

1-1-2017

## Review: The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors by Nicole I. Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, & Rebecca Jackson

Harry Denny

Enrique Paz

Anna Sicari

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Denny, Harry; Paz, Enrique; and Sicari, Anna (2017) "Review: The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors by Nicole I. Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, & Rebecca Jackson," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 2, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1836>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.  
Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.



Harry Denny, Enrique Paz, & Anna Sicari

**Review: *The Working Lives of  
New Writing Center Directors* by  
Nicole I. Caswell, Jackie Grutsch  
McKinney, & Rebecca Jackson**

---

Working in writing centers is a great gig. We get to lead units committed to making collaborative learning happen in a host of ways: students gaining access to or refining disciplinary literacies, faculty and administration discovering more effective ways for writing to demonstrate learning and transfer, and tutors becoming conscious of their voices as mentors of communities of practice, both disciplinary and sociocultural. Many of us “graduate” from being students who have been tutored in writing centers to serving as writing tutors ourselves; some of us inspired by all of that labor decide to pursue graduate education in and become directors of these amazing units, charged with sustaining and growing these amazing units and all those who teach and learn within them.

While our field has plenty of resources for educating tutors, for coaching faculty across the disciplines on using writing for teaching, and even for understanding the complex teaching and learning variables and processes around writing, very little is known about what constitutes effective leadership or how writing center directors come

The Writing Center Journal 36.2 | 2017 303

to be leaders or effective faculty and administrators. Some scholarship gives us a lay of the land for writing center directorship and provides arguments for recognizing its intellectual labor (Balester & McDonald, 2001; Ianetta, Bergmann, Fitzgerald, Haviland, Lebduška, & Wislocki, 2006), and other research speaks to the lived reality of writing center directors already established in their careers and offers implications for the everyday labor and disciplinary status of writing centers (Geller & Denny, 2013). Little is known, however, about the experiences of the novice writing center directors and the lessons they might offer for those who follow them as well as for those who teach those future leaders. *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* addresses that gap in our field's scholarship and likely will become a foundational text in graduate education.

*Working Lives*, co-authored by Nicole I. Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, & Rebecca Jackson (2016), investigates the labor of new writing center directors through a longitudinal qualitative study of nine directors with diverse backgrounds. The authors classify or code their analysis of interviews through three overarching lenses of the labor these new directors engage in: One, disciplinary labor is defined as signaling “participation and membership in a field, a sign that one belongs, seeks to belong, is trying to belong” and involves a wide range of disciplinary involvement, not just the production and dissemination of knowledge; a second, emotional labor, revolves around relationship building and maintenance as well as the ongoing work of managing one's own feelings; and a third, everyday labor, represents the work-a-day world of writing center directors (budgets, personnel, training, reporting, planning, etc.). Following this methods discussion, the text turns toward exhaustive reporting on their interviews with the participants as well as illustrating how each experiences the organizing themes. Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson draw all the individual presentations together in a conclusion that makes connections between them and that addresses the current condition for writing center directors, writing center studies, and its future.

*Working Lives* documents the experiences of new directors on the job, and that focus resonated with us. We are at different stages of writing center careers: Enrique is in graduate school and will soon experience the transition from student to professional in the field, something common to many of the participants in the study. Anna is in the midst of the very phenomenon that the study explores: She is navigating the new waters of the first year on the job after completing graduate school. Harry reflects the relatively senior experience of someone settled into a career, of someone who has had first years on the job at different insti-

tutions, and of someone who teaches and mentors students and former students like Enrique and Anna on their own initial entree into the life of a writing center director. While we had similar reactions to *Working Lives*, we believe our unique perspectives speak to the range of audiences who might take up this text.

### **Enrique's Perspective**

I will soon face the job market. As such, I am often answering questions about my aspirations for an academic job: I want a tenure-track position, right? What research and teaching loads would be ideal? What kind of institution would suit me? And of course, what about a writing center position? This latter question has been quite difficult to answer because I know the asymmetry across writing center positions: Each one can offer an entirely different situation and experience. It seemed to me mysterious what really lies behind each ad asking for writing center director applications. *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* excited me, as it promised a view into what this work looked like in the day-to-day and across different positions.

As I read, I saw myself in a handful of Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson's research participants. Like Allison, Anthony, or Joe, I will have a PhD in composition and rhetoric. I too have extensive graduate and undergraduate experience in writing centers, both as a consultant and administrator, including graduate coursework on writing centers. I too have conducted writing center research, which I've presented at conferences and am working toward publication. My dissertation research site also includes writing centers with consultants as participants. I've lined up, just as Allison and Anthony had, to take on a writing center position. But in spite of such preparation, much of the "everyday" work seems obscure or—perhaps worse—idiosyncratic. Each job has its own version of the day-to-day that you can't know until you get there. So I could never really know what I was getting into. Or so I feared.

