the WPA has been traditionally viewed in terms of a single person—as the monolithic expert or authority that Gunner describes—the survey respondents and Enos herself were not able to see how these two priorities can be viewed as integrally connected.

We are heartened by this increased attention to collaborative models of administrative service, partly because collaboration has always been our assumed method of inquiry and practice, inextricably connected to who we are, how we name our identities, how we construct our work, and how we envision our profession. But this essay is not a celebration of collaboration as a panacea for strengthening writing programs or for redefining our work as something other than “just service.” Our experiences with collaboration make us hesitant to claim that it will automatically lead to changes in how teaching, research, and administrative/service work are valued within English Studies (Long et al.) or that it will result in “a democratizing process that enhances professionalism (the sharing of power, control and authority over the program) and thus program excellence” (Gunner 14). Rather, we believe that some calls for collaborative models of service have idealistically under-conceptualized its nature—by confining it within traditional definitions of administrative structures, by failing to examine how it is valued and evaluated within larger institutional structures, and by ignoring the ethical implications for those engaged in such work (especially graduate students and junior faculty). Our own current institutional situation is challenging us to think more critically about how we represent and articulate the complexity of our collaborative service, especially in terms of its connections to our teaching, research, community outreach, and friendship. We believe our stories raise important questions about the nature of collaborative service in the academy, the nature of collaborative authority (or lack of it) in such models, and the problematic issues that can go unresolved even when collaborative service occurs.

Institutional History

To understand our stories, it’s useful to situate them within the institutional history and structures of our particular English department. We are Co-Coordinator of the first-year writing program, which means we are jointly responsible for coordinating a writing program that offers approximately 150 sections per semester and employs about 60 TAs and 30 part-time instructors. We design and conduct a one-week long

pre-semester TA workshop; coordinate the work of three graduate students—two program administrators and one Writing Assistance Center Director; revise curriculum and course goals; facilitate discussion and decisions about textbooks; organize TA mentoring groups, brown bag discussions and ongoing professional development workshops; and share in the teaching of a composition theory and practice seminar and a teaching practicum. What we don't do is schedule classes or assign TAs to their classes (we don't even have a role in hiring TAs,) and we don't have a budget. Our work is described as having a teaching and curricular function in the department, yet it is evaluated as "service," for which we each receive one course reduction in the academic year.

This collaborative service structure has been in place since the early 1980s when the department hired its first two composition specialists in the same year. Because they were both untenured and had entered the positions at the same time, and because the department wanted to "protect" them from too much service, they jointly coordinated the composition program. This structure was well-accepted in our department because of its historic interest and support for writing instruction and for scholarly inquiry into pedagogical issues and English Education. Our department administered several extensive federally funded programs for English curriculum development and teacher outreach in the 1960s and 1970s and was one of the originally funded sites of the National Writing Project. The faculty who participated in and guided these programs were literary scholars, but their thinking had been shaped by their work with K-12 teachers and schools, by progressive philosophies of education, and by emerging theories of language learning, linguistics, and cognitive psychology, all of which led them to see composition as an important area for both scholarship and teaching, one that many faculty saw as connected to the rest of the English curriculum.

This collaborative service structure continued to be accepted as the department identity shifted considerably over the past ten years and the composition and rhetoric faculty increased to four. Our university, like many research universities, began to increase pressure on faculty to produce more nationally recognized research and to reach Research I status. In keeping with growing graduate student interest in rhetoric and composition, this collaborative structure began to include graduate student assistants in the writing program's administration, in directing the English Department's Writing Assistance Center, and in a 1990-1991 ethnographic

study of a new first-year writing sequence. In many ways, our department's history can be looked to as a model for valuing collaborative service work.

