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Review: *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*

Christina Murphy and Byron Stay, eds.
Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006.

by Thomas Ferrel

From the daily posts on WCenter to the easy conversations among old and new friends at our conferences, one needn't look far to witness the collegiality of our field. Collaboration is at the foundation of our pedagogy as well as our professional culture. For writing center directors, one of our profession's latest artifacts demonstrating our field's neighborly nature is *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*, edited by Christina Murphy and Byron L. Stay. Fifty-one of our colleagues have generously put to paper 39 chapters containing observations, hopes, concerns, and of course advice for new and senior writing center directors alike.

One of *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book's* greatest strengths is its thoughtful and pragmatic organization. Containing seven topical sections and a final section consisting of four case studies, practically every major issue that a director must face is addressed: historical context, leadership, institutionally specific considerations, working with administration, ethics, tutor training, and technology. Each of the aforementioned sections includes an average of five articles engaging with different aspects of the category. The sheer volume of information is impressive alone. Even more impressive is the depth that accompanies its breadth. Furthermore, accidentally or purposefully, many of the chapters seem to be in conversation with each other, making it easy to see how even the most seemingly disparate issues are often interconnected.

Organizational systems play a significant role in writing center work, a fact of which the authors of this collection seem acutely aware. In this regard, the chapters in *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book* compliment one another. From historical inquiries considering the origin of writing center directors and the particulars of director positions to discussions about encounters with

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upper-level administrators, contributors make it readily apparent that the hierarchical structures and goals of our schools impact writing centers tremendously. In other chapters dealing with long-term planning (also frequently referred to as strategic planning), authors remind us that directors must work within the discourse, mission, and protocols of a center's institution to gain voice as a program and receive support for initiatives. The influence of an institution's organizational structure is also discussed at length in chapters exploring issues unique to community colleges, small colleges, writing centers for specific student populations, and multicampus writing centers. In addition to considering power within an organizational system, these chapters and others also express the importance of directors pursuing and maintaining productive interpersonal relationships with administrators and a variety of other people intersecting with the work of writing centers.

Directors designing a new writing center or redesigning an existing center might be particularly interested in chapters addressing issues related to institutional location and staffing configurations of writing centers. For example, chapter 21, "Administrative (Chaos) Theory: The Politics and Practices of Writing Center Location," analyzes how situating a writing center inside an English department, a provost's or dean's office, or a hybrid design (e.g., a center for teaching/professional development) affects relations with administration and faculty. Similarly, several chapters reflect on varying approaches to staffing—such as employing professional, undergraduate, or graduate tutors—and examine the advantages and constraints of each arrangement. Also related are chapters discussing training and managing tutors. Intrinsic to discussions about training and supervising is the tenet that these aspects of a director's job take place within the context of mutually respectful and beneficial relationships; however, the benefit of these relationships could be argued to favor administrators and the institution the most—in spite of arguments about professional development and advancement opportunities.

While a culture reflecting values rooted in teamwork and community sounds positive, I suspect that some readers will interpret such an articulation of writing center work culture as being aligned with corporate culture and concepts of community tied to a U.S. business culture based on inequality and subjugation. It is on this point and others that *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book* contains the potential to be a facilitator of "difficult conversations" related to race, class, tolerance, and power within our field. Hopefully, as we have these conversations, our collaborative and neighborly tendencies will influence

the manner in which we converse—publicly converse on our listservs, at our conferences, and in our journals—so that we can form new knowledge together, rather than entrench opposing positions.

Already having read several of the chapters twice, I sincerely regret not being able to discuss all 39 chapters. Chapters such as “Writing a Sustainable History: Mapping Writing Center Ethos,” “A Call for Racial Diversity in the Writing Center,” “Approaching Assessment as if It Matters,” “Tutors Speak: What Do We Want from Our Writing Center Directors?” and “When Compassion Isn’t Enough: Providing Fair and Equivalent Access to Writing Help for Students with Disabilities” represent just a small sampling of important works contained in *The Writing Center Director’s Resource Book* but not discussed in this review. Additionally, readers will no doubt appreciate the numerous appendices containing examples of strategic plans, budgets, surveys, annual reports, and an overview of six institutions’ writing fellows programs. High school writing center directors will also value the chapters focusing on writing centers at secondary schools, which includes one of the four case studies that conclude the book.

The Writing Center Director’s Resource Book represents an immensely helpful point of reference for current and future directors and will surely become a common text in graduate seminars and mini-regional reading groups. Given the thoughtfulness of the writing, the thoroughness of the research, and the experience represented by the 51 contributing authors, I expect Murphy and Stay’s text to serve as a launching point for discussions that will advance and improve our profession. *The Writing Center Director’s Resource Book* represents an insightful snapshot of a variety of perspectives related to administering a writing center in the twenty-first century. We are truly fortunate to be able to access so easily the helpful advice of so many of our best writing center neighbors.