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Review: (E) merging Identities: Graduate Students in the Writing Center

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Review: *(E)merging Identities:*
Graduate Students in the Writing Center

Melissa Nicolas, ed.
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by Danielle A. Cordaro

About the Author
Danielle Cordaro is a Ph.D candidate in Purdue's Rhetoric and
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gency in the teaching of writing. Her dissertation explores how
information about students' beliefs, goals, and demographic
profile matter in the design of writing center, writing across the
curriculum, and first year composition programs.

The scholarship of *(E)Merging Identities: Graduate Students in the Writing Center* sheds light on a little-discussed contact zone in composition theory, a place where the identities of graduate students merge with those of teachers, tutors, coordinators, liaisons, and administrators. Such mergers disrupt the conventional conception of graduate students as pre-professionals and cause disruptions in the institutional hierarchy. Nevertheless, as Melissa Nicolas asserts in the introduction to *(E)Merging Identities,* "graduate students are most definitely students, people who are learning about and becoming initiated into a field or discipline" (1). In this sense, graduate students who pursue writing center work, particularly administrative work, are attempting to shift their identities from neophytes to experts; the very fact that they are in graduate school indicates that they hope someday to be recognized as professionals (with tenure!). Graduate

95

1

Danielle A. Cordaro

students want and need experience doing the kind of work that will be expected of them on the job. However, as Nicolas points out, graduate students in positions of authority require mentoring and protection from overwork and the consequences for missteps that fully trained members of the profession would face. Directors and graduate students have to work together to design programs that are equitable and provide valuable learning experiences. *(E)Merging Identities*, a collection of narratives, theory, and empirical research, provides important generative material for graduate students and directors who are wrestling with issues of identity, responsibility, and professionalization in their centers.

The center where I am employed as a graduate tutor, liaison, and mentor has a distributed model of student administration. My center hires experienced graduate tutors as coordinators for ESL conversation groups, WAC workshops, business writing, grammar support, and our online writing lab. These experiences help graduate students learn about and even specialize in different aspects of writing center administration under the guidance of a professional tenured director. But not all graduate administrators are so lucky. In chapter 5, "Songs of Innocence and Experience," Katherine E. Tirabassi and Amy A. Zenger narrate their experiences working as assistants in the University of New Hampshire Writing Center during the leave of their co-author and the former director, Cinthia Gannett. In Gannett's absence, faculty members with no experience in writing center or WAC administration and no background in rhetoric and composition were appointed to oversee the center and the two assistant directors. Tirabassi and Zenger "were placed in the very awkward position of having more expertise in writing center and WAC work but less authority than [their] supervisors" (70). Throughout the year, Tirabassi and Zenger learned that their experience meant less to other faculty and administrators than their supervisors' institutional power. Zenger and Tirabassi's narrative is a cautionary tale of what can go wrong when graduate student administrators are given the responsibility of supervising the day-to-day activities yet lack professional protection and mentorship. This chapter might be used to defend or support the hiring of writing center professionals as directors, rather than any available faculty

96

or staff. The kind of experiential evidence offered by Tirabassi and Zenger is especially valuable given the current economic climate and its likely effect on academic appointments.

Happily, not every narrative in *(E)Merging Identities* is a tale of woe, as can sometimes be the case in collections that explore the working conditions of underprivileged groups in academe. Many of the other narratives in the collection such as Michael Mattison's letter to himself as a beginning graduate student, "Just Between Me and Me," and center director Leigh Ryan and former administrative mentee Lisa Zimmerelli's joint narrative, "Mentoring Graduate Students as Assistant Directors," describe both positive and negative aspects of the blended identities of graduate administrators. These pieces explore complicated yet ultimately successful stories about administrative training and professionalization. The graduate students in these essays discuss how they negotiated their administrator identity both within themselves and their institutional hierarchy. Mattison in particular discusses the intricacy of handling issues of authority with other graduate students in his writing program and center. He is at once their peer and their overseer. He doesn't always agree with fellow teachers' or tutors' practices, and though he has limited authority to enforce his center's policies, he uses that power with discretion. Exercising power too often or with too much severity can destroy friendships and working relationships among his peers but not exercising it enough means he is not doing his job. Yet such struggles, he suggests in the final paragraphs of the chapter, have led to a philosophy of "middleness"; that is, "a way to become more centered in your teaching, your tutoring, your administrating, and eventually in your research" (22). These and other narratives in *(E)Merging Identities* provide balanced case studies for graduate students and directors that they can use to help shape the work policies of their own centers.

