

# A Broader View: How Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition Prepare their Graduate Students to Teach Composition

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*This article presents a survey of WPAs serving at 38 United States doctoral degree programs in rhetoric and composition and seeks to describe their graduate teaching assistant (GTA) writing pedagogy education (WPE). Given the impact that GTAs have on undergraduate student retention, how we prepare them as teachers of writing has real implications for the students that they teach. The preparation that GTAs receive in their graduate programs in particular serves as an important foundation for their professionalization as emerging faculty. The responses collected in this study shed light onto the demographics, timing, goals, components, and practices used nationally to prepare GTAs to teach undergraduate composition.*

## INTRODUCTION

An American Federation of Teachers report (2009) found that GTAs (graduate teaching assistants) represent 41% of the instructional staff across public, doctoral-granting institutions in the United States (p. 10). GTAs teach a significant number of undergraduate students—especially undergraduates in composition courses. Studies of undergraduate retention (Davidson & Muse, 1994; Levitz et al., 1999; Reason, 2009) have identified the first two years of undergraduate education as the time when students are most likely to drop out (Murtaugh et al., 1999, p. 356). Powell (2009) noted that the composition course is one of the few spaces where the pedagogy necessary in retaining at-risk students can be enacted (p. 669). Holmes and Busser (2017) similarly identified composition instructors as important in university retention given that first-year composition instructors “are likely the one teacher students will see before stopping out, dropping out, or transferring” (p. 40–41). The connection between student retention and composition suggests that how we prepare the individuals who teach these composition courses is significant. At doctoral-granting institutions, GTAs teach many of these classes as instructors of record (not merely as assistants, as their title implies). GTAs frequently take on the full responsibilities of the composition classroom: delivering curricula, planning lessons, leading class activities, and responding to and evaluating student work.

The importance of GTA preparation is further complicated by the reality that GTAs in writing programs, especially those outside of rhetoric and composition, will graduate and enter their own teaching positions with fewer opportunities for additional preparation post-graduation (Beth Brunk-Chavez, 2010). Consequently, the teaching preparation that GTAs receive in their doctoral-granting program has impacts that reach beyond the immediacy of a GTA's graduate teaching career, having long-term ramifications as GTAs leave their graduate programs and take on administrative or teaching positions at institutions across the country. Despite its importance to higher education and periodic interest expressed in the scholarly literature, we have surprisingly few national data on GTA preparation in writing studies across the United States.

Estrem and Reid (2012) characterized writing pedagogy education (WPE) as the "complex, ongoing, evolving process in which instructors of writing are encouraged—through multiple venues and in multiple contexts—to teach, reflect, innovate, and theorize about the practice of teaching writing in college" (p. 224). Working from this definition, in the present study I seek to describe how 38 institutions across the United States with doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition designed and delivered GTA WPE in 2017. The data presented here can illustrate to WPAs administering or designing WPE programs what occurs at these institutions, how the identified practices relate to contemporary theory on GTA education, and what they might consider adding to their GTA WPE.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

GTA preparation is a perennial issue in writing program administration and has been consistently revisited since its beginning in the early 1900s (Greenough, 1913; Denney, 1918; Alden, 1913; Gott, 1929). A 1952 survey conducted by Harold Allen showed graduate student preparation in the mid-20th century was generally nonexistent with programs handling GTAs shared textbooks and a few rare others implementing observations and weekly practicum meetings. In response to this lack of preparation for GTAs and teachers of writing more generally, in 1982 the CCCC Task Force on the Preparation of Teachers of Writing crafted the "Position Statement on the Preparation and Professional Development of Teachers of Writing." The task force suggested all current and prospective teachers of writing should have opportunities to "develop knowledge of theory and skill in the teaching of writing" and "to work with individual learners and groups of learners, so that these teachers can apply what they are learning from the theories and practice of writing" (CCCC, 1982, p. 449).

Fourteen years later, Catherine Latterell (1996a) surveyed 36 programs to identify how they were preparing GTAs in English. She found the most common form of preparation (32 programs) was a preservice fall orientation, with 23 programs also offering a single course (most commonly a practicum). The practicum materials that Latterell reviewed dealt “with the immediate questions and concerns new GTAs have regarding their current teaching” (1996a, p. 36) and included discussion, response activities, journaling, observation, collaboration, and material review with “very minimal reading” (1996b, p. 18). Latterell’s findings echo many of the practices identified in GTA preparation scholarship of the early 1900s—practices that this study suggests still persist.