*Working Lives* addresses such concerns gracefully. As the authors make clear in their conclusion, "Though each participant was situated in different settings, different states, and different institutional histories, there were commonalities in the labor they reported to us" (p. 172). Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson demonstrate that the labor of a writing center director is not inconsistent. While there are always local concerns and knowledge to take up, most (not all—as the authors caution us against saying) writing center directors will also take up training and working with tutors, establishing new initiatives to support college writers, working with faculty to support their teaching of

writing, assessing their writing center, and engaging with the discipline. The strength of this work lies not just in the overarching view, which Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson provide at the end of the book, but rather in seeing these overarching themes play out individually and locally through each of their case studies. The authors intentionally eschew beginning with “a portrait of the typical writing center director” (p. 9), which flattens and generalizes the labor and the people doing it. Instead, the individual case studies offer rich detail of the ongoing work—both the large endeavors and the minutia—of each director. We see Isatta’s directing at a historically black college/university in tremendous depth juxtaposed with Darya’s work at a community college and Mandy’s high school writing center endeavors. Moving between these and other contexts allowed me as a reader to see the commonalities play out one-by-one, to draw connections and distinctions between each and to see for myself what “the work of directing a writing center” is, as the authors’ research question put it (p. 172). By the time I reached the conclusion where these connections were made explicit, they were already evident to me. By zooming in so tightly on these individual directors, Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson did not miss any grander picture. Rather, their work builds a wider picture with every facet meticulously detailed—and all the richer thereby.

As a graduate student and an aspiring writing center scholar (perhaps even aspiring director, if the market is kind), *Working Lives* offers me a few treasured insights. First, it allows me to project forward and reflect on my own ability: What work am I capable of already? What other preparation do I need? What misconceptions have I had? I look to the experiences of Allison or Anthony to imagine what my own professional life as a writing center director might look like. Second, the obscurities of writing center directorship become visible through these case studies. As some of Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, & Jackson’s participants lament, graduate training prepares us for work that engages and applies our disciplinary knowledge, but the everyday labor eschew the administrative, the managerial eschew remains invisible. This text provides an empirical demonstration of this labor for future training and discussion. As such, I believe this text holds much promise for any graduate student interested in writing center studies and their preparation and study.

### **Anna’s Perspective**

I was very excited when I saw that *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* was out and even happier when I received a copy of the work to

review. I first heard about this study from one of the co-authors, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, when she was discussing the theme of emotional labor and the everyday work of the writing center director. At the time she was telling me of their work, I was on the job market and, similar to Allison's story, looking specifically for a tenure-track writing center director position. Writing center work is the work I love to do and is why I decided to pursue a PhD in the first place. I remember thinking how I would love to read that book, as I was nervous at the time about directing my own center, even though I had significant writing center experience and close mentoring relationships with several national figures in the field. As the authors write in their introduction about the purpose of their study, "to see who new writing center directors really were and how those directors really worked . . . to hear their voices and privilege their experiences . . . to understand them within their own contexts" (p. 9), I felt a need to hear the stories of relatively junior writing center directors who navigated their institutional contexts and best positioned their writing centers. This was work that needed to be done, and I wished I had the book with me as I was preparing for the job market.

Flash forward a year later, I am currently a new director of a large writing center and am appreciative of the timing of the publication of the work. On one of my very first days at work, a person in upper administration talked with me about my curriculum vitae and proclaimed, "I did not even know you could get a PhD in writing centers!" I thought about this as I was reading the introduction of the work, when Grutsch McKinney was recalling a member of a search committee she was interviewing for telling her that "anyone can direct a writing center" (p. 11). *Working Lives*, to me, is important work in making visible the invisible intellectual labor of the writing center director—the disciplinary knowledge and expertise that is needed for this position (whether one comes to the job prepared with such knowledge or learns as they go along). As a new writing center director entering into an already well-established and large center, I found this book to be helpful in navigating the everyday, and sometimes overwhelming, work that is required of the director—from mentoring graduate students to educating consultants and being asked to run workshops by different institutional units. Similar to Allison and Joe, I have an additional pressure to publish as I lead a busy writing center, and I, too, find myself having difficulty pursuing my own research because of the everyday emotional labor required of me. As the authors discuss this tension that tenure-track writing center directors face, they help make aware the importance of scholarship in gaining further disciplinary knowledge to

contribute to both the institution and the field. The authors point to an issue of labor that the writing center field faces, with the administrative and leadership duties required, drawing from Anne Ellen Geller & Harry Denny's (2013) award-winning article "Of Ladybugs, Low Status, and Loving the Job" and through reading case studies of colleagues, I feel comforted to know I am not alone in this struggle. Through reading the different chapters, I feel I have gained knowledge in not "balancing" all the work but prioritizing the work according to what is most pressing and necessary to my professional identity and my center. While the authors were successful in avoiding prescriptive advice based on lore, I did gain concrete knowledge that will help me when I enter my first year in a tenure-track position.

