Nancy Maloney Grimm. *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 140 pages. $26.00.

Linda Myers-Breslin, ed. *Administrative Problem Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers: Scenarios in Effective Program Management*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English. 1999. 278 pages. $29.95.

# Reflections on the State of the Discipline: Administrative Problem-Solving and Good Intentions

Emily Golson

$W$e are maturing. And as we mature, we experience bittersweet moments when we are treated to glimpses of our past and possibilities for our future. Now, instead of positing our assumptions in strong statements that promise unlimited success, we articulate tentative scenarios, fragments of differing realities shaped by emerging institutional and social forces. As we describe our struggle to work with these forces, we qualify our imperfect solutions with voices that encourage readers to use fragments of our fragments when the need arises. Our efforts reflect our need to understand the widely recognized indeterminacy, decanonization, and hybridization of the academic culture and support our disciplinary struggle to find a favorable position in the changing university. Two books which contribute to this process are *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers: Scenarios in Effective Program Management (NCTE)*, and *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* (Boynton/Cook).

Both books advance discussions about two common disciplinary concerns: how we define our discipline

and how we define WPA work. Both books enrich our collective position while maintaining a healthy respect for the forces that define, support, or inhibit our development. The texts differ in that Myers-Breslin's offers a practical approach to writing program administration while Grimm's presents a reflexive and theoretical approach, but rather than detract from the reading, these differences attest to the complexity of our discipline. In presenting solutions to multiple problems in multiple settings, Myers-Breslin, et al. offer future WPAs ample material for analysis, discussion, and evaluation. In questioning what she terms simple views of writing and Writing Center work, Grimm opens the way for probing reflection. In referencing the authority that guides their thinking, Myers-Breslin and Grimm provide ample connections between WPA concerns and the forces that shape these concerns. In this sense, both accomplish what they set out to achieve. Yet, in spite of their success, both authors reveal an underlying sense of discomfort, a sense of being held in place by what is left unsaid. It is the latter sense that currently concerns our profession.

To begin, Grimm and the collective authors of Myers-Breslin's *Administrative Problem-Solving* project very strong images of WPAs. Myers-Breslin accomplishes this task by featuring solutions to common WPA problems in three areas: the selection and training of Teaching Assistants, program development and curriculum pedagogy, and departmental authority and professional development. The book contains 19 scenarios written by 24 authors. Each scenario is accompanied by an institutional overview, a program overview, a definition of the WPA's charge, a summation of challenges, and an author's commentary on the solutions. Although meant to generate discussion in graduate courses, the text also articulates the breadth, complexity, and disparate realities that shape the work of a Writing Program Administrator and in doing so, creates an image of WPAs as efficient, flexible, talented individuals capable of addressing the most difficult administrative problems. As we read through the details of the WPA's charges, we see that WPAs manage a plethora of assignments and a number of different positions in a variety of programs and departments, doing everything from monitoring budgets, scheduling courses, training and supervising personnel, and advocating for students and colleagues, to, among other things, mediating among multiple disciplinary discourse communities, obtaining the goodwill of those who allocate finances, supervising WAC initiatives, and promoting the image of the university. We are a versatile lot, capable of fulfilling the most difficult charge. What is left

unsaid, however, is that we do not always receive recognition and support for this work.

Grimm takes the WPA image in another direction by questioning the ways in which literacy teaching replicates the social structure. Working from a postmodern perspective, Grimm sees the postmodern forces of fragmentation and complexity as conflicting with the modernist imperative for correctness and coherence; accordingly, she views the WPA's task as threefold—to promote identity construction, to understand how literacy both dominates and liberates, and to see beyond the needy individual to a less than perfect social structure. As we read Grimm's book, we realize that WPAs are not only engaged in mapping their individual and collective subject positions within the university, but that they are passing this mapping ability along to their students as they encourage writers to question the very standards by which their writing is being evaluated. Grimm claims that by engaging in this questioning, WPAs are in a unique position to help the academy adjust to the postmodern world.

Both Myers-Breslin and Grimm present an inspiring, insightful articulation of WPA concerns. Anyone reading these books will see themselves in them. We have all been there. We have tutored students, admiring the beauty and complexity of their thinking while at the same time guiding them towards a coherence that simplifies and perhaps even sabotages original thought. We have also all found ways to subvert the modernist mandate, thereby problematizing our own positions. Similarly, as program directors we have lost our way in administrative mazes of conflicting charges and loyalties and like our colleagues in the Myers-Breslin text, we have forged innovative pathways home. We are a versatile group. We perform many roles and we are well accustomed to rapid shifts in the forces that affect our decisions. Most of us love what we do, yet for every program administrator that has found a rewarding position as a program or Writing Center director, another has succumbed to the frustration of a heavy workload and very little support. It is the plight of latter that we must address.

