Articles

Disciplinary Lifecycling: A Generative Framework for Career Trajectories in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies

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In this article, we theorize the disciplinary lifecycle as an alternative to the limited metaphor of the "career arc." We argue that theorizing career trajectories as lifecycles resonates more fully with the experiences that are common to careers in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies (RCWS), thereby providing more possibilities for individuals to recognize and enact their disciplinary development across varying environments and in different phases of their careers. Further, we call for the field to better acknowledge the changing environments for disciplinary work by making visible typified but underrepresented phases in our scholarship and career development discourse.

Disciplinary Identities and Labor Realities in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies

Shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic and the worst recession in the United States since 2008 (Irwin), higher education has undergone major financial and philosophical changes, with more expected in the months and years ahead. Amid hiring freezes, staffing cuts, and furloughs; the suspension of doctoral admissions; the suspension of research and travel funding; and other disruptions to business as usual, career advisor Karen Kelsky has gone so far as to suggest that higher education is preparing for "an extinction event . . . for a whole traditional mode of operations in higher education." To be sure, the "spaces of action" (Henkel 157) in which disciplinary activities are conventionally performed were already changing, but many have now been eliminated—perhaps permanently. What does this seismic shift in an already-precarious institutional context mean for those who do, and who someday will, develop disciplinary expertise in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies? Although no one can offer a crystal-ball view into the future, we can begin to imagine what the ongoing shifts in our landscape mean for the ways we claim and support disciplinary identification with rhetoric, composition, and writing studies (abbreviated as RCWS).

In this article, we examine open-ended comments from various self-identified members of the field who responded to a large-scale survey of their activities and career timelines.[1] This survey was prompted by a collaboration between the CCCC Cross Generational Task Force and the CCCC SIG (now a Standing Group) for Senior, Late Career, and Retired Scholars. Responding to a call from task force member Louise Wetherbee Phelps in 2017, we became part of an interinstitutional, intergenerational research team eager to better understand intellectual and practical labor within the field of RCWS throughout the career, including into retirement. We wondered what activities were typical of those in RCWS, what kinds of preparation individuals received for their various activities, and how specific activities mapped onto timelines of experience.

Through explaining, questioning, rejecting, qualifying, or otherwise attempting to shape our reading of their career trajectories, survey respondents prompted us to challenge the prevailing metaphor of the career arc, which consistently haunts and constrains ways of envisioning a career in RCWS. In this article, we illustrate three facets of the career arc that make it especially problematic for RCWS and articulate possibilities for "disciplinary lifecycling" as a generative frame for theorizing, enacting, and supporting more comprehensive notions of disciplinary development throughout one's career and beyond.

Activities, Phases, and Lifecycles

Our lifecycle survey collected a range of quantitative and qualitative responses from 419 participants who self-identified as affiliated with RCWS. In this article, we focus on responses to a multi-part question, in which individuals traced and described various "phases" of their RCWS careers. To do so, they selected positions from a menu and/or wrote in additional positions that were not already listed. (See table 1 for a list of included positions.)

Table 1
Survey Categories and Positions from which Participants Selected

Categories	Positions
K-12 Education	Teacher – Elementary Level Teacher – Middle Level Teacher – Secondary Level Administrator Librarian Other – Please describe _____
Higher Education	Writing Fellow, Consultant, and Tutor as Undergraduate Student Teaching/Administrative/Research Assistant or Tutor as Master's Student Teaching/Administrative/Research Assistant or Tutor as PhD Student Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty Non-tenure-Track Faculty Staff Administrator within a writing/literacy-related program/unit Administrator within a program/unit not writing/literacy-related Librarian Other Higher Education Position – Please describe _____
Employment Outside Education	Professional – Please describe _____ Self-employed Non-Academic Writer Independent Scholar Other Employment Outside Education – Please describe _____
Retirement	In a Partial or Phased Retirement Program Retired, Working Part-time in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies Retired, Working Full-time in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies Retired, Working Part-time in a position not Writing/Literacy-related Retired, Working Full-time in a position not Writing/Literacy-related Retired, Not Working Other Retirement Phase – Please describe _____

When participants selected a particular position (e.g., "Teacher—Elementary Level"), this position was auto-populated into the subsequent section where participants indicated the duration of that experience and the numbers of institutions at which they held that position. Then, participants arranged their experiences into a chronology that included all positions selected or written in (see figure 1 for a sample chronology) and provided additional details about their lifecycles through a text entry box. While the chronologies

identified the positions that individuals held, the open-ended comments provided affective, descriptive dimensions that narrated how these positions, as "phases" of a lifecycle, might contribute to an individual's sense of disciplinary "identity-as-position"—that is, the ways individuals represent and construct disciplinary identities through "rhetorical positioning of themselves within (or beyond) the field" (Bowen and Pinkert 258).

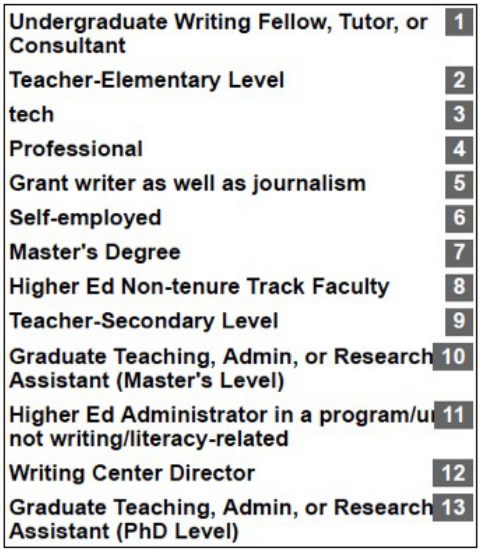

Fig. 1. Screenshot of a sample chronology of career phases arranged by a survey respondent.

Describing the career trajectory as a lifecycle grew initially out of our desire to capture the entirety of the career trajectory, much in the same way the Writing through the Lifespan research collaborative has driven attention toward the ways that literate activities occur and develop over lifespans and across sites ("life-wide") (Dippre and Phillips 6). Thus, *lifecycle* was initially chosen to be inclusive and lifespan-oriented; however, it also became generative for thinking about the possibilities for careers in RCWS.

