

We've Been Burned Out and Exhausted: GenAdmin WPA Labor Issues Exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the pandemic experiences of GenAdmin WPAs, a term coined by Charlton et al. (2011) to describe individuals who received explicit preparation for administrative work in graduate programs and sought administrative positions post-graduation. The authors contend that instead of returning to the status quo, the field should seize this moment and envision new administrative models. Analyzing interviews with 11 GenAdmin WPAs and drawing from the experiences of the three GenAdmin WPA authors, the study reveals unsustainable working conditions before and during the pandemic, including excessive expectations, resource limitations, toxic behavior, isolation, and exhaustion. The authors call for further research into decentralized coalitional community models for writing program administration and suggest feminist, collaborative, and decentralized administration could respond to the ongoing challenges of WPA labor and are particularly well-suited for the concerns participants mention in these data. This article contributes to the dialogue among WPAs, shedding light on the unique experiences of GenAdmin WPAs during the pandemic and advocating for transformative change. It emphasizes the importance of building resilient and supportive administrative structures that prioritize WPA well-being, ultimately enhancing the quality of writing programs and the academic environment as a whole.

We've been burned out, and we've been venting to each other about it for years. We—Sarah, Amy, and Natalie—met years before the pandemic and (trauma) bonded over passions for and disillusionments with our GenAdmin career paths. Like others who embrace the descriptor GenAdmin, we received explicit preparation for administrative work in graduate programs and sought out administrative positions post-graduation (Charlton et al., 2011). When the pandemic hit, our bond solidified—over Zoom, of course.

Sarah, a WPA at a two-year college, was too invested in her career after completing her PhD and muddled her success at work with her self-worth.

When the pandemic hit, burnout from insufficient funding, pandemic pedagogy, supervisor turnover, and the statewide dismemberment of a WAC program that she rebuilt coincided with being pregnant and going on maternity leave. She was tired before, but now she was having a *mother-teacher-scholar-activist* identity crisis.

Natalie, a WPA at a four-year institution, was burned out from (re) building two first-year writing programs at different small liberal arts colleges amidst intellectual loneliness, age and gender discrimination, political bullying, administrative gaslighting, and emotional burnout. When the pandemic hit, her students called out her programs' white supremacy on social media, causing the program to need to take accountability. At the same time, her childcare needs superseded her mad dash toward tenure. She was traumatized before, but now she was forced to face the trauma her program was inflicting on students and her kids' home lives.

Amy, a twelve-month staff/faculty member, was adjusting to a WAC position when the pandemic hit. She soon realized staff were not given the same consideration for safety or flexibility as faculty and students. She knew staff were treated differently, but now she saw their lives were being placed at risk.

When the three of us started this project, we wanted to understand if our GenAdmin experiences were an anomaly or the norm. We shared stories and wondered, was everyone living like this? Through a study on GenAdmin labor, we hope to call the field of writing program administration to reassess foundational labor documents like *The Portland Resolution*. Even as we write this article, filled with interviews from GenAdmin WPAs similarly struggling with burnout and balance, we fear, is the problem the system, or are those of us in crisis seeking each other out? In "The Quiet Revolution: How New WPAs are Shifting the Profession" in this special issue, Kristi Murray Costello asserts that some WPAs are finding balance—just not us.

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, voices in WPA literature identified exhaustion (Moore, 2018), bias (Craig, 2016), and bullying (Elder & Davila, 2019) in WPAs' lived realities. While the pandemic did impact WPAs in significant ways, this article highlights that participating GenAdmin WPAs felt they were operating in unsustainable working conditions before COVID-19, with the pandemic heightening already fraught circumstances. We explore GenAdmin WPAs' experiences during the pandemic in hopes of moving the field of writing program administration from individualistic, lone-WPA models towards decentralized, communal approaches (Adams Wooten, Babb, Costello, & Navickas, 2020; Hancock & Reid, 2020) that build and maintain healthier writing programs.