We need to refine the grammar and geometry of our discipline. Perhaps the best place to begin is the notion of service. Most WPAs are evaluated in the traditional faculty categories of teaching, professional activity, and service. This is understandable. Many of us began our careers teaching what is commonly perceived as labor-intensive "service" courses, thereby linking service to teaching. As we created the new programs, built

the Writing Centers, and revised the curriculum described in Myers-Breslin, we settled for ill-defined administrative positions with limited release time and vague promotion standards. Rather than separate service from administration or administration from teaching, we reconceptualized these categories as we argued that service equals administration, administration equals teaching, and teaching equals professional activity (Council of Writing Program Administrators; Cain and Kalamaras) In doing so, we unwittingly made it difficult for some to negotiate viable contracts and/or obtain tenure and promotion.

Perhaps it is time to redefine the role we play in higher education. If as the essays in Myers-Breslin suggest, WPAs routinely perform difficult and time consuming assignments that involve establishing, monitoring, promoting and revising programs, then perhaps we need to admit that we are administrators and ask for partial or full administrative appointments, appointments that will be evaluated by other administrators according to administrative criteria. Perhaps tenured faculty and well-established administrators could assist those entering field by defining their duties and posting these definitions to a WPA website, thus providing some specifics for the "it" in the phrase "get it in writing." In addition, in keeping with the effort to help others gain appropriate recognition for their work, perhaps we could document how much time we spend in tasks similar to those outlined in Myers-Breslin, thereby providing data for the evaluation of the average .4 release time also suggested in Myers-Breslin. In addition, as most of us do not want to give up teaching and scholarship, perhaps we could suggest possible rotation models that would allow WPAs to devote uninterrupted segments of time to scholarly and teaching duties. Finally, perhaps we could take current WPA courses in budgeting, problem solving, negotiation, and politics one step further by requiring a course in higher education administration as offered by Schools of Education (Ebest). This would encourage future WPAs, Deans, and Provosts to share their emerging knowledge and better understand each other's concerns.

We also need to continue to work on our scholarship. In spite of our efforts, most outsiders have very little sense of what future WPAs, those who specialize in composition and rhetoric, study and practice. To most outsiders, we are the caretakers of the comma, the magicians of style and form, the tireless readers of countless drafts, the classical or medieval scholars. Few realize that we are in a unique position to record changing agencies and subject positions that occur within the academy. Few realize

that our discipline has a rich body of theory that both supports and draws from many other disciplines and in doing so, reaches into the very heart of contemporary language, culture, and academia. Grimm's work eloquently explores some of the ways in which we work with the conflicting forces of authority, originality, cohesiveness, and coherence. Additional scholarship suggests ways in which revising, generating, working with style, storytelling, theorizing, and administrating shimmer in the light of postmodern theory. The efforts of contemporary scholars have resulted in multi-level interactive teaching models. As books and articles suggesting similar possibilities for program models continue to be published, we will be well on our way to creating a context that will account for the elasticity of our discipline as well as elucidate the underlying structure of the knowledge that supports and emerges from what we do.

We are now working on exploring the postmodern nature of our discipline by positing ephemeral but nevertheless promising connections between rhetoric and composition and its various theoretical, administrative and pedagogical subdivisions. As we work on continual reconceptualization, we are generalizing and concentrating in such a way as to privilege both the practical and the theoretical. In this context, problem solving is just as important as problematizing. Recognition and support are just as important as reflection and understanding. Contracts and evaluation criteria are just as important as pedagogy and theory. We have yet to produce a comprehensive schema for contemporary scholarship, as Stephen North did in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, nor have we published many pieces that challenge the concept of postmodernism. Yet, as we continue to discover what has been left unsaid, we are transforming our image from a jack-of-all-trades, service-oriented faculty to scholars and upper-level administrators who not only understand the larger forces shaping the university but whose discipline makes them unusually suited to assist in identifying, and coordinating these forces. We need to continue mapping our positions and we need to continue encouraging insightful connections to work in other disciplines. Otherwise our case studies will remain isolated incidents, our theories will be alphabetized and forgotten, our administration will be lost in a monoscape of service, and we will be overcome by a collective sense of *déjà vu*.

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