

REVIEW

WPAs Across Contexts and Thresholds

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Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges. Jill M. Gladstein and Dara Rossman Regaignon. Parlor Press, 2012. 289 pp. ISBN 978-1602353046

Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition. Seth Kahn, William B. Lalicker, and Amy Lynch-Binieck. UP Colorado and the WAC Clearinghouse, 2017. 330 pp. ISBN 978-1-60732-765-3

WPAs in Transition: Navigating Educational Leadership Positions. Courtney Adams Wooten, Jacob Babb, and Brian Ray. Utah State UP, 2018. 332 pp. ISBN 978-1607326328

A threshold concept can be considered akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something.

—Jan Meyer and Ray Land (1)

As originally conceived by Jan Meyer and Ray Land, the notion of threshold concepts describes disciplinary knowledge not as an acquisition of core concepts, but as a “transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something” or as “a transformed internal view of subject matter,

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subject landscape, or even world view” (1). By experiencing and understanding a threshold concept, the learner is changed. Such experiences cannot only transform perspectives, the authors claim, but also identities; these events probably are also irreversible, as once a transformation has occurred, it is nearly impossible to undo. This transformation can explain why those of us experienced in our fields may find it difficult to recall what we thought or knew when we were still novices—before we crossed over those thresholds. Threshold concepts are also often troublesome, which makes it harder for them to be acquired as they may at first appear “counter-intuitive, alien, or . . . incoherent” (Perkins, as cited in Meyer and Land 5). While thus foundational to intellectual growth, threshold concepts were not initially part of my plan for developing this book review. That is, while I have long been collecting and refining core “writing program administration” skills around curriculum development and programmatic assessment, marketing and coalition building, it wasn’t until I read these three books that I realized that threshold concepts, which I associate with learning the very notions of disciplinarity in any field, also apply to learning to do, and be, a writing program administrator (WPA).

Thus I was initially drawn to each of the texts I take up in this review because they speak to different aspects of my own WPA identity. For the past thirteen years, I have been administering writing programs and/or writing centers in three very different institutional contexts. Discrete elements of this broad range of experience resonated with the varied subgroups of WPAs reflected in the works considered here. Each text, it seems to me, is targeted toward helping the reader understand facets and frames of WPA work that otherwise might only be understood after a long career as a WPA. *WPAs in Transition: Navigating Educational Leadership Positions* edited by Courtney Adams Wootten, Jacob Babb, and Brian Ray, for example, drew my attention for its focus on leadership transitions, something which I (and they) have found other fields outside of our own have explored more thoroughly than is present in the writing studies literature. As someone who has transitioned from being a literacy coach and high school teacher-writing center director (WCD) to the WCD at a large, research-intensive university to now being the Director of Writing at a tiny, public, honors liberal arts college, I have experienced the impact of each transition not only on the work I do, but on how I think about the work I do. By contrast, the second text I consider here, *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition*, edited by Seth Kahn, William B. Lalicker, and Amy Lynch-Binieck, is one that I initially resisted reading because all three of my WPA/WCD positions have been off the tenure-track—my current one, happily so. I did not want to read that I should feel bad about feeling good about any of my positions’ status; thankfully, this collection, while frank, did not incite

guilt or despair. In spite of the commonality of my position types, the ways in which that status was ascribed and its impact on my work have been drastically different across each institution. Its manifestation in my current position leads me to (re)consider the third book in this review, *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges* by Jill M. Gladstein and Dara Rossman Regaignon. Their book helped me better articulate how the flexibility I have gained through my career transitions and my non-tenure-track status in many ways make me more effective within my current contexts as a small liberal arts college WPA. Thus, while these three books are not explicitly about threshold concepts in writing program administration, and though the authors do not explicitly discuss such threshold concepts, I see threshold concepts emerging from these texts. In reviewing each text on its own merits, I've foregrounded the concepts that resonate with me as potential WPA threshold concepts. To be sure: I am not asserting that these *are* threshold concepts in writing program administration but ruminating that they could be. For just as a collaborative discussion led to Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, so too, I hope this review sparks a discussion about reading WPA texts, in particular collections built upon narratives, through the frame of threshold concepts.