This research-driven article draws on qualitative analysis from a larger mixed-methods study.¹ The original study focused on workload, evaluation, and promotion for GenAdmin WPAs in their first eight postgraduate years. The COVID-19 pandemic was an unintended topic; because of timing, interview data was collected in summer 2020 when participants were moving from their “rush to remote” spring to prepare programs for the unknowable fall when some institutions would continue remotely while others would fluctuate across modalities without warning as variants peaked. One-hour, semi-structured interviews had three parts: First, participants described their titles and declared if they had moved institutions. Second, WPAs elaborated on tasks they reported doing as part of their administrative workload on a corresponding survey they completed before the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, highlighting new tasks they had been asked to take on since their initial response. Third, participants explained how tasks aligned or misaligned with their understanding of local tenure, promotion, and evaluation processes. Participant demographics are presented in figure 1.

Participant Demographic Information

We have chosen not to include individualized demographic information about study participants because we are concerned that our small sample size ($n = 11$) creates a risk of de-anonymizing participants. As figure 1 indicates, we can generally describe participants as male (4) and female (7); Asian (1) and white (10); between the ages of 25–30 (1), 31–35 (3), 36–40 (5), and 41–45 (2); Doctoral degree recipients (11) in rhetoric and digital media (1) or rhetoric and composition (10); and renewable non-tenure-track (2) or pre-tenure/tenure-track (9); ranked at institutions categorized as Historically Black Colleges or Universities (1), small liberal arts colleges (1), public four-year universities (2), and comprehensive research and MA-granting universities (8). WPA roles included directors of WAC/WID (2) and multiple programs simultaneously (including first-year writing, basic writing, writing centers, WAC/WID, and second-language writing) (4).

Interview transcripts were divided into stable t-units and coded in two waves to conduct the thematic analysis. The first wave used a deductive, descriptive framework, sorting each t-unit according to the study’s five research questions. The second wave applied Saldaña’s (2013) method of inductive subcoding, meaning t-units were analyzed to identify emerging themes and patterns. The inductive framework was revised twice. All data were coded in duplicate to establish an intercoder reliability rate of 90%.

The results below discuss the inductive themes that emerged in that second wave of analysis.

