Afterword

AGAINT IMPOSSIBILITY: A CLOSING
(OPENING?) CONVERSATION

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As the four of us read GenAdmin and considered ways we might together create an afterword to it, we realized that we wanted to produce something different from the familiar sort of “commentary on” or “guide to” the work at hand. And we suspected that the authors hoped for something different from us, too, since they had after all asked us to collaborate in writing a companion piece to their book. Their request itself seemed to invite innovation.

So we looked for a format that would allow us to write in the spirit of GenAdmin, to continue the work it starts. We decided that each of us would write a brief response to four questions that emerged from our reading of the book, and to arrange our responses in dialogue with one another. What follows, then, is a kind of forum or symposium in which we grapple with GenAdmin’s theorizing of new identities and forms of work for WPA.

What does it mean to have a philosophy of being a WPA or a philosophy of writing program administration?

Dennis: These could be construed as two quite different questions, one focused on the individual, one focused on the possibility of a systematically worked out position articulated for others. The first has echoes of what Heidegger calls “mineness” and reminds us of everyday uses such as “I have a philosophy of BBQing” or professional uses such as “Can you send us a statement of your teaching philosophy?” The second question can lead us to imagine an integrated, comprehensive,
systematic investigation of first principles—with definitions and analyses of central concepts—not just expressed but argued for. That is, the second question begins to move us away from a position statement toward an argument in dialogue with other possibilities, intended not to represent one self to others but to engage others in mutual acts of interpretation and critique regarding writing program administration.

Joe: I’m glad that Dennis notes the importance of dialogue and critique, since that lets me begin by stating my only serious worry about *GenAdmin*—which is its somewhat uncritical endorsement of the term administration. Administrators supervise, manage, evaluate. That’s their job, their role in the bureaucracy, and it’s necessary work. But there are plenty of other—and I think more compelling—terms to use to describe the kinds of programmatic work that the authors here seem most interested in: teach, direct, mentor, lead. I was thus a little puzzled throughout my reading of *GenAdmin* by its ongoing stress on the institutional role of the administrator rather than on the intellectual work we hope to promote. Why isn’t this *GenDirect* or *GenMentor*?

Marty: Or *GenTeach*, to recall the principle, practiced by those of a genuinely high-minded persuasion, that administration is a higher form of teaching? Although the authors use *GenAdmin* throughout the book, I appreciate that they also announce early on (in Chapter 1) that the term is actually a “placeholder.” Given their ambitious goals for the book, in claiming a new philosophy and new ways of conceptualizing the profession, they seem to recognize the lesson that Haig Bosmajian’s introduction to *The Language of Oppression* aims to show: that “the power which comes from naming and defining people has had positive as well as negative effects on entire populations” (1). By placing their focus on the more critical issue of elaborating their ideas rather than mounting an all-out campaign for a new term (indeed by acknowledging that WPA is “constantly immersed in, and quite conscious of, rhetorical negotiations and choices,” as they state in Chapter 5, and by insisting that “identity is rhetorical”), they leave open the possibility that others may arrive, perhaps through dialogic mediation, at a more appropriate label for the new generations of writing program administrators to come.

Jeanne: My sense is that, by articulating a philosophy of “becoming,” the authors point toward what might be called a cellular notion of the writing program administrator, a way of seeing, knowing, and acting that encompasses a decentered range of positions. They resist—productively, I believe—a “meager” identity. By de-camping—finding multiple ways of being and relating rather than aligning with a particular theory, standpoint, or political orientation—they open up a WPA philosophy that is less a defensive posture defined against as much as it is a stance of critical inquiry. In this sense, *GenAdmin* presents us with a new WPA epistemology and, in its service, reframes the historical narratives that depend on binary thinking (literature/composition; tenured faculty/contingent worker; and, more recently, as the *GenAdmin* authors discuss, power narratives/victim narratives, WPA/JWPA, complicity/shrill advocacy). In the earliest generations of writing programs, the tasks defined the position, disallowing or at least discouraging philosophical considerations of program work. Philosophically, for the GenAdmin administrator, theory and practice are dialogic, though not equally so; as the text amply demonstrates through the absence of administrative “practices,” the primary voice is philosophical.

Dennis: So perhaps the two questions might be read differently, both pointing toward philosophical efforts, one more narrowly focused than the other, or rather, one encompassing the other. To have a philosophy of being a WPA (as opposed to a philosophy of writing program administration) might mean merely to have a philosophy of identity, to have a philosophical basis for assuming an identity of a certain sort. Whereas to have a philosophy of writing program administration (as opposed to a philosophy of being a WPA) might mean that one has a systematically worked out basis for a full range of administrative practices, including but not limited to the practice of assuming or asserting a certain identity. In yet other terms, a philosophy of being a WPA might be comenous with an ethics (and politics) of WPA-ing, whereas a philosophy of writing program administration might have epistemological and ontological dimensions, in addition to ethical (and political) ones.