I begin this review with Courtney Adams Wooten, Jacob Babb, and Brian Ray's edited collection, *WPAs in Transition: Navigating Educational Leadership Positions*. Motivated by their own experiences transitioning from graduate school into their first tenure-track positions, and confronted by a dearth of research on "the impact of leadership transitions on scholars' lives" (5), the editors assembled this collection to address this gap, for as they note in the introduction, "so many in the field of writing studies go through such transitions routinely" (5). That is, as contributor Chris Warnick explains in his chapter, WPAs "make multiple transitions throughout their careers—a point that seems obvious but is sometimes obscured by the narratives told about program administration" (220). Narratives stress beginnings or endings, which "may obscure for current and future WPAs the transitions that happen between beginning and exiting, leaving them unprepared for these changes" (Warnick 220). A foundational threshold concept for WPAs, then, may be that the position itself is one in a constant state of transition.

As this is a collection built around a broad notion—transitions—it is useful that the authors foreground a theoretical or conceptual framework to help the readers connect individual chapters to each other in order to move beyond superficial connections and to delve seriously into the overarching theme. In their introduction, Wooten and Babb use the metaphor of travel to frame the collection: "We offer travel as a metaphor for the kinds of transitions individuals

make when they take on or step out of roles as WPAs” (4). They note that just as the act of traveling itself often changes the traveler, transitions change WPAs. As an avid traveler myself, and one who often thinks about things through the lens of travel, I am the right audience for this metaphor. For that reason I wonder how the metaphor might have been extended beyond the introduction and carried throughout the collection, perhaps in organizing chapters under travel-related metaphors (departures, arrivals, turbulence, etc.), and what additional cohesion that might have provided to the collection as a whole. In seeking deeper connections across the individual contributions, I did find the conclusion, written by Brian Ray, equally if not more valuable as a framing tool than the introduction. He argues that, while this collection of essays showcases the impact of transitions on WPAs, it more importantly reveals the ways in which WPAs transfer their knowledge of administrative work across these transitions. My recommendation to readers is to read both the introduction and the conclusion before reading the contributing authors’ chapters, rather than reading them as bookends.

WPA transitions don’t only occur between positions but can occur within them as well, particularly when the position’s boundaries are as fluid as they often are with WPAs; sometimes the lack of defined boundaries is a constraint, but other times, it can afford a WPA to work more effectively. The editors’ choice to open the collection with “A State of Permanent Transition: Strategies for WPA Survival in the Ever-Present Marginal Space of HBCUs” sets the tone for this expansive, and optimistic, understanding of transitions. In this chapter, Karen Keaton Jackson describes the seemingly indefinite states of transition in which WPAs of small colleges may exist. WPAs often move between “roles consistently, simultaneously, and permanently” and “for those of us at smaller institutions . . . wearing multiple hats becomes the norm” (26). While some would find the constant juggle of roles and responsibilities confusing or exhausting, in framing her response to these challenges Jackson draws on Henry Louis Gates Jr., arguing that being in a marginal space “can be positive, for it allows one to move easily from one role to the next, sometimes without even being noticed, seamlessly and rather effortlessly” (30). This has certainly been true in my own experience as the WPA at a small liberal arts college, and Jackson’s reading of the affordances of this fluidity and liminality is useful for someone considering such a position or for someone looking to reframe how they think about the “marginality” of their position. While there is plenty of scholarship about working in the margins, understanding that marginality can be an asset is a threshold I feel I have only recently begun to grapple with.

While liminal positions sometimes can afford a WPA flexibility, the impact of liminality on position status and, relatedly, on individual agency can create scenarios in which the WPA is asked to do more than their position gives them

power to do. One obvious place where this imbalance can easily occur is when graduate students are tasked with aspects of a WPA position. In this vein, “An Exercise in Cognitive Dissonance: Liminal WPA Transitions” by Talinn Phillips, Paul Shovlin, and Megan L. Titus shares research on graduate students, described here as “liminal” WPAs: “Liminals are asked to engage in work incommensurate with their institutional status—an institutional status that marks them as impermanent and thus lacking the power senior WPAs have to do their jobs effectively” (70). This lack of power, they claim, exacerbates an already difficult situation. That is, most WPAs will be asked to take on additional tasks beyond those listed in their position descriptions. When a WPA has a higher status, due to rank, degree, title, or salary, they are in a more powerful position to say no. When the WPA has liminal status, it “gives them less authority to ameliorate the conditions those additional duties raise” (74). In order to support the liminal WPA, the authors provide concrete and actionable suggestions for senior WPAs or graduate student advisors/supervisors: that they regularly evaluate the workloads of the positions, create accurate job descriptions, make plans for mentoring, and if/when the liminals leave, help them transition out. In my experience, job descriptions are often handed down from one person in that position to the next and, more often than not, the current person is working under an outdated position description. I found this chapter to be a useful reminder for all WPAs or those in administrative positions to regularly evaluate the scope of work being asked of graduate students and to ask whether their position descriptions require them to do work beyond what their position status reasonably allows.