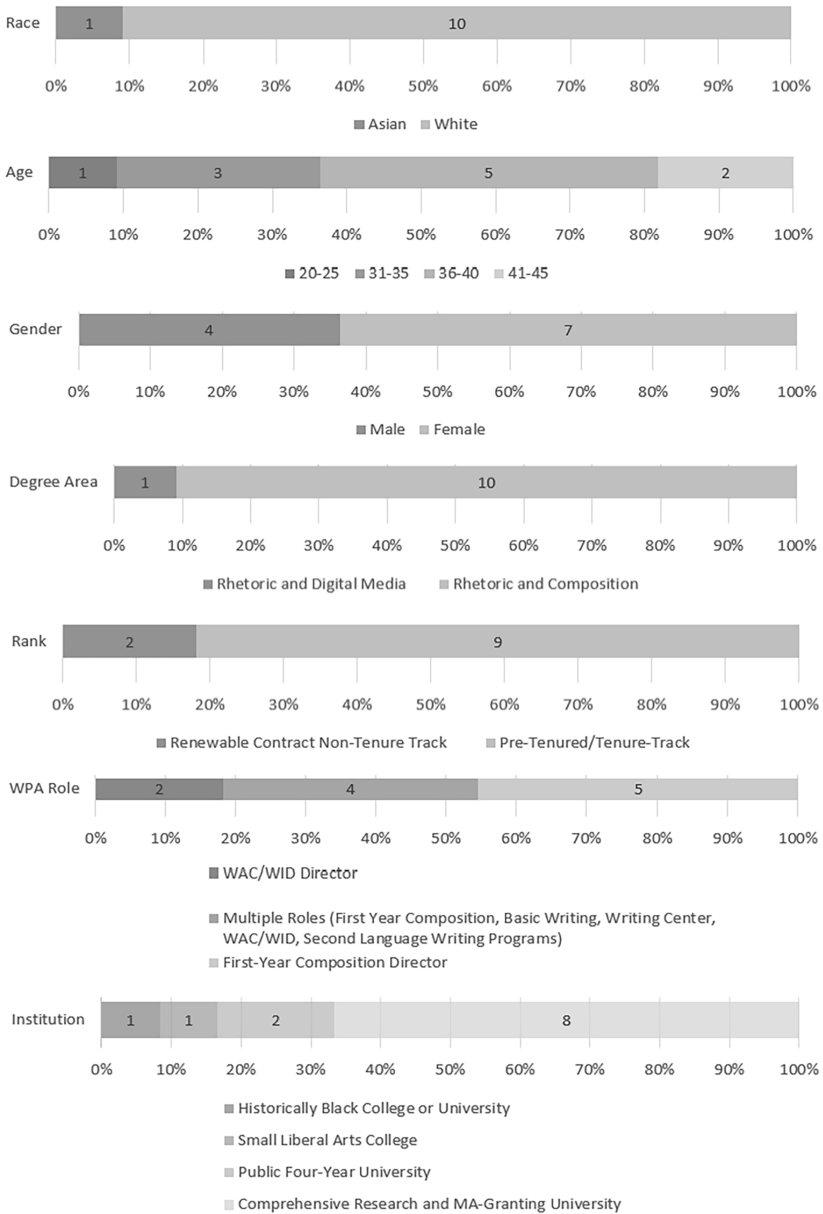


Figure 1

NORMAL WASN'T WORKING FOR US

In the sections that follow, we intentionally blend participant voices with existing literature. We want these layered voices to illustrate that the ideas and experiences present in our data are neither new nor unknown. As our title alludes, WPAs have been documenting exhaustion and unsustainable circumstances since before the COVID-19 pandemic, although the pandemic compounded these issues into further dire circumstances.

Burnout and Unsustainability

Jane Detweiler, Margaret LaWare, and Patricia Wojahn (2017) offer a feminist analysis of WPA ailments, including unsustainable working conditions and the failure of many institutions to properly recognize WPA work as either scholarship or leadership. They urge WPAs to stop leaning in so as to force institutional hierarchies to reframe and validate their essential contributions. Burnout and unsustainable working conditions were widely present in our data, too. Sometimes from the start, WPA positions were created without the “intentional thought and support . . . necessary to create. . . sustainable and functional” positions. Other times, that support was absent for different reasons.

Interviewees highlighted their inhibited ability to do WPA work because of lacking tangible and intangible resources: absent administrative titles, no course releases, unofficial budgets controlled by chairs outside of the writing program, or an inability to hire in programs they administered. Sometimes, promises would be made to eventually compensate WPAs if only they would “start coordinating this program, coordinating six different instructors, coordinating them solo by helping them have shared resources, etc., and set up an assessment—as [they] teach a 4/4 load—with no extra pay, no extra course release, or anything.” Other times, WPAs would be apologetically told by deans and chairs that they “should have a course release . . . should be paid more . . . All these things should happen. We just can’t.” In states with waning budgets and dropping enrollments, especially, WPAs felt there was “no hope of obtaining the funds needed” to make their work and programs sustainable.

In other instances, reasons weren’t given for under-resourcing writing programs as the university culture made it the norm to “teach four classes and act as chairs and as program coordinators” without additional compensation. As one participant said, WPA work without the resources needed to compensate and sustain the person doing the work felt like they were being asked to “lay a new track for the train” but were also being told “you can’t get off the train to lay it.” Combating the unethical working conditions

Detweiler, LaWare, and Wojahn (2017) write about requires systemic restructuring and deep change, but advocating for such change cannot fall to solo administrators and compositionists.

