

Portrait of a Writing Program

Monroe, Jonathan, ed. *Writing and Revising the Disciplines*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002. 196 pages. \$17.95 (paper).

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Frequently in WPA and WAC scholarship, readers find the illustration of a WAC program or the telling of a writing program administrator's narrative contextualized with the caveat: "Remember, each campus is unique." Therefore, the ways in which WPAs, for example, handle situations in their departments largely depend on their local context, and as readers we should expect a thorough description of the setting and see each of these as unique. Nonetheless, as a future rhetoric and composition professor, and possibly a WPA, I still find thick description of writing programs useful, if not wholly indicative of my future context. It is in this awareness of the highly situated nature of WPA work that I explored the more than unique, perhaps anomalous, setting of writing at Cornell University, as illustrated in Jonathan Monroe's collection *Writing and Revising the Disciplines*. Monroe's collection of essays from nine current and past Cornell professors offers a view of not necessarily the administration of a writing program but evidence of the importance of writing in all disciplines—a sort of "writing family" photo album. This book serves as a unique window into the writing, and the "family of writing," occurring across campus and creating and sustaining the various institutional disciplines which create the university.

The contributors to the text offer proof of the essential component writing plays in the existence and creation of disciplinary and institutional knowledge. Therefore, the stories contained within prove germane to the everyday work of teachers and scholars in the field of composition. As a professor of comparative literature, the associate dean of the college of arts and sciences, and the director of the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, Monroe sought the collected essays as a means to "assess and reevaluate [. . .] the relationship between writing and disciplinary" at Cornell. Therefore, the contributors seek to map and trace

the ways in which writing and disciplinarity are intertwined in their respective fields. The text, or family photo, is divided into three sections: the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Each section, in turn, is represented by three contributors: The physical sciences offers N. David Mermin's "Writing Physics," Roald Hoffman's "Writing (and Drawing) Chemistry," and Margaret W. Rossiter's "Writing Women into Science" (representing science and technology studies). The second section, the social sciences, is composed of Isaac Kramnick's "Writing Politics," Ronald L. Breiger's "Writing (and Quantifying) Sociology," and Larry I. Palmer's "Writing Law." Finally, the humanities section presents Jonathan Culler's "Writing Criticism" (English and comparative literature), Dominick LaCapra's "Writing History, Writing Trauma," and Hunter R. Rawlings' "Writing the Humanities in the Twenty-first Century." (classics, university president).

Originally the Knight Writing Program, the Institute's initiative to establish discipline-based approaches to the teaching of writing, both at Cornell and elsewhere, can be traced to 1966. Currently, the Institute coordinates both first-year and advanced writing classes, houses the Writing Workshop, and engages in outreach activities, such as the Cornell Consortium for Writing in the Disciplines. Further, according to the Institute's home page, "more than thirty-five academic departments and programs offer courses associated with the Knight Institute's programs" ("Institute Overview"). After offering a brief history of the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines and describing the effects that Cornell's approach to writing has, and continues to have, on various educational institutions who also aim to make writing "the property of all disciplines," Monroe highlights the key to the program's continued success: "the Cornell faculty's commitment to the importance of writing as a richly complex, heterogeneous activity that is integral to thinking and learning" (ix). Monroe contends that one question forms the basis for his interest in gaining a cross-section of writing at Cornell: "What do we talk about when we talk about writing?" (8). Monroe hopes to make present and future "teacher-scholars" throughout various disciplines more self-aware of writing practices "conventions, and constraints" that "each discipline necessarily cultivates" (7).

As Monroe notes in his introduction, the organization of the text is deliberately counterintuitive, as it opens with physicist N. David Mermin and closes with classics professor and Cornell president Hunter Rawlings. And interestingly, this counterintuitive arrangement mirrors my level of interest, and the writers' levels of self-awareness, in the essays. The contributions are strongest, and most germane to a novice "teacher-scholar" like myself, when they enact the same strategies employed in Diana George's edited collection *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and*

Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories, in which WPAs share *their* stories as part of the field. Unfortunately, the amount of “self” wanes as the book progresses, and ironically reaches a low point in the humanities section. Whereas N. David Mermin, in “Writing Physics” tells of his initial interest in physics through the magic of relativity and quantum mechanics, and of an experience in a high-school physics class, Dominick LaCapra, in his contribution “Writing History, Writing Trauma,” provides an extensive, and rather detached, consideration of two approaches to historiography. Similarly, while Margaret Rossiter in “Writing Women into Science” traces her difficult path as a woman into the university and the field of the history of science, Jonathan Culler, in “Writing Criticism,” traces movements of, and comments on, literary criticism, with little reflection on the self. And, writing as President of the university, Hunter R. Rawlings III offers a “state of the university” essay, highlighting the humanities central location in the “great university.” Thus, while some of the essays offer a view of writing and one’s use of writing in a discipline, others, unfortunately, simply offer disciplinary writing.

While Monroe admits in his preface that the text presents only a “family portrait or snapshot” of the disciplines included, I see the metaphor as more accurate, and dysfunctional, than he intended. The essays taken as a whole do present a snapshot of the discipline; yet, perhaps most perplexing is not only the lack of writing program administration in the text/snapshot but also the invisibility of the field of rhetoric and composition as a whole. As writing becomes a concern of the entire campus, rhetoric and composition, along with the administration of writing, become, it appears, everywhere and nowhere. The rather elite and/or dysfunctional portrait described by Monroe leaves future WPAs, such as myself, uncertain about their place in a university where “the humanities have fallen behind their more worldly disciplinary cousins” (Rawlings 188). While *Writing and Revising the Disciplines* succeeds in centralizing writing as key to the knowledge-making enterprise of the university, this action, at least as presented at Cornell, places the future, novice, and experienced WPA, at least as traditionally located within an English department, in a rare position of either being central or expendable in the university’s future.

WORKS CITED

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“Institute Overview.” 2001. Cornell University. August 13, 2002.