

Book Review

Learning on the Job and Learning from the Job: A Review of *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*

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Caswell, Nicole I., Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Rebecca Jackson. *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*. Utah State UP, 2016. 256 pages.

As Mark Hall adeptly chronicles in *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work: An Inquiry-Based Approach to Tutor Education*, the “Calls for further and more rigorous research are not new in the field of Writing Center Studies . . .” (8). The four decades of sources he cites certainly bolster his claim. The most recent discussions about rigorous research in writing center studies such as Babcock and Thonus as well as Driscoll and Perdue have focused on the production—or the lack thereof—of replicable, aggregable, and data-supported research with a focus on quantitative methods. However, in recent years, several texts such as Hall’s have answered the call for more research using a variety of methods. Detailing the inquiry-based learning and community of practice theories behind tutor education and analyzing the resulting writing center texts like observation reports, session notes, and blogs, Hall provides directors with the tools to analyze their own tutor education programs and texts. Mackewicz and Thompson’s 2015 book *Talk about Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors* uses discourse analysis to identify the practices of successful writing consultants, providing much needed insight into what makes a successful writing center session and, potentially, how to replicate those sessions. While much current research in writing center studies focuses on examining what happens during sessions and how best to train tutors, Nicole I. Caswell, Jackie

Grutsch McKinney, and Rebecca Jackson's volume *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* turns its attention to the profession, exploring who directs the writing center and what kind of labor is involved. This book uses detailed case studies to offer a rich picture of the wide variety of position configurations for writing center directors and provides insights into the labor writing center directors perform under those working conditions. Given that it won the International Writing Center Association's 2017 Outstanding Book award, the excellent and informative work in *Working Lives* is evident.

In addition to demonstrating the potential and depth of case study research for writing center studies, Caswell et al.'s book extends the disciplinary conversation about how the work of directing a writing center is defined and identified. Categorizing the existing scholarship in the field, the authors show that it "often tries to pin down what is 'typical' about the work of directing a writing center" by conducting surveys of directors, theorizing definitions of different types of directors, and providing anecdotal and advice narratives (5). Instead Caswell et al. wanted to listen to and privilege the voices of program directors, an impulse that led them to embrace "qualitative case-study inquiry" (9). As the authors describe, although Dave Healy suggested this type of approach to further the study of writing center directors in 1995, almost none of this work has been done since, with one exception: in 2013, Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny published, "Of Ladybugs, Low Status, and Loving the Job," an important companion to *Working Lives*. As I will show here, both issue serious calls for writing center studies and composition to reconsider the dominant narratives about what types of position configurations are best for writing center directors.¹

Whereas Caswell et al. follow participants, interviewing them multiple times throughout the first year of their jobs and creating detailed profiles for each, Geller and Denny record and analyze single interviews with fourteen writing center directors, who together provide a representative sample of the profession. Despite their differing methodologies and participants, these studies elicit findings that confirm one another and should provoke a critical discussion about the configuration of writing center director positions, particularly the working conditions those positions create. Though Caswell et al.'s case study and profile approach provides great detail about the various positions their participants occupy, their nine participants fall into the two categories Geller and Denny identify as "dominant models for writing center administration: administrative professionals and tenure-track faculty" (100). These categories are important, because as both sets of authors point out, within writing center studies, tenure-track writing center director positions have long been considered essential to developing a disci-

plinary identity for the director and for advancing the field. This narrative has shaped how positions are configured and how graduate students are prepared to work in the field. After completing their studies, though, both sets of authors identify the need to reconsider this narrative. In their individual contributions to the introduction, Grutsch McKinney describes loosening her grip on her “previously tightly held belief that tenure-track faculty positions are always better for writing center directors” (*Working Lives* 12). Caswell identifies how conducting this research challenged her “to interrogate our disciplinary narratives about preparing graduate students for the work of writing center administration” (*Working Lives* 13). Although their analysis of which new writing center directors stayed in their jobs and which left after that first year shows that tenure-track writing center directors with PhDs in composition stayed in their positions, the more nuanced information in the individual profiles demonstrates the tension the tenure-track directors faced trying to complete the different types of labor required by their positions.

From their study, Geller and Denny learn that the aspects of writing center professionals’ (WCP) positions “that turn out to be the most important to their success and satisfaction are at tension with the academic cultural actions that feed disciplinary growth and could position WCPs as central agents in the discipline of English” (97). As detailed in their study, Geller and Denny find that the tenure track position that is a part of the academic culture and meant to confer status and clout to writing center professionals also “makes them feel more torn in the everyday”; directors who are academic professionals may lack academic status, but Geller and Denny report that they “seem ‘happier’” (103). Of all the ways these studies confirmed one another, encouraging this reconsideration of how writing center director positions are configured is one of the most important.