The two research questions that drove their study, "Who directs writing centers?" and "What is the work of directing a Writing Center?," produced important insight into a serious gap in the field: We talk about the labor of the job, but what does it actually look like for the director (and who is the director of the writing center, anyway)? I think their research questions helped me wrestle with a new question I have found myself asking while simultaneously directing a center: "Why do I want to be a writing center director?" As I read the line, "most of our participants fell into this line of work serendipitously" (p. 3), I found myself needing to put the book down and reflect. As the data indicates, there seems to be a need of belonging to the institution for one to be successful, and as the data also shows, this sense of belonging does not seem to happen everywhere as only five of the nine participants remained in their positions as writing center directors. Why would one *intentionally* pursue this line of work? Why am I? To return to the findings of the work and to why I find myself returning to writing centers throughout my academic career, it is the mentorship that the writing center promotes that seems to be an underlying thread in each of the case studies. Whether we want to define mentorship as emotional labor or not, mentorship seems to be a big reason as to why I, and other writing center directors, stay in the job. This work is a significant contribution to the field, offering a detailed landscape of the current nature of writing centers and the everyday work of a writing center director.

While the book portrays the professional lives of these nine people, I could not help but think of other aspects of these participants and their identities. For instance, I could not help but think of Isatta's race and of how this intersects with her form of mentorship with her consultants or of Anthony's gender and of how this informs his ability to navigate political waters so well, particularly with upper administration. I wonder if age played a factor for Sara when she expressed difficulty working with

graduate students. When reading these case studies, I wondered if it is possible to separate the personal from the professional or to not address race, class, gender, sexuality, faith, and other aspects of one's identity. This is a question that I think should be asked, and I believe *The Working Lives* provides an excellent model for future qualitative studies to take up issues of identity and the writing center director.

### **Harry's Perspective**

*Working Lives* possesses a face validity, both from the perspective of my own experiences as a “first year” or new writing center director and from the standpoint of witnessing students of mine seek out and obtain positions as new writing center directors. The types of institutions that the participants represent dovetail with those my students or I have worked at: mainly regional comprehensive universities, small liberal arts colleges, two-year institutions, and high schools. For each of them, we have had to learn institutional history; understand personnel, their stakes, and their needs; know how to negotiate the unwritten protocol of departmental and university supervision; and develop and implement a vision that enacts their brand of leadership, one-to-one mentoring, and the broader “labor” of writing centers. I was most struck by how *Working Lives* captures the sometime fraught nature of the work, the vulnerability of a new director, and the liminality and precariousness of academic workplace relationship—with peers, with tutors, with supervisors or senior colleagues. I remember learning (and continuing to learn) that friendships are risky enterprises, while colleagues can be strategic relationships.

Liminality is ubiquitous. *Working Lives* forces us to consider in what ways is a new director a middle manager in academe, or how pedagogical expertise serves to compartmentalize for one audience and grant cred in another. A new writing center director never feels complete security in any move. They think: “Who will I run afoul of if I do this, what unwritten protocol will I discover if I make this decision, how will this decision influence others?” All that angst about decision making and relationship building (even maintenance) give readers powerful, rich insight on the intense emotional labor endemic to new and veteran writing center directors alike. While graduate school courses and teaching assignments in writing centers can provide students with experience on what the authors term the “everyday labor” of writing center work, *Working Lives* provides fodder for tangible conversations about how someone would react to a range of tough situations (difficult



departmental chairs, recalcitrant staff, shifting institutional priorities, jealous colleagues, etc.).

