

Review: *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers*

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Goodburn, Amy, Donna LeCourt, and Carrie Leverenz, eds. *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2013. Print.

In February 2013, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article by MLA past president Michael Bérubé lamenting the state of graduate education in the humanities. Bérubé argues that humanities graduate education “is a seamless garment of crisis: If you pull on any one thread, the entire thing unravels.” One thread of this crisis, Bérubé writes, is the humanities academic job market, which “has been in a state of more or less permanent distress for more than 40 years.” He asserts that in response, “We need to remake our programs from the ground up to produce teachers and researchers *and* something else, but since it is not clear what those something else might be, we haven’t begun to rethink the graduate curriculum accordingly.” Enter Amy Goodburn, Donna LeCourt, and Carrie Leverenz’s timely and important edited collection, *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers*, which takes on the very project Bérubé calls for: imagining what the “something else” might be and how best to prepare graduate students for them, specifically within the field of rhetoric and composition.

The book’s introduction explains the origins of the collection, which began as a proposed 2008 CCCC panel in response to a 2007 CCCC featured session that had introduced Ballif, Davis, and Mountford’s *Women’s Ways of Making it in Rhetoric and Composition*. Goodburn, LeCourt, and Leverenz describe their reaction to *Women’s Ways*, which they saw as too narrowly defining what it means for women to “make it”: acquiring full-time, tenure-track positions in research institutions and producing scholarship (vii). The editors argue that this limited

conception is problematic because “if we continue to value our academic lives primarily in terms of what we publish and its authorized effects, then what we spend most of our time doing—teaching, administering, mentoring—becomes implicitly devalued” (viii). Responses to their own panel impelled Goodburn, LeCourt, and Leverenz to collect narratives from rhetoric and composition professionals who did not follow the highly-sought path to tenured positions at large research institutions, but who rather pursued other options. These stories—told by those working in non-tenure-track university positions, or in traditionally marginalized institutions such as community and tribal colleges, or outside the academy altogether—offer different perspectives that might productively challenge how the field defines itself and its values in order to expand “predominant definitions of professional success beyond the research-focused university career” (viii-x).

Wrapped up with concerns about “disciplinary identity,” and more directly related to Bérubé’s point mentioned above, is the need to address the realities of the academic job market. Goodburn, LeCourt, and Leverenz assert in the introduction that we must acknowledge the trend in higher education toward the dwindling availability of tenure-track positions—and, in fact, the dwindling of academic jobs overall in the midst of economic downturn. Given this reality, the editors state, we cannot assume that all graduates of rhetoric and composition programs will land tenure lines in traditional university settings, or that these graduates will automatically wish to make the sacrifices necessary to acquire those few positions (x-xi). Nonetheless, a stigma remains for those who do not attain these jobs as tenured professors whose primary responsibility is research. Drawing on Marxist theory, the editors explain that “those not directly involved with scholarship signify as having less value, and [...] are accorded with different labor conditions, thus justifying the use of adjunct labor and contributing to the ‘corporatization’ of the university” (xv). In contrast to this devaluing of non-tenure-track work, *Rewriting Success* attempts to valorize the knowledge-making that is made possible specifically by being outside such positions. And it argues that the field should re-think graduate education to better prepare students for the possibility of alternate career paths—paths that should explicitly be valued for the different kinds of

knowledge sought and found by those professionals who follow them (xv-xvii).

The narratives in *Rewriting Success* are divided into three sections, with Section One focusing on “Redefining Work in Academic Institutions.” These compelling essays come from professionals working inside the academy, but in non-traditional roles off the tenure track or in institutions where the primary goal is not research production. Mya Poe’s “Field Notes from a Composition Adjunct at the Biomedical Engineering Outpost” uses the spacial metaphor of the “outpost” to explain how her position as an adjunct at MIT somewhat removed from the department writing program allows her to effectively teach disciplinary writing in biomedical engineering and to bring this knowledge “from the field” back to the discipline of rhetoric and composition (3-17). In “Moving Up in the World: Making a Career at a Two-year College,” Malkiel Choseed challenges the notion that professionals working in four-year institutions are defined by their research and that those working in two-year colleges are defined by their teaching, arguing that this is a false distinction, particularly in rhetoric and composition. Choseed wants “to see teaching valued differently and help those seeking to determine whether a teaching-focused job might best meet their needs as practitioners *and* scholars of rhetoric and composition” (20). Next, Ildikó Melis’s “Nontraditional Professionals: A Successful Career with a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition?” asserts that the undeserved lowly status of many composition instructors in the academy sends mixed messages to students about the value of writing itself in our culture. Melis, who has worked in a variety of positions including at a community college and tribal college, issues a call to “expand traditional concepts of success to include more of the experiences of nontraditional professionals who work in our field...” (35). In “Opportunity and Respect: Keys to Contingent Faculty Success,” Sue Doe contends that contingent faculty positions can be viable and humane long- or short-term career options if the qualities of opportunity and respect are present (51-68). And finally, Heather Graves offers “Disclaimer: ‘Professional Academic on a Closed Course: Do Not Attempt this at Home,’” in which she recounts her decision to leave a tenure-track position at a teaching institution to become a full-time scholar and writer with no institutional affiliation. While Graves acknowledges that many people could not financially afford to make

the same decision, she maintains that it was a useful temporary strategy for her to successfully write and publish several textbooks (69-82). Taken together, these essays show a range of meaningful options beyond traditional positions in research institutions, and they demonstrate how such options not only benefit the individuals who chose them, but also allow those professionals to contribute to the field of rhetoric and composition in innovative ways