In the 2000s, WPA scholarship expanded our knowledge of GTA preparation, addressing labor (Marshall, 2004; Fitts & Lalicker, 2004), resistance to theory (Mano, 2000; Ebest, 2005; Restaino, 2012), peer mentorship (Weiser, 2005; Wallis & Jankens, 2017), computer-based and online pedagogical preparation (Duffelmeyer, 2005; Bourelle, 2016), writing teacher professionalization (Lamonica, 2011; Beason et al., 2010), writing center tutoring (Janetta et al., 2007), and the role of theory and local context in GTA preparation program design (Blakemore, 1998; Yancey, 2005; Stancliff & Goggin, 2007; Beason et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2012). However, because a majority of the studies and reports describe the local practices of a single institution, few can give insight into how GTAs are prepared more largely. In 2015, CCCC revisited their 1982 position statement, creating the “CCCC Statement on Preparing Teachers of College Writing,” which is more specific in its advocacy for GTA preparation and conditions as well as more detailed in providing principles and guidelines for WPE. Despite this robust body of scholarship, we do not have evidence that the way we prepare GTAs to teach writing has changed in the decades we have been studying GTA preparation, with the last larger scale study (Latterell 1996a) showing a misalignment among nationally articulated guidelines, scholarship, and implementation.

Literature reflects that there are many approaches to GTA preparation. As a discipline, we currently lack significant evidence that suggests one approach to GTA preparation is a better practice than another. We have not collected the empirical evidence needed to prove that our current practices in GTA preparation actually prepare GTAs to teach writing more effectively. It is my hope that by identifying what GTA preparation practices are, we can begin to move towards the development of evidence-based best practices.

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## METHODS

The survey data reported in this article was part of a larger mixed-methods study of GTA preparation across institutions with doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition. The survey was limited to doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition because (1) doctoral programs emphasize graduate education, which offers a unique space for disciplinary formation and new faculty development and (2) it is reasonable to assume institutions with doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition have faculty specializing in rhetoric and composition, and, thus, their WPE is more likely to be informed by recent scholarship. The goal of this study is to describe what these WPE programs look like—their population demographics, goals, timing, duration, components, and practices. Importantly, WPE is a term used by the researcher/author (see Estrem and Reid, 2012), which might not have been chosen by the individual respondents, who were asked to describe their GTA preparation programs. The survey was designed under the assumption that GTA preparation could exist across years and have “multiple venues and in multiple contexts” (p. 224).

Jim Ridolfo’s RhetMap identified 91 institutions with doctoral-granting programs in rhetoric and composition. I contacted the WPAs of these 91 institutions using email addresses listed on their programs’ websites. Forty-one percent of that population ( $n = 38$ ) responded. Although the sample is not large enough to generalize across the larger population of doctoral-granting institutions with absolute certainty, these data do provide a nascent glimpse into institutional WPE across this subpopulation and offer a foundation on which to build a more comprehensive survey that affords not only a deeper description but also creates a more quantifiably reliable representation of how institutions with doctoral degrees in rhetoric and composition prepare their GTAs to teach undergraduate writing.

The survey included open and closed questions. Closed questions asked respondents to designate where their GTA WPE was housed, the number of individuals participating, the percentage of participants who were GTAs, the disciplinary backgrounds of those participating, the classes WPE prepared GTAs to teach, how individuals were chosen to participate in WPE, when WPE occurred, and what components and practices made up WPE. Closed questions frequently offered an “other” option, allowing respondents to type in answers. Two open-response questions asked respondents to identify their goals for GTA preparation and what they would change about their preparation programs if given more resources. Each open response was broken into phrases and inductively coded. In total, 130 phrases were coded (from multiple readings by two coders). Ten categories

emerged: composition theory; practices tied to teaching writing; rhetorical theory; local program, curriculum, or policies; curriculum/course development; development of teacherly ethos/identity; development of student-writers; mentorship; time/timing; and technology.

It is important to note that there are limitations to this study's findings. Namely, the sample size for this study ( $n = 38$ ) is small, and the study was purposely limited to institutions with doctoral degrees in rhetoric and composition—of which only 41% are represented. Because this population size (91) is small, information that was potentially identifiable was not collected from the WPAs so this study cannot speak to WPA identity within these programs. For all these reasons, the results should be read carefully and not generalized to a larger context. Although limited by a small subset, data developed through this study align to what many WPAs have personally identified: that while writing studies might engage in more GTA preparation than other disciplines, it continues to be designed and delivered *ad hoc* and is highly affected by local contexts.