But, unfortunately, this is not a narrative of continuous and unimpeded progress toward collaborative nirvana. As much as we value collaborative models for work traditionally defined as service, recent changes in our institutional culture have prompted us to consider how these models are problematically perceived and evaluated in the department and in the larger institution. Recently our department participated in a self-study and an external review that spurred a restructuring of administration in keeping with both our university's goals to streamline faculty work and our own department's attempt to re-conceptualize what being an English department means in the twenty-first century. Through these discussions, we've found ourselves having to argue for the legitimacy of collaboration in our service work and to rethink the nature of our collaborations in light of perceptions held by others in our department and in our university at large. We have begun to examine how our model of collaborative service obscures, veils, and limits the understanding and valuing of what we do.

Defining "Administrative Service" in University Settings

On the basis of the self-study described above, several recommendations were made to "streamline" our department's administration. In the case of the first-year writing program, a recommendation was made to make one person in charge instead of having two faculty jointly responsible. While we recognize the positive potential of these possible shifts and the wider university mandate to streamline and delineate decision-making and responsibility, this model of administrative service runs counter to our vision of our work as composition scholar/teacher/ administrators. In defining administrative service in this way, our chair and faculty governing committee conceive such work as a set of tasks to get done, tasks that are viewed as enabling and in the service of, but separate from, the real intellectual work of the department. Traditionally, service is defined as a set of tasks pre-defined apart from the people doing them. But our collaborative model of service has taught us that collaboration allows us to reconceive our "tasks" as more fluid and emergent, based on our assessment of the immediate needs of the students and teachers currently in the program and based on the strengths and personal interests of those coordinating it. Institutional conceptions of administrative work that emphasize monolithic authority and efficient deci-

sion-making create restricted and compartmentalized definitions of our work. By placing administrative power in one person, the enriching potential of the collaborative process is limited. Collaboration facilitates and even demands exploration, re-imagining, and revision of the work itself.

Second, when work is merely defined in terms of prescribed institutional goals and pre-defined responsibilities or powers, administrative service becomes a bureaucratic task-oriented function cut off from the mediating influence of teaching and research. Collaborative program administration has been productive for us not only because it provides mutual support and counters the isolation that many program administrators feel, but also because the dialogic processes required for collaboration are rich, generative, and syncretic, allowing the integration of all facets of our work. The synchronous quality of collaborative work creates the dailiness or “everyday-ness” that Alice Walker and other feminists have celebrated. Collaborative research informs our teaching and service and, at the same time, our collaborative teaching and service feed back into our research. Indeed, this interconnectedness often makes it difficult for us to categorize our work in terms of the traditional categories of research, teaching, and service. For example, our work together in designing a new first-year course syllabus, and our weekly meetings to plan and discuss the course as the semester progressed, led us to create new recommended reading lists—in collaboration with graduate student assistant coordinators. Now this syllabus and recommended text list undergo continual collaborative refinement and revision by the graduate students teaching the course (collaborations that they have theorized and articulated in the form of conference papers and scholarly articles). Conversely, our frustrations at having the composition program be the target of faculty discontent concerning student writing across the curriculum led us to develop a research project to investigate the wider institutional implications of writing instruction in newly initiated writing courses on our campus. We applied for and received funding to study writing in those courses across the curriculum, a study that now includes a Ph.D. student and another colleague in composition as co-researchers and also an on-going collaboration with math faculty for more intensive investigation of writing in math classes. The synchronous and “everyday” quality of collaborative service and the way it becomes diffused within the department creates a new generative, creative sub-culture of research, teaching, and administration—but one that is not easily defined, represented, or, as we’ll see shortly, evaluated.

