

Malenczyk, Rita, ed. *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*. Anderson: Parlor P, 2013. 462 pages. \$40.00. 978-1-60235-433-3. Print.

Reviewed by Jacob Babb

Rita Malenczyk's edited collection provides a significant resource for writing program administrators (WPAs) in postsecondary institutions, whether they are experienced or new, writing center directors or directors of first-year writing, tenure-line faculty or non-tenure-track staff. As this list suggests, the audience for such a text is necessarily varied: Contributors to this collection offer insights on various issues that are useful for anyone engaged in writing program administration. Malenczyk, who is currently President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), has published numerous articles and chapters on writing program administration in journals such as *WPA: Writing Program Administration* and *Writing Lab Newsletter*. She also co-edited *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement*. She has directed the University Writing Program at Eastern Connecticut State University for twenty years, as well as the Writing Center for six years. Based on her scholarly and administrative background, Malenczyk is herself an invaluable voice in conversations about writing program administration, and this edited collection demonstrates her insight into those conversations and the conversants, many of whom have contributed to the collection.

While there are sections of the book that would be useful for high school teachers—as contributors encourage greater cooperation and communication between K-12 and higher education educators—the book is aimed primarily at teachers and educators at the postsecondary level. Most specifically, this book is aimed at those directors and coordinators of writing centers, writing across the curriculum programs, and undergraduate writing programs identified broadly as writing program administrators. The book will prove especially useful for the new

WPA. I am myself a new WPA in a large undergraduate writing program at a regional public university, so I find the publication of *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators* to be especially fortuitous. While I have held administrative positions before as a lecturer and graduate student, I have never been, if I may call back this unique term from our recent political past, the *decider*. And if I have learned anything in years past from working closely with experienced WPAs and listening to presentations at the CWPA annual conference, WPAs face a multitude of dynamic and unpredictable challenges on a nearly daily basis, but I also learned that the WPA community, strongly represented in this collection, is committed to offering advice and assistance to new WPAs. This book is emblematic of that commitment.

As Malenczyk explains in her introduction, the exigence for the book arose in response to a plea for help from a new WPA on the WPA-L. That WPA's sense of being overwhelmed in the face of such a daunting task—"Nothing in my ten years of adjuncting/TF prepared me for this!" (3)—undoubtedly resonates with everyone who remembers what it is like to engage in writing program administration for the first time. Although the book is useful for more experienced WPAs as well, I focus my overview of the book primarily on its usefulness for new WPAs. In fact, Mary R. Boland writes her chapter as a letter addressed to new WPAs. In an effort to provide readers with some direction for engaging with the text, I also emphasize one chapter in each section that may be most immediately useful for new WPA readers. All of the chapters are useful, so I offer my comments only as suggestions for diving into the collection.

As is the case with any edited collection, the authorial voice of the book shifts from one chapter to the next, but Malenczyk's introduction establishes what I see as the overarching tone of the book, striking the careful balance that so many WPAs strive for in their work and in their conversations with one another at annual conferences and on WPA-L, a highly active listserv where those interested in writing program administration carry on a variety of discussions. The tone Malenczyk establishes is one of optimistic,

almost playful practicality. As she provides a brief overview of the range of topics covered in the text, she notes, “Not all of these chapters are reassuring; they are, however, realistic . . .” (7). The new WPA should welcome that realism.

Following the lead of Erika Lindemann’s *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Malencyk arranges the book into six sections: “Initial Questions,” “Complicating Questions,” “Personal Questions,” “Helpful Questions,” “Vexed Questions,” and “Eternal Questions.” Within each section, chapters are framed, as the section titles suggest, as heuristic queries into numerous areas of interest for WPAs. For instance, in “What are students?” Kelly Ritter offers a nuanced view of students intended to remind readers that the very notion of “students” is richly varied, and that WPAs will interact with students who come from multiple age groups, levels of employment, and educational backgrounds. As the opening chapter in “Initial Questions,” Ritter’s chapter establishes the expectation that while each chapter offers insight into the complex issues and problems WPAs will encounter, those issues and problems are *always* complex. The entire book leaves the reader with an expanded awareness that the work of running a writing program, whether it be a WAC program for faculty development led by a non-tenure-track director, a peer-staffed writing center, or an undergraduate writing program staffed with any range and mix of graduate teaching assistants, full-time lecturers, adjuncts, and tenure-line faculty, is infinitely complex.