Loneliness, Isolation, and Toxicity

Isolation, especially when GenAdmin WPAs are lone compositionists or solo administrators, left them susceptible to more malicious effects, like targeted bullying or intentional undermining. A participant working as a solo administrator said, "I was only the second rhetoric and composition person they had ever encountered. It was me and the writing center director, who was pushed out shortly after I got there, which left me alone in a literature department." In *Defining, Locating, and Addressing Bullying in the WPA Workplace*, Cristyn L. Elder and Bethany Davila (2019) highlight horrific stories of bullying experienced by WPAs, including anonymous submissions written so because the authors continue to work in toxic environments and fear retribution.

Staci Perryman-Clark and Colin Lamont Craig include testimonies of microaggressions experienced by Black WPAs in their (2019) edited collection, *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From Margins to the Center*. In the introduction, Perryman-Clark and Craig share being undermined and critiqued by senior white colleagues. Our participants also experienced gaslighting when they tried to advocate their education and training. For example, a participant was told by their department chair that they "had no real responsibilities in spite of having responded to a job that outlined a number of WPA responsibilities." This GenAdmin WPA told us, "It became very clear with all the work that I tried to do that they didn't really want my expertise." Jeffrey Klausman (2008) writes about this, noting that rhet-comp faculty members at two-year colleges are most often outnumbered by faculty members from other disciplines such as literature and creative writing. As Annie Del Principe (2020) found, this isolation can make creating a cohesive pedagogy and program difficult. Our participants working in isolation struggled to convince institutional communities that the field existed and that their expertise was real without senior allyship.

Participants were WPAs who identified as GenAdmin and were explicitly professionalized to take on administrative positions. However, they highlighted the conflation of WPA work with other, more general service roles. One participant explained:

my previous institution didn't realize what the discipline—and what the field—was and what this type of position involved. And so, they advertised something that they didn't really want. It was very clear that while, like, they all were very kind to me as a person, they didn't actually want me as a professional.

Participants also identified hardship when working with non-GenAdmin administrators who did not feel an identification with their administrative role, seeing it as service or a hopeful entry point that could lead to a tenure-track position free of administrative obligation. One participant alluded to their writing center director who should have been an ally but “was a spousal hire who was hired when her husband was hired as the graduate dean.” She went on to explain that they did have a professionalized WPA apply to the writing center position, but that candidate was passed over for the spouse with a sociology background when the graduate dean hire was negotiated. Others saw WPA positions as expendable, targeting them first when budget cuts came: “They had to find a way to take \$73,000 from our department. They decided not to keep my position for next year; it's just gone . . . a woman who has been teaching adjunct for us, they hired her as a one-year interim for me.”

Scholarly isolation left lone compositionist WPAs feeling like they lacked the support needed “to learn more about how to effectively do [their] job,” even when working in a friendly environment. WPAs worried too much emphasis would be placed on their “thoughts and feelings about what . . . a writing program should do” without considering how that vision might be over-reliant on their “scholarly agenda or . . . background.” As one participant noted, “there is a lot of collaboration that is needed for WPA work,” and finding points of connection and feedback is difficult, if not impossible, when you are the sole WPA at your institution.

The Pandemic: Making a Bad Situation Worse

Again, the grievances are not new, but the COVID-19 pandemic further stressed measures for sustainability recommended by WPA scholars, like boundary setting, self-care, and opportunities for the WPA community to gather and reinvigorate (Wetherbee Phelps et al., 2019). During interviews, it was clear these GenAdmin WPAs were overwhelmed by labor, uncertainty, and fear for their safety and the livelihood of their programs. Justin H. Cook and Jackie Hoermann-Elliott (2022) note that in safe working environments, failure can be an important part of the administrative process in that it can prompt reflection and critical assessment but not when WPAs cannot get beyond the base need of survival.