## REPORTING DATA

### *Program Demographics*

Importantly, the WPE characteristics reported in these data are undoubtedly affected by the selection criteria: institutions with doctoral degrees in rhetoric and composition. Almost all of the survey's respondents characterized their GTA WPE programs as small with the GTA population being primarily from English (generally literature, creative writing, and rhetoric and composition). Just over half of respondents (21 institutions) had 20 or fewer individuals participating in WPE at one time. Twenty-nine percent (11) had 20 to 40 individuals participating. Ten percent (4) had 40 to 60 individuals participating. Two institutions had more than 60 individuals participating; these programs referenced mass orientation meetings and pre-semester workshops or practica that included the full composition staff.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (28) reported that only GTAs participated in WPE while 21% (8) had populations mostly consisting of GTAs. Two institutions (5%) had populations comprising at least half GTAs ( $n = 38$ ). Besides GTAs, some programs were inclusive of contingent or part-time faculty, incoming instructors, post-docs, and visiting professors (the survey did not ask about forms of faculty development beyond GTA WPE). Of the GTAs participating in WPE, almost all included PhDs (95%), with MAs (82%), and MFAs (55%) also represented. Two institutions did not identify PhDs as participants because (as they later clarified)

PhDs had likely experienced WPE at their MA institutions, and, therefore, were not required to engage with WPE as doctoral students.

Thirty-two institutions (87%) housed WPE within English departments, four institutions housed WPE within rhetoric and composition departments, and two institutions housed WPE within independent writing programs. Unsurprisingly, the disciplinary backgrounds of GTAs were most often English with literature being most widely represented (81% or 31 institutions), followed by rhetoric and composition (73% or 28), and creative writing (63% or 24). Thirty-two percent of institutions (12) had GTAs from outside of English, including GTAs in education, theatre, communications, anthropology, information studies, Middle Eastern studies, Spanish and Portuguese, philosophy, history, sociology, and linguistics.

### *WPE Timing and Length*

When it comes to the timing and delivery of GTA WPE, a considerable number of institutions reported ending WPE before the end of year one, as figure 1 illustrates. Twenty-three institutions offer a summer preservice component. Fifteen institutions offer WPE components in the fall semester of a GTA's first year and 13 institutions offer WPE components in the spring semester of a GTA's first year ( $n = 38$ ). Some of these components were continuing (e.g., a summer preservice followed by a fall practicum course) while others were discrete. Eight respondents noted that GTAs with prior experience in postsecondary teaching could opt out of GTA WPE altogether. In total, 76% of institutions (29) characterized their GTA WPE programs as ending before GTAs enter their second year with only nine institutions continuing WPE throughout GTAs' graduate careers.

### *WPE's Purpose and Goals*

WPAs identified that WPE most commonly prepares GTAs to teach FYC. Nineteen institutions connected WPE to one FYC course while 20 institutions connected WPE to two FYC courses. Five institutions linked WPE to preparing GTAs to teach advanced composition courses, including intermediate composition and 200-level composition courses.

When asked to explain their goals for WPE, 38 respondents produced a total of 113 phrases, which were inductively coded across ten categories. The goal most-often articulated by WPAs related to learning the local curriculum and policies: this includes teaching GTAs a standard curriculum, procedures for participating in programmatic assessment, or institutional policies and resources (e.g., Title IX policies). Twenty-three WPAs mentioned this purpose across 29 phrases, which means that 25% of all coded

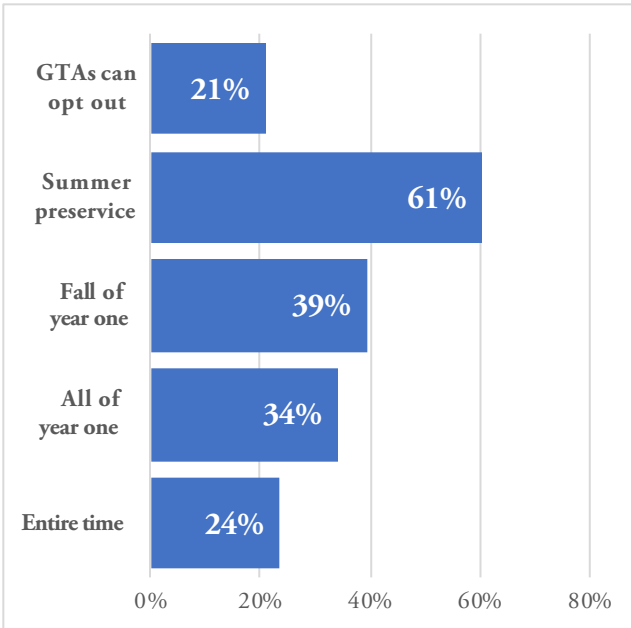


Figure 1. Reported timing of WPE at responding institutions ( $n = 38$ ).

responses to this question mentioned local curriculum and policies. Example responses coded as local curriculum and policies state WPE helps GTAs “understand the outcomes of FYC,” “prepare . . . to teach our common syllabus,” gain “familiarity with the curriculum” and develop “familiarity with program outcomes, assignments and assignment sequences.”

