

Two Handbooks for a Maturing Discipline

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Ward, Irene, and William J. Carpenter, eds. *The Allyn and Bacon Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators*. New York: Longman, 2002. 400 pages. \$54.00 (paper).

Pytlik, Betty, and Sarah Liggett, eds. *Preparing College Teachers of Writing: Histories, Theories, Programs, Practices*. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 330 pages. \$29.95 (paper).

In a recent essay in *College English*, Laura Micciche describes “the climate of disappointment that characterizes English studies generally and composition studies—particularly writing program administration—specifically (432). While Micciche builds a credible case for her rather dark thesis, it is worth noting, at the same time, that the professional lives of most writing program administrators are surely better now than they were in 1980, when *WPA: Writing Program Administration* first began publishing refereed articles in journal format. Not that things couldn’t get better. As Irene Ward says in her essay, “Developing Healthy Management and Leadership Styles: Surviving the WPA’s ‘Inside Game,’” on WPA burnout in *The Allyn and Bacon Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators*, much of the work we do as WPAs is “frustrating, draining, repetitive, and downright drudgery.” But our work, she points out, can also be “worthwhile, rewarding, challenging, and downright fun (50).

The two collections reviewed here touch occasionally on the disappointment and drudgery of WPA work, but far more often they testify to the excitement, even the fun, of what WPAs do. Their appearance also suggests that writing program administration has achieved a measure of disciplinary coherence: each collection is, in a sense, a “handbook,” a guide to fundamental information about the field. Ward and Carpenter’s book gives a broad overview of the field, addressing key issues, reprinting classic essays alongside new ones, and gathering essential

professional documents—the field’s “sacred texts,” if you will—in one place.¹ Pytlik and Liggett’s *Preparing College Teachers of Writing: Histories, Theories, Programs, Practices*, on the other hand, illustrates that a single area of WPA work, TA preparation, is complex enough to warrant a “handbook” of its own.

Ward and Carpenter organize their collection around five major aspects of writing program administration. The first two parts of the book focus on large questions: Who am I as an administrator? Where am I situated within the university? How can I exercise power responsibly? In “The Writing Program (Administrator) in Context: Where am I, and Can I Still Behave Like a Faculty Member?” David Schwalm skillfully probes the first of these questions, asking specifically whether a WPA can still behave like a faculty member. The answer seems to be “maybe.” A WPA’s effectiveness, he writes, depends on a “willingness to think institutionally.” At the same time, negotiating the ambiguities of the position may *require* that the WPA “maintain a faculty perspective and an administrative perspective simultaneously” (22). Like Schwalm, most contributors to the first two parts of the book address issues of power and authority. The most provocative piece is Edward M. White’s frequently cited 1991 essay “Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA.” At least partly in reaction to White’s thesis, Thomas Amorose and Hildy Miller describe alternative ways of exercising power, Amorose from his perspective as a faculty member at a small school, Miller from a feminist perspective. Miller points out, in one of the book’s most memorable phrases, that the complicated power arrangements at some institutions can make “writing directors feel like figurehead monarchs of make-believe realms” (81).

Parts III and IV of Ward and Carpenter’s collection turn to the more immediate concerns of WPA work: TA preparation, staff development, curriculum design, program assessment, the role of technology, and the politics of AP credit. One of the most lucid and sensible pieces is Todd Taylor’s “Ten Commandments for Computers and Composition.” Part IV ends with two helpful essays on writing across the curriculum, an original piece by Martha Townsend (“Writing Across the Curriculum”) and a reprint of Barbara Walvoord’s important 1996 *College English* essay, “The Future of WAC.”

The fifth part of Ward and Carpenter’s *Sourcebook* consists of three essays—by Douglas Hesse (“Understanding Larger Discourses in Higher Education: Practical Advice for WPAs”), Jeanne Gunner (“Professional Advancement of the WPA: Rhetoric and Politics in Tenure and Promotion”), and Charles Schuster (“The Politics of Promotion”)—on promotion and professional issues for WPAs. And Part VI (“Appendices”) reprints nine important historical documents, includ-

ing “The Portland Resolution,” workload guidelines from NCTE and ADE, the Buckley Amendment, and the WPA statements on outcomes for first-year composition and the intellectual work of writing program administration. These documents alone make the book invaluable.

New, returning, and seasoned WPAs ought to find useful reading in Ward and Carpenter’s collection. In their Preface, the editors suggest that the first two parts of the book will be “especially helpful for the newer WPA” (xii). But as a veteran WPA, I found these two sections, with their broad, sometimes speculative overview of administrative issues, among the most illuminating in the book.

Pytlik and Liggett’s collection of 26 essays, *Preparing College Teachers of Writing*, explores in detail the topic covered in Part III of Ward and Carpenter’s book: TA preparation. In their Preface, Pytlik and Liggett observe that no “best” model for preparing TAs exists. And several contributors agree, pointing out that any successful program must be tailor-made for the administrators, faculty, and students who inhabit the program. Local conditions—existing administrative structures, program history, the type of graduate students who make up the labor force—are always crucial factors in program design and development.