As many institutions transitioned online with little-to-no notice, the labor to support instructors and students fell to already under-supported WPAs. One participant “posted the file with just [the WPA’s] online shell so that [instructors] could download and upload it if they wanted to and just edit that to have something to work with, but I know our more experienced teachers started a Google Drive and put a bunch of resources in there.” This WPA said by rallying the community, “We got everybody where they needed to be, but it was certainly more labor-intensive for some of my teachers than for others, especially when we only had a week and a half of notice that we were going online.” Another noted, “I have spent probably 8–10 hours in the last week on recorded Zoom calls.” One WPA who considered themselves familiar with digital tools “worked with my department pretty closely to help them learn how to use things like Zoom and stuff.” She still reinforced how transitioning their WAC orientation to an online asynchronous format was “really exhausting to do.” Others described hosting extensive training over Zoom, forcing “two three-hour professional development trainings” or “six hours of workshops” online. Without surprise, WPAs found the rush to remote work to be “more labor-intensive,” “exhausting,” and “not super-efficient,” sentiments non-WPAs would likely have used to describe the summer of 2020, too.

An exhausted WPA leading an exhausted community further compounded the difficulty WPAs experienced as they tried “to support faculty emotionally getting through what’s been really, really difficult things and trying to make them feel like someone sees the work they’re doing and cares about their work they’re doing.” Documenting their labor was equally challenging. One participant said, “I think emotional work is really hard . . . What do you say, ‘I checked emails and answered emails?’ I mean, you don’t want to make faculty sound like they’re needy or whiny. How do you even explain to people that that’s such an important part of your job?”

At the same time, WPAs were also confronted with scary budget forecasting from upper administration. For one WPA, this meant having to realize that “the lecture positions that I worked so hard to finally get, we’re probably going to lose.” They went on that, aside from this disappointing realization, they would now need to take on the labor of informing full-time colleagues they would not be able to renew their contracts. Another WPA noted that a request for additional compensation for time, labor, and professionalization for instructors during the pandemic was denied: “the dean’s office rejected the funding because we’re in the midst of a pandemic. So, at the same time as the work doubles because we’re in chaos, the administration said, ‘no, we’re not going to fund you to do that.’”

Failed and Temporary Solutions

Despite the problems, participants often found reasons to stay in these environments. They feared the fate of their colleagues and programs if they left, with one confessing, “What horrifies me the most is I don’t know what’s going to happen to my associate directors if I leave.” In a personal conversation, WAC WPA Dan Melzer described this state as being “one Provost away from doom” (D. Melzer, personal communication, April 18, 2023). Another participant who planned on leaving said, “Because of the nature of the department, I can do all of these things, and then I will leave and they will go with me.” Multiple participants had worked to create systems and structures that they felt improved their programs and the lives of instructors and students, but they acknowledged those systems were often temporary because they over-relied on the labor of the WPA and were not sustainable without them.

Participants also noted that some institutions switched to rotating WPA positions to spread administrative labor across a group and promote a shared administrative mindset. One participant worried this was not true decentralization, instead describing it as a position that contained the time-consuming managerial tasks without enough time or authority to enact a vision or develop momentum. Another described this as the “sliding door effect,” continuing that this model “doesn’t really give you enough time to do much of anything. So, by the time you’re getting the institutional knowledge built that you need in order to accomplish any kind of curriculum change or assessment change, you’re cycling off.” While rotating WPAs are likely intended to mitigate burnout, risk, or loneliness, this model restricts those in temporary positions from being able to enact the visionary leadership that is necessary to lead to long-term change (Fedukovich, 2021).

REIMAGINING SOMETHING NEW

The concerns and troubles voiced in our data are not new (Dew & Horning, 2007). We struggled before the pandemic, and many are struggling now. This left us looking for sustainable and healthier ways forward post-pandemic. Given enrollment drops, student demographic changes, and substantive calls for equity, higher education itself appears to be on the cusp of an evolution. We suggest GenAdmin WPAs seize this exigence to re-imagine administrative workload.

