

Mentoring, Advocacy, Resilience:
Investigating how administrators cultivate agile writing programs

A DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

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Abstract

Writing programs are in a unique position in higher education because research and pedagogy interact to create educational leadership roles that rely on disciplinary expertise. When education moved to emergency remote instruction in Spring 2020, Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) supported instructors and students while making curricular changes for courses and negotiating with upper administration. Through it all, they continued a tradition of sharing their findings, tools, and strategies with other WPAs and writing studies scholars.

This study uses a survey (n=55) and interviews (n=13) to consider reflections and strategies used by WPAs to support teachers and students in the early pandemic in order to develop a "WPA toolkit:" a set of practical resources for WPAs to cultivate skills that support their writing programs. Preliminary findings suggest that WPAs relied on their disciplinary expertise in writing studies for activities like creating resources and engaging negotiations that, ultimately, centered the needs of teachers and students in their programs in uncertain times. The next stage of this project is to adapt principles such as design thinking, including prototyping and testing, to the process of creating the WPA toolkit, per Purdy's (2014) call to find avenues for design thinking in writing studies. I will use these processes and principles to make the WPA toolkit more applicable across institutional contexts and sustainable beyond completion of the dissertation.

Proposal Narrative

Contribution to the Field

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, Spring 2020, was a uniquely difficult shared moment for those in higher education: teachers had to quickly change the modalities and expectations of their courses; students had to adjust to those changes while, for many of them, their lives were uprooted from the stability of college life; and administrators had to balance new and changing policies, limited resources, and individual and collective needs of their instructors and students. At that point, I was a masters student teaching Composition and working as the graduate assistant for Oregon State's Writing Intensive Curriculum, which trained and supported faculty teaching writing courses in disciplines across the university. My position was as a graduate Writing Program Administrator (or WPA), and like other WPAs, my colleagues and I were figuring out how we could best support instructors in the program as they re-imagined their Spring courses for imperfect, emergency remote delivery (e. g. Clinnin, 2021; Sheppard, 2021; Hodges & Fowler, 2020). This moment, and the months that followed, prompted me to ask how other WPAs supported their faculty and students in a time when nobody could be expected to produce their best work.

Because many colleges and universities in the US have at least one required writing course, WPAs typically support programs that involve a large number of sections, faculty, and students. McLeod (2007), when describing the many varieties of WPA work, makes two distinctions that set it apart from other education administrative work: first, the work is directly linked to the WPA's scholarly discipline, and second, the prevalence of First Year Writing as a requirement and course students have in common make the WPA "answerable not only to the department chair but also in effect to the entire university" (p. 9). WPAs experienced the emergency remote instruction of March 2020 and the early pandemic as a whole from a unique position—all at once they were asked to revise course curricula, train instructors (often with wide ranges of experience) for new modalities, and manage the uncertainties and emotions involved with a crisis moment. Furthermore, WPAs can be found at all types of institutions, from community colleges to large research universities; they include tenure-track faculty, non-tenure-track faculty, graduate assistants, and staff members; they are often teachers and researchers, usually in fields like English and Rhetoric. WPA work requires the intellectual work of drawing from evidence-based pedagogy; it needs practical support structures for the people in the program, students and teachers alike; it asks for research, both for external resources and internal assessment; it thrives on collaboration, negotiation, and practicality. WPAs are educational administrators, but their direct applications of disciplinary expertise make them unique among administrators, which is what leads me to study their work during a time that was difficult for both teachers *and* administrators.

Discussing what happened in the early pandemic, even when best educational practices were not possible, is critical for educators and educational researchers. Reflections and data from this period show that, when things turned strange and difficult, teachers rose to meet the challenge. Mitchum et al (2020), as the writing program team at the University of Arizona, describe trying to reach out to students with inconsistent internet connections or who had to travel extensively at the moment of the remote switch, including international students who needed to return to other countries and quarantine on arrival. Nagelhout and Tillery (2021) explicitly define an ethic of care for leading their technical and professional communication program during this time. Clinnin (2021) draws on previous management of crises at her institution in addition to the pandemic to discuss crisis management for WPAs. Instructors began defining their own ethics of care, taking measures such as reducing students' workload (such as Meyer, 2020, and Doyle, 2020). Reflections on teaching at this time are still emerging in articles, special issues of journals in the field (such as *Computers and Composition*, *Journal of Technical and Business Communication*, and *Double Helix*), and book collections.

