

Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers, edited by Amy Goodburn, Donna LeCourt, and Carrie Leverenz. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2013. 240 pp.

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If rhetoric and composition as an advanced degree field is enveloped by what Amy Goodburn, Donna LeCourt, and Carrie Leverenz call “narrowness and elitism typical of other disciplines” in higher education institutions (xii), then who does it serve? How does this field fulfill rhetoric’s ancient Aristotelian promise of providing a voice for the people from the people, of the Ciceronian good man speaking well? Although *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers* is advanced as a book about reconceiving professional careers and opportunities, the above questions are at the heart of the authors’ stories that comprise the text. In other words, what is the use of a disciplinary field whose primary purpose in educating graduate students appears to be to get people academic jobs—just like those of their academic grandparents—when they finish? To what end the making and remaking of the scholarly self if only to beget new scholar-teachers for higher education—and for traditional research institutions at that? What does the future of higher education hold for those who identify themselves with the discipline of rhetoric and composition? More importantly, what do those who identify themselves as rhetoricians and compositionists offer to the world?

The editors of *Rewriting Success* issue “a call to action by suggesting how institutions can do a better job of supporting and encouraging *alternative* career paths, by welcoming adjuncts and term instructors as full members of the profession, and by actively mentoring in ways that honor all kinds of career options” (xvi, emphasis added). The issues raised in this book make sense in light of a dreadful economy and a greatly changing face of postsecondary education. Let’s be real: English studies educators have limited potential to be hired for traditional tenure-track jobs, as the recent “Report on the MLA *Job Information List, 2013-2014*” clearly shows. In the 2013-2014 hiring season, the *JIL* announced merely 1,046 English-language jobs, a number that had fallen by 96 (8.4%) over the previous year; fewer of these were tenure-track, assistant professor positions (another 8.4% decrease). It is not that English studies educators are underprepared; many are incredibly accomplished thinkers, scholars, and teachers. It is that the need for traditional scholarly humanities-based skills has not grown in the academy, and the economics of higher education will not accept an old model that no longer fits. To its credit, *Rewriting Success* does not bemoan that fact; rather, it critiques the old model and those in the professoriate who bemusedly wipe their sleepy-dust-

filled eyes and say, “What? Not *my* graduate students. They want and get jobs just like mine” (xiv). Such critique is necessary, and that is what makes this volume worth reading.

Yet the book could have had a greater impact with a different perspective. Certainly it rightly considers the lack of (traditional) jobs and the reality that rhetoric and composition PhDs are unique individuals who require the right job and the right fit for their personalities and life styles—meaning that not just any job will do, despite tight economic constraints. The challenges go deeper, however, and a less fully addressed but significant problem for rhetoric and composition professionals is an unclear identification of what it is to be a working, engaging, publishing, and/or teaching rhetorician and compositionist. For that understanding, I suggest returning to earlier conceptions of rhetoric and composition—once oral and now written and image driven. When John Quincy Adams was the first Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory at Harvard in 1806, rhetoric was a practical field. Students studied rhetoric primarily for their work in law, religion, and politics. However, by 1876 the department was no longer called “Rhetoric and Criticism” but “English Language and Literature” (Heinrichs), something Donald Stewart called the “‘Harvardization’ of American English” (Edwards 696). The focus changed from one of applying rhetoric to other disciplines to being a topic solely for the study of language and literature, leading to the field being too engrossed with the subject itself and not enough with the doing of the subject. Although in recent years the field has started to return to its roots, there remains a good bit of attention to mitosis evidenced in graduate programs where the end goal is to get a job in the professoriate. The authors of this book’s collective chapters seem to focus and function counter to the historical model of the past two hundred years precisely because they describe an action-oriented rather than reproductive rhetoric and composition approach. Indeed, some of the authors of this volume offer powerful narratives of career work that engage the notion of applied rhetoric (Yeats 111), which is the understanding that rhetoric is about something larger than itself and that it can contribute to the world in myriad ways—pragmatically and in relation to the work of other disciplines.

Applied rhetoric as action certainly is something that engages teaching, as Mya Poe, Malkiel Choseed, Ildikó Melis, Sue Doe, and Heather Graves describe in section one, “Redefining Work in Academic Institutions.” By taking jobs that enable supple definitions of productivity, they have rejected the requirement to publish just to keep a job. Choseed makes a particularly strong point about flexibility when he describes the empowering work of a community college teacher who can elect to write and publish—or not—depending on whether “I believe I have something to add to the conversation, not because a tenure-review clock is ticking like a time bomb” (22). His point is well-taken since

the purpose of research and publication should be to address real questions and not merely to punch a ticket on the way to tenure and peer acclaim, as is the case in a publish-or-perish mindset (see Barbara Fister regarding the need for selectivity in scholarly publication, for example).