In the beginning, we used the term *academic lifecycle* as we were primarily recruiting participants who were developing or applying their disciplinary expertise within academic or educational spaces. As we further theorized this lifecycle and analyzed participant responses, however, "academic" became a problematic boundary because, for example, many of our participants held concurrent positions within and beyond the academy. Further, the expertise developed in one domain was not confined to that domain: our participants described the applications of academic knowledge to community-based and

business-oriented spaces and vice versa, further suggesting that divisions between "academic" and "non-academic" activities will not offer the most meaningful ways of thinking about a career in RCWS. Therefore, we found "disciplinary" to be a more capacious and accurate descriptor of the lifecycle that we aimed to understand and used the verb form *lifecycling* to connote the active, cumulative, and iterative possibility inherent in this frame.

The Career Arc: A Prevailing Metaphor to Signal Ascension, Singularity, and Early-Career Vitality

The career arc is a pervasive metaphor to describe the trajectory of experience and development in any field, depicting an unbroken rising-and-falling trajectory. In its usage, career arc evokes the dramatic arc to conceptualize the career as drama or narrative. The dramatic arc, famously theorized by German novelist Gustav Freytag, is represented as having five stages that follow a pyramid structure: introduction, rise, climax, return or fall, and catastrophe or *denouement* (Freytag 114-115). The same visual metaphor came to depict a "rising and descending staircase" image of the modern human life course, which age studies historian Thomas R. Cole notes replaced "the endless circle or *cycle* of human life" of antiquity (5) and evolved into universal set of stages in which predictable social roles would be played at specific ages (see fig. 2).

Since individuals come to envision and understand themselves through the stories they tell about their lives (Bruner), the dramatic arc can be a compelling metaphor for a career, fashioning an appealingly linear, narrative structure to the evolution of the professional self and featuring a dramatically satisfying (and thus aspirational) zenith. However, this narrative structure also limits how career trajectories are envisioned. For example, just as literacy practices become associated with—and thus deemed socially appropriate for—people of particular ages and even generations (Bowen), the career arc model may prescribe not only what activities count as part of one's disciplinary development but also the appropriate timing of those experiences over the lifespan.

Fig. 2. An example of 19th-century iconography of the human life course; Baillie, James; *The Life and Age of Man: Stages of Man's Life, from the Cradle to the Grave*; c1848; Library of Congress; https://lccn.loc.gov/2006686267 (public domain).

The career-as-arc metaphor pervades discussions about career trajectories in higher education. Although often an unnamed narrative structure, a search for actual appearances of *career arc* in *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reveals some commonalities in usage. Universally, *career arc* denotes the long view of a working life, likening the career to a marathon, for example, rather than a sprint (Stober). Occasionally, the metaphor also captures activity of deliberately crafting one's own career, allowing the "conception" of one's own arc as a viable motive for pursuing the next "higher profile, higher-paying job" (Devine). While we find longitudinal and agentive dimensions worth preserving in our ways of representing and envisioning careers in RCWS, the arc metaphor represents rare and privileged career trajectories as norms. To examine the limiting factors of this sometimes implicit but ever-present metaphor for career trajectories in RCWS, we identify three themes that survey responses evidenced.

Career Arc Limitation 1: Rendering Invisible Trajectories that Diverge from the Ascension Model

The ideal career arc is envisioned as a template of stages for career advancement from low to high levels of labor: a steady, uninterrupted ascension through institutional hierarchies, accompanied by the commensurate accrual of professional influence and power. In the context of higher education, the rising trajectory of the career arc implies that, as a career advances, the ideal professional is increasingly removed from low-status labor, which traditionally includes the teaching of first-year-level courses. David Perlmutter caricaturizes this imagined trajectory in his *Chronicle* article, "Teaching the 101": "Unfortunately junior professors are quickly caught up in this culture of prole avoidance. Many assume that their career arc is to teach more and more graduate seminars and eventually to never meet an undergraduate save the ones that serve lunch at the Faculty Club." Rarely so blatant as Perlmutter describes, an ascension-model career arc reveals itself through a tacit but pervasive institutional expectation, which can shape valuations of career phases. However, steady, upward progress narratives are particularly unrepresentative of careers in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies, which often involve regular (and willing) interaction with introductory-level students across phases of the career.

For many RCWS members, their institutional positions offer a clear challenge to this ascension orientation of the career arc because these positions do not offer opportunities for changes in labor conditions. For example, those on fixed-term appointments may not have opportunities for promotion that change institutional titles connoting prestige, or if they do have such opportunities, more prestigious titles may not change labor conditions significantly. The relevance of institutional conditions is made evident in the chronology and narrative of one respondent (white, female, from a lower middle-class background, age 65-74), who explained that, upon earning her PhD, she obtained a tenure-line faculty position at a four-year college, then moved to an adjunct position, then became full-time faculty at a tribal college that did not have a tenure track.[2] From this position, she became chair of the department. As this instance demonstrates, the idea that a successful career constitutes a climbing of institutional hierarchies does not always map well onto the institutional realities of RCWS faculty careers in which individuals may move into and out of positions that do not have a series of delineated steps to prepare them to climb to subsequent levels.

Even when individual careers seem to follow an idealized ascension, the framework upholds institutional hierarchies that are detrimental to members of our field. For example, one survey respondent who identified as a retired

tenure-line faculty member and writing program administrator (white, female, from a working-class background, age 65-74) provided a lifecycle chronology that might, at first glance, appear to support an ascension model of rising upward through the institutional ranks (from graduate degree to graduate degree, to the tenure track) and away from contact with introductory-level students. However, the ascension narrative would position this participant's writing center work—because it was performed while at the graduate level—as lower-level work. Such positioning has consequences for RCWS spaces of action: if writing center administration is regularly viewed as introductory "graduate student" work, then it is less likely that institutions will assign higher-order-level value to such work, potentially contributing to the conflicts we sometimes see in hiring priorities, performance reviews, promotion, and resource management within RCWS spaces such as writing centers.