This project adds a broader view of WPA work to this growing body of pandemic-era reflections on education, as I will use this study to share practical tools and strategies from WPAs who showed their resilience as scholars, educators, and leaders. My study, a survey (n=55) and series of interviews (n=13) of folks in WPA positions in 2020, illustrates how writing program administration is the convergence of disciplinary expertise, administrative agility, and pedagogical support, and the data collection shows how those activities sharpen and influence each other in a way that has implications for studying writing *and* leadership in higher education. Furthermore, my discussion highlights how writing programs are *constantly* performing research on student success, instructor assessment, outcomes assessment, and any number of other aspects of their work, and demonstrates how they immediately apply that research to support instructors and students.

WPAs' disciplinary training in rhetoric and writing studies is explicitly related to writing and communication (McLeod, 2007). As an academic field in the US, the field draws from two major influences: the first, a tradition of rhetorical theory and philosophy that finds its roots in rhetoric as articulated by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle; the second, a concern with writing pedagogy, in part brought about by movements like the midcentury open admissions policies of US higher education (Brereton, 1995). As such, Rhetoric can be studied in disciplinary departments such as Philosophy, Communications, English, and Writing, although WPAs are often trained and working within the latter two. This training often involves basic rhetorical theories such as argumentative appeals and audience awareness alongside best practices for composition pedagogy such as process-based teaching, rich in feedback and active learning; it may additionally include specializations such as technical communication or Online Writing Instruction (OWI) (Lauer, 1984). WPA work uses this disciplinary expertise in practical

application alongside theories of educational administration and leadership (for more, see McLeod, 2007).

Online Writing Instruction (OWI)

Online Writing Instruction has been a growing conversation in the field of writing studies. In one of the earliest pieces on OWI, Warnock (2009) positions online writing courses as promising, progressive, and full of opportunity. The Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction published a 2015 collection on foundational principles for OWI, addressing the types of students in online courses and how they interact with teachers, the types of obstacles students may face in online learning, considerations for designing online writing courses, and a call for integrating technology into all writing classrooms (Hewett and DePew). The collection ends with a look to the future in which the authors write that "OWI is and will continue to be about composition--not just composition taught in an online setting, but, we argue, composition writ large" (p. 549).

In 2019, a book on OWI from Borgman & McArdle summarized OWI considerations into four attributes: Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic (they put it in a memorable acronym in "PARS"). This book not only gave new framings for thinking about effective online writing courses, but was released at a helpful time (and in an open-access format) as many writing instructors and WPAs implemented PARS principles going forward from March 2020. The PARS series has since become a series out of the WAC Clearinghouse, with one follow-up (Borgman & McArdle, 2021) and a third book on OWI and WPA work in press.

Of course, the best principles of OWI weren't always attainable under the difficult circumstances of March 2020; that's why many argue it would be incorrect to call Spring 2020's teaching situation "Online Writing Instruction," with those in the field preferring terms such as "emergency remote instruction." Still, OWI best practices provide a foundation from which to assess what went right in Spring 2020, and the period provides a critical look into what potential obstacles WPAs face when supporting OWI in their programs.

Mentorship and Writing Programs

Mentorship in writing studies is studied at horizontal and vertical/hierarchical levels and increasingly considers positionality (e.g., "CCCC Statement of Professional Guidance for Mentoring Graduate Students," 2019). Additionally, scholars in writing studies are interested in operationalizing mentorship and teamwork for more productive and equitable collaboration (e.g., McMullin & Dilger, 2021; VanHaitsma & Ceraso, 2017). In the case of this project, it is important to identify how the WPA considers their own mentorship duties. Scholarship such as Foley-Schramm et al. (2018) suggests there is more to be done in terms of WPAs mentoring graduate students interested in administration, writing they wish to "advocate more specifically for intentional dialogue between project leaders (WPAs/mentors) and graduate students" (p.

90). Wooten et al. (2016) take a closer examination of student evaluations of teaching as a tool for WPA mentorship of their teachers.

Towards defining what, exactly, effective WPA mentorship would look like, Beavers' (2019) study on WPA efforts to provide professional development for instructors (a form of mentorship) found that WPAs understand their work as grounded within servant leadership theory (from Greenleaf, 2002). Specifically, Beavers' study focuses on how WPAs encourage professional development for part-time faculty to prepare them for OWI. Beavers coins "Administrative Rhetorical Mindfulness" ("ARM") as a way WPAs utilize skills of awareness, foresight, and building community for those goals of developing writing teachers. The use of "mindfulness" is intentional: Beavers finds that WPAs, rather than dwelling on the limitations often imposed on their position, focus instead on "those moments where one can enact change" (2019, p. 111). The two main barriers for professional development of part-time faculty were, he found, funding and workload, and that's where the ARM skills of awareness, foresight, and building community come to the WPA's aid. For example, Beavers builds out a heuristic guided by those skills that WPAs can use for OWI professional development, asking questions such as "How do we encourage *greater investment in OWI training by PT faculty?*" and "What ways can you use PT faculty skill sets and knowledge to help them *feel more included in the departmental community?*" (p. 116).