It’s been nearly 30 years since Marcia Dickson (1993) and Jeanne Gunner (1994) wrote about the potential of feminist, collaborative, and decentralized administrative styles for WPAs. The 1990s were ripe with scholarship exploring the Gordian Knot that was collaborative administration,

including political implications, collegial and gendered power dynamics, effects on systems of tenure and promotion, a wide array of logistical configurations, and the inherent paradoxes of employing decentered feminist structures inside our institutions' hierarchical, patriarchal superstructures (Goodburn & Ritchie, 2000; Goodburn & Leverenz, 1997; Long, Holberg, & Taylor, 1996). By 2010 when Krista Ratcliffe and Rebecca Rickly's *Performing Feminism and Administration in Rhetoric and Composition* was published, it was clear that "many within the field still want[ed] to think about these possibilities, and still struggle[ed] to think beyond the apparent contradictions of such couplings" (Micciche & Strickland, 2013, p. 175).

We argue that there is still potential (and perhaps sustainability) in these past models; therefore, we would like to follow the lead of current scholars (re)exploring feminist and collaborative WPA administration (Cole & Hassel, 2017; Fedukovich, 2021; Maimon, 2018). GenAdmin participants reported feeling isolated; feminist collaborative models in the past have reported assuaging this to some degree in some contexts. Could that be true for programs post-pandemic? For co-author Amy, working on an administrative team creates rich, collaborative environments that can speak back to feelings of isolation. When anchored in feminist, egalitarian ideals, administrative teams can both discuss and develop programming, curriculum, and responsive solutions and share labor, accountability, and risk.

Finally, GenAdmin participants who were lone compositionists or solo administrators voiced concerns about the singularity of their knowledge base. Recent calls for actionable and meaningful equity, inclusion, and antiracist practices require a diversity of perspectives to operationalize. Could feminist, collaborative models provide a response to these concerns post-pandemic? For co-author Natalie, her choice to intentionally flatten programmatic hierarchies among her faculty led to a slow growth of community, and from this communal space emerged conversations around her curricula, policies, and leadership. Awkward and sometimes painful, these conversations during and after moments of contention humbled her and her white faculty and spurred the program to do better, evolve, and burn a few things down in service to BIPOC students and their needs.

Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Sheila Carter-Tod, Jessie L. Moore, Patti Poblete, Casey Reid, and Sarah Elizabeth Snyder (2019) "call for individuals and collectives to advocate systemic changes that proactively foster sustainability, both on our campuses and in the profession" (p. 30). One participant similarly admitted, "the number of structural changes that would have to be made to make the job not feel completely undoable are just not things that could happen quickly. I just don't even know that they are changes that can happen with me." Like in Christina M. LaVecchia's

article “‘But This is Bullshit’: Enforcing Boundaries as a Pregnant WPA” in this special issue, co-author Sarah’s pregnancy forced her to realize that she could no longer feel the misplaced need to be responsible for the dysfunction of larger systems impacting her program and needed to establish boundaries for her health. Revisiting 1990s and 2000s scholarship on collaborative administration may help with our burnout, loneliness, and isolation, but the work of Jennifer Heinert and Cassandra Phillips (2017), Natasha N. Jones, Laura Gonzales, and Angela M. Haas (2021), and Lorgia García Peña (2022) can help us imagine feminist collaboration as a mechanism for administrative system altering or even breaking.

Heinert and Phillips (2017) argue that “over 30 years of static or worsening conditions have shown that collaboration alone is not an effective tool for systemic change because the system itself must also change” (p. 128). To change that dynamic, they contend, we need to reconceptualize that work in a feminist way. Change requires not only collaboration but also collaboration in support of a strategic purpose: “A coalition has common goals, works purposely toward them, and shares credit and responsibility for the work. Creating a coalition begins with identifying, including, and supporting colleagues who share values, concerns, and goals” (p. 129).