Still, the tensions between responsibilities and authority don’t automatically dissipate with transitions into positions with the appearance of status, as evidenced by conversations at every writing center conference I’ve attended. Accordingly, I found Rebecca Jackson, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Nicole I. Caswell’s chapter “Metaphors We Work By: New Writing Center Directors’ Labor and Identities” to be especially insightful. They explain, “One of the biggest challenges new WPAs face is reconciling their expectations about who they will be and the roles and labor they will take up in their new positions with the identities, roles, and labor these new positions demand” (111). Grounding this claim, Jackson, McKinney, and Caswell interviewed nine writing center directors from a wide range of institutions. They note the recurring descriptions their participants employed to describe their experience as WCDs. Two dominant themes emerged: 1) directing is performative: writing center directors feel they are onstage, being “watched and judged” as “writing center directors’ labor is not only public but is also easily critiqued and scrutinized” (114–6); and 2) directing can be risky, unpredictable, and outside the director’s control, as

respondents variously likened it to Tetris, juggling, and riding a rollercoaster (114–5). As a former WCD and now a WPA with oversight of a writing center, the findings from this study were unsurprising to me, yet still revealing. The nascent professional identities that are developed through graduate education and professionalization in administration can be challenged quite publicly in WCD and WPA work, and transitioning into that type of role can take a toll if the construction of that identity is precarious.

Then again, when isn't identity somewhat precarious? Particularly when identities are partially founded upon something as mercurial as a professional identity as a WPA? It is not uncommon for WPAs' professional identities to become intertwined with their personal identities, and so when WPAs transition in or out of roles, their core identities can be threatened. In "Get Offa My Lawn: Generational Challenges of WPAs in Transition," Beth Huber describes the ways in which transitions between generations of WPAs, the so-called passing of the baton, can lead to culture shock for both the outgoing and incoming WPA. For the "WPA on their way out is sometimes left feeling . . . the near betrayal of having one's coveted vision shown to be outdated at best or ineffective at worst" (127). When a WPA's professional identity has been intertwined with their program, it can be hard not to take the incoming WPA's vision as threatening or insulting. Likewise, the incoming WPA "must engage with ideas from the past, be they from the former WPA or, even more challenging, the institution as a whole" (127) without "being rude about it" (131). Even in programs where it is not clear that anything existed before, institutional memory and related attitudes and beliefs about writing already in the program that the incoming WPA may not have access to; there is never a blank slate. This insight is certainly a foundational concept, yet it has taken me almost thirteen years and three positions to really understand that this is a threshold concept; once WPAs understand there is no such thing as a blank slate, it can and should temper their zeal to act as if someone else didn't get the ball rolling before them.

Threshold concepts are "troublesome" (Perkins, as cited in Meyer and Land 2); they can be "counter-intuitive." It follows that when learning knowledge that at first seems counter to what should be, failure of understanding is inevitable. For this reason, I especially appreciated Steve J. Corbett's chapter, "Performance Attribution and Administrative (Un)Becoming: Learning to Fail While Trying to Fly," which begins by reviewing research on transfer that demonstrates that the ability to cope with failure is an important part of successful learning. Yet, what we know about students' learning doesn't always transfer to research on professional learning: "Learning from failure is an important, even necessary, part of the training and professional work of the WPA" (140). Corbett explores his own "failed fit" (145) and argues for WPAs to develop a framework to be

able to analyze their own “critical incidents,” adopting that term from Yancey, Roberston, and Taczak (140).

