

**Gladstein, Jill M., and Dara Rossman Regaignon.** *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges.* Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2012. 269 pp. \$32. ISBN 978-160235-304-6.

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Jill M. Gladstein and Dara Rossman Regaignon's *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges* is, like its title, straightforward, descriptive, and comprehensive; what the title perhaps fails to convey are the rich nuances and broad significance of their work. For me, that title was an easy sell. Having recently assumed a WPA position at a *mid-sized* liberal arts university (MLAU doesn't have quite the same ring to it, does it?), I was excited about a publication that promised to contextualize and provide guidance for my own work—and grateful to discover that Gladstein and Regaignon's work does just that. Although the research project is deliberately descriptive rather than prescriptive, its discussion of trends and variations offers resources for improving writing programs within and beyond the SLAC context.

This book arose from what the authors—themselves WPAs at SLACs and active members of that community—call a “superficially simple” question: “What, exactly, does writing program administration at private small liberal arts colleges look like?” (xv). Previous work on WPA issues has included but not focused on this particular type of institution, a neglect redressed to some degree by Paul Hanstedt and Tom Amorose's 2004 special issue of *Composition Studies* (32.2) and Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon's 2007 collection *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*. Nevertheless, prior to this study there had been no extensive, empirical research conducted on writing programs in small liberal arts colleges. *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges* effectively and impressively fills that gap and will no doubt become a touchstone for future research in this area.

## Scope and Method

Gladstein and Regaignon's original question—"What do writing programs at small liberal arts colleges look like?"—led to a methodological challenge: "How do you find out what writing programs at small liberal arts colleges look like?" (23). Their answer to that question is an ambitious, multifaceted research process that may serve as a model for similar inquiries. Their findings result from "a mixed methods approach of grounded theory" that facilitated both description and a resulting theoretical framework: "This approach relies on more than surveys and interviews; triangulating such self-reported data with document analysis and other methods of data collection deepens the analysis and provides a fuller and more accurate picture of the subject than would otherwise be possible"(24). The study's sample is made up of a hundred schools (drawn from the Annapolis Group and The Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium) that represent the diversity of SLACs, encompassing different regions and enrollments, as well as single-sex and historically black colleges. The researchers administered a 97-question survey (available in the Appendix), supplemented by follow-up interviews and focus groups as well as textual analysis of institutional websites, catalogs, and other program materials. The wealth of data collected, in dialogue with historical and disciplinary research, results in a representation that is both broad and deep, and the authors' discussion of method throughout strengthens their ethos and the reader's understanding.

## Construction and Key Findings

The book is organized into 4 major sections. The first, "A Grounded Theory of Writing Program Administration" begins with essential historical background on small liberal arts colleges in American higher education. Based on their shared genealogy and despite their diversity, SLACs tend to maintain particular values and practices; Raymond Williams' concept of "structure of feeling," (from *Marxism and Literature*, 1977) is borrowed to

convey the ways that beliefs and values are enacted in personal and social life. Utilized throughout, this concept forefronts “how the shared values and assumptions of small colleges are grounded in their material conditions and history” as well as the always in-process tension between “the anti-bureaucratic, anti-formalist bias of these institutions *and* the ways in which, in fact, they have always and continue to formalize particular values” (7). The culture of feeling of small liberal arts colleges is marked by a “collective approach to general education” (13), “diffused instruction in rhetorical practices throughout the curriculum” (14), and a “residential and hence communal” dynamic (15). This discussion of the interplay among material conditions, shared history, and institutional differences establishes the essential foundation upon which the subsequent analysis depends.

Remaining chapters in the first section contribute to the reader’s big-picture understanding of writing program identity and administration in SLACs. Chapter 2, “Grounded Theory and Mixed Methods Research,” explains the research methods, data collection, and analysis process discussed above. The key theoretical findings are outlined in the following three chapters regarding writing programs, leadership roles, and institutional status. The nuanced discussions of these issues result in useful heuristics for critical analysis and conscious practice of writing program administration in general, not solely within the SLAC context.

Chapter 3, “Mapping Small College Sites of Writing,” opens with the reminder that a writing “program” may not always be easily identifiable at first glance. Citing Louis Wetherby Phelps, Gladstein and Regaignon define “writing program” as “the material form of an institution’s culture of writing... the courses, people (administrators, faculty, and students), offices, positions, centers, policies (written and tacit) and customs that make up how writing is taught, learned, and practiced on a particular campus” (36). Whereas these elements are often discussed discretely in WPA scholarship, they are not easily separated within small college contexts. They therefore began by identifying “sites” of writing

instruction, including *explicit* and *embedded* elements, categorized into *curriculum-* and *student-centered* structures. By mapping their data into these categories, the authors develop a set of heuristics that enable a broad overview and context-specific examinations of the cultures of writing at small liberal arts colleges.