The next goal most frequently mentioned was general teaching preparation. Unlike instances that were coded as writing-related pedagogy, these responses focused on preparing GTAs to manage the nuts-and-bolts of a classroom, including “classroom management,” “general pedagogical prep,” “problem-solving in the classroom,” and “practical teaching methods.” Other codes were present in the goals reported for WPE including composition theory (15 instances or 13%), teacherly ethos/identity (15 instances or 13%), practices tied to the teaching of writing (13 instances or 11%), curriculum/course development (8 instances or 7%), development of student-writers (4 instances or 3%), rhetorical theory (4 instances or 3%), mentorship (3 instances or 3%), and technology (2 instances or 1%).

### *WPE Components*

When asked what components—or elements of WPE such as practica, course work, orientations, workshops, mentoring programs—comprised

their GTA WPE, every WPA identified multiple components. On average, institutions identified 6.7 components in their GTA WPE programs, with the greatest number being 11 and the fewest being 3. The survey's length did not offer space for WPAs to explain why they used each of these components, which is a limitation of these data. The distribution of these components is visualized in figure 2. As figure 2 indicates, the most popular components were observations (used by 35 institutions), followed by workshops (31), coursework (27), and resources like teachers guides (27). When asked to describe the coursework being offered, respondents connected coursework to pedagogy (25 institutions), classroom practices (24), composition theory (17), and rhetorical theory (12). Teaching practica were present in 26 institutions. Twenty-five institutions reported using mentorship with 25 institutions listing peer mentorship and 25 institutions listing faculty mentorship. The less frequently used components were symposia (7 institutions), online training/modules (8), and tutoring assignments in a center/studio (8). One respondent added that GTAs participated on advisory committees as part of WPE.

### *WPE Practices*

Within these components, a variety of practices were reported. In completing the survey, WPAs identified the practices used in their GTA WPE but then also how important each practice was, with responses ranging from "very important," "somewhat important," "of little importance," "not at all important," to "not used." Respondents also had the ability to add practices. The range of practices used in GTA WPE is presented in table 1. The most valued practices according to these reported data included designing classroom activities, response activities, reflection activities, syllabus design, and classroom assignment design. Table 1 also identifies several practices that WPAs found to be generally valuable—and what I mean by this is that no respondent using the practice characterized it as "of no importance." These include responding to composition theory, participating in peer response groups, presenting to peers, participating in reflection activities, conferencing, observing more experienced teachers in the program, designing syllabi, designing assignments, designing classroom activities, participating in library orientation, being introduced to classroom/instructional technologies, and participating in response activities in which GTAs assess/respond to samples of student work.



