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Review: Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers

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Reviews

Myers-Breslin, Linda, ed. *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers: Scenarios in Effective Program Management*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1999.

Reviewed by Alice M. Gillam

As a current administrator of a first-year writing program, former administrator of a writing center, and mentor to graduate student writing program administrators, I began reading *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers: Scenarios in Effective Program Management*, edited by Linda Myers-Breslin, with more than a little curiosity and interest. I was curious to read about how other WPAs (I mean for this acronym to be inclusive) had handled some of the problems I have faced and to learn what this text might have to offer future WPAs.

Myers-Breslin's announced purpose is threefold: 1) to prepare graduate students "to assume administrative roles in the future"; 2) to offer current administrators an opportunity to compare and "reconsider their own decision-making strategies"; and 3) to enable "instructors at any level the chance to gain skill at administrative problem-solving" (xvi). To accomplish these aims, she has assembled nineteen case studies which vary widely in terms of the type of program, institutional setting, type of problem addressed, and WPA role. For example, Deborah Holdstein discusses the challenges entailed in incorporating technology into a composition program at an upper-division institution while Lisa Gerrard discusses efforts to encourage scholarly activity among lecturers in the writing program of a large research university. What links all of these cases together, however, is their mode of presentation. Each case begins by setting the institutional and programmatic context, continues by defining a particular problem or set of problems, and concludes by offering the author's comments regarding the problem. The concluding section offers the author's solution, although Myers-Breslin is quick to caution in the introduction that "this section is not intended as an 'answer key'" (xix.) Another feature of the text is the hypothetical pretext used in many (but not all) of the cases in which the reader is imaginatively put in the WPA's position: "Congratulations on your promotion to Writing

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Program Administrator of Texas Tech University's first-year writing program" (180). A final notable, and welcome, feature of this text for writing center administrators is Myers-Breslin's recognition of writing center work as writing program administration and her inclusion of a number of cases that focus primarily or secondarily on writing center issues.

As a veteran writing center administrator, I found most useful either those essays which offered detailed narratives of a particular WPA's work over time or those which focused on pragmatic problems and solutions. In the first category were such essays as Joan Mullin's "Writing Across the Curriculum" and Rita Malenczyk's "Productive Change in a Turbulent Atmosphere: Pipe Dream or Possibility?" Though both begin with the hypothetical, pretend-you-are-the-WPA stance, both abandon this pretense at some point in the narrative (Malenczyk not until the "Author's Comment" section) and offer a straightforward first-person narrative of events. What I like about both of these essays is the richly textured portrait offered of each university's culture and politics. By setting the scene with such care, these authors enable readers to appreciate more fully the WPA's dilemmas and decisions within those contexts. For example, Mullin provides readers with a detailed history of the writing-across-the-curriculum program she developed at the University of Toledo, so that we can understand better the strategies she chose to defend (successfully) the WAC requirement when it was threatened by the change from quarters to semesters. Similarly, Malenczyk offers an instructive inside look at how she, as an untenured WPA, sorted out a mire of difficulties and acted strategically by "isolat[ing] the issues, consider[ing] them in terms of institutional culture, and figur[ing] out how . . . to make not just temporary but lasting change" (160). Particularly impressive and useful to others is her linking of local issues to their "global equivalents"—for example, she relates the local problem of an obnoxious (my term, not hers), micro-managing executive VP to the larger issue of faculty governance versus administrative governance (161). As Malenczyk puts it, "Considered in global terms, the local problems seem somewhat more manageable" (162). Throughout, both of these writers refer to relevant WPA literature on writing-across-the-curriculum, developmental writing, the WPA statement on intellectual work, and so on. In short, these essays provided strategies I might extrapolate and use to address issues in my local institutional context.

Also useful to me were more pragmatic essays, like Muriel Harris' "Selecting and Training Undergraduate and Graduate Staffs in a Writing Lab" and Rich Bullock's "In Pursuit of Competence: Preparing New Graduate Teaching Assistants for the Classroom." In both of these essays, I found sound, practical ideas that I can imagine implementing—for example, the group interviewing of prospective tutors recommended

by Harris and the practice teaching for new TAs during orientation recommended by Bullock. Other essays which seemed particularly instructive either for their larger sense of the complex public role the WPA plays within the university or for their attention to specific issues like placement were Louise Wetherbee Phelps' "Mobilizing Human Resources to (Re)Form a Writing Program," Carol Peterson Haviland and Ed White's "How Can Physical Space and Administrative Structure Shape Writing Programs, Writing Centers, and WAC Projects?," Barry Maid's "How WPAs Can Learn to Use Power to Their Own Advantage," and Dave Healy's "Managing the Writing Center/Classroom Relationship."

While I can imagine using selected essays from this text in a graduate seminar in writing program administration, I cannot imagine asking students to read the whole text for several reasons. For one thing, the details of so many different institutional settings and WPA issues can become tedious and overwhelming. For another, some essays are thin in both problem representation and "solutions." Very few offer much in the way of theoretical critique or in-depth reflection. And finally, as hinted at earlier, I found the hypothetical patina and the occasional fictionalization of details distracting and unhelpful. Perhaps it is my actual role as a WPA that prevented me from playing along, but I don't think that is the only problem with this approach. It seems to me a fundamental contradiction to present local, and often clearly recognizable, features of particular universities as fictionalized and thereby somehow more generic. Since all narratives are to some extent fictionalized, that is, some details or parts of the story are selected, others parts omitted, what is gained by this elaborate fiction of "Erehwon University" (no one actually uses this particular pseudonym)? I would much prefer straight-ahead first-person narratives, followed by critical, theoretically-informed reflections on these experiences. It is such narratives that I would foreground in any course I might teach on writing program administration. It would, for example, be interesting to couple Phelps' essay in this volume with her essay "Becoming a Warrior: Lessons of the Feminist Workplace," a much more personal account of her WPA experiences at Syracuse. Further, I would ask students to read multiple accounts of a particular "case," such as those available regarding the very public controversy over the first-year curriculum at the University of Texas some years ago. And I would want graduate students to follow the wide range of unfolding "cases" one can track on the WPA and WCenter listservs.

Despite my reservations about some aspects of this text, I find it a valuable contribution to the emerging research and scholarship on writing program administration. Indeed, I would like to see more case study work on writing program administration along the lines I have suggested above. Although the claim that "[b]y the end of the text, readers will develop decision-making strategies, perhaps a problem-solving template that

will assist them once they embark on careers in our ever-expanding field,” may be overstated, this is a book every WPA should have on her or his shelf.

Alice Gillam directs the first-year writing program at the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee), where she also teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in rhetoric and writing.