

## Review

Christina Murphy and Byron L. Stay, eds. *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006. 472 pages. \$49.95

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“The history, the identity, the ethos, and the legacy of the writing center militate against any easy categorization of ideas” (xvi), Christina Murphy and Byron Stay suggest in the introduction to their text, a collection of thirty-nine articles designed to guide writing center administrators. The inability to categorize and simplify can present a problem for new writing center directors struggling for guidance not only in the daily operation of their centers, but also in the articulation of their professional identities. Murphy and Stay’s collection mirrors the multiplicity of approaches among which directors, as inevitable Jacks and Jills of all trades, can choose.

It is a comfort to have such an assembly of writing center luminaries’ voices in one’s ears as one faces the challenges that accompany assuming a director’s role for the first time. However, the wealth of contributors and topics also make Murphy and Stay’s volume a difficult work to summarize or review. There is as great a range of approach in these chapters as exists in writing-center scholarship. Some chapters place writing-center issues in historical context, while others—such as Rebecca Moore Howard and Tracy Hamler Carrick’s piece on the ways writing centers might help lead current conversations on plagiarism and authorship—consider writing-center questions in relation to contemporary trends in academia. Many chapters, such as Albert DeCiccio’s strategies for integrating writing-center services into core-curriculum requirements by using a writing fellows programs, describe hands-on approaches to recurring issues in the writing-center world. Still others, such as Carl Glover’s consideration of the ramifications of *kairos* for directors and tutors, make more reflective connections between theory and practice.

While Murphy and Stay do not privilege one perspective over another, they have structured the text by dividing the chapters into two broad categories: writing centers and institutional change, and writing centers and praxis.

In the first section, the chapters move from providing some historical context for writing-center practice to considerations of writing-center management, the ways writing centers can respond to their respective institutional settings, and the relationship between writing centers and administration. Within each of these subsections, however, a range of methods and perspectives are offered, so that a beginning-to-end reading of the book may not be the most productive approach. The occasional disconnects between these offerings are not necessarily flaws, however, since the text works best if read as the resource manual it is, diving in and out to retrieve the appropriate topic for any given situation. The thorough and interesting chapter by Helen Snively, Traci Freeman, and Cheryl Prentice on the challenges of starting a graduate writing center, for example, might be read if one is starting a project to work with graduate students, followed by Pamela Childers' chapter on building a strategic plan to help implement the ideas.

Whatever reading approach one chooses, I, as a new director, would recommend certain chapters as starting points. These chapters provide perspective on some of the early decisions that must be made and also give particularly focused insight into the current concerns of the profession, both informing and inspiring action. Neal Lerner's "Time Warp: Historical Representations of Writing Center Directors" and Ray Wallace and Susan Lewis Wallace's "Growing Our Own: Writing Centers as Historically Fertile Fields for Professional Development" are fruitful contextual starting places; Lerner's especially provides a lineage that new directors will find useful in articulating professional identities both for themselves and their colleagues. Pamela Childers's chapter "Designing a Strategic Plan for a Writing Center" walks readers through the process of articulating goals and objectives for the center and aligning these with the goals of the institution; it even suggests how and when to make the process a collaborative one and considers which resources might be worth consulting. Childers provides examples from her own documents throughout each stage in the process. Childers's chapter is followed, logically enough, by Kelly Lowe's "If You Fail to Plan, You Plan to Fail": Strategic Planning and Management for Writing Center Directors," a useful addition and contrast. Lowe highlights the relationship between writing-center mission statements and strategic plans, while presenting questions for directors to ask in developing a mission statement and a plan that matches their institution's goals.

"As directors operating within different institutional contexts, our writing centers' effectiveness depends not just on our scholarly knowledge, but also on our administrative ability to read shifting academic priorities" opens Joan Mullin, Peter Carino, Jane Nelson and Kathy Evertz's "Administrative (Chaos) Theory: The Politics and Practices of Writing Center Location" (225). This chapter considers not the physical location of writing centers but

their location within the funding structure of a university, whether within an English department, a college of arts and sciences, a center for teaching and learning, or somewhere in between. The four authors spell out clearly the costs and benefits of each situation and the effects these elements may have on a director's position in regard to tenure or position on campus in relation to administration and other faculty, as well as the effect on funding possibilities and the sustainability of the center and its staff. Continuing this collection's thread of finding new metaphors through which to read our work, the authors turn to chaos theory as a way of articulating the patterns that directors can see illustrated in even the smallest actions. The authors pose useful questions to consider, especially if one is faced with choices or changes in the structure of a center. If new directors take their words to heart—and the survival of their careers and centers may well depend on it—then special attention should be devoted to the chapters by Jeanne Simpson, Joan Hawthorne, Lauren Fitzgerald and Denise Stephenson, Brad Peters, David Sheridan, and Margaret Weaver.

I begin with Jeanne Simpson's "Managing Encounters with Central Administration," because of its exhaustive translation of the language and terminology of central administration, from FTEs to use rates. Simpson walks directors through their major job duties, including staff evaluations, budgeting, policy statements, and annual reports, explaining the administrative rationale and decoding the necessary and useful terminology, all with an understanding eye and ear to the needs of both directors and administration. This chapter and Joan Hawthorne's "Approaching Assessment as if It Matters," which focuses more specifically on assessment areas, help directors determine how to communicate strategic plans most effectively to university decision-makers. The central administration is not our only audience, however, and Lauren Fitzgerald and Denise Stephenson remind us of that in their analysis of relationships with tutors, support staff, faculty, and administration. By using real-life stories drawn from their own experiences as writing center directors at a variety of institutions, Fitzgerald and Stephenson tease out the complexities of negotiating these interactions and discuss directors' potential contribution to the development of their institutions. Achieving the relationships, however, may depend on a solid understanding of the stakeholders involved, as Brad Peters suggests in "Documentation Strategies and the Institutional Socialization of Writing Centers." Here he applies narratological principles to a study of individual writing-center histories, arguing compellingly that new directors of existing centers may find it useful to investigate the history of their centers.

