Book Review

Traveling to New and Familiar Places:
A Review of *WPAs in Transition*

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Adams Wooten, Courtney, Jacob Babb, and Brian Ray, editors. *WPAs in Transition: Navigating Educational Leadership Positions.* Utah State UP, 2018. 321 pages.

As a WPA who recently moved across the country to take on a newly established WPA position, I found particular resonance with Courtney Adams Wooten, Jacob Babb, and Brian Ray's *WPAs in Transition: Navigating Educational Leadership Positions* reliance on travel as a metaphor for WPA transitions, and I suspect their efforts toward inclusivity led others to feel similarly. The volume establishes from its first sentence the ways in which it intends to reach WPAs across diverse roles, ranks, cultures, contexts, and institutions, and it contains works from the perspectives of contingent, interim, graduate student, tenure-track, and tenured administrators, directors, assistant directors, and site directors. Authors tackle issues of gender, race, and status from many institutions, including two-year, four-year, small liberal arts, HBCUs, and the United States Air Force Academy. These inclusions not only represent our field's expansive breadth of experiences but encourage unity among all of us in the field, including those too often left out of the conversation.

WPAs in Transition is divided into four sections: Power and Agency, Identities and Subjectivities, Collaborations and Dialogues, and Disruption and Activism. The four chapters in section 1: Power and Agency "contemplate the power that WPAs actually have, the role that power plays in their efforts to support and develop their programs, and the agency they have as WPAs" (14). A natural choice to open the collection, Karen Keaton Jackson's "A State of Permanent Transition: Strategies for Surviving in an Ever-

Present Marginal Space" uses John Kotter's "What Leaders Really Do" as a touchstone to explore what it means to be both leader and manager, ultimately illustrating the ways in which one can concurrently inhabit both roles. While Jackson does address the limitations to inhabiting multiple roles, such as exhaustion and decreased accessibility, she also shares with us potential affordances of liminal realities (34–35). "Being in the margins," she writes, "means the rules are still being formulated and often we can determine how much of a part we want to play in that process" (36).

The second piece, "Suddenly WPA: Lessons from an Early and Unexpected Transition" by Chris Blankenship, describes how he inherited of a director of composition position despite taking steps to avoid administrative duties pre-tenure. Blankenship's story is well told and all too familiar: he relays the back-and-forth negotiations he engaged in over release time and contract length; he describes coping with colleague resentment; and he observes how men's arguments regarding labor and compensation are often better received than those made by women—a point he openly and refreshingly acknowledges. For me, the highlight of this chapter is Blankenship's inclusion of the email he sent to his chair rejecting the university's initial offer, which I fully expect to return to if faced with a similar situation (42–43). Like Jackson, Blankenship ultimately shares with us the glass-half-full perception of his efforts; the next WPA received the same course reassignment he had, suggesting that his negotiations had a lasting impact on the university's composition program and perception of WPA work. The collection's authors do not shy away from the struggles of WPA realities, but they also display their ability and willingness to examine the positive aspects of their experiences and reframe missteps as teachable moments. For example, Jennifer Riley Campbell and Richard Colby's rhetorical reexamining of responses to teaching observations in the third chapter helps to ensure that the book lifts readers up instead of weighing us down (58–59; 64).

The last chapter in section 1, Talinn Phillips, Paul Shovlin, and Megan Titus' "'An Exercise in Cognitive Dissonance': Liminal WPA Transitions," focuses on survey data derived from four gWPAs. The data represent the struggles liminal WPAs experience, such as the lack of authority needed to set clear boundaries and "lack of protection" (74–75). As I when I first read Phillips, Shovlin, and Titus' 2014 *WPA* article "Thinking Liminally: Exploring the (com)Promising Positions of the Liminal WPA," I was struck by the authors' choice to refer to itinerant WPAs as *liminals*, a jarring term that conjures within the reader the very tensions and dissonance their findings suggest. The chapter concludes with a helpful list of recommendations for those in non-liminal positions to support liminals, arguing, "it is far easier to offer those with power advice on how to support liminals in their

transitions than it is to give liminals advice on how to negotiate those transitions" (82).