Career Arc Limitation 2: Reinforcing Industrialized Notions of Work

In addition to narrowly representing success as ascension through institutional hierarchies, the career arc also prioritizes singularity: a sense that a career's progress is measured only by the labor valued by an employing institution. In this way, the career arc sets up additional binaries: not only the high/low, up/down of career ascension, but also the in/out, on/off binary of a singular career track. Despite our own efforts to create a survey that allowed for self-description, flexibility, and space to resist the ascension imperative of the career arc, our survey design still evidenced the pervasive influence of arc's emphasis on singularity, as we imposed an insider/outsider metaphor when asking respondents to identify their current position. By marking "professional" positions as "outside the academy" and denoting "non-academic" writing as non-normative labor, we inadvertently replicated the career arc metaphor's singular focus, rendering the academic as institutionally recognizable and the non-academic as less valued, perpetuating an industrialized notion of work that counts only in service to a primary institution.

Fortunately, many respondents used the affordances of the write-in phases and the open response question to challenge an academic/non-academic boundary. For instance, a tenure-line faculty survey respondent (Latino/Hispanic/Spanish, male, poor/working poor background, age 65-74) narrated a chronology that seems to progress upward through the institutional ranks. Despite the seemingly consistent upward trajectory of the academic phases—graduate study to tenure-track position to administration—the participant explains that their employment phases overlap: "I was a short-order cook while a tenure-track assistant professor." In the career arc narrative, there's typically no place for a short order cook and no way to make sense of labor that doesn't explicitly contribute to institutional prestige, yet this participant writes this experience

into visibility and calls us to find ways to understand this labor and its potential contributions to disciplinary experience. Despite our field's research that acknowledges the literacy practices present in activities that are not always understood as discursively-based (e.g., Mirabelli), we have yet to see similarly thriving research on the co-constitutive nature of such activities for experts in RCWS careers. As a field, we seem eager to validate and acknowledge literacy-based activities for our research participants but less likely to do so for ourselves.

Narrow emphasis on a single-track progress narrative occludes the economic realities of academic labor: in particular, the labor that many academics must perform to create the conditions that make RCWS work in academia possible. A tenure-line research university faculty member (American Indian or Alaska Native, female, from a poor/working class background, age 55-64) describes teaching four classes per semester at one institution while completing her doctoral degree at another—a balancing act that required 700 miles of commuting per week, but which she hoped would provide her an opportunity for promotion at her current teaching institution. Unfortunately, the university where she taught "refused to hire [her] in ten academic searches," though she did eventually move on to a full-time faculty position elsewhere.

Further, a graduate student and teaching assistant (two or more races, female, from a lower-middle-class background, age 45-54) outlines a complex chronology of thirteen phases, including undergraduate tutoring, elementary-level teaching, professional writing, self-employment, pursuing a Master's degree, teaching as non-tenure-track higher education faculty, secondary-level teaching, directing a writing center, and completing doctoral work. About this complex chronology, the respondent explains:

> The jobs I have had do not pay enough to live off of (e.g. I was full-time adjunct faculty at a R2 institution and started at $19,000 a year, raising two-children as a single mother, and with student loans); so, I have worked 2-3 jobs at a time (often working 50-80 hours a week) for over 20 years. This makes my work timeline more complex and look more broken… However, I have held many of my jobs for many years (e.g. I am still working one job for the last 18 years...).

The participant noted that seeing her jobs as distinct phases didn't seem to "reflect [her] work experience in the field of higher education." In this comment, she seems oriented toward a field of higher education, not toward a singular institution—an orientation undercut by a career arc, which is primarily vectored toward a primary institution of employment. The arc's singularity is rigidly reinforced by institutions that require reporting of outside activities through conflict-of-interest policies, which position the institution as the

determinant of what kinds of labor are appropriate, when, and under what conditions, calling upon the field only in certain instances, when outside readers or external reviewers are deemed appropriate and defined most often by a notion of peer institution not a measure of disciplinary expertise.

Conversations about the traditional progress narrative of the academic career arc have already indicated that variation inevitably exists, as a diversifying professoriate demands broader recognition of successful career pathways (Segran) and leaving the academy does mean an individual has "failed" in some way (Yachnin). However, diversification is often presented as a set of discrete obstacles to be accommodated or otherwise endured: for example, the need to temporarily "stop the tenure clock" for childcare (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine 31). The career arc does not readily permit us to recognize the ongoing effects that the various roles we play across social and economic domains can have on career trajectories.

Career Arc Limitation 3: De-Emphasizing Development that Occurs in Later Stages of One's Trajectory

The upward, linear movement of an idealized professional trajectory not only fails to anticipate the career paths that do not map easily onto it but also leads to predictable (and usually age-aligned) chronological phases that fail to capture one's actual career chronology. Further, the arc also obscures the latter phases of a career. Put in terms of Freytag's narrative arc, the resolution of the career arc would occur after the arc's climax—where, presumably, one has officially "made it" as a success in one's field (see figure 3). Perhaps as a consequence of the career arc vision, very little attention has been paid in RCWS or other disciplines to what happens beyond what is traditionally called mid-career, and retirement is not cast as a part of the career, at all, but the sometimes-welcome end of it.

Even those careers that move along institutionally celebrated milestones are not well-served by the invisibility of what happens after one has ostensibly made it in RCWS. Peggy O'Neill describes one outcome of this invisibility in a reflective *WPA Writing Program Administration* essay, in which she describes being in "mid-career and midlife" and feeling "bored, unsettled, unmotivated" (174)—an experience that, she soon discovered, was common among faculty who perceived themselves at a similar position in age identity and professional status. Through research on and observations of career satisfaction, O'Neill reflects on the importance of the "pivot," or meaningful, deliberate transition into what Laura Micciche calls "hypermiling" or "purposefully slowing down" in order to steer into a mid-career "U-curve" and make a "gradual arrival" in late-career (qtd. in O'Neill 179). Two things strike us as especially important

about O'Neill's reflection: first, the sense that she needed to actively seek out a framework for confronting what she learned, eventually, was a common experience; and second, that she describes her trajectory as a kind of detour—a "U-Turn"—from a previous trajectory. In both points, we see laid bare both the pervasiveness of the career arc metaphor and its limitations for making sense of the latter "half" of an RCWS career: it silences and diminishes what later careers (and later life) might actually look and feel like.

