

Review

## Writing Majors: Signs of Things to Come

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Greg Giberson, Jim Nugent, and Lori Ostergaard, eds. *Writing Majors: Eighteen Program Profiles*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2015. Print. 266 pages.

Greg Giberson, Jim Nugent, and Lori Ostergaard's edited collection, *Writing Majors: Eighteen Program Profiles*, is a highly generative text. Here are just a few of the marginal comments I wrote on pages in this remarkable book as I read through it to prepare for writing this review: "Must share with committee members." "Cite in curriculum report." "Use for new course proposal." The chapters not only provide immediate help on a range of pressing programmatic and curricular issues; they've got me thinking, dreaming, believing—believing in writing faculty who organize for resources, in the value of trying something new, in rhetoric's reality-shaping power.

The appearance of *Writing Majors* signals the healthy, sustained growth of writing majors, and it spotlights important stories and insights for stakeholders creating or revising such programs. Fifteen years after the publication of *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum* and five years after *What We Are Becoming: Developments in the Undergraduate Writing Major*, *Writing Majors* speaks to the bold dreams and dogged labor of writing faculty who promote a wide-ranging and sophisticated vision of literacy education. In this regard, the field owes Giberson, who also co-edited *What We Are Becoming* with Thomas A. Moriarty, a debt for his sustained attention to writing majors. The editors of the new collection themselves "acknowledge a debt to *Composition Forum* for presenting the innovative series of writing program profiles that inspired" *Writing Majors* (6). In creating this collection, the editors not only draw attention to diverse profiles but also put them into conversation with one another.

This movement to think and represent writing majors in a holistic and programmatic way suggests something of a break with the history of what has been called advanced composition, a history that has haunted even recent efforts to imagine advanced instruction in writing. Much of the story of a course called advanced composition involves efforts to promote certain versions of a course (that is, celebrating its diverse manifestations) or to lament a lack of uniformity. Often, vivid descriptions of pedagogical moves within courses seemed intimations of authors' yearnings that their *energias* become entelechies, organizing energies for structuring students' development. In *Writing Majors*, we bear witness to the writing major becoming a more powerful organizing force for thinking about postsecondary literacy education and that movement toward majors involves accounts of curricula that operate on broad bandwidths with lots of room for different kinds of courses to serve various outcomes.

One strength of this collection is its organizational scheme within the chapters, a point that Giberson discusses in his afterword. While some slight variation occasionally occurs, a shared structure organizes each chapter, enhancing the accessibility of the text and allowing for easier comparisons across programs. All chapters include an introduction, program overview and rationale, implementation narrative, reflection and prospection, and a curricular summary with major requirements. These chapters are arranged in two sections: programs in "writing departments" and programs in "English departments" (vi). While this section arrangement may place more emphasis on these traditional departmental distinctions than is strictly necessary, I still think readers will find the approach helpful, especially when trying to locate an institutional situation akin to their own. Rather than taking chapters or sections in their published order, I organize this review based on themes and issues that recur throughout the text and across chapters. While not every chapter receives a mention here, I recommend them all.

Institutional context, along with disciplinary and departmental negotiations, may well be the most oft-addressed concern. Some contributions indicate that a strong embrace of rhetoric as a liberal arts tradition (in keeping with a larger institutional mission) helps generate both an attractive practicality and a theoretically rich learning experience (Perron, Rist, and Loewe in chapter sixteen). How major programs are named indicates not only disciplinary affiliations but also practical and local issues (Grobman and Weisser in chapter fifteen). Names reflect, among other issues, a curriculum's focus, the concerns of faculty and institutions, and the need to attract students. Barbara E. L'Eplattenier and George H. Jensen (chapter two) discuss how disciplinary negotiation between writing studies and

journalism historically influenced the writing major's shape at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Indeed, essentially every chapter helps readers imagine what organizing for a major might mean in a range of circumstances.

Negotiations—both local and disciplinary—unfold within the passage of time, and time—especially thinking in the long term—repeatedly surfaces as a concern in this collection. In an explicit way, Jessie L. Moore, Tim Peeples, Rebecca Pope-Ruark, and Paula Rosinski (chapter eighteen) invoke rhetorical notions of *chronos* and *kairos* as a way to theoretically imagine the unfolding process of writing major development. While some majors in the collection are long-established (the writing major at St. Edward's University dates to 1975), Sandra Jamieson's foreword helpfully reminds readers that, as a widespread disciplinary development, the writing "major is still in its infancy" (vii). As readers move through accounts that share stories of exciting work to create vibrant teaching and learning communities around writing, it's critical to keep the perspective Jamieson forwards and to think in the long term. As writing major programs exist for longer periods, faculty can turn to alumni to help understand the role writing and writing study play in former students' post-college lives. Laurie Grobman and Christian Weisser (chapter sixteen) demonstrate what this sort of long-term interest in students' lives might mean for program development.