In Beavers' 2021 article on the study, he links finding those professional development opportunities for part-time faculty to activism on the part of the WPA. This project takes up Beavers' point that "more research is needed that is grounded within the narratives of what WPAs do," in order to better understand those skills which help WPAs develop and mentor their faculty (2019, p. 112). Rather than focusing on one specific goal of mentorship like OWI training, however, this project examines how mentorship occurred during a critical moment.

Designing Agile Programs

While the questions of the survey and interviews focused on decisions made in Spring 2020 and soon thereafter, this is not meant to be a dissertation study just capturing the historical moment of working in writing programs in higher education during COVID-19; rather, the intention is to use that moment to discover which practices of writing programs were resilient in difficult times and allowed WPAs to continue in their roles of mentoring and developing writing teachers which, in turn, benefits students.

This goal was made more salient to me by one of my participants, who said the advice she would pass on to newer WPAs concerned:

Having support for our instructors in a variety of forms, having professional development so that our instructors know how to work technology and how to teach an array of delivery modes, having a flexible enough curriculum, spending the time to invest in curriculum for different delivery modes like online, hybrid, face to face—**trying to really**

create an agile writing program that can respond to changes. As universities change, as student demographics change, as situations change, trying to do that sets you up for these crisis situations ("Imelda," emphasis added).

To theorize what may help build "agile writing programs," I first turned to Agile web development, as Agile's principles easily aligned with the *Personal, Accessible, Responsive*, and *Strategic* principles of OWI from Borgman & McArdle (2019). Originally used for web development, Agile was helpful to think about how writing programs prepare online writing courses and, in particular, how writing programs' OWI infrastructure can stand changes and crises such as emergency remote instruction. Per Lang (2016), Agile is "a rapid and occasionally chaotic type of project management" (pp. 83-84); Pope-Ruark (2014) writes that it "encourages flexibility of mind, responsiveness to change, collaboration with cross-functional team members, and attention to smaller project tasks rather than only end products" (p. 324). It may be that Agile is helpful in providing a framework for further theorizing what little-a *agile* writing programs may look like, but I will also be exploring principles such as design thinking (described below) or other avenues such as expanding Beavers' Administrative Rhetorical Mindfulness framework in order to support the study's discussion. In the case of design thinking, this project takes up a research question posed by Pope-Ruark, Tham, and Conner in their 2019 introduction to a *JBTC* special issue on design thinking, with a couple of small clarifications: "How might an understanding of design-thinking methods empower technical and professional writers [such as WPAs] to build on their carefully developed competencies in rhetorical practice in order to empathetically advocate for specific audiences and users [such as instructors]?" (p. 374).

Project Intervention

The resilience shown by WPAs during the pandemic offered, at times, a counternarrative to more corporatized or profit-driven definitions of resilience: WPAs prioritized safety, stability, and care for instructors and students, sometimes negotiating health-related boundaries for instructors with their institutions or advocating for strategic changes to teaching-as-usual that centered students. In other words, while *resilience* was often tied to *productivity* continuing despite a pandemic, my study data points to WPAs understanding *resilience* as for the sake of each person and the people they serve, either through administrative roles supporting teaching or teaching roles supporting students. WPAs' resilience and expertise expanded beyond writing pedagogy to include curricular changes, program structure, and professional development and training for teachers, and while their strategies varied based on institutional contexts, they maintained shared core values. My project articulates these values as they connect to the many activities of WPA work. WPAs used their disciplinary expertise to be more effective in their administrative roles: for example, one participant described "operationalizing care" with "cheat sheets" that helped instructors make grading and assessment decisions based on a variety of

complicated student situations. Then, in addition to that work at their own institutions, WPAs worked quickly to disseminate effective pandemic-related strategies of teaching and administration in scholarly journals like one devoted to WPA work, *Writing Program Administration*. Even in the early pandemic, WPAs were making moves to share strategies across institutional contexts: one participant described her online teaching tipsheets as service not just to her department, but to her discipline and wider scholarly community, as she circulated them through informal networks like social media. This goes back to the person-centric values of WPAs: as one of my study's participants put it, "I care about our standards, I care about our outcomes, I care about our pedagogy, but the reason why I care about all those things is because *I care about the faculty and the students*." My project, then, engages with the reflections of WPAs to ask what can be learned about the complicated work of running a writing program by examining this difficult, early-pandemic moment.