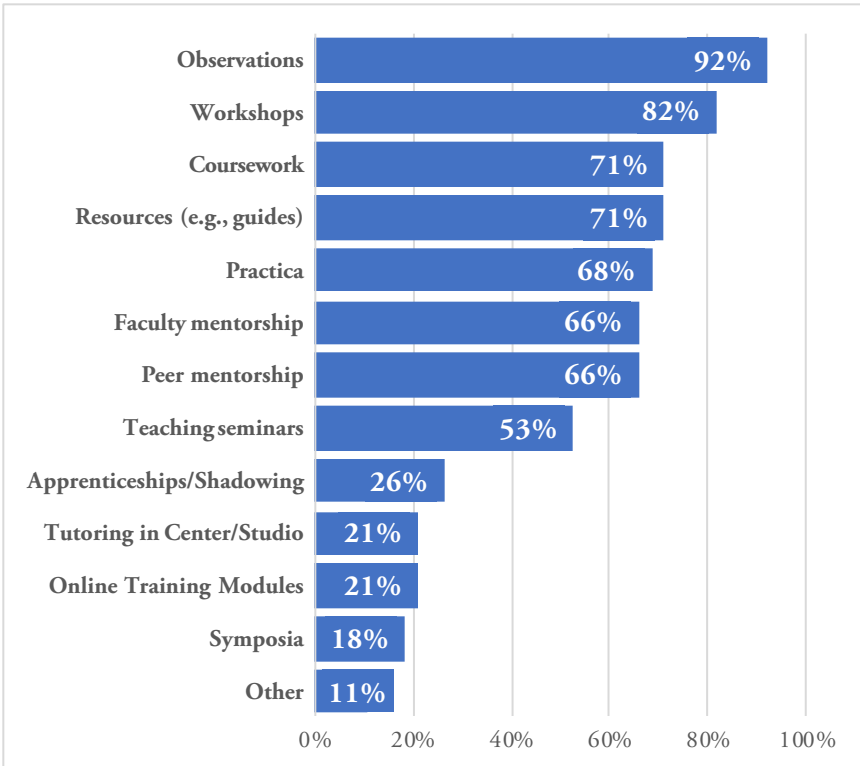


Figure 2. Portion of respondents reporting WPE components ( $n = 38$ ).

Equally interesting are the practices that are almost uniformly not used. Of the 23 practices listed, the practice least used in GTA WPE was writing a literary analysis with only 25% using this practice, 14% identifying it as “not at all important,” and 11% identifying writing a literary analysis as “somewhat important”—no respondent ranked the practice above “somewhat important.” Another infrequently used practice was “tutoring observations or sessions in a reading/writing/learning center or studio,” with 34% using this practice. Of the 13 institutions that did use this practice, however, just over half (7) regarded it as “very important.” Since I did not collect regional identifiers, it is unclear as to why tutoring experience was regarded in such a polarized way. For programs that include tutoring as a part of their GTA assignments for whatever reason, tutoring preparation can become a relevant aspect to WPE.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1

Portion of respondents reporting WPE practices, by assessed importance (1 = very important; 2 = somewhat important; 3 = of little importance; 4 = not at all important; and NU = not used).

Practice ( <i>n</i> = 38)	%				
	1	2	3	4	NU
Designing classroom activities	92	8	0	0	0
Response activities in which GTAs assess/respond to samples of student work	84	13	3	0	0
Reflection activities	71	26	3	0	0
Designing syllabi	68	24	3	0	5
Designing assignments	66	24	5	0	5
Observing more experienced teachers within the program	63	24	3	0	11
Responding to composition theory	58	37	3	0	3
Peer response groups	58	32	3	0	8
Conferencing	50	45	3	0	3
Presenting to peers	47	32	18	0	3
Multimodal composing	45	26	11	11	8
Writing a rhetorical analysis	42	32	8	3	16
Portfolio construction	42	13	18	3	24
Introduction to classroom/instructional technologies	34	55	11	0	0
Library orientation	32	45	13	0	11
Guest speakers	24	39	18	8	11
Role-playing/narrative exercises	21	42	18	3	16
Plagiarism/cheating activities	18	61	16	3	3
Journaling	18	47	16	8	11
Tutoring observations or sessions in a center or studio	18	3	11	3	66
Responding to education theory	16	47	24	3	11
Participation in programmatic assessment including exit/entrance exam assessment	0	26	21	11	29
Writing a literary analysis <sup>a</sup>	0	0	11	14	75

<sup>a</sup> Percentages reflect the number of respondents answering this question (36).

### *Limited Resources*

Lastly, WPAs were asked what they would change about their GTA WPE if they were given additional resources. Sixteen respondents acknowledged issues related to time. These time-related responses took three forms: (1) issues of timing; (2) a lack of time; and, (3) a list of additional topics which could be covered with more time. The first set of these responses included

making changes to the timing of the WPE program and/or its components, including comments such as:

- “I wish we could figure out a way for them to take the pedagogy course before they start teaching . . .”
- “I would like to experiment with teaching the GTA training course in its entirety before GTAs enter the classroom . . .”
- “We would have graduate students take the course before teaching rather than concurrently”

Additionally, comments related to time requested expanding the overall time devoted to WPE or components of WPE:

- “I would have a two-week orientation in the summer, rather than one week”
- “New graduate instructors need more than a week of preparation . . . I would like to have a full month in the summer or a full semester in the fall to work with them before they begin teaching”
- “we would increase the length of orientation so it was less intense and more complete”

Finally, respondents also mentioned the different practices and components they could include with more time, such as:

- “I would build in more opportunities for GTA-focused professional development . . .”
- “I’d do more work with them around fy writers’ experiences with and attitudes towards writing, the challenges they face in the transition to college; how the GAs can manage their workload effectively”
- “I’d love to have students work as writing center tutors for year [one] before putting them in the classroom”

Outside of time, three respondents mentioned they could do more with an increase in money with intentions to add more staff, pay GTAs to attend professional development, and fund peer mentors. Two respondents wanted GTAs to take coursework in rhetoric and composition identifying disciplinary knowledge as a constraint. Lastly, two respondents answered that they would not change anything about their WPE.