Just as Section One highlights the valuable contributions of professionals working in non-traditional roles within academia, Section Two, entitled “Redefining Valuable Knowledge Beyond the Academy,” highlights the stories of rhetoric and composition professionals who have gone further afield by stepping outside of academia altogether. The first essay, “Coming to Terms: Authority in Action and Advocacy” by Moira K. Amado-McCoy, describes Amado-McCoy’s work as the executive director of an LGBTQ community center. She argues that people trained in rhetoric and composition are well suited for work as advocates in the public and nonprofit sectors, and that they should be actively encouraged to pursue those roles (83-103). In “Ten Ways English Studies Contributes to User Experience Research, or: How to Retrofit an English Studies Degree,” Dave Yeats explains how he draws on his graduate education in his job as a user experience (UX) researcher at a small consulting firm (104-116). Similarly, in “Establishing a Writing Curriculum at a Law Firm,” Benjamin Opiari provides an impressive account of how his rhetoric and composition education prepared him for a career as an in-house writing consultant at a large, multinational law firm, where he helps bring clarity and concision to legal writing (117-131). Further, in “My Unexpected Success as a Technical Editor,” Shannon Wisdom describes her position as a technical editor at a company that publishes and teaches educational materials about data and telecommunications (135). She argues that rhetoric and composition professionals are well positioned to succeed and enjoy such work, and she offers recommendations for how graduate programs can even better prepare students for work as technical communicators (132). The final essay in this section, “Conversing with the Same Field: Same Questions, Different Road,” is Nick Carbone’s story of deciding to leave academia for a fulfilling career in publishing at Bedford/St. Martin’s. As Carbone states, the job taught him that “there are lots of places where you can work with smart people who care about

ideas in places other than the academy” (153). These narratives offer compelling alternatives of meaningful work beyond the ivory tower—and they nod toward the need for graduate education in rhetoric and composition to gaze beyond that tower in preparing students for these possibilities.

The redesign of graduate education to better meet the needs of students who may seek alternative careers is the focus on Section 3, “Working for Change.” Cindy Moore’s “Mentoring for Change” begins the section with a charge that those faculty who mentor graduate students are minimally obligated to “ensure that our students understand what the real opportunities are for them, what the pros and cons are for various options, and how to develop the skills they will need to secure the positions they seek” (161). In “Composing a Life: Negotiating Personal, Professional, and Activist Commitments within the Academy,” Jennifer Ahern-Dodson shares her experiences as a postdoctoral teaching fellow and then as an adjunct and how these opportunities put her in “the unique position of collaborating as a change agent to foster writing across the curriculum in unexpected ways” (189). Stacey Pigg, Kendall Leon, and Martine Courant Rife’s “Researching to Professionalize, not Professionalizing to Research: Modular Professionalization and the WIDE Effect” offers an illuminating description of Michigan State University’s Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center. WIDE provides a variety of research opportunities to students, and the authors argue that while some might assume this experience in a research center pushes its graduates to pursue elusive jobs in R1 institutions, many graduates of the program find themselves well-prepared to take on work at institutions of all kinds, both inside and outside of higher education (192). The last essay is Lara Smith-Sitton and Lynée Lewis Gaillet’s “Bridging Town and Gown through Academic Internships.” Here, Smith-Sitton and Lewis Gaillet detail their experiences working for the internship program that started in 2005 as a joint initiative of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association and Georgia State University. The innovative program provides graduate students with service learning and internship positions in a variety of areas including “editing and research, event planning, technical and professional writing, or general nonprofit sector administration” (213). The essays in this section offer an impressive

expansion of what graduate education in rhetoric and composition can and should be in order to maximize students' career options.

As a whole, this collection presents readers with a valuable resource for rethinking what it means to “be successful” in a rhetoric and composition career. While the book's audience is not exclusively women, it's important to remember that the inspiration for the project was rethinking narrow prescriptions for being a successful woman in the discipline. As such, the book might be particularly useful for female academics seeking both theoretical and practical approaches in working toward their own definitions of success. More broadly, *Rewriting Success* is a must-read for anyone concerned about the future of our discipline and those who practice in it: academics on or off the tenure track who might be seeking change, current graduate students deciding where they best fit, and any faculty in the field who mentor these graduate students and have a hand in shaping their future choices.

If I have one critique, it's that I would have liked to see more narratives in the collection from this latter group of faculty. In particular, I would like to read narratives from a variety of directors of graduate rhetoric and composition programs who are developing visionary curricula to educate tomorrow's rhetoric and composition scholars with a more expansive conception of and skill set for success. But one can hope more such narratives will soon emerge as we continue to imagine the future possibilities and “something elses” for the field.

To return briefly to Bérubé's metaphor of the “garment of crisis” in humanities graduate education, perhaps what is truly needed to avert the crisis is not a tighter but a looser weave, and a roomier fit that better accommodates more shapes and sizes. That is precisely what *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers* seeks to do, and it's a worthy alteration indeed.

Work Cited

Bérubé, Michael. “The Humanities, Unraveled.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 18 Feb. 2013. Web. 28 May 2013. < <http://chronicle.com/article/Humanities-Unraveled/137291/>>.

About the Author

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