Goals of the Project

By discussing the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic from the unique standpoint of WPAs, my dissertation highlights what can be learned about writing instruction, faculty support, and educational leadership through the multilayered position of a WPA. Based on my own WPA experiences at two institutions, and guided by the data from my 55 participants, I ask: *What can the early pandemic teach us about skills and strategies WPAs use to best advocate for their instructors and students?*

Additional questions include:

1. How did WPAs understand "support" in the sudden pivot to remote instruction? How did they determine where to focus support for their instructors?
2. What considerations, especially in terms of instructors' labor and preparation, were made to craft and offer this support? How were WPAs considering their own positionality and their own labor when supporting instructors?
3. What parts of this support were specific to the needs of a writing program, rather than other programs or curricula? For example, what have we learned about infrastructure necessary for OWI?

The final goal of my project, in addition to the dissertation, is to create a toolkit for WPAs that identifies and supports those specialized skills and strategies of the position while offering tools for building resilient writing programs. This toolkit simply follows in WPAs' tradition of service and sharing by offering the broader view of a cross-institutional study to craft and share resources, so I see crafting it as a form of reciprocity I can offer my participants for their wisdom and mentorship. Forming this toolkit requires attention to both disciplinary theory and administrative, pedagogical practice.

Research Design and Methods

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach: first, through a survey with questions about decisions, obstacles, and what instructors writing programs were supporting (Phase 1); then, through two interviews, with one focused on reflective narratives and the other examining support materials crafted for writing programs by those doing WPA-like work (Phase 2). Depending on fellowship awards and the timeline I follow for completing my graduate work, I may add a third phase of the data collection that will expand my participant pool and allow more time for iterative design of the toolkit alongside user testing.

The Phase 1 Survey focused on the following sub-questions:

1. What areas of instruction (technology, delivery, synchronous engagement, other support to instructors) did WPAs focus on for support?
2. Was that support catered at all to the specific often-tenuous situations (contingent faculty/graduate TAs) of instructors in these types of programs?
3. What barriers existed to delivering that support?

To capture these reflections before they faded from memory, I began Phase 1 of this study, the survey, in October of 2021. The list of survey questions can be found in Appendix A. This survey was conducted on Qualtrics survey software and distributed through writing studies mailing lists, on Twitter through informal professional networks, and later through direct recruitment emails. After circulating the survey in October 2021, the study was revised to include direct recruitment and expand the inclusion protocol to those who did WPA work but did not have a named WPA position. The decision to revise inclusion protocol was in part because, as literature like McLeod (2007) reminds us, those who do WPA work do not always have WPA titles (or their positions are more complex than one title). These revisions, with an additional push on social media and mailing lists, more than doubled my response rate. Between October 2021 and January 2022, I received a total of 55 responses.¹

Conversation guides for the interviews, Phase 2, were drafted for IRB approval, but were revised based on survey responses. Phase 2 interviews took place over Spring 2022. The Conversation Guide for both interviews can be found in Appendix B. Recursive coding was again implemented for both sets of interviews: a first round focused on recurring themes, a second on flexible structures for writing programs (mainly in terms of OWI infrastructure and professional development), and a third on specialized skills and strategies used by WPAs. A potential Phase 3 to add to and diversify my participant pool, dependent on fellowship support, is outlined below.

Preliminary Results

In January 2022, I began survey analysis. Responses to the one open-ended question, "If you could time-travel to two weeks before the emergency shift to remote teaching and give yourself a quick bit of WPA-related advice, what would you say?", were coded after data collection. Survey coding was done in a couple of rounds. In the initial round, I considered some

¹ This study is approved by the Purdue Institutional Review Board: IRB-2021-779.

notable answers for multiple-choice responses that chose “other,” and created preliminary codes for the one open-ended question. More codes were defined in the second round to, for example, try to untangle the ways that OWI-specific preparation is different from technological familiarity and how that is different from other technological support infrastructure. Notably, this coding after-the-fact helped me rethink my initial questions: while I was wondering about how WPAs conceptualized empathy in the early pandemic, many responses brought up some form of self-care for themselves and their instructors, giving me a more specific lens for thinking about this emotional labor for WPAs. This allowed me to reframe some of my questions in Phase 2 concerning emotional labor.

The early stages of this project have indicated promising contributions to a growing body of knowledge on WPA work in the pandemic. My recent article in a special issue of *Computers and Composition Online* focusing on reflections from the early pandemic (Yerace, 2022; Appendix C) analyzes Phase 1 survey data to provide a big picture view of the decisions and challenges writing programs faced, building upon the meaningful reflections on pedagogy in the early pandemic from teachers and program administrators. Even this early data indicates that studying this shared and uniquely difficult moment of WPA work meant an opportunity to reconsider priorities for teaching writing *and* to more concretely theorize concepts like care and emotional labor in writing instruction and educational administration.