The importance of locating potential allies and cultivating relationships emerges across several chapters. For example, administrative figures such as deans and provosts can be power brokers who make writing majors possible (Miles, Owens, and Pennell, chapter three; Smitherman, Mongno, and Payne, chapter five). Within a traditional English department, the goodwill of departmental colleagues can be critical to a major's success (Leverenz, Lucas, George, Hogg, and Murray, chapter eleven). Julie Dyke Ford, Julianne Newmark, and Rosário Duráo (chapter nine) describe how, at a campus dedicated to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, their department forged generative alliances not only on campus, but also within industry. Their department's corporate advisory board allowed for relationships to grow between academic faculty and professionals in industry and between students and potential employers. Grobman and Weisser (chapter fifteen) describe a similar advisory group of community members at Penn State Berks. I could easily imagine writing being marginalized or treated as purely instrumental in situations where literary studies dominate or where professional/technical writing serve as governing terms. However, the collection reflects a compelling diversity of programmatic and tactical responses based on specific local conditions and histories. While authors in this volume certainly don't seem to disregard the long history of writing's

marginalization, this collection may suggest that dualisms that have historically shaped interactions between rhetoric and literature are not as important as they might once have been. Indeed, reconsidering long-standing commonplaces may be another shift that occurs as the field moves from its important focus on introductory writing courses and a few advanced courses toward writing majors.

As writing majors grow and spread, they will also interact with broader circular movements. For example, Zerbe and DelliCarpini note that the writing major at York College is “connecting professional aspirations with liberal learning” (128). They demonstrate how that connection serves not only their department, but also students more generally by discussing the writing major in relationship to general education and a first-year experience program. Undergraduate research opportunities also appear in this collection. Ford, Newmark, and Durão at New Mexico Tech note the importance of technical communication research activity in their curriculum. They also highlight, along with Grobman and Weisser, how undergraduate research publication and presentation opportunities contribute to students’ learning. In short, authors demonstrate that the writing major never operates in isolation. Ideally, it works in a mutually supportive relationship with other sound teaching and programmatic practices. A writing major may, in fact, become a nexus or hub for developing many exciting opportunities for students, faculty, the university, and the broader community.

Pieces that take up the significance (or growing significance) of digital technology and media in writing major programs are numerous. As Nugent notes in the introduction, “Technology is vital” (5). Encouragement to embrace digital composing technologies runs throughout many chapters. At Columbia College, faculty came to a renewed focus on media, video, and journalism (Brinson and Tuten, chapter seventeen). The urgency around such issues is captured when L’Eplattenier and Jensen advertise that the department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock “will focus on recruiting faculty who are skilled in new media” (30). Such growing attention to technology should surprise no one. Program planners should move forward intentionally to help students harness the power of 21<sup>st</sup> century composing technologies.

*Writing Majors* describes programs that promote specialized and professional expertise in ways that tend to blur the hard distinctions between disciplinary knowledge and teaching, between writing as practice and writing as declarative knowledge. In other words, writing majors point to the productive interaction of the pedagogical activities traditionally associated with writing studies’ teaching focus and the discipline’s academic professionalization through research activity. Heavily oriented toward the practi-

cal, the collection strikes me as the best of *praxis*: theoretically informed practice that encourages the field to think capaciously about students, to imagine undergraduate learning about writing as consequential intellectual work, and undergraduate writings as consequential material artifacts. In these chapters, students are positioned as disciplinary participants who grapple with complex knowledge, engage in research, compose for situated audiences, publish written work, showcase writing at local celebrations, and present at conferences. In this way, student learning and writing achieves consequences: feeding a discourse that argues affirmatively for the value of both writing pedagogy and writing students. Even as writing major programs are locally negotiated enterprises, differing in titles, courses, and emphases, they often allow students to work at the intersection of various realms of knowledge: writing studies, technical communication, literary studies, journalism, or creative writing.

Recent work speaks to how writing studies is at a point of recognizing what we are as a field and the content of our knowledge about writing. Such is the goal of *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle. In *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak encourage us to think about how to enable students to write in ways that have consequences, that produce outcomes for the students, for audiences, for communities both local and distant. *Writing Majors* demonstrates that we have established programs of study that operationalize the concepts that we know.

As a whole, *Writing Majors* suggests at the disciplinary and major levels what WPAs know well at the program level and what instructors know at the classroom level: We can learn a lot from students. This learning informs our work. Classroom and program work might achieve effects that are small and local, but the work matters. As Giberson writes

I do believe that these chapters taken collectively tell a story of a discipline that is *becoming* something, and that we are heading collectively in a particular direction, though not the direction that we as editors expected to find. . . . But it is exciting—and unsettling at times—and that is good. (247; emphasis original)

Amen.

#### WORKS CITED

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