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## Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement by Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser, eds.

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*Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement*

Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser, eds.

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Reciprocity is a complicated and necessary component of academic institutions' engagement with other communities, and approaches to reciprocity often can be summarized in the form of a single question: "What is the community getting out of this?" This question emphasizes how important it is for participants from higher education institutions to check again and again, in each divergent engagement activity they are involved in, that they are not exploiting or negating the needs of their communities. However, responsible practitioners also need to verify that the academic partner is gaining something from the relationship. Without this "give-and-take," as Cushman puts it, engagement runs the risk of being simply charity work (16). Instead, academic partners must also gain something in a reciprocal engagement relationship. If that's the case, then *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement* asks and provides answers to another equally meaningful question for engagement: "What is the academic institution getting out of this?" Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser have compiled a collection of diverse answers to this question, answers that each point to a single, exciting conclusion: engagement can transform writing programs.

Rose and Weiser situate this volume in the context of reciprocity, explaining in their introduction that there are "expectations that both sides of the engagement partnership—the university or college and the community agency or entity—will not only contribute expertise and other resources but also will garner new knowledge and develop new resources." And they demonstrate that what writing programs stand to gain opens more possibilities for the work of teaching writing, researching writing, and transforming how writing is viewed by society. The chapters that follow offer a range of insights into the academic side of learning as a result of public engagement, "from how we understand the writing program's role in the institution and community to learning from specific literacy communities,

to understanding an institutional culture, to maintaining the core functions of our programs while finding ways to extend our reach, to viewing engagement as both a way of teaching and a way of conducting research” (7). To that end, the authors of the various chapters describe changes to program ethos, curricula, students’ perceptions of writing, and program goals as a result of engagement, and they outline the potential for more.

A number of the chapters in this collection address the meta-level changes that occur in the ethos of writing programs during and as a result of community engagement. Jeff Grabill, in “Infrastructure Outreach and the Engaged Writing Program,” explains how working with communities can help redefine the trope of “service” in the triad of “research, teaching, and service” so that community engagement can be seen as intellectual work that traverses these constructs. In the same way, in “Centering Community Literacy: The Art of Location within Institutions and Neighborhoods,” Michael H. Norton and Eli Goldblatt show how, by engaging in the community, writing programs’ sense of what literacy is, who it’s for, and how we go about teaching it can be disrupted. Instead of focusing solely on academic literacy, community engagement can make room for more inclusive and flexible approaches. Indeed, this inclusiveness translates to all aspects of writing program administration, since “community literacy can help both universities and non-profit community organizations articulate their shared goals through lending perspective to each other in the context of shared work” (48). Even within programs, community engagement can offer lessons for inter-faculty and administrator relationships, as Jessie L. Moore and Michael Strickland show in “Wearing Multiple Hats: How Campus WPA Roles Can Inform Program-Specific Writing Designs.”

On the curricular level, David A. Jolliffe discusses how community engagement can lead to shifts in expectations of what higher education writing programs should do. In “The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project: A Hands-On, Experiential Course on School-College Articulation,” Jolliffe shows how working with the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project instigated major changes in college approaches to teaching writing, since working with students taught him the importance of meeting college composition students where they are instead of bemoaning what they didn’t learn in high school. Thia Wolf, Jill Swiencicki, and Chris Fosen explain how the development of a public-engaged writing curriculum was a catalyst for interrupting the “business-as-usual” model of their writing program. In “Students, Faculty and ‘Sustainable’ WPA Work,” they describe how their “Writing for the Public Sphere” first-year composition syllabus, which includes a Town Hall Meeting event with faculty, community organizers, and fellow students, resulted in increased student engagement. It becomes clear here that expectations of what writing programs can and should do were interrupted and restructured by engagement.

Other chapters offer examples of how students' perceptions of writing and the role of the writing program can shift as a result of public or community engagement. Susan Wolff Murphy demonstrates that her development of a writing program in a "vertical" curriculum, where students take specified classes that build on one another throughout their college career, resulted in a shift in civic identities for students. The major assignment in one of her first-year writing classes, which includes a program-wide event to present their work, "teaches civic engagement by teaching students to read arguments critically [...], but also moves students into practicing the activities traditionally used to define 'political engagement.'" In this class, students' research for their projects "has also taken them in to the local, off-campus community, developing their skills and awareness of civic engagement," allowing them to not only learn about, but to practice public engagement (119). Moreover, in "Coming Down from the Ivory Tower: Writing Programs' Role in Advocating Public Scholarship," Dominic DelliCarpini explains how students' awareness of what writing does and entails can be challenged when they engage with non-academic communities through public writing. Rather than emphasizing divisions between "disciplinary/academic writing" and "public genres," DelliCarpini asserts "the viability of building bridges between the two" (211). Such efforts lead to shifts in students' conceptions about what writing entails.

Linda Adler-Kassner's closing chapter, "The WPA as Activist: Systematic Strategies for Framing, Action, and Representation," brings the concept of reciprocity full circle. She describes how different writing programs can teach community project programs much through engagement, and how these programs, in turn, can develop new frames for how the public views writing: "One of the most pressing challenges that WPAs face in the current climate is figuring out just how to participate in this process of framing so that we can have some voice in—maybe even affect—the frames that surround stories about what writing teachers do, what students are, and what writing should be" (217). Her challenge here may well be the most compelling component of this book, raising the stakes for why writing programs must certainly engage in broader communities.

Additional chapters address further implications for writing programs when they engage in community, and still more offer help and suggestions for doing so. Among others, "Not Politics as Usual: Public Writing as Writing for Engagement" by Linda Shamoan and Eileen Medeiros and "The Writing Center as Site for Engagement" by Linda S. Bergmann each suggest ideas for how to instigate and sustain such efforts. In addition, Jaclyn M. Wells' "Writing Program Administration and Community Engagement: A Bibliographic Essay" is a useful and straightforward guide for further reading. Throughout this volume, the authors suggest compelling complications and potential solutions, yet many also maintain a sense of

reality. As Norton and Goldblatt put it, “University-community literacy partnerships may be irritants to any and all involved” (30). However, they are quick to add that this irritation is part of the appeal, and as they and their fellow authors show, addressing these issues can be highly productive.

There are, of course, examples of such complications in the volume itself. While Rose and Weiser are careful to fully define “engagement” in their introduction, they do not define what is meant by “public” or “community,” the two words that get attached most to “engagement” throughout the volume. Many of the chapters emphasize “community” engagement in the sense of non-academic, while others consider any literacy beyond the university, even school-based literacies, “community.” In addition, there is a blurred line between “community engagement” and “public engagement,” which leads to a blurred line between “service-learning” and “public engagement”—some of the examples are clearly based on a service-learning model of providing a service where resources can’t be found elsewhere as with Joliffe’s project, while others are less official versions of internship as with Moore and Strickland’s example of a student creating PR for a brewery, and still others are examples of students composing arguments that are public in the sense that other students read them as with Susan Wolff Murphy’s example. In their introduction, the editors emphasize community engagement. And certainly, the type of engagement—“community,” “public,” or even “civic,” as some of the essays refer to—has not been specified in the title, likely to widen the breadth of the project. This discrepancy, though, leads readers to ponder what each author means by “engagement.” I suspect that paying attention to the question of what constitutes engagement would result in further productive and necessary discussions.

## Work Cited

Cushman, Ellen. “The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research.” *College English* 61. 3 (1999): 328-36.