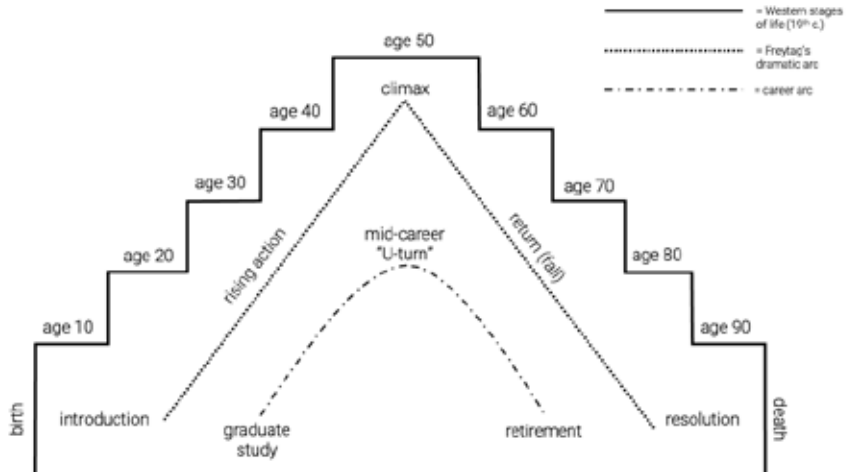

Fig. 3. Diagram illustrating the mirroring shapes of the career arc, dramatic arc, and Western iconography of the ages and stages of modern life.

These limitations, we contend, can have detrimental effects on career planning and disciplinary identity development. Some of these effects are suggested in responses to our survey, in which we dedicated particular attention to retirement as experienced and envisioned. We asked participants to identify activities they hoped to pursue or were already pursuing during retirement and to provide open-ended comments on their retirement plans or experiences. While many respondents named and identified activities they hoped to take up (from learning new skills, to engaging in community service, to continuing teaching), others were confounded by the prompt, as they did not envision career continuity following separation from employing institutions. "Do you expect people to work until they die? Isn't your survey kind of missing the point of retirement?" asked one responded. Said another, "When I leave academia, I don't plan to moonlight. I will have had enough."

For others, retirement was an altogether unknown entity, as evidenced by survey responses such as, "I haven't really thought much about this" and "I can't even imagine what I'll want to do (even though I'm no longer a spring

chicken)." Across all age groups, respondents indicated a general sense of being ill-prepared for the transition into retirement, as compared with traditionally other transitions. For example, when asked about their preparation for submitting materials for promotion, 36% of our respondents reported being "very well prepared" whereas only 15% reported the same level of preparation for making decisions about retirement. One respondent (age 65-74) explained, "Perhaps like a number of other academics, I have not nurtured hobbies or other activities outside of my professional work that I am eager to have more time to pursue, and so how I will fill time productively is a current concern." Another respondent, from the same age group: "I have yet to find useful resources to help me think through my plans. Nor have I been able to identify useful steps to engage my possible plans." We believe that respondents' sense that they lack the means (or the will) to envision retirement as a phase of the career speaks to the commonplace status of career arc perspectives. The idealized career arc as an unbroken rise and unspoken decline, at best, misrepresents career trajectories as they actually unfold and, at worst, denies individuals the opportunity to envision meaningful disciplinary trajectories.

The Disciplinary Lifecycle: A Framework with Generative Possibilities

The inadequacies of the career arc have been previously identified in RCWS, particularly through feminist critique and intervention. For instance, Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford's *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*, published at the beginning of the 2008 recession that marked significant and lasting changes to the academic job market, made an important effort to help women "obtain tenure-track positions," "succeed in the tenure and promotion process," and "balance career with personal endeavors" (4). This valuable work called attention to the limitations of traditional models and offered stories and strategies for not just navigating one's career but also "making it" in that career. The focus of *Women's Ways*, as the contributing authors of the "Wo/men's Ways of Making It in Writing Studies" special issue of *Composition Studies* observe, is mostly on the pathway toward securing tenure-track jobs at research-oriented universities: a pathway that seems to require a kind of "single-mindedness" about career success (Danberg 69). While this is a career path that many individuals may pursue, Loren Marquez and Christine Cucciare et al. question the focus on the tenure-track and research productivity as dominant markers of success.

We read such critique as an indication that the ascension model of the career arc is exerting a pervasive and oppressive force on individual career paths. As an abstract ideal, the arc casts real career trajectories as deviant or deficient when labor is distributed outside of institutionally-recognized activities. Familiar to many academics, including us, parenting is one such form

of labor, which, in the absence of institutional policies and resources, forces many in academia to improvise what Alex Hanson calls "career killer survival kits" (35). Marquez poignantly calls for the field to further advance the work of *Women's Ways* by advocating for greater diversity in recognizing the career trajectories and accomplishments of women in RCWS:

> As women in Composition Studies who work, give, write, parent, listen, mentor, read, present, teach, publish, administer, guide, evaluate, and who are of different cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, different sexual orientations, and teach at two-year, four-year, teaching, and research universities, public and private, and who care for children, parents, or loved-ones, we need to write about our ways of making it in the field to provide a broader account and fuller definition of making it. (76)

As a feminist project, these efforts to challenge the inadequacies of the traditional career arc are linked to a view of the field across more varied sites of disciplinary action, as we see happening, for example, in Amy Goodburn, Donna Lecourt, and Carrie Leverenz's edited collection, *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers*. Even more crucially, we see a link to the wide and varied efforts to uncouple the work of the discipline from normative white, Western academic perspectives. In *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration*, Staci Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamont Craig call our attention to the "historically and politically maintained power asymmetries endemic of the ivory tower" that become "coded" into institutional practices (10-11)—asymmetries that we see inherent not only in institutions but also in the career arc with its emphasis on an idealized ascension that inheres and requires privilege, therefore making it not just difficult but impossible for those who do not have access to its entry points or institutionalized mechanisms for validation. In reflecting on her own disciplinary trajectory as a Black scholar, Sherita Roundtree further pushes us to examine such points of entry and access: "What are the gatekeeping mechanisms that become an inherent part of procedures and protocols, making it more difficult for folks like myself to access and continue doing meaningful work?" (Botex et al., n.p.).