Evaluating Collaborative Service

Let us not underestimate the difficulty in changing university culture. —UNL Senior Vice Chancellor at a 1997 faculty meeting

Our Vice Chancellor’s comment named quite clearly for us the dilemma we face in having our collaborative service understood and valued at our institution. While he was not referring to collaboration specifically, his honest assessment of how difficult it is to change university culture resonates with our own experiences and also gives us a wider perspective from which to view hortatory appeals for collaboration within English Studies. Although we value and experience many of the benefits of collaborative administrative work as called for by Gunner and Long, Holberg, and Taylor, we find little support for representing the interrelated nature of our collaborative service as we look at current scholarship about collaborative administration in composition. Even in composition literature, administrative service is conceived as separate from teaching and research. Resolutions to have such work evaluated as intellectual work still replicate these structural definitions. Occasionally an enlightened department will credit outstanding administrative service with as much value as research, but this is simply a short-term suspension of values rather than a long-term re-imagining or re-conceptualization of the meaning of service in general. This claiming of administrative service as a site of intellectual scholarship is even further complicated/vexed when collaborative models are promoted. It’s much easier to make idealistic claims about the intellectual value of administrative service if it’s *only* in “composition land” that one indulges in such structures. In describing our collaborative work together, some colleagues have dryly responded, “Well, you can collaborate because that’s your field, it’s easy for you.” In some ways, then, collaboration becomes a model for work primarily within the administrative service of composition programs, marginalizing the value of (and, we’d argue, the necessity for) collaborative inquiry throughout English departments. When collaboration becomes the sole province of composition, it inevitably becomes defined as something of lesser value, or even something easier.

Despite our enthusiasm for collaboration, then, we believe calls for change within the disciplinary literature of composition or even English Studies in general do not hold much value if institutional evaluative struc-

tures for assessing faculty work remain the same. Even if we can define our work as collaborative administrative service, the university structures used to evaluate it “split” the credit for such work, viewing our contributions as “halved” instead of doubled. In essence, we are viewed as occupying one position with two people each providing half of the work, instead of as two people working as much (maybe even more) than one person.

Our collaborative service model requires a different way of valuing work because it is not about individual entrepreneurship but rather about creating a subculture, a different type of organizational process that allows for working relationships in which conversations about pregnancy, a strange dream, or advice about auto repairs are part of the ebb and flow of conversation about Writing Center policy matters or a grant proposal for more research funds, and in which planning for a collaboratively-taught course occurs while clearing debris from a friend’s yard after a freak October blizzard or in a five-minute conversation between classes. Our ideas are conceived, challenged, developed, refined, expanded, or abandoned through written and spoken dialogue, and not just between the two of us, but also with other faculty and graduate students. But the value we place in the dailiness of our collaborations becomes a liability when it comes to substantiating the work we’ve done because it is often invisible or too diffuse to pin down who is doing what and when it occurred.

Evaluative mechanisms for representing our work also complicate the nature of our collaborations. It’s difficult for us to make visible what our work *is* in light of the institutional mechanisms used to (de)value it. Most of the forms that our institution uses to evaluate work assume administrative hierarchies and monolithic systems of authority. The question of “Who gets the credit?” is represented by the single line for “principle author” of university grant forms or our department’s handbook, which often omits one of our names in its list of committee and program heads. When our administrative service is evaluated, questions such as “Who can be charged with solving this problem?” and “Whose decision counts?” take precedence over questions such as “How and why are we defining this issue as a problem?” or “Whose opinions need to be solicited to promote a stronger teaching community?” Our collaborative model makes it seem less efficient to answer these questions, and sometimes the answers may seem less definitive, or at least less-quickly reached, if time is taken for conversation, viewing options, and consensus-

building. When we write our yearly cover letters for merit review assessment, for instance, we constantly find ourselves using phrases like “with my colleagues, I did x...” or “we received a grant...” instead of the assumed “my” that represents solitary ownership of activities in most of our colleagues’ letters. Despite our rhetorical attempts to resist these individualistic measures of our work, it’s hard to know how these documents are read by our colleagues or within different contexts in our institution. One thing we know is that the evaluative mechanisms used to give credit to our work often are “divided” in ways that don’t accurately assess the amount of work each of us has contributed. For instance, three members of our composition faculty routinely collaborate in planning and conducting the pre-semester orientation for new teaching assistants, but only one of us—the one who teaches an accompanying one-hour fall practicum—is given credit for the time and intellectual work that the continuous revision of this professionalizing work entails.