WPA work creates an environment where intellectual and scholarly work in writing studies and OWI meet practice and institutional power, and therefore capturing this particular moment in WPA work allows us to think about how these broader areas of scholarship and practice interact, especially when put under pressure. My forthcoming chapter in the third of Borgman & McArdle’s *PARS* series, on OWI for WPAs (Yerace, 2023; Appendix D), builds upon this with early Phase 2 data, asking how WPAs can make their programs’ OWI practices more agile in the face of crisis and change. What that angle of analysis finds is that resilient writing programs were attentive to the labor involved for any changes instructors had to make, centered a culture of accessibility and provided tools, assessed the strengths of their teams and instructors, and focused on responsiveness and strategy over rigid planning.

WPAs who participated in my study seemed like they could not help but offer pieces of advice and mentorship to me, the researcher but early-career scholar, speaking to a culture of service-oriented educators that this project implicitly celebrates and wants to highlight with the formation of a WPA toolkit.

Potential Phase 3

While I am indebted to my initial participants for their generosity and wisdom, my study is skewed towards larger, public institutions with more funding, and towards WPAs with tenure, larger program support staffs, and more institutional support for students and instructors. Funding from additional grants and fellowships (outlined in my section on Fellowship Applications) would allow me to conduct additional recruitment, with participant incentives, for

WPAs from underrepresented institutional contexts—WPAs without tenure options, or from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Community Colleges, and other contexts.

Recruiting WPAs of underrepresented positionalities will mean a more effective and all-around useful Toolkit as a result of the dissertation, and Phase 3 will help me move away from the pandemic and to focus more on the regular crises that arise in WPA work, especially WPA work with less support from the institution. Therefore, I foresee a Phase 3 which recruits ten new participants underrepresented in initial data collection, planning for two interviews with conversation guides updated from Phase 2's interview series: the first seeking narratives of recent problem-solving, and the second learning about materials they create to support instructors.

Analysis for the Toolkit

The process of crafting the toolkit will require additional data analysis, on one hand, to theorize and articulate what skills are unique to WPAs because of their disciplinary situation, and on the other hand, to craft and provide practical tools that help cultivate those skills and strategies that build resilient writing programs. Specifically, this toolkit will answer recent calls in the discipline to apply technical communication (TC) skills to writing studies and WPA work (for example, Purdy, 2014) by implementing methods such as design thinking and usability testing. In analyzing my data for and crafting the WPA toolkit, I will follow what the d.school at Stanford University outlines as five steps of the design process: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test (Dam and Siang, 2020).

The first step of data analysis for the toolkit will be the *empathizing* portion, which I intend to implement through the practice of creating personas of potential users of the toolkit ("Personas"). These personas will be created based on what I know about WPAs who participated in both phases of my study: to build personas means considering how different users will interact with the toolkit, so it requires identifying patterns in my participants, such as patterns in their roles as WPAs, in their knowledge of the field, their goals, attitudes and motivations, processes, environments, pain points, tools, mental models, relationships, and their ideas of the future (Goltz, 2014). This empathizing portion will help think of issues of wider applicability of the toolkit: for example, how does collaboration look when the WPA has a team including faculty and graduate students versus where the WPA doesn't have designated support staff? How do negotiations differ when an institution provides clear expectations for hybrid or online courses versus where they insist on in-person courses while instructors feel at-risk? How do WPAs adapt to these different cultures, find collaborators and teammates, and still center their instructors and students?

The next step of data analysis is the *define* step, which will involve articulating what parts of disciplinary expertise make WPAs more effective administrators, especially in centering the needs of teachers and students. For example, often, my Phase 2 conversations with study

participants easily veer into disciplinary jargon in our shared field of rhetoric and writing studies—conversations will shift from audience awareness in crisis communications to identifying *kairos*, strategic rhetorical timing, in getting procedural changes approved by Deans and Provosts.

The articulation of those strategies leads into the *ideate* stage, which takes the personas built and strategies identified in the first two stages and thinks about tools that support those activities and those people. The *ideate* stage and on will be explicitly recursive: *ideation* will lead to the *prototyping*, which is then put through *testing*. In my final year of the dissertation, I will conduct repeated *testing* through recruiting testers and using the personas created. This aims to ensure the toolkit meets usability standards such as "effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction" (per Barnum, 2020); additionally, recruiting testers will mean I can follow recent disciplinary trends noted in Dilger (2023) to improve user experience within the toolkit.

Overall, my remaining dissertation work will be guided by the concept of *iterative design* when it comes to this WPA toolkit. First, I will be defining and describing the theoretical disciplinary grounding that makes WPAs effective in critical times and describing that in the dissertation itself. Alongside this, I will craft an organized, practical toolkit that supports those activities and makes those strategies more explicit—all while getting feedback through testing and additional data collection and continuing to revise.