Geller and Denny may have first called for this reconsideration in 2013, but it is the more detailed case study inquiry approach of *Working Lives* which allows Caswell et al. to show why, as a field, writing center studies needs to “revise the ways we think about WCPs’ position configurations” (Geller and Denny 104). Caswell et al. categorize the participants’ work as disciplinary, emotional, or everyday labor: disciplinary labor is “work that involves interaction with other professionals, scholarship, or research, e.g. attending academic conferences, participating in a scholarly listserv, or writing for academic venues; might be listed on a curriculum vitae”; emotional labor is “work that involves care, mentoring, or nurturing of others; work of building and sustaining relationships; work to resolve conflicts; managing our display of emotion, usually an unstated requirement of the job”; and everyday labor is “day-to-day work of [the] job (may include teaching or

other roles as well); might be listed in an annual report or in a job description” (27). For each profile, Caswell et al. include a chart where they categorize the different types of labor discussed by the director. The charts provide an effective way to show how the labor of each position is impacted by the position configuration. The long lists of emotional and daily labor performed regularly by directors is a striking contrast to the blank space and relatively small amount of disciplinary labor. If emotional and daily labor dominate writing center directors’ time in this way, then perhaps readers, like the authors, should reconsider the wisdom of writing center director positions that require disciplinary labor, or attempt to define positions in ways that better reflect the actual labor performed. As the authors discuss in their conclusion, the impact of this invisible labor is rarely considered when calculating things like course release times for directors. The everyday and emotional labor involved in directing a writing center impacts directors’ lives in other ways as well. Faculty status for a director can “imply that the work is discrete, with clear beginning and end dates,” yet what these case studies show is that “tasks bleed from week to week, semester to semester” (193). Caswell et al.’s findings extend Geller and Denny’s call to critically reconsider how writing center director positions are configured by using the specific and local stories of these case studies to make the different types of labor involved in directing a writing center visible.

In addition to the way writing center tasks refuse to begin and end in conjunction with a typical faculty appointment, the chapters focused on Allison and Joe, the two tenure-track writing center directors participating in the study, illustrate just how difficult it is to balance the everyday and emotional labor required of directors with the disciplinary labor required of their tenure-track positions. One quick glance at Allison and Joe’s labor charts reveals that, even though their more stable, tenure-track faculty lines should make them “more likely to be active in disciplinary conversations,” very little of their time is devoted to this type of labor (6). Tenure-track directorships are meant, in part, to enable directors to contribute to the development of the field of writing centers studies; however, the disciplinary labor listed for these directors focuses on tutor mentoring and developing, not necessarily on contributing to the field. As Allison and Joe’s division of labor demonstrates, “directors labor in untenable positions or in positions where they lack necessary resources, struggle for visibility, and thus select labor that brings them recognition and satisfaction” (14). The demands of their emotional and everyday labor make disciplinary work difficult, and, when it is done, it extends the development of their local staff and center, not necessarily the profession. Geller and Denny quote one of their anonymized participants who describes this well: “There is so much

I want to do *now* that it makes it hard to prioritize that writing work over the more immediately rewarding daily collaborative work within my writing center” (116). As each of these studies show, the emotional and every-day labor is often the least visible to others, but it is also the work that is the most immediately rewarding and dominates the time and energy of directors.

For readers of this journal, how each of these studies addresses the relationship between writing program administration and writing center administration will be of particular interest. As Geller and Denny identify when establishing WCP positions with composition studies and English, “WCPs are positioned as a substrata of writing program administration” (98). Throughout their study, Geller and Denny draw attention back to how, even with tenure-track status, writing center professionals struggle to establish a disciplinary identity for themselves as WPAs have done, or to perform the disciplinary labor required to advance their field. Given their focus on new writing center directors, Caswell et al. isolate one direct factor contributing to the differing labor conditions between writing program administrators and writing center directors, and it is worth considering in full here:

The positions our directors took were seen as appropriate for beginners; prior experience leading a writing center was not required. They were also seen as positions for which institutional capital and contextual knowledge was not helpful; some directors who were hired into their positions were outsiders. We can contrast this with writing program director positions for which experience is often required and in which a director might first work at a campus through their pretenure days, taking on the WPA position posttenure. We wonder why such a wide gulf exists between the way writing center director and WPA positions are configured. (199–200)

Though there are certainly instances when a person hired as a writing program administrator is new to the field, or at least to the campus, writing program administrative work is understood to require institutional capital and contextual knowledge in a way that writing center work is not. Reading through the case studies in *Working Lives*, however, there is hardly one in which the new director did not face a challenge rooted in that lack of institutional capital or contextual knowledge. In contradiction to the idea that directing a writing center is work that can be taken on with little or no experience, it is important to acknowledge “the first theme that emerged in the data is that the work is difficult, often untenable, even for those ‘prepared’ for writing center administration” (193, emphasis removed). If, how-

ever, even those prepared for this work found it difficult, then surely it is time to reconsider the idea that very little experience in administration or local contextual knowledge is required to run a writing center.

With decreasing budgets, everyone in academia is consistently asked to do more with less, then they are often rewarded for their successes with additional responsibilities. Consequently, like Caswell et al. I do not want to “invoke a picture of the writing center director as the only overworked person in education today” (193). As these two studies demonstrate, however, traditional attitudes about the types of positions beneficial for writing center directors, and writing center studies as a discipline, may contribute to the challenges writing center directors face. Grutsch McKinney notes that this book, published after her *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, was an attempt to shift her focus away from grand narratives of the field to the individuals performing the work of the field; however, even as it demonstrates the power of individual stories, *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* also encourages readers to question the existing grand narrative about the best working conditions for directors. Whether or not the answer is bringing attitudes about writing center administration more in line with those about writing program administration, *Working Lives* should provoke critical discussions about writing center administration.

NOTE

1. Each set of authors uses different terms to describe writing center administrators. I will follow the author’s lead and when referring to Geller and Denny’s work use writing center professionals or WCPs as they do. When referring to Caswell et al.’s work I will use writing center directors.

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