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Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories (Review)

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curriculum developers, and the research community—regardless of those individuals' interest, or lack of it, in issues of race, racism, and identity in rhetoric and composition.

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Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories

Diana George, editor
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1999.
184 pp. \$20.00. ISBN: 0-86709-456-7.

The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher: Inquiry in Action and Reflection

Shirley K Rose and Irwin Weiser, editors
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1999.
188 pp. \$24.00. ISBN: 0-86709-464-8.

Writing program administrators have been important figures in the field of composition and rhetoric for many years. Although many if not most of the influential people in the field are or have been WPAs at one point in their careers, until recently publications explicitly focusing on writing program administration have been limited to *WPA*, the publication of the national Council of Writing Program Administrators, and isolated essays in other journals (although many publications that do not explicitly target administration are of immense importance to WPAs and are arguably aimed at them, rather than at the larger composition/rhetoric community). An outburst of WPA-focused scholarly ac-

tivity occurred in 1999 with the publication of no fewer than three book-length collections of essays on writing program administration: Linda Myers-Breslin's *Administrative Problem-Solving for Writing Programs and Writing Centers* (NCTE) and the two books discussed in this review.

On the surface, *Kitchen Cooks*, *Plate Twirlers*, and *Troubadours* and *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher* appear to be very different sorts of books. *Cooks* offers stories told by WPAs to provide “a portrait of people in a profession” (xiv). This portrait, made up of individual WPAs’ stories—of how they became WPAs, what and how they do their work, and how they collaborate with others—hopes, in editor Diana George’s words, to function as a form of mentoring: “It is through such stories, tied to the scholarship, research, and teaching that continue to shape our profession that we mentor each other and see beyond self” (180). By contrast, *Researcher* asserts that “[WPAs] play a critical role in the development as well as application of knowledge in the field,” that “even experienced WPAs need to learn additional ways to identify the opportunities for doing significant intellectual work in the context of their programs.” *Researcher* aims ultimately to foster recognition within the university community that the research performed by WPAs in their own programs is as important and worthy of reward as other, more traditional types of scholarly research. The two books participate in very different genres: one is personal and anecdotal; the other, research-based and discipline-oriented. But both books reveal a common theme that informs their various essays: control.

“This was not what I originally wanted to do with my life. It was not my first choice.” So begins Richard Miller’s essay, the first in *Cooks*. A few pages later, he continues, “Of course, the fact that institutional life gives rise to a general feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness is obvious to us all,” and notes the “pervasiveness of these sentiments in the academy” (7–8). These statements articulate a strain that runs, thickly or thinly, through many of the essays in this collection and, indeed, through much of the discussion among WPAs of their lot. This humanist-oriented antipathy toward organizational life represents an interesting form of institutional blindness: WPAs have traditionally looked toward literature professors as their models for what their professional lives *should* look like, but don’t. That in itself is not surprising; until very recently, most specialists in composition and rhetoric were the only writing specialists (at the professorial level) in whatever English department they found themselves in, and perforce the WPA as well. Their colleagues were all literature faculty, and the writing specialists would be judged by those literature faculty at tenure time. And since many had begun their careers as literature specialists

themselves, especially in the days before doctoral programs in composition/rhetoric were common, they brought with them many of the attitudes common to literature faculty, including an animosity to administration.

In another essay in *Cooks*, Mara Holt defines one WPA stance as “‘identifying with the oppressor;’ attempting to gain mainstream status by identifying primarily as scholars, exploiting the rest of us who value teaching and service as scholarship’s equal” (40). Such an identification can be dangerous, as Alice Gillam notes in quoting from survey research done by Sally Barr-Ebest in “Gender Differences in Writing Program Administration”; one respondent wrote, “I work from 10 PM–3 AM on weeknights to get my writing done—and arise at 6 AM to get kids to school” (71). As many of the writers in both books point out, this is often a response to universities’ tendency to see the work of WPAs as “invisible” “service” that doesn’t “count.” Yet the work has to get done, and the WPA does it, often at great personal cost. In an earlier collection, Charles I. Schuster portrayed this best in his image of the WPA as Boxer the Horse, “haul[ing] the stone and get[ting] up an hour earlier every morning even if it means career death at the age of seven” (87).