Chapters 4, “Configurations of Writing Program Leadership,” and 5, “Positioning of Writing Program Administrators,” delineate the different roles and responsibilities involved in managing writing instruction at SLACs. Like programs themselves, the configurations of leadership vary significantly; Gladstein and Regaignon offer “a heuristic for understanding the contours of programs that do not fit the norm or that are not coextensive with their respective administrators” (44). These “configurations of leadership” reflect the complexity of lived cultures of writing, facilitate comparative analysis, and productively complicate existing WPA scholarship. This fine-grained set of classifications is presented in order of frequency:

- Explicit WPA (Writing Program Administrator) + Explicit WCD (Writing Center Director)
- Solo WPA/WCD
- Explicit WCD Only
- Embedded WPA + Explicit WCD
- Explicit WPA Only
- No WPA or WCD

By examining the responsibilities and institutional status associated with WPA and WCD positions, Chapter 5, “Positioning of Writing Program Administrators,” considers how these leadership configurations play out on the ground. The authors’ findings complicate assumptions about power, authority, and status; although they agree in theory with disciplinary preference for fully-tenured professors as WPAs, Gladstein and Regaignon argue that “both institutions and the field as a whole need to think with nuance and complexity about the best scenario if that ideal is not feasible” (90). These chapters offer examples, exceptions, and pros and cons that will be of value for readers who already or plan

to serve in these capacities as well as those involved in building or revising writing programs. As the authors explain, “a WPA needs to understand how his or her position and its responsibilities fit into the institution’s larger leadership structure” in order “to use the position to create positive change” (43). Likewise, the identification of trends, particularly the move toward professionalization of administrative roles, may well provide helpful evidence for reform of existing institutional norms.

Section II, “Curriculum-Centered Writing Instruction” addresses key curricular issues of requirements, staffing, and leadership. Chapter 7, “Writing Requirements,” delineates the varieties of writing-related requirements, which do not always follow standard expectations of formal composition coursework. Gladstein and Regaignon argue that SLACs’ departures from disciplinary norms often stem from and suit particular contexts and missions. SLACs’ historical prioritization of students’ critical abilities has led to widespread and substantial writing instruction—embedded as well as explicit—across the curriculum. Although explicit requirements (first-year composition courses, first-year writing seminars, and writing intensive courses) may be easier to identify and assess, embedded requirements (as in first-year seminars, core curricula, and theses/capstones) should not be underestimated in scope or influence. The prevalence of WAC approaches is notable, with attendant benefits like regular reinforcement and challenges like lack of oversight. Two notable trends—a shift from embedded to explicit requirements and growing prioritization of verticality in writing instruction—reflect the innovation afforded by small colleges’ agility.

The usually vexed question of “Staffing First-Year Writing” is addressed in Chapter 7, which further highlights differences between SLACs and most post-secondary institutions: although staffing (and, by extension, class size) remains a core concern, small colleges do not tend to rely on underpaid, temporary faculty. Required first-year writing courses are relatively small and primarily staffed by full-time faculty, but those faculty are

rarely specialists in rhetoric and composition. As a result, the key staffing issues revolve around “faculty recruitment, faculty development, and programmatic alignment (which we might also think of as consistency)” (127). The discussion of recruiting colleagues from different fields, and guiding them toward a shared vision of writing instruction, emphasizes the particular challenges faced by WPAs at small colleges. Again, there are trade-offs: Writing programs staffed by specialists in rhetoric and composition may rely on clear, mutual expertise; on the other hand, “[w]hen no single department ‘owns’ writing instruction, WPAs can use their expertise to infiltrate and educate these colleagues on best practices” (132). The philosophical reflections and practical advice offered by informants—particularly the value placed on relationships and informal, collegial consultations—will have resonance for any reader interested in WAC initiatives or collaborative teaching in different educational contexts.

Chapter 8, “Redefining Small College Writing Programs: Leadership Configurations and Writing Requirements,” places curricula in dialogue with those that manage them, an approach that “allows us to analyze what types of requirements are most closely associated with what types of leadership positions... understanding their interaction is therefore essential to understanding a program’s functioning and underlying philosophy” (140). For example, programs that value vertical integration of writing instruction are more likely to have an explicit WPA, while those without an explicit writing requirement may have only a WCD. During their research, the authors note, they observed significant moments of self-evaluation and either revision or reinforcement of current priorities among participating writing programs. Though they certainly do not ascribe these changes to their own research, the cases they present indicate the value of institutional mapping and analysis that their theoretical concepts can help facilitate.

The book’s third section, “Student-Centered Writing Instruction,” focuses on writing centers and other extracurricular support for student writers. Chapter 9 highlights the centrality of

writing centers at small colleges, where they reflect the schools' commitment to ongoing writing development across—and outside—the curriculum and therefore largely avoid the stigma of remediation. Notably, all schools examined in this study have writing centers, most of which rely heavily on peer tutors. This dependency results from SLACs' focus on the development of students as intellectual leaders and the rejection of beliefs that “undergraduates are incapable of teaching one another” (164). Instead, the tutoring process serves to educate both tutor and writer; peer tutors are often involved in writing center research, ongoing reflection, and collaborative training. The potential drawbacks of such a system are not addressed until the following chapter, where the authors point out that a “reliance on peer tutors to provide writing instruction to the neediest students may indicate that the institution has abdicated a key responsibility” (186). In cases like these, the authors' descriptive agenda (as well as their evident admiration for SLACs) means that such constructive critiques arise only in passing until the discussion of areas for future study in the conclusion.