Beyond assessing work that clearly falls within the range of administrative service, we find it even more difficult to represent for assessment how our collaborations cross the traditional categories of research, teaching, and service upon which most evaluative structures rely. As Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky remind us, “the service and research functions of expertise are variably interrelated, never wholly monolithic, and, ideally, should be integrated rather than dichotomous” (627). But this interrelatedness is often difficult to articulate within traditional models of evaluating faculty work. For instance, in the fall of 1995, we collaboratively wrote a grant proposal to a local foundation to fund a summer community literacy institute and a follow-up conference. We received the grant, for which we were both able to claim credit, but the subsequent activities that stemmed from this grant were not equally assessed. Even though we worked together to do research in the community, to contact agencies about their literacy needs, and to conceptualize the goals of the summer institute, only Amy was given credit for teaching the course because her name was on the schedule. The preparatory research that led into the successful running of this institute was not easily represented.

Despite what we feel have been successful collaborative structures, we feel we must also examine the extent to which our efforts to collaborate may constitute exploitation of graduate students, non-tenure-track instructors, and newer faculty. Do these opportunities to engage in program administration really serve as professional development for graduate

students, especially when the majority of our students are not in composition? How will they serve the assistant coordinator who is a medievalist or a creative writer, if they will not ultimately be hired to do administration? Or how much does it advance the real employment prospects of the non-tenure track faculty member to gain a tenure-line position, if she takes time from her four-course teaching load to engage in collaboration program development or serve on a teaching panel? Even when collaborative models of service serve our purposes as coordinators—in fostering positive teaching community and perhaps building supporters and allies for the field of composition in the long run—its benefits to others are not always reciprocal.

We are also sympathetic to collaborative service models that attempt to subvert the “top down” apprenticeship model of professionalizing new faculty by bringing them quickly into positions of authority. We believe that our collaborative model does invite new faculty to enrich the intellectual life of the composition program and the department in general. But these structures also can be exploitative. New faculty face conflicting demands: on the one hand, they are invited to help revitalize and energize our programmatic work, but on the other hand, they must fulfill the demands for publication and research in order to gain tenure and seniority within the hierarchical institutional structure. Thus, they are often pulled between administrative service that allows them to exercise and demonstrate their authority but might jeopardize their prospects for tenure and promotion and having no authority in a program for several years. Ethical administrative and evaluative structures demand a much more reciprocal and collaborative vision of professional development and of tenure and promotion.

We don't want to sound wholly oppositional to the current climate in which we are working or to the ideals of collaborative administrative service in general. Collaboration connects to our philosophical and theoretical beliefs as feminists; to our beliefs about the nature of language and literacy learning; to our ethical concerns for what constitutes “good teaching”; and to the issues of ownership, authority, and reciprocity that we value in our research. It arises from our desire to integrate the various facets of our professional and personal lives in a more seamless, holistic way; to create structures in which learning is reciprocal rather than unidirectional or top-down; and to promote a wider institutional climate in which this interconnectedness is understood. Still, we are hesitant to

speak authoritatively or glowingly about how collaborative models and practices can unproblematically transform the administrative service of faculty members. Despite our myriad collaborations—in our curriculum development, in team-teaching, in ethnographic research, in writing program initiatives, and in the collaborative production of texts (including this one!)—we know that our collaborations are still questioned, misunderstood, devalued, and even ignored. We hope this essay spurs more conversation beyond the idealization of collaboration as a guiding principle or structure to start thinking critically and strategically about how collaboration is defined, evaluated, and enacted in particular institutional contexts. Until then, we fear that calls for collaborative models of service will fail to transform the lives of faculty in particular or the nature of the profession in general.

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