It’s worth noting, though, that Boxer is complicit in his own demise. What makes the overall message of *Cooks* depressing and frustrating is its sense that WPAs are not in control: their jobs are defined by university policies that are not of their making and in which they have no voice; their work situation is often more demanding than any human can endure for any length of time; and even their becoming WPAs is not volitional. George recounts her surprise at hearing a graduate student reveal his career plan to become a WPA. A seeming majority of the stories in *Cooks* include a disclaimer: I didn’t plan to do this with my life. One essay is titled, “On Being an Accidental Administrator.” While Doug Hesse contributes a thoughtful, lyrical meditation on his life as a man and administrator; Marguerite H. Helmers offers up a fresh metaphor for writing program administration based on orienteering; and other essays (mostly in the third section, “WPAs in Collaboration”) provide useful and interesting perspectives, the overall mood of *Cooks* is dark, because of the sense it conveys that to be a WPA is to be out of control.

In contrast, the essays in *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher* show WPAs taking control of their situations by researching them. The different kinds of research described in this collection not only serve the purposes of program improvement, political advantage, and institution-based persuasion; they also show how WPAs can control their positions through judicious exercise of the power that research—and the knowledge it creates—

provides. *Researcher* presents the WPA in a very different light than in *Cooks*: confident, resourceful, thoughtful, even wily, using various research tools to fend off ill-conceived assessment demands, develop curricula, create program histories and archives, and understand the dynamics of the WPA position itself. These essayists do not wonder at the accidents that made them administrators; rather, they use research to support their administrative agendas and argue cogently that their research should be acknowledged as scholarship as well.

Tim Peeples observes in his essay in *Researcher* “that WPAs aren’t “only” faculty members; they are also administrators, and the two roles require very different skills and lead to very different sets of expectations and behaviors that WPAs must often deal with simultaneously. Too often, it seems, the contributors to *Cooks* treat their administrative roles as something subordinate, even distasteful. Keith Rhodes worries that the WPA may be “a corn king—a ritual sacrifice” (88). And Jeannette Harris, in the “Coda,” observes that she tries not to think of herself as an administrator: “I have always viewed every administrative position I have held as opportunities to teach or to mentor. Rather than viewing myself as in charge, or directing, or managing, I think of what I do as a form of teaching” (177). Miller’s image of the despair inherent in institutions resonates in Harris’s refusal to acknowledge her participation in “institutional life” as a major aspect of her professional identity. Interestingly, the tendency among WPAs to identify themselves first (and sometimes only) as faculty members cuts through both books in fascinating ways. In *Cooks*, M. L. Tiernan complains that “With the exception of WPAs, I can think of no faculty who are required to document their academic service . . . something is out of kilter” (167), while the essays in *Researcher* take for granted that writing program research is serious intellectual work—the work of faculty who choose dual roles as administrators.

The image of the administrator that dominates *Researcher* begins with the assertion in the Introduction that WPAs “play a critical role in the development as well as the application of knowledge in the field” (v). While their contributions may be undervalued in academic culture—an undervaluing the editors locate in “the academy’s failure to value the focal subject of study—student writing” (xi)—WPAs’ research is “theoretically-informed, systematic, principled” (ix), and empowering. Julia Ferganchick-Neufgang focuses her critique of empiricism on *possibilities*; Betty Bamberg chronicles the persuasive power of WPA research to affect curricular decisions at two universities; Wanda Martin describes the salutary effects of ongoing outcomes assessment research on a writing program. These essays and the others in the volume show the WPA not as accidental,

victimized, or underappreciated, but rather acting—taking control—to create respected spaces within the academy for themselves and their work.

Ultimately, the two books represent two complementary aspects of the WPA's professional and personal life. There's no doubt that many WPAs labor under conditions in colleges and universities that appallingly devalue their contributions. There's no doubt that many WPAs work far too hard, have too many responsibilities, and juggle too many pieces of fruit. Sometimes they can make lemonade out of the lemons, as *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher* shows; sometimes, as some of the essays in *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours* suggest, they're stuck with the lemons. What makes the difference lies, it seems, in the extent to which WPAs perceive themselves as having control, or the possibility of gaining control, over their professional and personal lives. Both these books may help in that perception: one by offering stories that, as Diana George notes, "[tell] us something of ourselves" (xiv) and our situations, the other by offering various methods for increasing control over those situations.

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Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times

Nancy Maloney Grimm

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1999.

140 pp. \$26.00. ISBN: 0-86709-487-7.

Nancy Grimm's *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* wants to make you uncomfortable. It wants to take your hard-earned writing center naiveté away. It wants to pull the comfy rug of "modernist" assumptions about literacy right out from under your writing center's conceptual underpinnings, and it wants to sow in its place the seeds of a postmodernist sensi-