Taking a cue from these scholars, we argue that it is not enough to critique the pervasive metaphor of the career arc by demonstrating its inadequacies and finding ways to validate ever-more varied experiences through the existing metaphor. Instead, we think it is important to work toward the imagining of new metaphors to replace the career arc because lived career trajectories rarely map well onto exponential line graphs. Further, we anticipate that new metaphors for our career trajectories can begin to erase the sometimes-unspoken,

often-palpable distinctions we have internalized between the academic and the professional ("non-academic"), the novice and the expert, the institutionally-recognized and the community-oriented. Toward this end, we offer disciplinary lifecycling as a generative frame. Like the career arc, it can speak to a desire for a lifespan narrative and an image that not only explains but also visualizes possibilities for career development. Yet unlike the arc, its dimensions are malleable enough to retract and stretch with the kinds of variance that mark careers in RCWS. In what follows, we outline disciplinary lifecycling as a framework of possibility that is more responsive to the realities of labor in RCWS.

Visualizing the Lifecycle: Foregrounding Microcycles and Spaces of Action

When we say lifecycling, readers may immediately conjure an image of the biological lifecycle in its simplest form: a circular model of progress through specific phases of an organism's lifespan, from inception to reproduction (see fig. 4). While we see resonances between disciplinary lifecycling and the biological lifespan, our lifecycling model centers on the development and regeneration of disciplinary knowledge (not the individual species as in a biological model). Therefore, a single loop in a disciplinary lifecycle represents disciplinary knowledge (fig. 5, panel A) that is sometimes accumulated, building in effect over time, and sometimes immediately transformative, like threshold concepts that open new, irreversible ways of thinking (Meyer and Land 74).

Over time and across contexts, a person's lifecycle can be represented by a series of loops or microcycles, in which disciplinary knowledge is conceived and regenerated through a range of activities and practices that make up the ongoing process that we call *lifecycling* (fig. 5, panel B). We do not represent these microcycles as a line of progressive development that eventually curves its way to a clean, closed loop when expertise is attained, as this approach would leave microcycles incomplete when the spaces of action in which disciplinary knowledge is developed or applied is removed or rendered invisible. Rather, we see the microcycles emerging as an already-complete loop that enlarges according to the transformative effect of the disciplinary knowledge developed within it.

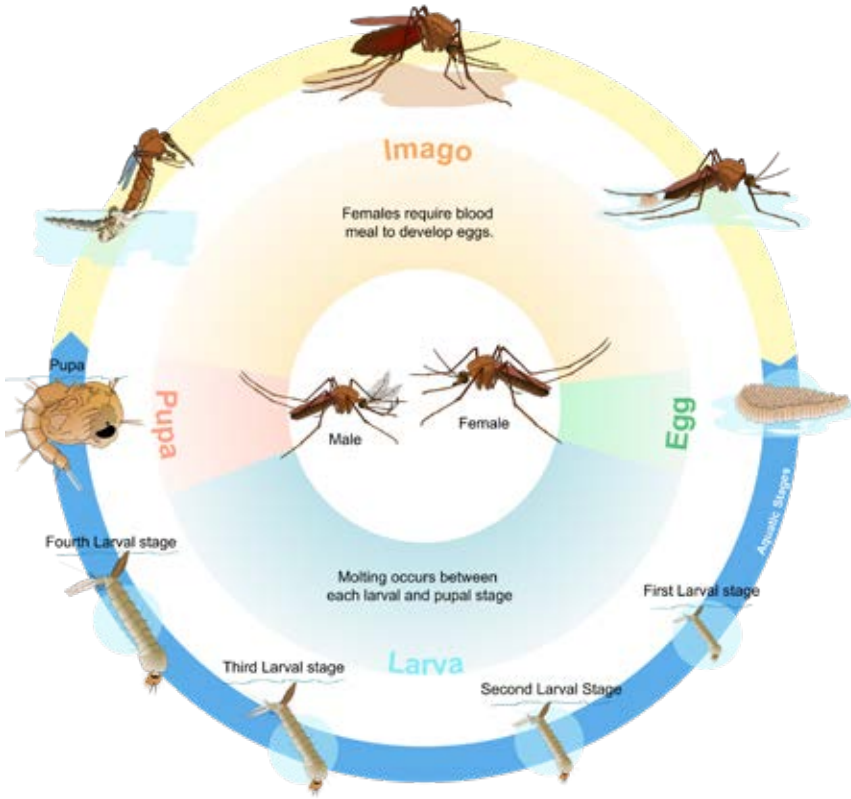

Fig. 4. Sample Biological Lifecycle Visualization; Mariana Ruiz Villareal; "Culex Mosquito Lifecycle"; Wikimedia Commons; July 1, 2020. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/.

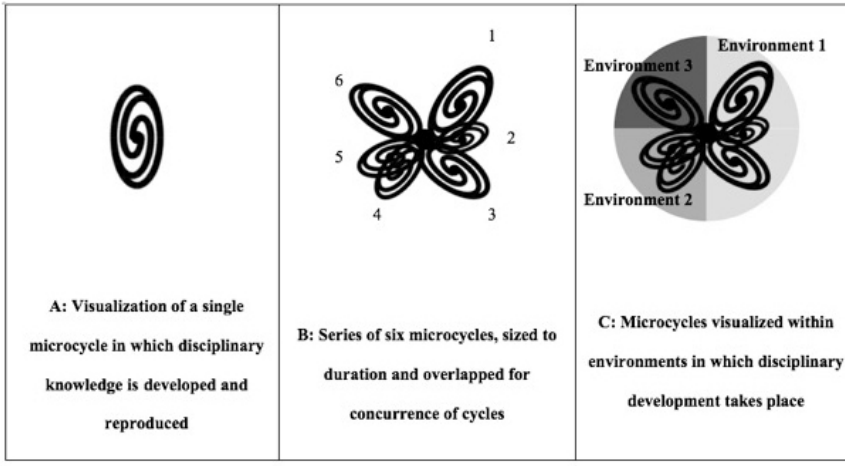

Fig. 5. Diagram illustrating disciplinary lifecycling.