Chapter 10, “Supporting Diversely Prepared Writers,” addresses a point of tension and transition: Traditionally, small colleges “resist systematically identifying or labeling” students with greater needs, who are therefore primarily supported by writing centers (170). Recent shifts toward diversification, particularly through international recruitment, have focused more attention on the question of support for student writers. In a departure from their usual descriptive stance, here Gladstein and Regaignon promote directed self-placement as a solution that “provides the necessary balance between bureaucratic formality and pedagogically-oriented flexibility” (171). This argument stems from concerns over the informality and potential invisibility of mechanisms for finding and serving students needing additional support; in most cases, identification occurs by faculty or students themselves. Support is more often embedded (in writing centers, for example) than explicit in designated courses, and basic writing instruction is more often a recommendation than a requirement.

Despite the range of support available, therefore, students may simply not recognize or utilize it. Directed self-placement, the authors suggest, provides a solution that retains the small college emphasis on student agency without sacrificing due diligence: “Coupled with an appropriate and flexible set of support offerings, such a program can scaffold the learning of a diverse set of students by honoring them all as individual learners” (186). This uncharacteristically overt recommendation seems related to the authors’ sense that small colleges are perhaps uniquely “supportive of innovation and experimentation”—and therefore may offer an ideal testing ground for a promising but relatively untested administrative tool (183).

In the fourth and final section, “Small College Writing Programs,” Gladstein and Regaignon turn to the question of assessment (Chapter 11) before the final conclusion (Chapter 12). The placement of assessment in this closing section reflects its high profile and problematic status in any discussion of writing program administration. In small colleges, assessment is more often driven by re-accreditation than externally imposed mandates, and colleges are “unlikely to undertake assessment until they see how it will enhance the learning of their students” (194). While diffused leadership and/or resistance to the language of accountability may seem to put them behind the assessment curve, small colleges are able to learn from and customize best practices in the field. The authors offer three case studies that demonstrate how small colleges approach assessment as genuine inquiry in service of faculty development. Though significantly different, these examples illustrate “flexible, sustainable, and robust assessment processes” that are also local, rhetorical, and context-specific (191). These examples reflect the prevalence of direct and portfolio-based assessment, enriched by faculty and student surveys; they engage multiple stakeholders and therefore the college as a whole. Most importantly, these assessment models “take the form of feedback loops, with each iteration leading to new insights about student writing, writing pedagogy, and the school’s writing curriculum” (195). Though context-specific, the



three models offer strategies for meaningful assessment worthy of consideration in any context.

In Chapter 12, Gladstein and Regaignon conclude by recapping their methodological choices and highlighting key findings: the prevalence of WAC approaches and vertical integration, the high priority placed on critical writing at all stages in students' development, and the move toward explicit leadership configurations—a shift that they believe “bodes well” for the future (206). Ultimately, the authors return to their six categories of leadership configurations as perhaps the most significant contribution of their work; this schema facilitates analysis that can “help the institution and the writing administrator understand the program’s historic mission and philosophical underpinnings—and, as a result, if and how it needs to change” (207). They conclude by emphasizing on the potential of this and other “action research project[s]” to inform and guide careful (re)consideration of writing programs.

### **Audience and Application**

Naturally, the primary audience of this work is WPAs working at and/or studying SLACs—who, like me, will be grateful for the insights it offers. On the other hand, this study has a broader reach. Within WPA-related scholarship, it challenges the dominant focus on large (public) universities staffed by TAs and adjunct instructors; it documents alternatives to conventional course requirements, staffing solutions, and assessment models. In particular, the coverage of WAC and vertically integrated curricula engages key questions about collaborative leadership and faculty development. We can surely all benefit from the advice that “WPAs will be most effective if they listen to what faculty have to offer before jumping in to profess their own expertise” (138). Likewise, the chapter on assessment provides innovative alternatives to standard top-down mandated methods.

Within the field of composition studies, *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges* provides valuable insights into a little-studied sphere of teaching and learning in higher

education. Though SLACs may account for only a small percentage of possible institutional contexts, this research, as well as the method itself, seems an invaluable inclusion for any graduate seminar on writing program administration, enriching discussions about key issues of authority, curricula, and assessment, among others. And, as Carol Rutz notes in the foreword, those who wish to prepare graduate students for positions beyond research institutions should also attend to and pass on its lessons. For anyone invested in composition and rhetoric, this work deepens our understanding of the disciplinary landscape.

Finally, within the broad field(s) of writing-related research, the mixed-methods analysis and grounded theory approach demonstrated by Gladstein and Regaignon may serve as a useful model for researchers interested in deep examinations of broad issues. The variety of data and recursive analysis process produced rich descriptions of particular practices as well useful theoretical concepts that help explain the interrelationships of shared history, present practice, and evolving culture. Mixed-methods analysis seems well suited to examining cultures of teaching and learning in or across regions, educational levels, or institutional types. In these ways, as I suggested at the start, the title *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges* may not do full justice to the insights it affords teachers and researchers of writing in general.

#### Works Cited

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