

Graduate Student Writing Center Administration

by Karen Rowan

Several years ago, a poster to the Wcenter listserv enquired about the history of the "Position Statement on Professional Concerns of Writing Center Directors" by Jeanne Simpson; despite her review of the literature, the poster had found few details about how the statement was crafted, the historical context from which it emerged, or the reception it received after its initial publication (Stephens, Post to Wcenter Listserv, July 23, 2000). Fortunately, Simpson and others were on hand to provide a narrative of that statement's genesis, adding to IWCA historical archive. Inspired in part by that exchange, this short history of the IWCA Position Statement on Graduate Student Writing Center Administration aims to give those who did not participate in writing or revising the statement insight into the process that led to the final statement.

Primarily, the Statement is the result of efforts by Julie Eckerle, Karen Rowan, and Shevaun Watson to draw attention to graduate student administrators (GSAs) in writing centers. Our interest in this issue arose from our own experiences as GSAs, coupled by the near invisibility of GSAs in writing center discourse. During the process of developing, writing, and revising the Statement, we benefited from the insights of other GSAs and writing center directors who are similarly concerned about these issues.

In the late 1990s, each of us worked as GSAs in different writing centers: Julie at the University of Minnesota--Twin Cities, Karen at the University at Albany--SUNY, and Shevaun at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Though we had very different experiences--ranging from serving as the sole administrator for the writing center to working along side supportive faculty directors--we each found ourselves questioning our positions. What did it mean to be both a graduate student and administrator, a peer and supervisor to our fellow graduate students? In the fall of 1998, Kendra Banks Perry, then a GSA at Andrews University, created a listserv for GSAs in an effort to connect GSAs from across the country. Though that listserv was short lived, it did provide a forum for Kendra, Julie, and Karen to plan a proposal for a session on GSAs at the 1999 National Writing Center Association (NWCA, precursor to the IWCA) conference in Bloomington, IN.

At the 1999 National & East Central Writing Centers Associations Conference, in Bloomington, Indiana ("Giving a Voice to the Graduate Student Writing Center Administrator: A Roundtable Discussion."), Kendra presented her research about the numbers of graduate students working as administrators in writing centers; Julie presented her review of conference presentations and listserv discussions that touched on graduate students in the writing centers (and noted how few of these discussions dealt with grad administrators); and Karen drew from Simpson's statement to discuss why it wasn't applicable to graduate student administrators. Though the audience was small, they were interested in the issues we raised, and we left encouraged to keep working.

Several weeks before the NWCA conference, Julie and Karen met in person for the first time at the 1999 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in Atlanta, GA. We were both audience members in a presentation on GSAs; after quickly introducing ourselves, we pounced on one of the panelists, Shevaun Watson. After the NWCA conference, Julie, Karen, and Shevaun prepared a proposal for the 2000 CCCC pre-conference writing center workshop. Though Kendra participated in the initial plans for the workshop, she moved on from her writing center position and needed to attend to her graduate studies and teaching.

The workshop at 2000 CCCC in Minneapolis" (Graduate Students in the Writing Center: A Practical Approach to Visible and Meaningful Work.) proved to be a breakthrough for our work. The roundtable discussion included both critical debate about the role of GSAs in writing centers and productive brainstorming about what steps the writing center field could and should take to better attend to the working conditions and professional development of GSAs. Again, we drew on Simpson's statement as a model for a new position statement for graduate students and collaborated with workshop participants on what such a position statement might contain. The notes from this session later served as the basis for the first draft of the position statement. At the end of the session, Jon Olson answered Karen's call for someone to help the group act on the ideas generated during the discussion and to serve as a liaison to the NWCA Executive Board. Later in the conference, Julie briefly spoke to the Executive Board and announced the group's intention to submit a proposal on GSAs at the November 2000 business meeting.

During the spring and summer, we wrote our proposal to the NWCA Executive Board on GSAs. The proposal included background information and the lack of professional discourse about GSAs, as well as four requests: 1) incorporate the web page created by Kendra Banks Perry into the NWCA web site; 2) include a chapter on GSAs in the upcoming revision of the Writing Center Resource Manual; 3) include a graduate student representative on the NWCA Executive Board; and 4) endorse the Position Statement on Graduate Student Writing Center Administration. Jon Olson forwarded the proposal to the Executive Board listserv and asked members to read it before the business meeting at the 2000 NWCA/MAWCA conference in Baltimore, MD.

At the business meeting in Baltimore, Shevaun and Karen presented the proposal to the Executive Board. Much to our surprise, the Executive Board passed the first three parts of the proposal and agreed to discuss the Statement on the Executive Board listserv. In the ensuing months, Perry's listserv was transferred to the IWCA web site; we wrote a chapter for the Writing Center Resource Manual; and, in the next round of elections for at-large board members, Shevaun was elected as the first Graduate Student At-Large Representative. Over several months in 2001, board members debated the finer points of the Statement, leading us to revise the Statement two more times. In November 2001, the Executive Board voted online to endorse the final version of the Statement. (See our Writing Lab Newsletter article to compare the original Statement and the final Statement endorsed by the IWCA).

In the years since the IWCA endorsed the position statement, we have continued to publicize it in our publications and presentations to ensure that new GSAs have access to it. In 2002, the Writing Center Journal published the statement, giving it just the sort of visibility and "professional cachet" that Jeanne Simpson sought when she published "Position Statement on Professional Concerns of Writing Center Directors" in the same journal over fifteen years earlier (Simpson, Post Wcenter listserv, July 24, 2000).

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