The first section, “Initial Questions,” addresses a number of issues that can help an incoming WPA get a sense of the lay of the land. In addition to the chapter on students, this section on “Initial Questions” includes chapters on placement, basic writing, first-year composition, English as a second language (ESL), and Writing across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID). As the contributors remind the reader, the new WPA should learn as quickly as possible how the program and the institution more broadly incorporate courses and resources to address these needs. Some campuses will, for instance, have practically no WAC/WID presence, while others will have

incorporated writing into the institutional culture to a significant degree. Further, some WPAs *are* WAC directors—and all WAC directors are WPAs—while others who direct first-year writing programs, for example, may historically have had nothing to do with WAC/WID programs. Structures and roles vary from one institution to another. The chapters in this section are aimed at helping WPAs to understand all of these different components of writing on different campuses. Or, as Doug Downs so eloquently puts it in his chapter on first-year composition, “It depends whom you ask” (50). Dan Royer and Roger Gilles’ chapter on placement is an excellent place to start in this section, since WPAs will inevitably need to make decisions about which courses students take and why.

The second section, “Complicating Questions,” reminds the reader that there is always more to learn and grasp about how our institutions function so that we may be better stewards of and advocates for writing in our institutional context. With chapters on general education, institutional mission, pre-college credit, transfer articulation, transfer, and assessment, the section offers a view of the kinds of issues that will arise routinely in institutions that have a significant impact on writing programs. Further, however, as Lauren Fitzgerald argues in her chapter on general education, writing program administrators are uniquely qualified to have a significant impact on these issues because of their institutional knowledge and rhetorical savvy. In this section, readers should start with Elizabeth Vander Lei and Melody Pugh’s chapter on institutional mission. New WPAs would benefit from reflecting on their own institution’s mission as they read. Any program within an institution is working to uphold and fulfill that mission, and becoming familiar with the institutional mission can give the new WPA valuable insight into a program’s history and its present state.

The third section, “Personal Questions,” collectively asks who is involved in the writing program as instructors and peer tutors, and what are the conditions of their employment. Seth Khan’s chapter on unions and Eileen E. Schell’s chapter on writing

instructors both address terms and protections of employment, while E. Shelley Reid's chapter on TA education emphasizes the careful balancing in TA education between the ubiquitous pedagogy course and ongoing professional engagement and development. The section provides a useful overview of the complexities of personnel issues in writing programs and the need to work with others on campus through faculty development. New WPAs would benefit from Schell's breakdown of the multiple kinds of instructors who teach in writing programs. Especially in 2014, termed by some the "Year of the Adjunct," every WPA needs to be very mindful of the differing professional statuses for each writing instructor in his or her program. WPAs interact with these instructors on a routine basis and are positioned to advocate for the improvement of professional and material conditions for all the instructors in their program, a responsibility that the new WPA should be prepared to take quite seriously.

The fourth section, "Helpful Questions," offers several chapters about projects and organizations with which most WPAs must be familiar, as well as a chapter on the importance of understanding a writing program's history. From William P. Banks' chapter on the National Writing Project to Irwin Weiser's chapter on the intertwined relationship between institutional administrations and budgets, this section provides readers with helpful backgrounds on those elements that are usually beyond a WPA's control. The chapter that I would suggest as a starting point in this section is Shirley K. Rose's chapter on writing program histories. Rose asserts, "A writing program's history can inform the current work of that program" (240). This seems like a useful reminder for new WPAs who must learn as much as they can about their programs to better enable them to make changes in how a writing program runs. She notes that without program histories, WPAs depend on "gossip, rumor, and hazy memory" to construct a narrative that is crucial to understand how a program works. She then offers a helpful introduction to methodologies for developing such a history if one is missing. While these histories are invaluable in a

local context, they also provide other WPAs with insight into broader historical trends in writing program administration. The field's strong interests in archival research indicate the importance of constructing multiple narratives, properly contextualized, to offer WPAs a rich understanding of WPA work.