Significance

The ultimate goal of the dissertation is to support creating the WPA toolkit, a resource that uses accessible and adaptable tools and how-tos that support and strengthen WPAs' resilient strategies as drawn from their disciplinary expertise. We could consider the toolkit as supporting activities of communities of practice from Wenger (2011): problem solving; requests for information; seeking experience; reusing assets; coordination and synergy; discussing developments; documentation projects; visits; and mapping knowledge and identifying gaps. No WPA toolkit developed from a single dissertation study will contribute helpfully to all the activities that help build practice, but this project offers a unique standpoint from which to begin building centralized resources for such practice.

I originally thought of this deliverable as a "WPA Crisis Toolkit," which would have prompts, plans, and resources for WPAs to implement when an upheaval like COVID-19 strikes their programs again. However, my conversations with participants have led me to believe that we should stop assuming "stability" in our writing programs as the norm. Indeed, the negotiations, support, and pedagogy that WPAs engaged in during the early pandemic weren't necessarily *new skills*, but were parts of the specialized skillset of WPAs that were highlighted and engaged *especially* during that time. What this toolkit will do, then, is support those skills by articulating them, offering resources for highlighting them, and sharing the different ways they might appear in varying institutional contexts. For example, WPAs, with their rhetoric and writing studies training, are often already good communicators, so what communication

principles shine when they're asked to engage in crisis communication with their programs? How do they negotiate and display their own expertise and positions when they are working within moments that feel as uncertain as March 2020? A toolkit would first explicitly name the knowledge and principles WPAs hold, and then offer examples of crisis communication and resources for future communications.

In terms of education, this means that instructors who feel more prepared and supported can better support the students in their courses. While, as I said, many WPAs already have skills like these, my participants still found areas for improvement that further preparation could have alleviated; by studying the strategies of WPAs in the early pandemic, I can use their feedback and reflections on what happened to sharpen future use of those skills. In addition, some of the WPAs who were able to rely on and clearly articulate their expertise in crisis could do so because they benefited from factors like larger program support teams, or additional institutional support for helping instructors learn new modalities. Other WPAs with fewer resources or less support can use the toolkit to help prioritize tasks and, ideally, make room to focus their time and resources elsewhere, especially during a crisis.

Furthermore, it is my hope that such a toolkit can offer a model for other types of educators looking to explicitly contribute to their communities of practice. The goal of my ongoing fellowship and grant applications for my fourth and potential fifth years is to find more resources for a wider pool of participants and/or extended user-experience testing, either in collaboration with current study participants or other contacts in my subdiscipline, to ensure that the resources are easy-to-implement and adaptable across a variety of institutional contexts (that is to say, *to ensure they are resilient*); however, testing and using iterative design processes will be a large part of the final dissertation year either way. Such a process requires inviting additional collaborators and more rounds of revision, and this support would ensure the timely completion of my degree by giving me the time to pursue these tasks. An effective toolkit would not be a static resource, either, so the other goal of the final year of the dissertation would be to plan a sustainable future for this resource as I continue into an academic career—a future which may involve identifying more long-term collaborators, or a post-PhD research agenda involving more data collection, or more time to learn from open-access resources for educators which have also proved resilient. Ultimately, it is my hope that the next step of incorporating TC principles will make this toolkit more effective in following the tradition of scholarship and service exemplified by educators like my study participants.

Outline of the Dissertation

As I see it, this will be a six-chapter dissertation. I have outlined these chapters below.

1. **Introduction**, explaining the background that led to the project's main questions and how the project developed from there.
2. **Literature Review**, including methodology, which will cover WPA research, teaching during COVID-19, and design thinking for the toolkit.
3. **Methods**, including research design and methods of analysis for each phase of the dissertation and the formation of the toolkit.
4. **Preliminary Findings**, which will combine my first two publications of this study's results (see Appendices C and D).
5. **Analysis and Discussion**, which will describe both analysis of WPA skills and strategies and the design and implementation of the WPA toolkit.
6. **Conclusion**, which will tie the pieces of the study's deliverables together and outline the future of this research and the toolkit.

Important to note: external to the formal dissertation, this study will result in an open-access web-hosted WPA toolkit, described in the Proposal Narrative.

Fellowship Applications

With Dr. Dilger's encouragement, I have begun applying for dissertation fellowships that would fund my fourth year of the PhD. Below, in order of submission, is an abbreviated description of these, their due dates, and how they will impact the dissertation formation and timeline.