Jeanne: If we take philosophy to be a reasoned belief system that accords meaning and value, then for WPA *GenAdmin* repositions this
The problem with building an argument about a new identity around “choice” might be related to constraining one’s sense of identity to when and where without full consideration of how and why once accepts or asssents to an identity or to an identification with certain ways of being. In this regard, it might be useful to remember Martha Nussbaum’s comments on emotion as they relate to identity: “Emotion itself is the acceptance of, the assent to live according to, a certain story” (287).

Jeanne: The professional identity of a Miltonist, historian of rhetoric, or ESL specialist may coalesce retrospectively, or may evolve with the appearance and acknowledgment of published works, almost like Stephen Jay Gould’s notion of punctuated equilibrium. Historically, for the WPA, however, choice of a special order has been the mechanism of identity. Colleagues moving into WPA positions spoke of serving a stint, being drafted, stepping into the breach, or other quasi-military metaphors that at one time were common ways of explaining administrative “service.” That negative legacy is what distinguishes a commitment to WPA as an academic/scholarly specialty today as a choice. As the authors argue, it’s also necessarily a matter of active choosing due to the negative professional pressure against junior WPAs.

What the authors emphasize is that I see as particularly valuable is the validity of choosing (or retrospectively defining ourselves through) WPA as an academic/scholarly specialty. I haven’t held the title of WPA for eight years, but I consider WPA my field, research agenda, and intellectual home. GenAdmin speaks strongly to this construction of the WPA as a theoretical pursuit rather than a job, assignment, or posting. Much of the text works as a subversion of prior formulations of the field as the position (“junior” WPAs, field technicians, correction officers). It refutes the notion of graduate-level WPA study as managerial training. Like an anthropologist, a WPA may engage in fieldwork, but the work is embedded in theories, methods, and research. Its purpose is inquiry and knowledge production, and one becomes a WPA by participating, by choice, in cultural practices, stepping out to question the interpretive frames one is using.

Marty: But what if the “choosing” is reversed, in the sense that WPA- ing chooses the person? It is true, as Jonikka writes in the Prelude that in response to her compelling 2002 WPA conference presentation, I
told her I had chosen to be a WPA. Had we conversed in more depth, though, I would have explained that I’ve long likened my work in higher education, and as a writing program administrator in particular, to a calling. Not an ecclesiastical calling, but a secular one. Not in service to a deity, but in service to students and fellow teachers. And not service in the traditional academic triad of teaching, research, and service, but service in the sense of using one’s gifts and talents to fulfill a worthy mission. As the offspring of a clergyman, I observed and grew to understand the obligations of someone who has been called: to lead, guide, nurture, mentor, mediate, teach, inspire, and profess a set of beliefs. As I watched my father, I knew that what he was doing was something I also could—in fact, should—do. What my father felt about religion, I feel about higher education. For me, that identity wasn’t formed “retrospectively”; it was formed early on, even though the specific instantiation occurred, as it did for these authors, in graduate school. In a very real sense, WPA work chose me, and the work has given meaning and purpose to my life.

What does it mean to see one’s professional identity as a WPA in isolation from institutional contexts (in connection with portability)?

Dennis: It would be interesting to try to think of an identity that was formed with few or tenuous ties to a particular institutional context—one that was not at least formed in serious dialogue with a particular context with lasting and durable effects.

Joe: But don’t most of us imagine our work identities in precisely these free-floating ways? Read the author bio at the close of our articles and books. They always describe individuals who are “Professors of Rhetoric” or “Professors of English” or whatever, and who teach at (rather than for) a particular university. And of course almost all of us, over the span of a career, end up teaching at several institutions—with the result that we end up identifying more with the values of “the discipline” or “the field” (or “WPA-ing?”) than those of any particular institution we happen, at the time, to be working “at.”

Dennis: It is also interesting to think about the relations between identity formation and the relative portability of identity. Is “GenAdmin” really a postmodern twist on the professional identities of older WPAs?

Portability—or transitoriness—has long been a feature of academic life, or more accurately of some academic lives. What would it mean, though, to build the possibility or expectation of such movement into the heart of one’s professional identity as a WPA?

Joe: Yes, I think that is perhaps the boldest claim made in GenAdmin—that you might think of yourself as a career WPA in much the same way that most academics think of themselves as career teachers.

