

Review

McGee, Sharon James and Carolyn Handa, eds. *Discord and Direction: The Postmodern Writing Program Administrator*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 2005. 222 pages. \$22.95 (paperback).

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One of the truisms of WPA work is that all writing program politics, to paraphrase the late Massachusetts congressman Tip O’Neill, is local. While disciplinary knowledge is essential for guiding course development as well as for managing and administering programs, nevertheless WPAs—when trying to determine what courses of action to take for their programs—inevitably ground their answers to administrative questions in large part on specific institutional circumstances. Can we increase our number of tenure-track lines in rhetoric and composition? (*Depends on where those lines would come from.*) How should I start a WAC initiative? (*Depends on who’s receptive to it.*) How much reassigned time can I expect to get for the new first-year comp coordinator? (*How much do your faculty with similar jobs usually get?*) Where should the writing center be? (*Depends on what kind of space is likely to become available—but never, oh never, in the basement.*)

In other words, writing program administration is a field premised on contingency, a situation that some might find maddeningly chaotic but which WPAs have learned to accept and which—happily—Sharon James McGee and Carolyn Handa have, with their collection *Discord and Direction: The Postmodern Writing Program Administrator*, found a way to celebrate. Other edited collections, notably Linda Myers-Breslin’s *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers* and Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen’s *Resituating Writing*, have shown WPAs how to administer programs within the constraints of local circumstances and—in Janangelo and Hansen’s case—have theorized the WPA position as postmodern. Handa and McGee’s book, however, absorbs this theorizing statement and takes it a step further. Drawing on Ihab Hassan’s discussion of the terms “postmodern” and “postmodernism,” the editors contend in their introduction that while composition studies tends to be, as Lester Faigley claims, modernist in its values and its striving for grand narratives, “the WPA’s job in

reality must grapple with postmodern habits of thought and ways of being” (2). Hassan identifies postmodern qualities as “antiform (disjunctive, open), chance, anarchy, exhaustion/silence, process, participation, dispersal, rhetoric, parataxis, metonymy, anti-narrative;” this list, McGee and Handa argue, “aptly characterizes the world in which WPAs must function everyday” (2). It’s a world in which, the editors point out, students come from a variety of high schools, countries, social classes, generations (antiform); in which the teaching staff may consist of tenured faculty whose syllabi the WPA cannot mandate, overworked adjuncts who teach at a variety of schools, graduate students from different disciplines, or a combination of all three (anarchy). It is also a world in which the administrators to whom the WPA reports come and go, and in which legislative demands require WPAs to make seemingly arbitrary changes in their programs (chance) (McGee and Handa 3–8). Rather than resisting these facts of daily WPA life, this book provides examples that, in effect, argue that the most effective programs embrace them—albeit in varying ways—and, by so doing, move the field forward.

The strongest essays in the collection at hand are those that make the most radical, counterintuitive arguments—arguments that read writing programs, richly and descriptively, against the grain: Fred Kemp’s “Computers, Innovation, and Resistance in First-Year Composition Programs,” Richard E. Miller and Michael J. Cripps’s “Minimum Qualifications: Who Should Teach First-Year Writing?” and, on a slightly different note, Jeanne Gunner’s “Cold Pastoral: The Moral Order of an Idealized Form.” Gunner’s essay, which appears early in the collection, underscores and validates McGee and Handa’s whole enterprise, even while calling into question the value of the scholarship on which that enterprise is, in part, based. Using Raymond Williams’ analysis of pastoral as a conservative genre, Gunner claims that collections such as Myers-Breslin’s, which offer descriptions of—and solutions to—local problems, in fact reinforce the inherently conservative structure of writing programs and prevent systemic change. Much “how-to” WPA literature with its problem-solution structure, Gunner argues, reaches for a prelapsarian universe that has been effectively deconstructed and that—in the absence of critique—erases cultural and material conflict. “Like the pastoral,” Gunner writes,

the writing program points to an idealized social realm that validates not the tension of competing linguistic and cultural communities but a golden age of past and potential linguistic purity, where language and culture were and will once again be natural and simple, in a seamlessly pristine interrelationship. Modern writing programs evoke this Arcadian landscape

through their generic operations . . . schooling and evaluating [students] in relation to the mythical past which their essays—their written and corrected productions—then help to memorialize, charging them with its (re)propagation. (33)