In “Connection, Community, and Identity: Writing Programs and WPAs at the Community College” Mark Blaauw-Hara and Cheri Lemieux Spiegel reveal how complexities of WPA positions and writing programs are often amplified in the community college setting. They note, “New community college WPAs [feel] as though they have to craft their position from whole cloth” (245). Writing programs at community colleges are often not explicitly called writing programs, they observe, and are often run by department chairs or other administrators. As a result, WPAs at community colleges may not self-identify as such. Throughout the chapter, Blaauw-Hara and Lemieux Spiegel describe their own transitions from graduate school into community college WPA positions, experiences that undergird their conclusion that “our training had been at universities and we didn’t really know what a community college program could (or should) look like. Nor did we know what a WPA at a community college looked like, or what, exactly, such a person’s job should be” (257). As I was reading this chapter, I was struck by how the process of figuring out what the community college WPA’s job is was similar to the processes I went through determining both what a high school writing center director should do, as well as what the Director of Writing at a small, liberal arts college should do. In both roles, my WPA position seemed (and still seems) to be in a never-ending state of transition. This sense of endless becoming is perhaps an important concept for future WPAs to be aware of, even if it is harder to understand until it becomes one’s lived experience.

Such transitions occur even when a WPA position seems clearly stated, as in a position description: the scope of the role nevertheless can remain undefined. When Bradley Smith and Kerri K. Morris were hired at Governor’s State University, the institution was undergoing massive change as it moved from a two-year, upper division-only college to a four-year college. During the transition, first Morris, then Morris and Smith, built the writing program largely from the ground up. In their chapter, “Fostering Ethical Transitions: Creating Community as Writing Program Administrators,” they describe the establishment of the program as well as a successful transition from one WPA to the next. One of the most resonant parts of this chapter for me was Morris’s description of being hired for a job position that technically did not exist to oversee programs that did not yet exist: “The leadership I was to provide was not clearly articulated, nor was campus broadly aware of it” (262). It has also been my experience that position descriptions often may not match the actual work to be done, and the actual work to be done may or may not have been given the green light by all of those individuals and groups who feel they should have a say in such things.

A threshold concept for WPAs, then, might be that position descriptions, or descriptions in job ads, may not accurately represent what the WPA will actually do. Being prepared for the transition between an imagined position to the actual job may save the incoming WPA from initial shock.

While I finished *WPAs in Transition* reflecting upon the endless changes involved in WPA work, I was grimly aware of the challenges that have always been with us as I opened *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition*, edited by Seth Kahn, William B. Lalicker, and Amy Lynch-Binieck. Eileen E. Schell opens this collection with a foreword, “The New Faculty Majority in Writing Programs: Organizing for Change,” in which she cites research from the Coalition on the Academic Workforce that nearly 75 percent of the instructional workforce in two- and four-year colleges is “contingent”—that is, off the tenure-track (ix). As this was 2009, it is likely that percentage of this “new academic majority” has only continued to increase. Schell notes that the idea of contingency doesn’t adequately convey the “complexity” of those positions (x). As someone who has had multiple continuing positions off the tenure track, I appreciated this important and early distinction: the term *non-tenure-track* contains multitudes. Schell argues this collection, in which both tenure-track and non-tenure-track authors describe their own institutional cases, doesn’t focus on “hollow (but certainly well-intentioned) exhortations; dramatic (and not unjustifiably so) depictions of abusive exploitation; or a combined anger and despair” but instead “resolute change, problem-posing, problem-solving, and institutional and department/program-level change” (xi). I don’t know that the collection entirely avoids the former, but I do agree with Schell that for the most part, it succeeds.

In their introduction, the editors set the tone for the ensuing chapters, arguing that it is past time to move beyond research and data collection on labor conditions and toward action:

We’ve been documenting the exploitative conditions of adjunct faculty for a long time, and while trends and specifics matter, continued surveying and data-collecting all too often preclude movement toward equitable treatment in the name of ignorance. *We know*. We know *enough*, anyway . . . and it’s possible to make concrete progress based on what we know *right now*. (emphasis in original, 4)

In this regard, they believe the book is “less about envisioning a utopia toward which we strive—particularly because we don’t all agree on what that utopia looks like—and more about taking concrete steps to fight both exploitation of contingent faculty and the denigration of composition studies as a worthy field of study” (7). They are resolute.