### *Summarizing Responses*

In all, these data describe GTA WPE programs as being small, often housed in English departments, and mostly made up by GTAs from Eng-

lish departments. WPE generally prepares GTAs to teach one or two FYC courses. GTAs participate in WPE throughout their first year, including the summer before their first year. Roughly one in four WPE programs do have GTAs participate throughout their graduate careers but many do not. Major goals for WPE included developing local knowledge and preparing GTAs with the general pedagogical information needed to manage a classroom. Moreover, WPE was unanimously multifaceted with most institutions employing about seven components. The most popular components were observation, workshop, coursework, and resources (e.g., teachers' guides). The most popular practices were the design of classroom activities, activities that practice response, reflection activities, and the design of syllabi and assignments. Finally, when asked about constraints, WPAs most frequently pointed to issues of timing including when and for how long GTAs experienced WPE.

#### PATTERNS IN THESE DATA

Four patterns characterizing GTA WPE emerged from these data. First, WPE is heavily constrained by time, whether that alludes to the brevity of the program or the timing of its delivery. Second, GTA preparation most often is linked to teaching GTAs about local curriculum and policies. Third, WPE is multifaceted and employs a variety of components and practices, with some emphasizing composition theory. Finally, WPE provides GTAs with a chance to develop general teaching practices.

##### *Pattern One: The Issue of Time*

Timing was a recurring theme across responses. First, with regards to when GTAs experienced WPE, nearly three-quarters of the institutions surveyed (74%) end WPE in a GTA's first year in a program with two in five institutions (40%) concluding WPE earlier (at the end of the first fall semester). While it is also true that a quarter of institutions (24%) extended WPE throughout a GTA's entire time in a program, for a majority of the institutions surveyed, this was not the case. Second, when WPAs were asked what they would do with increased resources for WPE, nearly three-quarters (73%) gave answers related to time—changing the timing of the WPE program, adding more time, or including more components and practices which, in turn, demand an increase in time. Time is perhaps the greatest constraint in the delivery of WPE across institutions with doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition.

One reason timing is so significant is because of the way in which it affects GTA development and shapes how GTAs come to understand pro-

fessional development. Scholarship suggests that during their first semester in the classroom, GTAs are looking to survive teaching in a discipline with which many are unfamiliar—in addition to facing a number of personal and professional challenges, GTAs are also adapting to new environments, competing their coursework, and learning to balance teaching and student personas while taking on the responsibilities related to leading a classroom, often for the first time. Restaino (2012) wrote that first semester GTAs “have little room for thinking critically about existing scholarship and little time and space for thoughtful, pedagogical decision making” and, instead, “desire . . . survival tools for [their] day-to-day classroom existence” (p. 26). When GTAs do encounter WPE as a preservice or early-program resource, many are looking for a “one-time process of gaining a discrete and readily transferable set of skills and techniques” (Duffelmeyer, 2005, p. 50) instead of realizing WPE as an ongoing, recursive, and integrated need (Lamonica, 2011).

In their study of GTA’s continuing needs in PhD programs, Obermark, Brewer, and Halasek (2015) argued that “as TAs develop, they often express an increasing interest in composition theory and pedagogy that they do not articulate in their first year” because “Experienced TAs’ interest in composition theory and pedagogy was a marked shift from inexperienced TAs who sometimes were outwardly frustrated by (what they viewed as) theory presented during their early TA FYW training, teaching, and coursework” (p. 39). Because scholarship suggests that GTAs make space for theoretical knowledge over time, time constitutes a crucial factor in and a substantial argument for continuing GTAs pedagogical preparation time in their graduate program instead of ending GTA preparation just as GTAs are getting acclimated to theoretical knowledge that should inform their approach to teaching composition. By ending GTA preparation preemptively and primarily supporting theoretical knowledge in preservice elements, we do not provide GTAs with ample opportunity to see how their teaching should be connected to theoretical knowledge—an argument that is not new (Estrem & Reid, 2012). These issues in timing, in turn, can be correlated with the next three patterns relating to the articulated purposes of WPE programs.