A more explicit guide to best practice is the IWCA's "Statement on Graduate Student Writing Administration." The story of its adoption and initial outcomes is told in *(E)Merging Identities* by the Statement's co-authors, Julie Eckerle, Karen Rowan, and Shevaun Watson. In "The Tale of a Position Statement," the authors describe how they collaborated with members of the IWCA to draft the

97

Danielle A. Cordaro

2001 document they say is an "ideal vision of graduate student administrative positions" (42). The statement was a response to the relative silence in the writing center literature about issues of professional development, working conditions, and unique needs of graduate administrators, who, unlike their faculty and staff peers, are in a uniquely vulnerable and transitory period. Modeled on Jeanne Simpson's "Position Statement on Professional Concerns," the authors say that the Statement is a "living document" intended as both a tool for negotiation and a guide for writing center practice (41). Eckerle, Rowan, and Watson discuss exploratory research that demonstrates that some writing centers are already using the Statement. One director uses it as a way to introduce new graduate administrators to their positions, while others draw on its principles to advocate for more distributed models of graduate administration similar to that of my own lab. This historical narrative and exploratory research essay powerfully demonstrates how graduate students can work in partnership with professional organizations like the IWCA to produce documents that affect their own lives. It also shows how both graduate students and directors can use the Statement to promote equitable working conditions in their local contexts.

The latter half of the collection moves away from the topic of graduate student administration to graduate tutoring. "A Writing Center in a School of Education" by Helen Snively describes the history and organization of the innovative, graduate-student-run Writing, Research, and Teaching Center in Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Using interview data to support her points, Snively describes how the center allows for true collaboration between graduate consultants and graduate students. Because tutors in this center are peers in the discipline of education who possess "enough domain knowledge to engage deeply in the conversation about a topic" they can thus act as a "very informed audience" (93). This essay demonstrates how "peer tutoring" among graduate students differs theoretically and practically from that practiced among undergraduates. Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of this piece is that Snively highlights the fact that that tutors in her center frequently edit the work of other graduate students (93). While this seems to go against the best practices of writing center pedagogy,

98

Snively argues that editing is a skill that can and should be taught though modeling. Further, as knowledgeable, collaborative peers, the tutors in her center have the authority to do so. This essay also provides a model for graduate students who would like to initiate a writing center at their own institution or make significant changes to one that already exists.

The theme of authority and tutoring practice among graduate tutors continues in Brooke Rollins, Trixie G. Smith, and Evelyn Westbrook's "Collusion and Collaboration: Concealing Authority in the Writing Center." In this study, Rollins, Smith, and Westbrook used transcript analysis to parse the transcripts of three graduate-tutor led tutorials, two with native-speaking undergraduates and one with a non-native speaking graduate student. The authors found that all three tutors often experienced "conversational dysfluency," or gaps in normal conversation, because they were constantly monitoring their speech to make sure it did not appear too authoritative or directive. "The assistants we observed...resisted appearing too authoritative by using self-blame to mask their criticism. Often, rather than criticizing a client's unclear writing, the assistant would ask for clarification by blaming herself for not understanding what was said: 'Tell me I missed it'" (125). The authors conclude that nonhierarchical, nondirective models of peer collaboration put an unfair burden on graduate tutors who are often not true peers but experts in relation to their clients (135). I was surprised and delighted to find a piece of empirical research so convincing and well executed in a collection primarily devoted to narratives and theory. This piece, like Snively's, provides needed evidence that nondirective, collaborative models do not work equally well for all tutors in all situations.

(E)Merging Identities represents the first collection of research focused entirely on graduate students in writing centers. Perhaps because this is the case, its chapters sometimes lack continuity with one another, collected as they are under the very general theme described by the subtitle, *Graduate Students in the Writing Center.* However, there are examples of excellent scholarship in this volume, notably those by Eckerle, Rowan, and Watson and Rollins, Smith, and Westbrook. Writing center directors who employ graduate students as administrators or tutors should acquire a copy for their

99

Danielle A. Cordaro

center library; chapters from *(E)Merging Identities* are ideal for use in graduate tutor or administrative mentoring classes. Perhaps most crucially, directors or graduate students can use the collection in conjunction with the IWCA's "Statement of Graduate Student Administration" to challenge unfair or theoretically unsound policies on graduate administration that are already in place. However it is used, *(E)Merging Identities* deserves a place on the shelves of writing centers interested in fostering further research on graduate student identity and practice.

100