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Review: The Writing Center Resource Manual

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Silk, Bobbie Bayless, Ed. *The Writing Center Resource Manual*. Emmitsburg, MD: NWCA Press, 1998. (ISBN 0-9648067-2-X).

Reviewed by Doug Enders

When Bobbie Bayliss Silk confesses in the introduction to *The Writing Center Resource Manual* “if only I’d had the book you are now reading . . .,” I could sense in her ellipses the countless precarious moments that she and all those who have pioneered writing centers have faced: the march to budget discussions with the dean, the heated departmental fights for tenure, the negotiations with the provost for building space, and the other numerous battles that go on behind the scenes of the writing center’s comfortable environs. As a tutor, I witnessed such struggles but viewed them with a blind eye; now, however, as a Writing Specialist, working more closely with our Writing Center Director, these issues hit closer to home, and it is for this reason that I’m glad I now have this book.

And I am sure that I am not the only one who will be grateful for this book. While of benefit to all writing center staff interested in reflecting upon their current practices, the *Manual* proves especially useful to those of us who may seek to direct a writing center, or to those who, having little prior writing center experience, have that responsibility thrust upon them. As Silk notes, due to the highly contextualized nature of writing centers, the *Manual* isn’t a book of how-to’s. It is, instead, a collection of easy-to-read essays, written by experienced writing center personnel who present the central issues and struggles involved in starting, managing, and developing a writing center at the university, community college, middle, and high school levels. The *Manual* poses key questions to ask about such essential areas as creating a writing center philosophy and mission; establishing the center’s institutional niche; proposing a budget; selecting and implementing technology; hiring and training staff; keeping records; ensuring patron and staff safety; formulating accurate means of assessment; serving learning disabled, ESL, and graduate students; working in tandem with a WAC program; maintaining public relations; and developing writing center research. In short, the *Manual* addresses nearly every issue one could possibly need to know about maintaining a writing center today, shy of a lesson on plumbing and wiring.

In acknowledgment of the unique contexts of writing centers, Silk has constructed a pragmatic, unbound, hole-punched text that allows one to add to and update the information presented here—a good idea given the ever-changing circumstances within our field. In addition to an introduction and appendices, the *Manual* contains twenty essays that fall

into three categories: “Starting a Writing Center”; “Managing a Writing Center”; and “Special Needs and Opportunities.” While I found every essay informative, several stood out as cornerstone explanations of how writing centers function.

Jeanne Simpson’s “Assessing Needs, Identifying an Institutional Home, and Developing a Proposal,” for example, makes clear to new and would-be directors the challenges they might face in establishing a center and ensuring its survival. Particularly useful is Simpson’s recommendation that one should develop the writing center mission in accordance with the host-institution’s stance on its student body, curriculum, graduation and retention rates, and relationship to its surrounding non-academic community. I also found Simpson’s discussion of how to think about the budgeting process eye-opening. Trained as a tutor, I never thought much about this aspect of the writing center or about such crucial questions as: “Who makes the decisions affecting my budget?”; “What is the standard budget?”; “What hard-and-fast constraints must be accepted?”; “What are the main budgetary categories?”; and “How are expenditures tracked?” Simpson also presents a useful glimpse into the dark waters of institutional politics by exploring the implications of affiliating the center with a department, of proposing a tenure/non-tenure line for the director, and of drawing up means of assessment by which to set promotion and goals of the center for administration. To veteran directors, such points may seem obvious; to the uninitiated, however, these points may be essential to survival.

Survival depends, of course, on a director’s understanding of the writing center’s niche within the university. As Gail Cummins explains in “Standing in the Places Where We Are,” establishing or broadening that niche requires a sensitive awareness of the history of the writing center and its mission. Cummins argues that any shaping of a center’s mission should involve careful study of original job descriptions, documents related to writing center funding, university or college mission statements, as well as recommendations from other centers’ directors. Throughout her article, she demonstrates how to make the most of what is already available. In discussing how to promote the writing center’s services, for example, she suggests forming advisory boards for all campus tutoring programs, forging WAC relationships with interested faculty, and offering workshops and demonstrations on tutoring techniques.