*Pattern Two: WPE and An Emphasis on Local Knowledge*

The second pattern showed that GTA WPE often unequally supports the development of local knowledge. To be clear, no discrete division should exist between theoretical knowledge, local curriculum and policies, and general teaching practices, and I imagine many WPAs would argue that their local curriculum is informed by compositional theory and scholarship

in rhetoric and composition and education. That being said, when local curriculum is presented to GTAs as policies or standards for local practice without exposing them to the theoretical underpinnings of said curriculum, GTAs are not reflecting on how their daily practices are linked to compositional theory nor are they recognizing that this approach to teaching writing is more theoretically sound than other approaches (e.g., a current-traditional or a literary approach to composition).

When asked to articulate the goals of WPE, WPAs most often mentioned local practices and policies. These responses pointed to “orient[ing] them to the curriculum” or gaining “familiarity with university resources such as disability [sic] services, veteran’s services, counseling, writing center, student advocacy, etc.” In all, local curriculum or policies were referenced 29 times in total across the 38 respondents—almost twice as often as composition theory (15) and the development of a teacherly identity (14), but even more than general teaching practices (21). This emphasis on local policies and knowledge is interesting given that GTAs are, by design, a transient population who will leave their local environments. However, an understanding of local curriculum is necessary if WPAs are to administer coherent programs and offer undergraduate students similar experiences across sections of writing. This is especially challenging when one considers that GTAs must be constantly re-prepared as each year veteran GTAs graduate and new GTAs are admitted.

This revolving-door context often results in the creation of standard curricula which GTAs re-enact in their classrooms—this re-enactment is uniquely different from curricular design. Standard curriculum serves as a point of consistency across the program’s sections as well as a scaffolding tool for GTAs new to the classroom. Standardized curricula were referred to in the survey responses as “our common syllabus,” “the curriculum at our university,” or the “assignments and assignment sequence.” One might argue that these standardized resources can “compel” GTAs “to experiment with models and strategies for effective composition instruction that are informed by scholarship in the disciplines . . . so that their capacity to reflect critically on their pedagogical practices, to enact appropriate practices in future contexts, and to articulate the rationale behind those practices will grow” (Dively, 2013, p. 47). However, as articulated in my first-identified trend, timing is a major constraint in WPE. Thus, GTA WPE seems to mostly occur when GTAs need specific directions for surviving the classroom but ceases before GTAs are ready to use their theoretical knowledge to develop their own composition curriculum. If we consider these GTAs to be emerging faculty, it becomes a question of where and how these teachers of writing learn about curriculum design if not in through WPE

and how this local curriculum both can and cannot serve them as future faculty in a different local context.

*Pattern Three: WPE and Theoretical Knowledge*

Scholarship on GTA WPE suggests that theory should be prevalent in GTA WPE (Gebhardt, 1977; Farris, 1996; Stancliff & Goggin, 2007; Estrem & Reid, 2012; CCCC, 2016; Bourelle, 2016). To some degree, this holds true in practice. For instance, 71% of those surveyed reported using coursework to prepare GTAs—an ideal vehicle for the learning of theory. However, when asked to characterize that coursework, only 11 of those 27 respondents identified the course as including an emphasis on compositional theory with most respondents stating the course emphasized pedagogy (17 respondents) or classroom practices (16). Latterell (1996b) noted the importance of pedagogy courses, writing that they “imbue GTAs with practical teaching strategies, pedagogical texts, and most of all, a language for talking about teaching” (p. 15). Although some GTAs pursue degrees in rhetoric and composition, the demographic data collected in this study shows that far more have disciplinary backgrounds in other areas of the humanities—most commonly literature. Thus, GTA preparation becomes a way to introduce these teachers of writing to the theories guiding writing studies as a discipline. Again, because it bears repeating, these GTAs are teaching composition and, thereby, represent the writing studies discipline to undergraduate students in their classrooms. Yet many of them do not engage with any kind of composition teacher preparation after their first year and the courses they do take during that time tend not to emphasize theory according to these data.

*Pattern Four: WPE as General Teaching Preparation*

Finally, respondents noted that GTA WPE supports the development of general teaching strategies, like classroom management. GTAs do need forms of practical support as many have never taught, and GTA preparation is, perhaps, the only preparation they receive taking up classroom instruction during their graduate careers. This emphasis on general practice emerged through these data in three ways. First, in describing the goals of WPE, WPAs referenced general teaching practices directly or indirectly 21 times, making it the second-most articulated goal. Practices of teaching, secondly, were visible in the components WPAs most identified: with observations and workshops being most frequently reported. Third, the practices most identified by WPAs as “somewhat” or “very” important supported the development of general teaching practices: designing classroom activities,

responding to samples of student work, designing syllabi, conferencing, and peer response groups.