Applied rhetoric as action—maybe most helpfully and engagingly—disrupts the academic beaten path, erupting new and fertile ground, as Moria K. Amado-McCoy, Dave Yeats, Benjamin Oipari, Shannon Wisdom, and Nick Carbone explain. In the second section of the book, titled “Redefining Valuable Knowledge Beyond Academe,” they offer fascinating stories of people with rhetoric and composition PhDs, or with graduate work, who elected to work outside academia. Yeats’ chapter is especially helpful because he outlines ten specific ways that English studies applies directly to varied careers, which in his case involves user-experience research. Oipari writes in especially clear prose about lawyers’ stark need to learn to write well; this chapter’s emphasis on teaching strong writing skills to lawyers, who have a particularly obfuscating vocabulary, underscores that rhetoric and composition professionals can model and teach practical writing to workers in varied settings. Carbone’s chapter illuminates the satisfaction that scholar-educators can achieve when they work for such educational venues as textbook publishers, which are badly in need of the knowledge that rhetoric and composition specialists can provide.

“Working for Change,” the third section of this book, examines some ways to bring about the kinds of changes our profession needs if it is to accommodate the exigencies of contemporary higher education economy. Cindy Moore, Jennifer Ahern-Dodson, Stacey Pigg, Kendall Leon, Martine Courant Rife, Lara Smith-Sitton, and Lynée Lewis Gaillet write of projects aimed at professionalizing students for potential careers outside the academy. Because of its focus on collaboration and learning “in the moment” (199), the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) research project that Pigg, Leon, and Rife discuss is particularly interesting. This collaborative project prepares students for jobs outside the academy by addressing learning as an ongoing and meta-cognitively rich experience. (These chapters would be even more helpful if they were to point readers to such outside-the-academy resources as “PhDs at Work,” an online collaborative where PhD-holding professionals network and share career building experiences.)

I very much wanted to like *Rewriting Success* because I, too, have struggled with an academic identity. My scholarship solidly lives in the academic arena while my thinking, writing, and work reject its borders—hence, my alter egos as a dissertation coach and bereavement author, trainer, and coach.

I also wanted to like this book because its publication is a necessary first step toward overturning an outdated perspective of what it means to have a rhetoric and composition advanced degree. That perspective fails to acknowl-

edge the economic realities of the academic job market and the diverse life choices available to those with PhDs. Yet, while I admire the contributors' efforts and believe they offer a path to important dialogue, I sensed a patronizing attitude about walking such a nontraditional path born of the very editorial collaboration that created the book. The editors—all accomplished, smart, well published, and *well situated* academics—fail to include on their team even one of the individuals whose voices they purport to support. This failure to include a non-tenure track academic or non-academic professional on the editorial team creates the impression of the *haves* showcasing the poor *have nots*. To their credit, the editors admit that they hail from privileged positions and, as a result, their “own stories . . . are perhaps overly influenced by the very model we sought to question” (viii). However, to offer people a voice in a book while not including them (or someone like them) in the book's planning and construction removes self-determination about the story being told from those whose writing and lives comprise the book itself. To paraphrase from the important messages in James I. Charleton's *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, a book about rewriting rhetoric and composition careers cannot do its work well without collaboration with those whose careers are, in fact, different from the traditional norm. In trying to explain others' career choices as legitimate, the editors trip over an implicit core assumption that those alternative choices are *not* legitimate and, therefore require traditional academics to legitimize them through publication in a book such as this one. Operating even unconsciously from such a core assumption is to participate in the very milieu that afflicts the professional lives of those who are not recognized as PhDs in full regalia when their work setting deviates from traditional academe. Sadly, the approach is condescending. The collaborative inclusion of even one editor who was not so traditionally situated could have changed the trajectory of the entire volume, inspiring a different, exciting set of questions and responses from the authors. For example, those who choose alternative rhetoric and composition careers might have framed the book around such questions as “Why do you (not) publish and what does publication mean from your career perspective?” and “What does the academic notion of service mean when it is not required for the job?” or “What is the nature of a rhetoric and composition career when one's work has global, practical applications?”

Despite my sense that the editors have offered a somewhat limited view of legitimacy in the rhetoric and composition profession, I realize that, without such initial conversations as they provide, the status quo cannot change. To what degree it will change in the academy—where the triumvirate of research, teaching, and service still reigns—is unclear, but change it must, particularly for the many professional rhetoricians and compositionists who should see themselves as free to create meaningful lives of which their careers are but one

part. Ultimately, *Rewriting Success* is a book about *alternative paths* in rhetoric and composition rather than *paths*. Yet when we stop looking at the mainstream path as the ideal and begin seeing all paths as legitimate, something this book can help us learn to do, we will make progress toward encouraging graduate students and seasoned rhetorician and compositionists alike to choose applied careers that make personal and professional sense—and about which no apologies need to be made.

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