Section 2: Identities and Subjectivities explores "how our work as WPAs impacts our professional and personal identities and how our subjectivity shapes and is shaped by our role as administrators" (15). The section begins with Andrea Scott's "Defining Disciplinarity at Moments of Transition" and Kate Pantelides' "The Joys of WPAhood: Embracing Interruption in the Personal and the Professional," which both disrupt existing narratives of disciplinary identity. Scott, who has a PhD in literature and whose work in a multidisciplinary writing program led to her decision join the field of writing studies complicates the field's conversion narratives, arguing that embracing a "more synergetic disciplinary ethos may help us reimagine" the work of the field "as the dappled purview of many disciplines" (98). Scott further argues that the field's perpetuation of competition narratives between composition and other fields, especially literature, does not do us any favors and ultimately furthers "stereotypes about both fields" (88). In the chapter to follow, Pantelides interrupts the myths of the *superparent* and *superWPA* and challenges notions that parents and WPAs need to hide "any challenges in balancing the personal and the professional" (101). Continuing with the book's successful approach of finding affordances in what may often be construed as obstacles, Scott illustrates how the intersections of her literature and WPA backgrounds open up new disciplinary ways of seeing that inform and enhance her scholarship, and Pantelides suggests embracing the dual roles of parent and WPA and practicing impiousness, explaining: "We *need* to be impious. We need to be honest. We need to be actively looking for joy and be able to recognize it when it appears, hold onto it when we can, and embrace the next interruption as mindfully as we are able" (109).

These interruptions are followed by Rebecca Jackson, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Nicole I. Caswell's "Metaphors We Work By: New Writing Center Directors' Labor and Identities"—which should serve as required reading for all incoming WCDs—and Amy Rupiper Taggart's "Reseeing the WPA Skill Set: GenAdmins Transitioning from WPA to University Pedagogical Leadership"—which should be required reading for all current WPAs. Jackson, Grutsch McKinney, and Caswell's study of nine new writing center directors illuminates the uncertain and high-pressure transitions of new directors articulating what many of us, not just WCDs, need to hear our first couple of years in a job. They note,

> no matter how strong the director's preparation—whether a PhD in rhetoric and composition, a dissertation in Writing Center studies, coursework in administration, years of writing center experience—or confidence going into their job, each had to learn to negotiate the system in which they worked. (122)

As they note, transitioning into a new role is a process, and the process of transitioning takes time (111). But what about when transitions are "forced" and "unanticipated," as a result of crisis (155)? To this end, Rupiper Taggart shows us how WPAs can "reflect on the broader skill and knowledge sets we possess and their relevance in other institutional spaces" (154), while also reflecting on the culture shock and feelings of loss WPAs can experience when negotiating new roles (163–66).

Completing the second section are Beth Huber's "Get Offa My Lawn! Generational Challenges of WPAs in Transition" and Steven J. Corbett's "Performance Attribution and Administrative (Un)Becoming: Learning to Fail While Trying to Fly," both of which illustrate the importance of reflection in understanding the situatedness of the present. Huber chronicles how the transitions of the four Western Carolina University WPAs parallel the national profession revealing the ways each new WPA pushed and pulled—pushing against the previous WPA's philosophies and practices and pulling as they benefit from the foundations laid by their predecessors. Huber insightfully concludes that, while none of them made it easy on their predecessors or successors, conflict propels programs forward just as such conflict has propelled the field forward (128; 136). In a similar vein, Corbett draws

> on research in knowledge transfer and productive failure . . . and [his] own experience . . . to highlight why coming to terms with and learning from failure is an important, even necessary, part of the training and professional work of the WPA. (140)

As I read through section 3: Collaborations and Dialogues, I particularly enjoyed the different representations of collaboration. In "You Say Goodbye, I Say Hello," Letiza Guglielmo and Beth Daniell describe their complicated transitions as their institution merged with another; they pause frequently and thoughtfully to consider the impact on the other school's WPA and their faculty colleagues and to highlight the chaos that can ensue, resentments that can form, and lessons that can be learned when universities impulsively make big moves. While Guglielmo and Daniell's piece shows how order can morph quickly into chaos, Tereza Joy Kramer, Jaquelyn Davis, Holland Enke, and Reyna Olegarion's "The Collaborative WPA: Bringing a Writing Center Ethos to WAC" shows how collabora-

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tion and community can turn chaos into harmony as well as help ease the transition of WPAs.

In fact, I was still glowing from the feel-good resonance of Kramer et. al's story of establishing a thriving WAC/WID/WC community enhanced by their demonstration of collaborative authorship, when I began reading Laura Davies' "Command and Collaboration: Leading as a New WPA." Davies explores the roots, risks, and rewards of collaboration and command theory, illustrating how they are "far more complicated and complementary than they may seem" (198). Through detailing her experience as WPA at the United States Air Force Academy and performing a close reading of Louise Wetherbee Phelps' essay "Becoming a Warrior: Lessons Learned of the Feminist Workplace," Davies shows how both strategies can be useful for transitioning WPAs. As someone whose first inclination is almost always collaboration, Davies explanation of command theory as creative and able to foster definitive roles and boundaries was eye-opening and persuasive (193).

The third section ends with the expertly placed "There and Back Again, Sort Of: Returning as WPA (and Preparing to Leave)" by Chris Warnick, which reiterates one of the points made in the introduction: WPAs "make multiple transitions throughout their careers" not just as they enter and leave positions. Warnick, who returns to WPA work after a hiatus suggests that literacy brokering—serving as a "go-betwee[n] in literacy exchanges" (220)—is a potential strategy for negotiating "the emotions involved in crucial transitions" (221) and staying "focused on the stakeholders' interests rather than [his] own" (225).