Kemp's and Miller's essays, while not explicitly addressing the particular political issues that Gunner foregrounds, begin to show what things might really look like for WPAs in a postlapsarian universe. Describing the writing program at Texas Tech University, which "implemented [in 2002] what could well prove to be the closest thing to a genuine paradigm shift in composition at the university level in over a hundred years" (107), Kemp claims that while composition scholars have recommended a shift to teaching practices based in rhetoric, such a shift has not taken place because administrative practices have not changed. Kemp suggests that most WPAs refuse to accept any teaching paradigm other than that of *one* teacher in *one* classroom, with that solo teacher also responding to, and grading, student writing. At Texas Tech, Kemp and his colleagues restructured the entire first-year writing program so that its students receive not only classroom instruction but also what he calls "document instruction"—that is, Texas Tech's student writing is distributed, through a Web application called ICON, among instructors in the writing program, where it is read and graded anonymously and through which students also receive assignments, peer critiques, and other necessary course communication. The program is centrally administered so that expectations are consistent from course to course. Not only has the approach made effective use of computer technology, it has also challenged the conventional—and conservative—wisdom that students need a classroom teacher to learn to write: "We are moving the center of gravity of teaching from what happens between teacher and students in a classroom to what happens between teacher and students in a piece of writing" (109).

Similarly, Miller and Cripps's essay challenges the notion that students are best served by learning to write from faculty with degrees in composition and rhetoric. McGee and Handa's introduction uses Hassan's formulation "anarchy" to describe the staffing dilemma many of us face in writing programs, that is, where are all the teachers going to come from? Miller and Cripps use that problem as a segue into an instance in which some Rutgers WPAs exploited a graduate school's need to place its TAs in order to solve the Rutgers WPAs's problem of who was going to teach the first-year writing courses. The result was a composition program staffed by graduate students in disciplines ranging from English to history to anthropology to political science. While such a solution isn't exactly new to this reviewer—I attended New York University, where in the 1980s and early 1990s the pro-

gram was similarly structured—what is particularly interesting in Miller and Cripps’s essay is their reflection on what they call the “unintended consequences” of this staffing: it forced them to rethink their program’s texts to make them more interdisciplinary, helped spread writing throughout the curriculum, and allowed graduate students from a variety of disciplines to take on administrative roles. To reflect the faculty’s discomfort with grand narratives—as well as with the notion that their program has been a complete success—the authors provide a number of different perspectives from which to interpret what happened in their program, thereby enabling critical reflection about the changes they describe.

Also compelling is Christy Desmet’s “Beyond Accommodation: Individual and Collective in a Large Writing Program.” In what is possibly the most fascinating essay in the book, Desmet invokes Nancy Welch’s 1993 *College English* essay “Resisting the Faith,” with its evocation of the tension between a particular individual and a writing program (or, as she aptly suggests in an Althusserian moment, between the individual’s needs and the repressive state apparatus). Desmet argues that composition studies has, perhaps despite itself, “created the myth of the composition teacher as heroic individual” and argues that we should “get beyond” that particular narrative by finding new ways of discussing the problem of what happens when an instructor’s and a program’s philosophies conflict (44). The rest of the chapter analyzes the tension between individual and collective through the lens of Drucilla Cornell’s work on jurisprudence, offering as it does ways of resolving that tension by redefining the relationship between the one and the many.

Other essays in the collection take on—and examine through a postmodern lens—a variety of issues with which WPAs are routinely faced: “remediation” (Edgington *et al.*, Rhodes), program evaluation and assessment (Holdstein, Harrington), program identity (McGee, Handa), WAC/CAC (Billings *et al.*), and the role of technology in writing programs (Palmquist). All are worth reading. The only downside to this book is described well, if unintentionally, by Kemp in his chapter. In discussing why faculty resisted the changes he made to the program at Texas Tech, Kemp outlines what he calls “the psychology of loss”:

When confronted with the advantages to undergraduate students in terms of consistent and coherent across-the-board writing criteria, active learning (writing-based, not listening-based), objective assessment, distributed work load, and so forth, the usual response is agreement, but with the additional comment: “But this is not why I became an English teacher.” (113–114)

One could imagine a similar response from a WPA who is reading some of these essays: If everything I've been taught to believe is being called into question, why am I here? To which one might answer: maybe we don't really need to be doing some of the work we're doing. Maybe *not* doing it would free us up for other kinds of activity: political work, rhetorical work, work that might make a bigger difference. Isn't that what revolutions are supposed to be about?

WORKS CITED

- Myers-Breslin, Linda, ed. *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers*. Urbana: NCTE, 1995.
- Janangelo, Joseph, and Kristine Hansen, eds. *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995.