Marty: The idea of not being a career WPA seems odder to me than being an on-again/off-again WPA. So in that sense, the authors are giving welcome voice to my experience and identity. From a purely pragmatic point of view, rotating WPA positions deprive writing programs of the continuity they need to survive inevitable instability. (This assumes, of course, that the WPA is performing the job well.) If the WPA’s professional identity derives from a commitment to the principles and precepts of higher education writ large, I could see that identity as free floating, unencumbered from ties to a specific local institution. The professoriate has long recognized that scholars’ loyalties aren’t to the specific department in which they’re currently housed, but to the sub-discipline in which they work. I don’t see the authors of GenAdmin as making a case to change that historical reality.

Jeanne: We’ve expended a lot of effort in forcing the map to be the terrain—to find WPA principles of a Platonic order, as the numerous WPA handbooks and guides and case-study collections show. I don’t see GenAdmin as an attempt to rise above the local or to offer general precepts about administering writing programs. We’re asked to see local conditions as themselves unstable, open to strategic change, and always contingent. That frees the WPA from a defining relationship with the institution. His or her strategies in a given situation emerge from and in the institutional context; they are particularized in time and place, and so they are not absolutes that can be made into abstract truths.
How seriously should a new WPA take the history of the profession, or the history of the institution (department, general education program, WAC initiatives) they step into?

Jeanne: Seriously enough to know it well, certainly, but the GenAdmin philosophy applies here as well, and so the answer is necessarily dependent on multiple contexts. But one of the notable characteristics of this text is the authors’ extensive grounding of their arguments in the history of WPA literature. Their aim is the reframing of WPA history, an anti-foundationalist move. The comparison the authors draw between their position and that of third-wave feminists is apt. They reflect on the history and show it to us through new screens, revealing the limits of the historical frames we’ve constructed. They challenge us to throw off the chains of WPA history, to work from a philosophical perspective in all things, to see all things as philosophical propositions that are always open-ended. This standpoint transforms binary situations because no one thing, no event, discussion, “battle,” or even collaborative endeavor takes on precedent-setting power or identity-determining implication. WPA and institutional histories (necessarily plural) thus have more or less importance depending on the situation—but knowledge of them seems critical still, and they in turn must be critically seen.

Joe: This question moves us in a different direction, toward the particular and the local. I’ve directed two university writing programs, and I experienced the two positions as almost completely different jobs—not different versions of the same job, but different jobs. At one university, I administered, making sure the courses were staffed and the teachers were following the curriculum that had been set up for them. At the other, I led a faculty who were responsible for designing their own courses—keeping them in dialogue with one another and with the goals of the program. I thus suspect that we need to avoid confusing having the same job title with doing the same kind of work—that a WPA is not a WPA. And I also suspect that there may be many situations, many programs, that it might be better not to step into.

Marty: I can’t imagine any professional stepping into a new job not knowing the history of both the profession itself and the institution at which the job is situated. With regard to the former, GenAdmin’s authors make a significant contribution to the field through their substantial retelling, critiquing, and repositioning of WPA history and literature. Even as they criticize their forebears, the authors remain respectful; they enact the brand of rhetoric and ethics they seek to promulgate. Their commitment to the discipline is clear. I suspect that Harvey Weiner would approve of this book, even if he couldn’t have predicted it. With regard to the latter, I recall my shock when, two decades ago, faculty on my campus drafted a new general education program without having a sense of the history of general education in the US. How, I wondered, could this body of well-intentioned leaders craft a new program without knowing the roots of the movement? WPAs have no less an obligation to understand the exigencies to which they are responding. GenAdmin offers them a new philosophical grounding for undertaking their work.

Dennis: I suspect it is a sign of significant change or development for any group of people moving toward a sense of collectivity when it begins to become concerned with its “history.” It is a sign of professionalization. Such work of course sets in motion competing narratives, and to this extent I appreciate the effort of these authors to coin a new term—“GenAdmin”—that helps them tell a story, their story, our story, from a fresh perspective.

Regarding how seriously new WPAs need to take the history of the institutions they find themselves a part of, I could not imagine teaching a course—any kind of course—about writing program administration that did not ask class participants to reflect deeply on the institutional embeddedness of whatever administrative position they held or might hold (WC, WAC, or WP Director). Put otherwise, it would be a central “learning outcome” of any such course that students would develop the habit of attending first and foremost to institutional history, structure, and location—to the materiality of their job.

I would go so far as to say that our discipline (CCC/CCCC/WPA) has been remiss not to stress more than it has the varied—not universal but nevertheless persistent—relations between composition (first-year, advanced, WAC, WID, etc.) and general education as an enduring educational movement in this country.
And yet, would I go so far as to say that it is of the essence of WPA-ness, of what it means to be a WPA, that we are (they are) always already institutionalized? That WPA-ness is necessarily inextricable from its historicity and institutional embeddedness? Would I discourage a new WPA from imagining her or himself floating free from the institutional context and the history of whatever WPA position she or he happens to enjoy at any particular time, nor ever to carve out a sense of professional self largely or mostly independent of any particular place and time? Would I say categorically that doing so is unimaginable or always undesirable? No.