If the tasks of establishing a writing center’s mission, budget, and institutional niche aren’t daunting enough, considering how to properly employ technology within the center surely can be. Fortunately, Stuart Blythe’s “Technology in the Writing Center: Strategies for Implementation and Maintenance” provides sensible suggestions on how to determine the center’s technological needs. Like Simpson and Cummins, Blythe

advises readers to consult their center's mission statement when attempting to match technology to the needs of those who use the center. Like so many of the *Manual's* contributors, he models useful questions to ask such as: "What is your writing center supposed to do?"; "Whom does it serve?"; "What kinds of services do students, faculty and administrators expect of the writing center?"; and "What goals might the writing center envision that it could not without the support of a particular technology?" With these questions and others, Blythe helps us to determine the center's technological needs, and he is helpful in making readers aware of the variety of available technologies that we might explore, such as e-mail, MOOs, OWLs, and web browsers. I wish, however, he would have explained how the use of these technologies in the writing center has challenged long-held notions of tutoring pedagogy and practice. By merely acknowledging that "computers can bring both subtle and obvious differences in how we write, share, comment on, and discuss texts," Blythe doesn't go far enough. He misses an opportunity to inform those readers—and there are many—who may be unfamiliar with this increasingly important aspect of writing center operations. Fortunately, he does offer an extensive list of further readings on the subject.

While most chapters are generally geared for directors, two prove particularly useful to tutors as well. Paula Gillespie and Jon Olson's "Tutor Training" is useful because of its concrete overview of a tutorial from introductions and discussion of assignments through post-tutorial paperwork. I plan to use it along with Carol Severino's "Serving ESL Students," with its sensitive look at conferencing with second language students, in my tutor training sessions.

One of the *Manual's* strengths comes from the intersections of various authors' discussions. Several essays, for example, offer advice on the ubiquitous problem of budget. In addition to Simpson's and Cummins' articles cited above, Katherine Fisher's "I'll take the Boardwalk for \$400" presents insightful strategies for writing effective and persuasive budget proposals. In the process, Fisher convincingly argues that "the narrative that accompanies your budget may be the most important document you prepare in the whole budgeting process."

Assessment is another key link between articles. Again, in addition to the discussions by Simpson and Cummins, Penny Bird's "Program Assessment and Reporting," Muriel Harris's "Managing Services: Scheduling, Record-Keeping, Forms," and Neal Learner's "Research in the Writing Center" not only provide rationales for using assessment but offer tested examples of surveys, questionnaires, and forms used to assess such diverse things as student satisfaction, tutor self-evaluation, and center use. In light of all these possibilities, Harris offers a sensible warning not to overdo ("a new writing center doesn't need all that's offered here"), but I appreciated having the chance to see the variety of means used for

assessment presented here.

In addition to the long-standing issues of budget and assessment, the *Manual* presents essays that highlight current concerns of writing centers staff as they try to serve a broad range of writers' needs (i.e., learning disabled, ESL, and graduate students) and faculty expectations. I was glad to see that Michael Pemberton, in "Working with Graduate Students," takes up the controversial issue of tutors working with papers outside their own disciplines. While conceding limits to a tutor's efficacy in such situations, Pemberton rightly points out that when a writer with a high degree of disciplinary knowledge meets a tutor who brings to the table a "naive" reading, sessions are likely to be highly collaborative and often lead the writer to form new insights about the material.

Joe Law's "Serving Faculty and Writing Across the Curriculum" impressed me because of its clear articulation of the differences between writing center "writing to learn" and WAC "writing in the disciplines" pedagogies, and the potential conflicts that can occur when faculty, in sending their students to the writing center, fail to recognize the differences between these two programs' practices. Law's suggestions of training tutors to work within specific disciplines, and providing workshops and special training sessions for faculty, students, and tutors, serve as potential ways out of the writing center/WAC pedagogical conflict.

These are only a few of the many articles that make *The Writing Center Resource Manual* a truly useful book. I have only a couple small complaints with it. For one, it needs a good dose of editing; numerous typos and inconsistent formatting make it a bit rough looking, not indicative of its content. Secondly, the appendices, which contain useful materials—bibliographies, forms, definitions, etc.—need to be made more accessible. I, for one, had a difficult time tracing some items to the essays from which they came. A list of contents and reference to source essays would certainly help. These criticisms aside, the *Manual* is a must-have addition for every writing center reference shelf. Using straight-forward language, it provides readers access into the current and ongoing conversations about issues that writing center people struggle with daily. I highly recommended it for center staff in general and especially to those who wish to get a larger perspective of the full-range of a writing center's operations and director's potential responsibilities. The book, with its comprehensive scope, I believe, has a lasting worth. Given the ever-changing nature of writing centers' contexts, readers will find new insights in each rereading.

Doug Enders is a Writing Specialist at Indiana State University where he teaches composition and trains peer tutors in the writing center. He writes about composition and tutoring practice and is co-editor of *Indiana English*.