Section 4: Disruption and Activism begins with Sarah Stanley's "Revolving Doors and Settled Locks: Staying Put in an Undesirable Place," which complicates the practice of stepping-stone academic placements, revealing how her disconnection from the WPA community and discourse led to her remaining in her WPA position. Stanley speculates that, if she had a connection to others in the field and field lore during that time, she likely would have left. She also contends that her departure would have diminished the opportunities and success she has experienced in her current position and institutional context (236), which includes not only being a WPA, but also "a volunteer, a board member, and an activist" (242). Stanley convincingly argues that "electing to try, acquire, and learn impacts places, and writing may only truly 'flourish' when the WPA is trusted," which means that WPAs should also consider "staying put" (233–35). Later in this section, in "Fostering Ethical Transitions: Creating Community as Writing Program Administrators," Bradley Smith and Kerri K. Morris illustrate how to create community, collaboration, and program coherence that can withstand (and

even be informed by) WPA transitions and different perspectives. To this end, Smith and Morris weave their individual WPA origin stories, process analysis detailing how they developed a cohesive pedagogical vision among a "disparate group of teachers tasked with teaching in a first-year writing program," theoretical grounding for their approach, and reflection about what ultimately worked or didn't together toward defining, illustrating, and advocating for "coming together" (261; 70).

The remaining three chapters in section 4 argue for inclusiveness and activism. In "Connection, Community, and Identity: Writing Programs and WPAs at the Community College," Mark Blaauw-Hara and Cheri Lemieux Spiegel illustrate through an effective balance of well-paced, compelling narrative and equally compelling analysis the struggles of community college WPAs to find communities of practice (CoP), access pertinent scholarship, and gain recognition and support in the field and within their institutions. Using their roles within the broader CWPA community as evidence, they posit that "engagement with the larger WPA community can support those transitioning into WPA roles at community colleges" (247). Molly Tetreault's chapter, "Writing Center Professionals, Marginalization, and the Faculty/Administrator Divide" also stems from feelings of marginalization. A condescending experience at a conference illuminated the ways in which the field's focus "on job status as a measure of marginalization . . . undermin[es] attempts to bring WCPs out of the margins" (274), inspiring her call for dismantling the hierarchal assumptions that can make some feel unwelcome (282). The final chapter, Liliana M. Naydan's "Transitioning from Contingent to Tenure-Track Faculty Status as a WPA: Working toward Solidarity and Academic-Labor Justice through Hybridity," is perhaps the culminating argument for inclusion. Naydan describes the power dynamics experienced and lessons learned from two disparate WPA positions, "a contingent faculty WPA who ran a writing center at an institution with a labor union for contingent faculty" and "a tenure-track assistant-professor WPA at an institution that lacks a faculty labor union," toward arguing that "working toward labor justice in solidarity across disciplines . . . [is] a means by which to transition into having *actual* power on the job" (294).

Throughout *WPAs in Transition*, metaphors for WPA work and transitions are developed, examined, and complicated. Participants in Jackson, Grutsch McKinney, and Caswell's study refer to WPA work as being like "conducting an orchestra," "playing Tetris," and "juggling" (114–15). Huber conjures the images of WPAs past as "giants and ghosts" (127); Stanley compares it to cultivating a garden (149), and Riley Campbell and Colby explore metaphors of servers and cooks toward showing how such metaphors can limit our understanding of our roles and progress therein

(52). As Jackson, Grutsch McKinney, and Caswell explain in their chapter, within our metaphors "there are hints of how [our[particular contexts shape [our] telling" (120). Thus, as I completed the volume, I returned to Adams Wooten, Babb, and Ray's choice of travel as their metaphor for WPA transitions.

Each of the chapters in this collection include reflection about the journeys of WPAs—the pit-stops, potholes, traffic, and lookout points, and, through showing in the text's conclusion how "transfer can and should inform readers' interpretations of the transition narratives," Ray provides readers with a map for effectively navigating these multiple and varied locations (303). Though the metaphor of travel isn't explicit throughout, like a tourist, I was still able to spot something new in my visit to each chapter—new strategies or new ways of seeing—and to spot familiar landmarks to guide me when I'm feeling lost. In fact, I have a shelf of books that I keep nearby for those moments I feel overwhelmed, discouraged, or inspired to initiate change; *WPAs in Transition: Navigating Educational Leadership Positions* has already earned its place among them.

Note

Neither Courtney Adams Wooten nor Jacob Babb participated in the commissioning or editing of this review essay.

Work Cited

Phillips, Talinn, Paul Shovlin, and Megan Titus. "Thinking Liminally: Exploring the (com)Promising Positions of the Liminal WPA." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 42–64.

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