The third section of Pytlik and Liggett’s book, “Programs,” is most acutely attuned to such local issues, offering detailed descriptions of how specific programs evolved, how they are currently configured, and how they work. Katherine Gottschalk opens the section, discussing TA preparation in Cornell’s WAC program. Then Betty Bramberg (Cal State LA) and Chris Burnham and Rebecca Jackson (New Mexico State) describe historical and current features of the preparation programs at their institutions. The next two chapters examine TA preparation for a professional writing course at Miami University (Ohio) and a Web-based program at Utah State University. In the final “Programs” chapter, Muriel Harris discusses the Purdue writing lab as a site for TA preparation.

Part IV of the Pytlik and Liggett collection (“Practices”) also focuses on individual programs, discussing specific strategies used for TA preparation. There is useful information on mentoring (three chapters); on conducting summer orientation, practica, and formal TA courses; on valuing journal and essay writing; and on using teaching portfolios and notebooks. Michael Flanigan provides an especially rich discussion of reflection, role-playing, and classroom observation in the ten-day summer orientation at the University of Oklahoma. And one of the most pragmatic chapters in Part IV is Donna Qualley’s essay on helping TAs evaluate and grade student writing. Qualley and her TAs—all master’s degree students—develop grading criteria as a “teaching community,” which ensures that even beginning TAs share ownership of the criteria.

Qualley writes, “It doesn’t work to devise a set of criteria yourself and hand it over for others to apply. The people using the instruments need to become part of the process at some point” (283). The TAs in Qualley’s program finish their degrees within two years; the “teaching community” in which she works is constantly in flux. Like all the authors who contribute to this collection, Qualley recognizes that teacher preparation is a *process*. Each new group of TAs reconstitutes the “community”; for Qualley, and for all of us, each fall term brings new challenges that invite reflection and innovation.

The many discussions of local programs and practices that make up the bulk of Pytlik and Liggett’s collection will help newcomers to TA preparation build solid programs. And veteran WPAs, too, will find much inspiration and advice for fine tuning or renewing their programs. I’ve worked with TAs for 20 years, and reading this collection has convinced me to add teaching portfolios—and maybe peer mentoring—to the program I direct. Maybe old dogs *can* learn new tricks.

In reading Pytlik and Liggett’s book cover-to-cover—which is not the way that most readers will approach it—I was sometimes overwhelmed by the attention to specific programs, to “local” concerns. The book describes all or part of 18 programs in considerable depth (three chapters focus on TA preparation at Purdue), leaving only six chapters that are not tied closely to a particular program. While the book’s emphasis on the local is nearly always grounded in an awareness of theory and history, I wished at times for greater emphasis on global issues.

Kathleen Blake Yancey raises a related point in her chapter, “The Professionalization of TA Development Programs: A Heuristic for Curriculum Design.” Although she acknowledges the usefulness of studying specific model programs, Yancey notes that “in their diversity, the models offer very little general guidance about how to develop a program or sense even of what features these programs might share” (63). While agreeing that “a common model seems neither possible nor desirable,” Yancey argues that WPAs might find useful a “common understanding and explanation of the components that define [effective] programs” (63). She goes on to say that “we must consider not only the local context but also the larger rhetorical contexts of writing programs” (65). Her chapter then maps out a useful and rhetorically rich twelve-point heuristic for both the design and review of TA preparation programs.

For me, the 18 “local” programs described in the book are read most productively in light of Yancey’s heuristic, and I would recommend her piece as both an introduction to and conclusion for the chapters (4, 7-17, 19-26) that focus most heavily on particular programs. Like Yancey’s chapter, the first two chapters in Pytlik and Liggett’s book also provide

a much-needed framework (in this case a historical context) for the later “local” chapters. Pytlik herself, in “How Graduate Students Were Prepared to Teach Writing—1850-1970,” tells the first part of the story, Brian Huot, in “Recent Trends in TA Instruction,” the second.

The Pytlik and Liggett volume includes an exceptionally thorough index, making the book especially well suited for reference. There are detailed entries, for example, on mentoring, on orientation programs, on the role of reflective practice, and on the use of portfolios. A WPA thinking about adding a portfolio assignment to a TA practicum would want to read all of Margaret Lingren’s essay on the topic, which includes advice about everything from establishing a theoretical stance to selecting appropriate documents. But the index would also direct the reader to six additional places in the book that address one particular aspect of portfolios—their usefulness in a job search.

The two books reviewed here are not the sort that Francis Bacon, in his classic essay “Of Studies,” advises us to chew, digest, and read “wholly.” Rather, most readers will probably want to read the books “in parts” (50). Both collections, in other words, are reference works: “handbooks” for a maturing discipline. And the members of that discipline—new and experienced WPAs, faculty and staff who work with TAs, and graduate students exploring writing program administration—will want to read these books in various ways at various times. Each collection is a welcome and important addition to the field. I can’t imagine a WPA who wouldn’t want to read substantial parts of each book and then to keep both of them close at hand for quick reference and moral support.

NOTE

¹ Ward and Carpenter’s *Sourcebook* is not the first, and certainly not the last, book that might be classified as a “handbook” for WPAs. Two other contenders, one seven years old and one brand new, are Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen’s *Resituating Writing* (1995) and Stuart C. Brown, Theresa Enos, and Catherine Chaput’s *The Writing Program Administrator’s Resource* (2002).

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