While the authors of *Working Lives* and I have all been active agents of disciplinary labor, the limited role scholarship played in the participants' work makes me wonder what that minimal engagement means. What do we do when most writing center directors are confined to campus and the bubbles of the local? If disciplinary engagement is operationalized as attending a conference or reading *WLN* or the Wcenter listserv, what are the consequences? Perhaps it means posting an email message to the collective hive instead of conducting a literature review or exploring appropriate research methods for answering and honing a guiding question or scholarly agenda. For the students I prepare, I worry whether I am preparing them appropriately: My colleagues and I foreground research engagement, challenge students to make coursework a proving ground for a research pipeline, and mentor our students to create intellectual community. The participants reflect a different reality where pragmatics and strategic planning and engagement rule the day, where surviving the day, the week, or the semester dominates one's thinking. It's a curious dissonance for those of us training future directors at AAU institutions, or more broadly at Research 1's: Few of our schools have faculty writing center directorships, most being hybrid or staff positions. Yet, we churn out students who are interpolated in our mindsets, but face institutional realities with very different priorities or ways of operating. In my own institution, some in administration judge our success by the perceived quality job placements at peer or aspirational institutions, not in those different (or "lesser") than us. That said, I know firsthand and have witnessed the difficulty of negotiating a working life that involves an expansive notion of disciplinary labor alongside the emotional and everyday labor this book documents so well. That pressure, that juggling, that exhilaration is just not present in this text. I don't know whether that absence is an omission or a recognition of the reality of the current state/status of writing center directors at research extensive or intensive universities.

### **Come Together, Right Now: *Working Lives* Sets a Course for the Future**

Our individual reactions complement the shared assessment of *Working Lives* we possess. We remain curious about what this text teaches us about the role of research and scholarship and whether we ought to be worried that its production might get reserved to an exclusive club. Ironically, the authors themselves represent writing center directors

at “full-service” institutions that emphasize teaching, service, and research. We wanted to hear how their own experiences dovetail or depart from the object lessons that their participants reveal. As we have done in this review, connect our own experiences and concerns within writing centers, we wish we heard from the authors themselves, particularly in the conclusion, on the role scholarship plays in their work as writing center directors. The reviewers of this work are invested in scholarship and the production of disciplinary labor and yet, the findings of this work indicate that this is not a concern for most of the new writing center directors in this study. What does that suggest about the future landscape of the field?

The research in *Working Lives* begs for replication in a whole host of contexts and along a range of variables. As we have suggested all along, the writing center directors that we do not witness here need to be explored: How does leadership and scholarship happen where writing center directors must juggle an even more complex set of relationships? How does our work compare with that of other writing program administration sorts of labor? How does this work intersect with other aspects of identity or perspective (e.g., race, gender, nationality, class, language)? We are drawn to thinking about how we might replicate the study to document the realities and needs of writers traversing our writing centers and future writing center practitioners and scholars. We are excited by the future research this book can produce.

Despite the questions or doubts we are posing, we each applaud this collection. It presents necessary case studies of experiences that have not been explored in writing center studies. *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* is an important read not only for the writing center community but for the field of writing program administration, as it demystifies the all-encompassing work that is often done by a writing center director and shows how writing center directors are often the sole “writing experts” at an institution. Although the reviewers of this work are at different stages in their academic careers, we each gained new insight on what it means to direct a writing center or mentor a new colleague in the field. This work would be an excellent read for a graduate student pursuing a career in writing centers, a faculty member tasked with teaching a course on writing program administration work to graduate students, and certainly, a new writing center director. The data from this study certainly is rich and allows for readers to theorize their own findings from the text, as well as gain insight from the authors’ own conclusions.

**Harry Denny** is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing Lab at Purdue University. Harry's scholarship focuses on writing center theory and practice, cultural studies and research methods. Harry is the author of *Facing the Center: Towards and Identity Politics of One-to-one Mentoring*, and a co-editor of a forthcoming collection, *Out in the Center: Public Controversies, Private Struggles* (with Lila Naydan, Rob Mundy, Richard Sévère, and Anna Sicari), both with Utah State University Press.

**Enrique Paz** is a doctoral candidate in Miami University's Composition and Rhetoric program. He also serves as co-editor of the *IWCA Update*, IWCA's membership newsletter. His dissertation examines how students define writer identity and how they negotiate their own writing identities within their communities of practice.

**Anna Sicari** is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Oklahoma State University. Anna's scholarship focuses on writing center theory, writing program administration, and feminist leadership. Anna is a co-editor of a forthcoming collection, *Out in the Center: Public Controversies, Private Struggles* (with Harry Denny, Lila Naydan, Rob Mundy, and Richard Sévère), with Utah State University Press.

## References

- Balester, V., & McDonald, J. C. (2001). A view of status and working conditions: Relations between writing program and writing center directors. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 24(3), 59–82.
- Caswell, N. I., Grutsch McKinney, J., & Jackson, R. (2016). *The working lives of new writing center directors*. Utah State University Press.
- Geller, A. E., & Denny, H. (2013). Of ladybugs, low status, and loving the job: Writing center professionals navigating their careers. *Writing Center Journal*, 33(1), 96–129.
- Ianetta, M., Bergmann, L., Fitzgerald, L., Haviland, C. P., Lebduska, L., & Wislocki, M. (2006). Polylog: Are writing center directors writing program administrators? *Composition Studies*, 34(2), 11–42.