Within this framework, we use environment to name the places (physical and virtual, social and individual) in which disciplinary activities occur. However, these places—institutions, organizations, homes, community organizations, etc.—are not accessed or experienced equitably by all individuals. Therefore, we differentiate environments—the places in which our activities occur—from spaces of action—those particular environments in which individuals experience agentive possibilities for disciplinary development. The interactivity of environments with disciplinary knowledge development might be represented by a shaded background in figure 5, panel C. Environments certainly provide a background for disciplinary activity that is necessary to acknowledge but an environment shared by two individuals does not necessarily indicate equal access to a space of action. As we discuss in an interview-based study of disciplinary identity (Bowen and Pinkert), spaces of action, which are created by organizational contexts, position responsibilities, reporting structures, and so forth, are essential for ongoing development and application of disciplinary expertise in phases such as retirement. Here, we extend our thinking to include spaces of action as a key component of disciplinary lifecycling, as they can constrain or make possible disciplinary development within a single microcycle and across multiple microcycles. Moreover, shifting access to one space of action may have impact on another. A brief example from our interview study is illustrative: in retirement, Michelle Lewis (a pseudonym) felt that academic conferences, once a key space of action for her, no longer served this function as she lacked continued access to a corresponding institutional space. She explained, "why do I want to go and hear all the latest and greatest . . . when I have no writing center to go back to with this information?" (Bowen and Pinkert 264). Thus, the transformative effect of a microcyle and, therefore, its size in relation to other microcycles is related to one's *transformative access* to the "networks of power" (Banks 45) that can enable environments to emerge from the background as spaces of action.

The representations of lifecycling we provide are messier than the career arc, with its even curves and singular lines. However, this variation is not the side effect of a career gone awry, as the career arc would suggest. Disciplinary knowledge is refined in overlapping experiences, such as being a faculty member and a graduate student simultaneously, and in social realities, such as abruptly changing locations to pursue a job nearer family or take on another position that better meets one's financial needs. The loops and layers are essential to understanding our careers amid their gendered, racialized, socialized, institutionalized realities: if we aim to envision what's likely and possible for RCWS experts and to more inclusively represent career trajectories, we must develop a frame that allows for the contours, the backgrounds, the variations, and the repetitions. To begin such acknowledgment, we discuss three possibilities

through which lifecycling can offer a frame that isn't limited by the narrow perspectives inherent in the career arc.

Disciplinary Lifecycling Possibility 1: Recognizing Individual Variance in Disciplinary Development

In contrast to the career arc's emphasis on ascension, often signaled by the expected pursuit of increasing salaries or increasing prestige of position type, lifecycling thwarts *a priori* hierarchies that privilege one phase (with its accompanying microcycles) over another. For example, pursuing a graduate degree after gaining professional experience connotes neither ascension nor decline. Instead, it signals a new phase in which disciplinary knowledge is developed and applied. In this way, lifecycling diverges from the career arc in which the speed and height to which you "climb" to the next "level" is favored, while any continuation of the same activity can be perceived as a plateau, and thus as a deficiency. By recognizing the interrelations within individuals—their knowledge and their labor—a disciplinary lifecycling model can make visible often-overlooked phases in which disciplinary knowledge is acquired, honed, applied, revised, and transformed.

By working against the reliance on a presumed upward trajectory, lifecycling opens the possibility for developing a more realistic and discipline-specific understanding of the typified experiences of the disciplinary lifecycle in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies. In the participant-generated chronologies, shown in table 2 below, all of the participants share experience as Master's Degree Students, as Graduate Assistants during their master's degrees, and as Higher Ed Administrators. Additionally, three of the four chronologies trace their earliest disciplinary development to their undergraduate experiences as a student or a writing fellow, tutor, or consultant and include experience in non-tenure-track positions within higher education. But the chronologies vary significantly in the timing of these experiences. This maps onto what we already know about the variance in individuals' career trajectories: individuals may hold positions before pursuing a doctoral degree, after obtaining a doctoral degree, or concurrently with their graduate work. Such variation highlights the reality that, even when participants experience the same position types within RCWS, these positions are sequenced and contextualized differently, necessarily shaping individuals' development and application of disciplinary expertise. Disciplinary lifecycling makes space to acknowledge the varied ways that individuals encounter and develop disciplinary knowledge through practice, advanced study, teaching, research, and so on.

Table 2
Four Participants' Lifecycle Chronologies

Participant A **Administrator in a program/unit not writing/literacy-related; white, male from a working class background, age 35-44**	**Participant B** **PhD-level teaching, admin, or research assistant; two or more races, female, from lower-middle-class background, age 45-54**
1. Bachelor's Degree 2. Professional 3. Master's Degree 4. Graduate Teaching, Admin, or Research Assistant (Master's level) 5. Higher Ed Staff 6. PhD 7. Self-employed 8. Graduate Teaching, Admin, or Research Assistant (PhD level) 9. Higher Ed Non-Tenure-Track Faculty 10. Higher Ed Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty 11. Higher Ed Administrator within a writing/literacy-related program/unit 12. Higher Ed Administrator in a program/unit not writing/literacy-related	1. Undergraduate Writing Fellow, Tutor, or Consultant 2. Teacher—Elementary Level 3. Tech 4. Professional 5. Grant writer as well as journalism 6. Self-employed 7. Master's Degree 8. Higher Ed Non-Tenure-Track Faculty 9. Teacher—Secondary Level 10. Graduate Teaching, Admin, or Research Assistant (Master's Level) 13. Higher Ed Administrator in a program/unit not writing/literacy-related 11. Writing Center Director 12. Graduate Teaching, Admin, or Research Assistant (PhD level)
Participant C **Tenure-line faculty; American Indian or Alaska Native, female, from a poor/working class background, age 55-64**	**Participant D** **Administrator within a writing/literacy-related unit; Latino/Hispanic/Spanish, male, from a poor/working poor background, age 65-74**
1. Bachelor's Degree 2. Undergraduate Writing fellow, Tutor, or Consultant 3. Self-employed 4. Master's Degree 5. Graduate Teaching, Admin, or Research Assistant (Master's level) 6. Higher Ed Administrator in a program/unit not writing/literacy-related 7. Non-academic writer 8. Edited medical books, including one about diagnosis at the molecular level 9. Higher Ed Staff 10. Higher Ed Librarian 11. PhD 12. Training in using computers in composition 13. Higher Ed Non-tenure-Track Faculty 14. Higher Ed Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty	1. Military, personnel clerk, short-order cook, computer operator (prior to the existence of personal computers) 2. Associate's Degree 3. Bachelor's Degree 4. Master's Degree 5. Graduate Teaching, Admin, or Research Assistant (Master's Level) 6. Graduate Teaching, Admin, or Research Assistant (PhD Level) 7. PhD 8. Higher Ed Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty 9. Department Chair, Associate Dean, Director of American Studies 10. Higher Ed Administrator within a writing/literacy-related program/unit