General teaching practices are significant in that they can develop GTAs' knowledge in important ways: helping them discover the logistics of running a classroom; leading them to discover multiple pathways to achieving the objectives of a course; and, when combined with theoretical knowledge, supporting them in reflecting on "how knowledge is produced through specific practices and processes, as well as the values and assumptions that inform those interactions" (Stenberg & Lee, 2002, p. 328). However, without theoretical knowledge working in tandem with knowledge of general teaching practices, GTAs are vulnerable to regurgitating practices they have been exposed to instead of critically considering practice. This can be seen in observations, in particular—a component of WPE that was frequently reported by the survey's respondents. Observations have been said to give a good understanding of "the surface features of the master teacher's work" but lack "the fundamental theoretical assumptions that shape a teacher's lessons" (Haring-Smith, 1985, p. 34). In other words, observations can show GTAs the practices used by a particular teacher on a particular day or, conversely, might show how a GTA teaches on a particular day, but they do not serve as conveyers of theoretical knowledge. The practices that were recognized as being most important for WPAs (designing classroom activities, responding to sample papers, conferencing, etc.) were similarly practice-focused instances of mock teaching. It is important to note that theory-building practices were also present—albeit less present—in these data including responding to compositional theory and reflection. However, other theory-building practices like responding to rhetorical or educational theory, writing a rhetorical analysis, or constructing a teaching portfolio were less reported in these data, leading me to ask if GTAs are aware of the theoretical knowledge that should be guiding their day-to-day classroom practice.

## CONCLUSION

These data represent a first step in understanding large-scale practices for WPE design and delivery.<sup>2</sup> While this study describes WPE programs across 38 doctoral-granting institutions, a doctoral-granting institution is a particular subpopulation of our very large discipline and only 40% of that subpopulation is represented in these data. There needs to be continued efforts to identify and describe institutional practices across larger populations, including MA programs and graduate programs without rhetoric and composition tracks.



Despite the limitations of these data, some clear patterns in how the WPAs surveyed practiced GTA WPE emerged. First, WPE at these institutions was typically smaller in the number of GTAs included and focused on GTAs within the humanities, especially English tracks. Second, for a majority of institutions, WPE was delivered during a GTA's first year, raising serious concerns about the importance of time and GTA development with time being named by WPAs as the largest constraint. Third, within that year, GTAs were likely to encounter multiple sources of development with some components opening spaces for learning about theory (such as courses emphasizing composition theory) and others taking up mentorship (peer and faculty) or supporting the development of local and procedural knowledges. Fourth, the goals of these programs, as articulated by WPAs, included the development of local knowledge, general teaching knowledge, and theoretical knowledge.

The findings of this study have implications for those designing or re-vamping GTA WPE. First, most WPE programs can develop by extending their timing and delivery to engage GTAs throughout their graduate careers. Undoubtedly, in order to deliver the theoretically rich, ongoing support that Estrem and Reid (2012) describe in their definition of WPE, institutions need to extend GTA education beyond the first year to ideally work across a GTA's entire experience within a program. Finally, given that WPE works to support GTAs in developing local, general, and theoretical knowledges, WPAs must reflect on the designs of their programs to see how these multiple purposes are being supported and balanced. Put differently, are GTAs understanding when theory has informed general teaching or local practices? Based on these data, it seems reasonable to suggest that WPAs should engage in a recursive process of reflecting on the goals for their GTA preparation, they should align these goals to contemporary scholarship, and they should conduct regular assessment.

As a field, writing program administrators should move in the direction of developing evidence-based best practices for GTA WPE. To do this work, there needs to be increased knowledge of the measures programs are taking to prepare GTAs to teach writing as well as evaluative knowledge that assesses the how effective these measures are in preparing GTAs. In order to determine how the description provided here compares to a representative sample of varying institutional types of graduate programs, more empirical data must be collected specific to GTA WPE. Those empirical data must be in conversation with multi-institutional, qualitative research that can capture the depth and rationale behind WPE designs, such as a deeper understanding into how each component of WPE is enacted through specific practices—an understanding which is missing in these

data. Finally, GTA WPE programs should be regularly evaluated using programmatic assessment so that the effects of such programs and their practices can be measured. Those assessments should be published and shared with the field. These three steps—increased empirical research, increased qualitative research, and increased assessment—would result in a more robust knowledge of GTA preparation across the field and make possible the identification of best practices in GTA WPE.

## NOTES

1. To learn more about the practice of having GTAs work in a writing/learning center before teaching, see Ianetta, McCamley, and Quick (2007).

2. This study was approved by Florida State University's Office for Human Research Protection under file IRB00000446.

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