The Spencer Foundation/National Academies of Education Dissertation Fellowship

(Due October 6, 2022–submitted.) This fellowship is focused on funding dissertations with educational research. It is a terminal fellowship intended for final analysis of data, so it would abbreviate the PhD plan to four years. [The full guidelines can be found here.](#)

The Mellon Foundation/American Council of Learned Societies Dissertation Innovation Fellowship

(Due November 2, 2022–submitted.) This fellowship is for “graduate students in the humanities and social sciences who show promise of leading their fields in important new directions” and is intended for a formative stage of dissertation development. It is advantageous for PhD students who are not yet advanced to candidacy. My proposal for this fellowship involves a potential Phase 3 of additional recruitment of a handful of WPAs from underrepresented identities or institution types and additional interviews concerning navigating change and crisis in their positions. This fellowship would put my dissertation on a five-year plan. [The full guidelines can be found here.](#)

Internal Bilsland and Ross-Lynn Fellowships

(Due Spring 2023–submitted.) I will also apply for these fellowships when they are announced; the Bilsland requires completion of the dissertation during the fellowship, meaning it will abridge the PhD plan to four years.

Timeline for the Dissertation

Again, because I have begun applying for dissertation fellowships, here is a workplan including 4- and 5-year timelines, with some history provided.

Time	Four-Year Plan	Five-Year Plan
Fall 2021 (Year 2 of PhD)	● Study approval from Purdue IRB ● Circulation of Phase 1 Survey ● Proposal to & acceptance in special issue of <i>Computers & Composition Online</i>	
Spring 2022	● Jan: Data analysis of Phase 1; begin Phase 2A interview scheduling ● Feb: First draft of <i>CCO</i> article due ● Mar: Begin data analysis of Phase 2A; presentation at <i>CCCC</i> roundtable; begin Phase 2B interview scheduling ● May: Conclude Phase 2 interviews; Proposal to & acceptance in <i>PARS</i> edited collection	
Summer 2022	● Finalize revisions of pieces in <i>CCO</i> and <i>PARS</i> edited collection (these two pieces comprise Chapter 4: Preliminary Results of dissertation) ● Aug: Complete preliminary examinations for doctoral degree	
Fall 2022 (Year 3 of PhD)	● Complete coursework ● Complete applications to dissertation fellowships ○ For some applications, outline a potential Phase 3 of the study (5-Year Plan only) ● Outline methods of analysis for WPA toolkit ● Form dissertation committee	
Spring 2023	● Jan: Defend dissertation prospectus ● Feb: Present 2B findings at Writing Research Across Borders conference, Trondheim, Norway	
	● Draft Chapters 2 (Literature Review) and outline Chapter 3 (Methods) of dissertation	● Draft Chapter 2: Literature Review of dissertation; get close to completion over the semester

		Finalize plan for Phase 3 with dissertation chair and committee
Summer 2023	- Continue outlining Chapter 3 of dissertation - Begin outlining Chapter 1 of dissertation (Introduction) - Job market preparation work - Create a plan (budget, tools) for development of the WPA toolkit. - Recruit potential testers to ensure helpfulness, accessibility, validity of tools and strategies. Begin user experience testing on the WPA toolkit.	- Pursue IRB approval for an amendment for Phase 3 of data collection - If time, begin recruitment for Phase 3 of data collection - Begin outlining Chapter 3: Methods of dissertation - Job market preparation
Fall 2023 (Year 4 of PhD)	<i>*Start of proposed fellowship year</i>	
	- Continue recruitment and start of user testing for the toolkit - Begin developing the WPA Toolkit: conduct analysis for first three steps of design thinking - Draft Chapter 5 of dissertation (Theorizing WPA strategies), which will provide theoretical grounding for the WPA toolkit	- Conduct Phase 3 interviews - With additional funding, attend conferences/workshops that provides training on tools for crafting toolkit
Spring 2024	- Draft Chapter 6 (Conclusion) of dissertation - Bring toolkit to near-presentable condition; outline plan for sustainability after completion of the dissertation - Finalize dissertation ahead of a public defense in late April	- Complete data analysis on Phase 3 of dissertation - Begin toolkit formation alongside analysis, following first three steps of design thinking (empathize, ideate, and describe)
Summer 2024	- Complete final revisions of dissertation from the committee - Ensure WPA toolkit is available and ready-to-use that Summer as educators look toward the new academic year	Conduct user experience testing on WPA toolkit, revising as needed