The fifth section, "Vexed Questions," wrestles with some of the more difficult and involved questions WPAs have to answer on a regular basis. Peggy O'Neill focuses on educational standards, reminding WPAs that the "impact of standards on teaching and learning is what is most important" (344). Tom Fox and Rita Malenczyk offer narratives about their experiences with institutional politics that can have a soporific effect on new WPAs who may find themselves dealing with problems that spiral out of control and get them into trouble, from difficulties collaborating with faculty and administrators to, in some cases, losing tenure bids. I would urge readers first to give their attention to Gregory R. Glau's chapter on class size, in which Glau attempts to explain how administrators like deans or provosts think about class size as opposed to how WPAs think about class size. Glau urges WPAs to search for data to support the field's long-held assertion that smaller class sizes lead to better writing instruction. As financial resources for institutions continue to decline, WPAs will face more pressure to increase class size, so the new WPA is wise to consider Glau's call to study the correlation between class size and the improvement of writing instruction. As Glau puts it, the quandary of class size is something WPAs inherit, so the new WPA should begin considering the issue as quickly as possible.

The sixth and final section, "Eternal Questions," articulates some of the questions that WPAs will face throughout their careers: what is the intellectual work of WPAs, what is WPA research, what is principle, what is an English Department? I'll return to that last question momentarily. However, the chapter *every* WPA, new or veteran, should read first, is Douglas Hesse's chapter that urges WPAs to have a personal life. As the heft of this book—over 400 pages—and the astonishing range of topics covered suggest, writing program administration can be incredibly

demanding. Hesse encourages WPAs to set boundaries and to monitor their work time to ensure they are actually working, and perhaps most importantly, he urges WPAs to “be attentive to both personal and interpersonal time” (413). Hesse’s chapter is the last one in the book, an apt place for such a reminder.

The emphasis on the reality of WPA work is the greatest value of the text. However, as running a writing program can easily be daunting and overwhelming work, so can reading a book that is driven by the need to give readers a realistic overview of what it means to be a WPA. Seemingly in response to that challenge, Malencyk ends her introduction on an optimistic note. Responding to a quotation from Mary R. Boland’s chapter on academic freedom in which Boland calls the WPA the “steward—cultivator, promoter, and protector—of the study of language use at your institution,” Malencyk adds a simple but encouraging remark: “Really, you know. You are” (8). The casual, conversational line establishes the friendliness characteristic of the WPA community, a friendliness that other authors pick up on in their approaches to their chapters: Hannah Ashley’s metacommentary in her chapter on basic writing; banter between Tom Fox and Rita Malencyk in their dialogue-driven chapter on institutional politics; Chris Gallagher’s repeated references to *Talking Heads*; and Melissa Ianetta’s opening joke about deans in hell being punished by—well, I won’t ruin the joke. (I was thoroughly disappointed that my dean had already heard it.) Thus the book seeks both to empower WPAs to embrace their responsibilities as stewards of literacy and to provide frank and honest narratives and advice about the difficulties involved in such important work.

No collection can address every concern or topic, and Malencyk does not attempt to offer an encyclopedic last word on writing program administration. However, one chapter in the last section of the book brings into focus a particular absence of attention to independent writing programs or departments, although it must be noted that several contributors are members of such units. The chapter in question is Melissa Ianetta’s chapter

on the English Department, which encourages WPAs to consider more than rhetoric and composition's typical characterizations of English departments as places rife with conflict and professional disdain. While Ianetta's chapter offers valuable and too rarely articulated advice on interacting with others in English studies, it does raise the question about the collection: Why is there not a chapter on WPAs in independent writing programs and departments? Ianetta notes, quite rightly, that the vast majority of writing programs are housed in English departments, but there are numerous writing programs housed elsewhere in colleges and universities than in English departments. Such a chapter on independent programs in dialogue with Ianetta's chapter would prove helpful, even if only in helping WPAs in English departments to be the fish who see the water, to borrow Ianetta's metaphor.

Rita Malenczyk's *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators* will prove to be an indispensable resource for those involved in the complex, difficult, and rewarding work of writing program administration. The book does not address every issue a WPA will face, but no book is capable of that. But the contributions within its pages act as valuable introductions to multiple facets of writing program administrations that can then lead WPAs to more resources. This is the kind of book that the field should hope will be revised for subsequent editions.