Disciplinary Lifecycling Possibility 2: Allowing for Concurrent Applications of Disciplinary Knowledge Within and Across Spaces of Action

Lifecycling also offers an opportunity to recognize the cross-contextual mobility of RCWS disciplinary expertise, as well as the broader variability of spaces of action in which disciplinary expertise can be developed and applied. This provides an important contrast to a linear, single-minded focus on disciplinary activity only occurring within institutionally-recognized spaces of action (e.g., for our survey participants: institutions of postsecondary education, academic conferences, academic journals, etc.).

Demonstrating the wide-ranging applications of RCWS expertise, survey respondents often included in their chronologies those jobs which earned them income during the phases of undergraduate and graduate study. For example, a full-time community college staff member with teaching, administrative, and/or technological responsibilities (white, female, from a working-class background, age 55-64) describes her entrance into an RCWS career lifecycle after being nominated to be a writing tutor when she enrolled in her local community college at the age of 40. Before then, she had worked primarily in retail and as a medical receptionist, the latter of which continued to sustain her financially throughout her bachelor's and master's degree programs, until she eventually landed a full-time position as a writing center director. Another RCWS member, a tenure-line faculty member at a research university (white, male, from a working-class background, age 35-44) shared that he had worked as a private writing tutor during his PhD program, which "doubled" the income he earned as a graduate teaching assistant. From his personal experience, this respondent offered a hypothesis: "I expect that recent students in rhet/comp have expanded prolifically into the service (gig) economy of such affective labor."

Another way our survey respondents addressed the variation in the domains in which their expertise is valued was to provide counterevidence of the traditional distinction between academic and non-academic career paths. A doctorate-holding participant (white, non-binary, from a lower middle-class background, age 55-64) represented what they perceived to be a disciplinary overlap between two traditionally distinctive careers. This participant presented a career chronology that begins with the completion of a PhD program (which included teaching experience) followed by several years as a non-tenure-track faculty member at two different institutions. Eight years after earning their PhD, the respondent describes "return[ing] to my original field, being a liberation theologian/preacher/writer/minister in the Presbyterian Church, USA"—a line of work the respondent anticipated pursuing for "five to ten more years." Although the survey did not tell us precisely how the disciplinary intersections of these two fields of work—theology and writing studies—were experienced, we can see an alignment of interests across both fields within in their lifecycle, and we can imagine the possibility that skills, dispositions, and experiences of lifecycle phases are informed by, and carried outward into, other phases throughout the lifecycle. For example, although the respondent notes that they are no longer in a higher education context, they did indicate current engagement in activities that are not far-flung from traditional academic/RCWS work, including teaching, lecturing and speaking publicly, and "writing poetry, prose poems, and spiritual inspiration in published books, journals, and [a] spiritual/social justice blog." In this case, the application of writing or

rhetorical expertise is not described as a means of financial necessity but rather as an integrative experience.

In another survey response, a tenure-line faculty member at a community college (white, male, from a lower-middle class background, age 65-74) described what the traditional career arc model would represent as two distinct career paths—yet, in actuality, the two career trajectories were co-dependent. Commissioned to the military in the early 1970s, this respondent explained that the US Army sponsored his master's degree so that he would be able to teach at West Point—which he did, on a part-time basis, while still active in the military. Retired from the Army after 27 years of service, the respondent spent three years "as a technical writer and adjunct" before shifting to full-time faculty positions, first at a regional master's institution and finally at a community college. The respondent plans to retire from teaching in "another year or two." In addition to challenging traditional visions of retirement, this respondent's account challenges the facile separation of "academic" and "non-academic" work, as the non-academic employer functioned as a sponsor and beneficiary of the academic trajectory of his career.

Disciplinary lifecycling encourages greater recognition of concurrence and multiplicity that is already common to RCWS careers and that may become more exigent for RCWS experts' career trajectories in the near future. Students who specialize in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies often enter positions that demand their expertise, but which may not be identifiable by a title that differentiates their *writing* expertise from other domains (social media developer, project manager, user experience specialist, etc.). By recognizing that RCWS disciplinary knowledge and labor realities do not always align in ways that acknowledge and promote the articulation of disciplinary identity development, the lifecycle framework can prompt participants to trace meaningful trajectories that acknowledge disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary labor within and beyond a singular employer.

Lifecycling Possibility #3: Creating the Possibility to Trace Typification Throughout Disciplinary Development

A lifecycle model not only creates space for variance in the timing and type of experiences that make up RCWS disciplinary development but also avoids the conflation of chronological age with developmental stage, as illustrated previously in figure 3. If career phases in RCWS mapped onto chronological age, then we might expect Participant D (table 2), who identified as being age 65-74, to have the highest number of phases in their career or to have experienced some traditionally prestigious phases that others of a lesser age have not. However, what we see in the survey results is that at varied ages, members of the disciplines are participating in a range of activities, which

reinforces the inadequacy of an ages-and-stages-style ascension model and the continued need for a frame that acknowledges and affords disciplinary development throughout one's lifespan. The recognition that disciplinary development does not progress, start, or stop at predictable stages of a career or ages of a lifespan resists the tendency to dismiss later stages of the career—including retirement—as irrelevant, such that a perceived sense of "U-Turn" in mid-career, or a sense that disciplinary development must end at retirement, no longer holds. Such a shift in perspective aligns with interviews with retired members of RCWS who completed this survey, all of whom operated at a remove, either entirely or in certain particulars, from their pre-retirement academic institutions. Many retirees seek new spaces of action in which to apply and extend their disciplinary expertise and are able to extend their disciplinary identities into what would be considered non-academic sites, including political organizations, community reading groups, and even in grandparenting activities (Bowen and Pinkert 262).