And, finally, to reflect . . .

Jeanne: We have spent decades theorizing about WPA work. The GenAdmin philosophy transcends that theory-work division and announces what they call in Chapter 1 the “viral potential” of WPA work. I welcome this challenge to a deterministic linear history and claim for a post-administrative WPA philosophy. As with Sid Dobrin’s recent work, this text anticipates a next WPA phase, and it is intellectually exciting to see the generation of a new paradigm. And I say that as someone whose work has been much caught up in the old paradigm—my doubting game to GenAdmin’s believing game. In notes from an initial reading, I can trace my increasing openness to a GenAdmin position: from “need to problematize that; avoid smoothing out these conflicts” on a first page to “optimists, but no Candides” near the end.

Taking up doubting ways for a moment, though, I question how GenAdmin will apply in the context of the massive changes underway in higher education. Already the majority of faculty are contingent workers; for-profit institutions further reduce faculty roles; research is increasingly being privatized; outlets for scholarly work are shrinking—the litany is familiar. Is GenAdmin a philosophy only for an increasingly tiny elite? How will the changing material practices of higher education impinge on a philosophy of open-ended possibility, no matter how rhetorically agile one is? How much meaningful work, how much flourishing, will happen in such cynical places, such conditions of profit and (academic) loss? At what point does portability become commodification? Or can position GenAdmin against what seems currently almost a WPA guild, whose interests, as Dobrin argues, are served by creating safe institutional places, insular and tribal communities that are increasingly atheoretical and ahistorical. How far in such straits will empathy take us?

Marty: I share Jeanne’s concerns here. As much as I endorse these authors’ new ideas and believe that WPA needs them, I worry that they’re arriving at a time when academe’s larger issues will override their value. I needed this book more than a decade ago when pursuing a bid for promotion and tenure. I had assembled the body of literature, already large then, that established WPA work as constitutive of a discipline for my promotion and tenure chair to review, only to have him ask, “What am I to make of this material?” This book might have helped convince him that WPA work has theoretical, philosophical grounding. My hope is that GenAdmin will help other WPAs coming up in the field now, not just for promotion and tenure, but for guidance and inspiration in their work.

Jeanne: And yet . . . this text, now, an unexpected turn, a dialogical history. As a member of an earlier generation in relation to GenAdmins, I feel like Ursula and Birkin at the end of D. H. Lawrence’s Women in Love:

“I don’t believe it,” she said. “It’s an obstinacy, a theory, a perversity.”

“Well—” he said.

“You can’t have two kinds of love. Why should you!”

“It seems as I can’t,” he said. “Yet I wanted it.”

“You can’t have it, because it’s false, impossible,” she said.

“I don’t believe that,” he answered. (473)

In their epistemological responsibility and philosophy of active hope, impossibility is the one position that the authors of GenAdmin don’t accept.

WORKS CITED

Notes

CHAPTER 1: TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF GENERATION ADMINISTRATION

1. Although we recognize its source, we find the claim that junior WPAs are too inexperienced to be problematic for GenAdmin subjectivity. Our understanding of WPA work involves a conflation of abilities to theorize, experiment, network, act, assess, and build a community of teachers and students, a conflation which Horning and others would argue requires on-the-job experience or a position that is labeled “full professor.” This perspective perpetuates an apprentice-expert model, which, though rarely unpacked in terms of its administrative significance, tells us that what we can do before tenure is fundamentally different from what we can do after tenure. Moreover, this argument does not fully embrace what we see as the larger purposes of WPA work—building knowledge about our goals of teaching students rhetoric and writing, developing writing teachers, and integrating sound rhetorical practices into the academic and personal lives of our students, colleagues, and selves. When our conception of WPA work—and the people working in those positions—is defined by the power afforded by tenure alone, we cut ourselves off from a more generative conversation that attends to the ways in which the WPA can not only create power or influence without tenure, but also improve the conditions in which s/he works. This in turn discredits the value and importance of discursive, rhetorical acts that all WPAs engage in because of their training as rhetoricians and their disposition to work toward meaningful, pragmatic programmatic change that supports student writers.

2. Throughout this book we offer multiplicity to connote the ways that our jobs require us to make decisions from and move between disciplines, positionings, and conceptions of power, in turn resulting in opportunities for us to shift episteme.

3. We see the following books as important precursors to this one in the ways they have shaped our thinking and the ways they serve as key texts in WPA seminars and in individual research: *Culture Shock and the Practice of Profession: Training the Next Wave in Rhetoric & Composition* (Anderson and