Perhaps intentional coalitions of writing administrators working in contextually situated collaborations could indeed “destabilize the status quo of work environments that contribute to marginalization and devaluing of disciplinary work” (Heinert & Phillips, 2017, p. 129). Jones, Gonzales, and Hass’s (2021) work leans into the same use of coalitional frameworks, asserting, “Instead of building these initiatives within the same institutions of power while maintaining the same systems of power, white and non-Black POC can further advocate for Black faculty, students, and staff by leveraging personal and coalitional privilege and power in material, tangible ways” (p. 32). García Peña (2022) works between these intersections as a woman of color, similarly advocating that “Community is the most effective form of rebellion” (p. 31). Instead of coalitions, she uses the language of accomplices: “We cannot survive academia without accompaniment” (p. 47). Her work passionately urges scholars to find, build, and care for communities because “. . . social change is a process that is not given to but emerges from the people. Allies cannot create social change alone” (p. 73).

These more recent scholars turn us to the work of affect and care in their collaborative arrangements and encourage us to think about how coalitions of community members who share values, concerns, and goals can “. . . [increase] the political capital and [disburse] the workload” (Heinert & Phillips, 2017, p. 129). These ideas were in our data, too. As one participant suggested, “What you really need in this is some sort of network

of mentorship and that can be like vertical or horizontal . . . And we're bouncing those ideas off of each other in this kind of a reflective practice." Another went on to say:

if people are in these isolated contextual unique situations, there's got to be some sort of network in place that they can draw on when they get completely lost, like I'm doing this multimodal thing. I really believe in it. Am I doing it well? What am I missing? What am I leaving out? Am I leaving out primary research? Am I leaving out these other things that should go into a writing program because things get lost when you get hyper focused on leading your transformation.

Political capital gained in sustainable ways can potentially destabilize patriarchal, racist, and exploitative systems for the benefit of WPAs, our colleagues, our students, and the future of the field.

CONCLUSION

Doing research on WPA labor and evaluation during a pandemic was exhausting yet affirming. Like many readers, and like our GenAdmin participants, we faced exhaustion and burnout. We hope important disruptions can lead us to confront unsustainable working conditions. Instead of returning to normal, these data push us to reflect and join voices of other WPAs who similarly hope for something new (Wilkes, Mina, & Poblete, 2023). Perhaps community with a united purpose could be the key to moving towards more sustainable administrative structures that make us feel connected and realize administrative load as a shared coalitional responsibility we all have a stake in. Perhaps community and decentralized administrative structures like those that exist at some community colleges (Hancock & Reid, 2020) are legitimate and sustainable paths forward—as long as we make the work visible (Graziano, Halasek, Hudgens, Miller-Cochran, Napolitano, & Szymanski, 2023). Perhaps graduate preparation for becoming a GenAdmin WPA should emphasize the many different options for professional identities, including coalitional, community, and multiverse (Hancock & Reid, 2020; Snyder, 2020). And perhaps younger (Millennial and Gen Z) generations of GenAdmin are already doing a better job at articulating and enforcing sustainable work/life boundaries than those of us represented here (see Costello, this issue).

Coalitional community structures are not new (Heinert & Phillips, 2017; García Peña, 2022), even in WPA scholarship (Dickson, 1993; Gunner, 1994). Now is our time to build respectfully on these existing ideas to create more sustainable futures for GenAdmin WPAs. This must include investing in community models of administrative work and redefining

what professional success looks like, whether that's assessing if tenure criteria include administrative workload or creating more expansive definitions of professional success beyond the tenure/tenure-track faculty as WPA model. As well, we hope WPAs who are currently practicing coalitional models will write about their experiences and that data will be collected on these WPA organizational structures. Finally, we recognize how difficult it will be to meld a coalitional model of administration into a higher education structure that thrives and profits from hierarchy, but we feel practicing wellness and balance in writing program administration requires radical change.

NOTE

1. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Buffalo State, SUNY IRB Sponsored Programs Office, listed under study #STUDY00001707.

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