Lifecycling affords opportunities to trace typification without ossifying as another ages-and-stages arc, which not only prescribes the stages, but also the timing of those stages over a lifespan. Identifying the typified experiences emerging across multiple trajectories yields, we think, two important opportunities: (1) to identify phases—like retirement and self-employment—that are common but are, as of yet, underrepresented in the field's scholarly and professional development agendas; and (2) to trace the shifting morphology of RCWS careers over time, amid changing spaces of action.

Reinventing Our Conceptions of the Career in RCWS Through Disciplinary Lifecycling

If we aim to recognize more fully the realities of intellectual labor within RCWS, reinventing our conceptions of the career through the metaphor of the lifecycle is not just possible but necessary. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* argues that metaphors are "not just a matter . . . of mere words" but reflect and reify cultural conceptual systems (6). Jonathan Alexander, Karen Lunsford, and Carl Whithaus have recently argued for "an analysis of the dominant metaphors of a given field of study" to consider how such metaphors operate as Burkean "terministic screens" that "*determine* and condition how scholars are approaching, understanding, and analyzing their objects of study" (107). Nedra Reynolds enacts such careful examination of dominant spatial metaphors in composition, such as locating the teaching and researching of writing in contact zones, at the boundary, or on the frontier, or lamenting the location of composition in the trenches, at the margins, or even in the basement (28). Such metaphors, however, not only determine how we perceive our discipline (as Reynolds notes) and how we perceive our

objects of study (as Alexander et al. note) but also how we perceive ourselves and others as disciplinary experts—and, in turn, how we enact our career trajectories and support the career trajectories of others. We believe that visual and spatial metaphors have played a crucial role in our discourse on disciplinary development: the career arc haunts and constrains how careers in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies are theorized, enacted, and supported.

In terms of theorizing RCWS careers, the shift away from the linear, ascension-emphasizing career arc toward the lifecycling frame recognizes that disciplinary/intellectual development must be oriented within a lifespan perspective that is life-long and life-wide—that is, across domains and contexts—up to and including multiple generations (Dippre and Phillips 6). This imperative isn't just for those who spend their careers in places other than the academy (e.g., technical writers or copyeditors) but also for those who labor in spaces traditionally conceived of as academic or educational because rhetorical expertise is developed and applied across such boundaries, and lifecycling is aimed at marking individual regeneration through disciplinary knowledge-making activity wherever it occurs. We see great possibility for further theorization of the regenerative nature of lifecycling and the interconnectedness of generations, which aligns with our disciplinary understandings of writing, research, teaching, administration, service, activism, and so on as means of creating opportunities for future individuals and activities.

New ways of envisioning careers, we contend, support new possibilities for individuals to enact them. Even before the pandemic, shifting realities of intellectual labor in institutions of higher education—in which the age of austerity and retrenchment presses postsecondary writing programs to "make do with less" (Scott and Welch 5)—are already rendering some privileged academic spaces of action less accessible in the short-term and less sustainable in the long-term. In a field in which a high percentage of members already develop and apply expertise in contingent positions, the neoliberal privatization and destabilization of higher education have significant consequences for RCWS career paths. Alongside other crucial responses, including resistance through labor equity advocacy (Kahn et al.) and adaptation through forging multi- and interdisciplinary institutional relationships (Matzen and Abraham), we propose disciplinary lifecycling as a metaphor that makes possible a new vision for careers in RCWS (and beyond) that responds to the disciplinary knowledge and labor realities of our field.

Consider two data points, likely familiar to readers of *Composition Studies*: (1) According to State Higher Education Finance data, the proportion of US public higher education institutions' revenues coming from student tuition (called "student share") has increased from 20.9% in 1980 to almost 50% in 2019, as states become less and less invested in supporting higher education

as a public good. Historically, student share rises during periods of economic recession and levels off afterward but does not return to pre-recession proportions (SHEEO); (2) The 2020-2021 hiring season for faculty positions in Rhetoric, Composition, and Technical Communication marks a historic low, with listings down by more than half from the previous hiring season (Ridolfo). Exemplified in these two trends is a clear exigence for those who seek academic positions, in particular: individuals who are entering the discipline will need to be both proactive and nimble in their enactments of disciplinary identity, as the institutions (environments) to which the work of the field is traditionally attached continue to narrow access to the spaces of action in which transformative disciplinary development can occur. Moreover, the changes in landscape—shifts away from singular employers, institutionalized markers of prestige, and predictable chronologies—aren't characteristic only of those working in education but are also experienced by writing and rhetoric experts who work across a range of contexts (Tigar; Kahn). Given our participants' backgrounds, this article has focused on lifecycling's possibilities for RCWS members working in educational/academic contexts, but the disciplinary lifecycling model, which recenters career development on relationships to the discipline rather than employing institutions, may yield important ways to conceive of disciplinary development across RCWS career tracks that have been traditionally differentiated not by the kinds of expertise needed within them but by the perceived academic or professional environments in which they were performed.

The shift from institution to discipline necessitates, in turn, a shift in how members of the discipline support one another. We believe that lifecycling can point the way toward career development practices that are more responsive to the current and future realities of disciplinary labor. When viewed from a lifecycling standpoint, development can and must include closer attention to typified phases that are currently under-represented. Further, lifecycling and corresponding research efforts can shift focus productively away from traditional emphasis on currently-less-common, privileged phases and their related microcycles and instead build a career path vision that acknowledges, recognizes, and values common phases more fully. Lifecycling will not eliminate the pressures exerted by the institutions in which we enact our disciplinary knowledge, perform disciplinary activities, and, in cases of employment, draw our incomes; but it can help us to challenge the values of those institutions as the status quo for measuring career success and development.

Finally, our shift away from a focus on the institutions to the discipline leads us to consider the generative work lifecycling can do beyond traditional boundaries. What spaces of action currently elide our view? How might we support members of RCWS across a greater range of domains? In considering

such questions, RCWS can be open to fundamental pragmatic changes in how we mentor, recruit, promote, and recognize members of our field—changes that, we believe, would lead to more inclusive and equitable career development within the discipline.

Notes

1. Participants were recruited through e-mail announcements on disciplinary listservs such as the ATTW-L, WPA-L, WAC-L, WCenter-L, and ARWS-L and through flyers at disciplinary conferences such as CCCC.

2. Tenure-line is used to describe both tenured and tenure-earning respondents.

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