	• Deposit dissertation for August graduation • Profit.	
Fall 2024 (Year 5 of PhD)		• Draft Chapter 5 of the dissertation describing analysis for toolkit and process of toolkit formation • Begin drafting of Chapters 1 and 6, Introduction and Conclusion, of dissertation • Finalize the toolkit
Spring 2025		• Perform revisions of dissertation as needed, to be defended by late April
Summer 2025		• Complete final revisions of dissertation from the committee • Deposit dissertation for August graduation • Profit.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. How would you describe your instructional role/job title?
 - a. Full-time Teaching Faculty
 - b. Graduate Teaching Assistant
 - c. Part-time Teaching Faculty
 - d. Tenure-line Faculty
 - e. Other (please describe):
2. How would you describe your role in the writing program as of March 2020?
 - a. Lead administrator (often "Director")
 - b. Online Course Specialist or equivalent position
 - c. Supporting lead administrator ("Associate/Assistant Director," either as a faculty member or graduate student)
 - d. Other (please describe:)
3. Now, let's learn a little about your writing program and how you made supportive decisions in March 2020. Who teaches in your writing program? Choose all that apply.
 - a. Full-time teaching faculty
 - b. Graduate Teaching Assistants
 - c. Part-time teaching faculty
 - d. Tenure-line faculty
4. About what percentage of your program's instructors are... [Sliding scale]
 - a. Full-time teaching faculty
 - b. Graduate Teaching Assistants
 - c. Part-time teaching faculty
 - d. Tenure-line faculty
5. Who did you focus support efforts towards during the emergency shift to remote teaching (including writing support materials and resources)? Choose all that apply.
 - a. Full-time teaching faculty
 - b. Graduate Teaching Assistants
 - c. Part-time teaching faculty
 - d. Tenure-line faculty
6. Did you provide different supportive communications or resources tailored to the different types of instructors in your program?
 - a. No, all instructors received the same resources and communications.
 - b. Yes, some were different based on audience.
7. [If yes:] Could you describe just a few of those differences?
8. What area(s) of instruction did you focus support towards during the shift of March 2020? Choose all that apply.

- a. Accessibility in online writing instruction
 - b. Engaging students in asynchronous courses
 - c. Engaging students in synchronous courses
 - d. Grading/assessing students in uncertain times
 - e. Instructor self-care
 - f. New course delivery format
 - g. Technology for asynchronous coursework (such as LMS setup)
 - h. Technology for conducting synchronous class sessions (such as videoconferencing software)
 - i. Other (please specify):
9. What, if any, barriers did you face in supporting your instructors during the emergency shift to remote instruction? Choose all that apply.
- a. Difficulty communicating with instructors
 - b. Lack of clarity from other admin on new expectations
 - c. Resource constraints
 - d. Time constraints
 - e. No major barriers
 - f. Other (please specify):
10. If you could time-travel to two weeks before the emergency shift to remote teaching and give yourself a quick bit of WPA-related advice, what would you say?
11. Tell us a little about the institution you work at. Is it...
- a. Public
 - b. Private
12. Degrees granted at your institution:
- a. Two-year
 - b. Four-year
 - c. Masters
 - d. Doctorate
13. Institution type:
- a. Community College
 - b. Completely Online University
 - c. Historically Black College or University
 - d. Regional Comprehensive University
 - e. Research University
 - f. Small Liberal Arts College
 - g. Tribal College
14. About how many undergraduate students are enrolled at your institution?
15. About how many graduate students are enrolled at your institution?

16. Would you be interested in being interviewed at a later stage of this project to reflect on support and the role of WPAs in March 2020?

- a. Yes
- b. Maybe: send me more information
- c. No

17. [If yes or maybe:] Please enter your email address so we can reach out to you.

Appendix B: Conversation Guides

In our first interview, participants were prompted to reflect on March 2020 decisions in terms of curriculum, faculty support, and obstacles they may have faced.

1. What areas of instruction (technology, delivery, synchronous engagement, other support to instructors) did you focus on in your communications and materials distributed to your writing program instructors?
2. Did you encourage synchronous or asynchronous course delivery in March 2020? What considerations went into that decision?
3. How did you adapt your communications to different types of instructors, if applicable?
4. Did you run into any barriers or complications in delivering support communications and materials? From where did those arise?
5. What, if any, instructional support that you provided do you think was specific to the needs of a writing program (versus another type of curriculum program)?
6. How did you imagine or re-imagine self-care in this moment, both for you and for your instructors?
7. Generally speaking, what went well in terms of the support offered?
8. Where could there have been more or different kinds of support offered?
9. What advice would you give to other WPAs if we faced the same kind of crisis next week?

Second interviews will discussed specific communications or resources WPAs may have created for faculty at the start of the pandemic.

1. Which difficulty of the emergency switch to remote teaching does this document/resource address?
2. What audiences were you addressing with this resource? What audience, or part of that audience, did you anticipate would need this the most?
3. What did you expect the primary needs of your instructors would be? Reflecting now, how true do you think that prediction was?
4. Did you run into any problems or constraints in creating resources for your instructors?
5. What rhetorical considerations did you make in terms of your own position when making this document? How did you understand and convey things like expertise, support, and empathy?
6. Looking at this now, are there any word choices that stand out to you?
7. If you could revise this document, time travel to March 2020 , and switch this with the original, what revisions would you make?