The connections between our audiences and the ways the structure of our centers may help or hinder our efforts to reach those audiences are addressed both thoughtfully and pragmatically in chapters by Margaret Weaver and

David Sheridan. Weaver's "A Call for Racial Diversity in the Writing Center" interrogates the inherent assumptions concerning race built into some writing-center practices that many of us perform unquestioningly, such as training our tutors to strive for objectivity or neutrality in tutoring or tracking the number of visits by minority students. She leaves us with a strong call to examine our practices in managing or encouraging diversity in our centers. David Sheridan's "Words, Images, Sounds: Writing Centers as Multiliteracy Centers" asks us to examine our focus on written literacy and suggests the need to expand our definitions of the texts with which we work. "To support new media composing effectively," Sheridan argues, "multiliteracy centers need to move away from models that see the written word as the exclusive or even the privileged mode of communication" (341). Sheridan supports his proposal with a thoughtful exploration of ways writing centers can recruit and train multiliteracy consultants, how and when a center should lead institutional initiatives toward multiliteracy in pedagogical practices, and what a multiliteracy tutorial looks like in practice. Sheridan makes a topic that many writing center directors might find daunting seem not only necessary but implementable.

Aside from Sheridan's chapter, I have devoted little of my attention in this review to the chapters in the section of the book regarding writing centers and praxis, not because those chapters are any less useful, but because I suspect that writing center directors, especially new ones, are likely to consult that section first, without prodding. It is the section that I filled with sticky notes and enthusiastic marginalia to "include this in consultant training manual" or "read this for tutor-training class." Some of these notes appear in Steven Strang's "Staffing a Writing Center with Professional Tutors," a useful chapter for anyone hiring or considering hiring professional tutors and useful to everyone because of its clear and concise list of guidelines to give to tutoring staff. Other enthusiastic notes are scattered throughout Carol Peterson Haviland and Marcy Trianosky's "Tutors Speak: 'What Do We Want from Our Writing Center Directors?'" it gives some much-needed insight into a tutor's perspective regarding the director's role. I find many notes on rereading the case studies by Childers, Abels, Pemberton, and Schreiber, studies that present concrete examples of problems and solutions tried by four directors in five very different writing-center situations. In addition to Sheridan's chapter, the praxis chapter to which I would direct all new directors first is Muriel Harris's "Using Tutorial Principles to Train Tutors: Practicing Our Praxis." She argues for a tutor-training program modeled on the principles we use in tutorials themselves. The program she describes is flexible and collaborative, one in which the director has a say in agenda-setting

but the tutors have an equal, if not greater say; it is one in which we all, new directors especially, are reminded that not only do we not need to have all the answers, it's even better if we don't.

If the chapters described above are those to dive into first, an equally rich pool for a second foray exists, including, among others, Bruce Speck's "Managing Up: Philosophical and Financial Perspectives for Administrative Success," which furthers Simpson's and Hawthorne's conversations and moves toward a financial understanding of central administration. They also include Christina Murphy's "On Not 'Bowling Alone' in the Writing Center, or Why Peer Tutoring Is an Essential Community for Writers and for Higher Education," which argues convincingly for writing centers as sites of civic engagement that can contribute to the communities formed across the university. And, depending on the specific community in which a director finds him- or herself, Murphy and Stay provide excellent chapters on writing centers in small colleges, community colleges, and in multicampus universities, as well as writing centers' relationship to remedial learning programs.

Several consistent threads wind through the disparate chapters of this text. Many authors contribute to the ongoing search for illuminating metaphors for writing-center work, including Childers's and Lowe's integration of the language of business and management into our descriptions of our work, perhaps an indication that writing centers are feeling sufficiently secure to enter the "grown-up" world of the university's revenue-generating elements, Michael Mattison's suggestion that we borrow from another area of academic life—athletics—with his exploration of the director-as-coach analogy, and Harris's suggestion that we look more closely at our own existing metaphors and apply the techniques of a writing consultation to our tutor training, among others. Responsiveness to specific situations is another thread that recurs, not surprisingly, throughout many chapters. In addition to Mullin et al., discussed above, Howard and Carrick's statement that "the sort of power described above is derived primarily through the writing center directors' ability to identify, understand, and respond to the urgently felt needs of their communities, students, and faculty" (256) is a case in point. While Howard and Carrick spoke specifically about plagiarism concerns, it is a sentiment echoed repeatedly throughout the entire volume.

I have mentioned chapters that I found striking or useful, and several more fell into this category, though, for reasons of space, I was not able to include them here. Other chapters I did not find particularly applicable to my concerns as a new director, and these, I suspect, may not engage me even when I return to them in a year or two. With the importance of local situations in mind, however, I have great confidence that in the varied collection



of circumstances in which writing-center directors find themselves, each chapter in this collection will speak to someone. In that respect Murphy and Stay's text is a widely useful resource.