Given this determination, the title of the opening chapter of this collection is apt and could have been a subtitle for the entire book: “Despair Is Not a

Strategy.” After reading this chapter, in which Barbara Heifferon and Anna K. Nardo describe what transpired at Louisiana State University (LSU) between 2003 and 2008, it is easy to see how falling into despair would have been a rational response. Prior to 2003, LSU had offered its non-tenure-track faculty members instructorships; these individuals served on committees, had voting rights, and were eligible for university-wide teaching awards. Contracts were renewable, and those who passed a review in year six earned the rank of Career Instructor, which gave them job security and seniority when it came to course assignments. Between 2003 and 2008, a combination of administrative mandates, the economic crises, and the elimination of the state income tax caused many instructors to be laid off or have their course numbers reduced. With morale sunk, the new WPA intentionally designed strategies including soliciting bottom-up input, respecting curriculum design, streamlining a labor-intensive assessment process, and clarifying instructor goals. Outside the department, an activist organization was formed. “Despair is not a strategy—even though strategies must change over time as obstacle after obstacle surfaces” (39): as a threshold concept, this may seem obvious. Despair is not, of course, a strategy. Yet, it seems like every WPA has a story in which despair would have been a logical response. Programs are built then dismantled or eradicated, or budgets are cut or not funded adequately in the first place. New administrators, particularly at smaller institutions, can have an outsize impact. Yet, for all the stories of loss, there are also stories of resilience, and paying attention to ones like the one in this chapter can offer WPAs strategies for hope in their own local contexts.

Strategies for hope may often require compromise, and narratives in which compromise is the successful approach are especially needed as WPAs confront their institutional challenges with relying on adjunct labor. Solutions to the problem of part-time, adjunct labor have often been “limited to calls for complete labor revolutions or line-in-the-sand workplace uprisings” (McBeth and McCormack 42). As most WPAs too soon learn, neither solution is likely to occur. In the chapter, “An Apologia and a Way Forward: In Defense of the Lecturer Line in Writing Programs,” Mark McBeth and Tim McCormack argue that lecturer lines can move a program toward positive labor practices in a workable way. As they recount, a new WPA was hired at John Jay College to “upend a thirty-year old composition curriculum, based in belletristic essay/writing-for-literature, and replace it with curricular and programmatic structures that represented the best new practices in the field” (43). After the new curriculum was approved, the WPA attempted to provide faculty development to eighty-five part-time adjuncts, a moment in which best practices in curriculum design met the reality of contingent labor. Without converting some of the part-time positions to full-

time, non-tenure-track positions, the benefits for students of the new curriculum couldn't be fully realized. The rest of the chapter details how the WPA took advantage of a "kairotic administrative moment" (47) and proposed eight new full-time, non-tenure-track lecturer positions. The moral of the story suggests that "we see the mistake of manufacturing a binary labor division between fully-employed, happy tenure-track faculty and underemployed, unhappy, part-time faculty" (53). There can be a middle ground wherein non-tenure-track faculty are fully employed and happy if the conditions for such positions are carefully constructed. When our institutions are moving—or have moved—away from tenure-track hiring, our options are to fight that inertia or to try to work and create sustainable positions within the new paradigm. For newly minted Ph.D.s being advised to only seek out tenure-track positions, understanding that not all non-tenure-track positions are "bad" and not all tenure-track positions are "good" can open up other possibilities for happy employment.

While compromises that lead to renewable lecturer positions are one solution to relying solely on adjunct labor, another, perhaps more pie-in-the-sky solution is to build in mechanisms to convert non-tenure-track positions to tenure-track. The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education includes such a provision that enables its institutions to convert full-time, non-tenure-track positions to tenure-track. Since many WPAs nationally might wish for such a clause at their own institution, William B. Lalicker and Amy Lynch-Binieck use their chapter, "Contingency, Solidarity, and Community Building: Principles for Converting Contingent to Tenure Track" to offer guidelines for conversions. Beginning with hiring, WPAs should be as meticulous with hiring contingent faculty as tenure-track faculty. If the program already offers good salaries and benefits, the possibility of conversion of non-tenure-track positions to tenure-track positions might make them more desirable than they would be otherwise. However, new hires should also be given explicit upfront guidance in what the conversation process would entail. Once hired, "Maximize contingent faculty access to the complete collegial life of the department: meetings, policy discussions, social events, scholarly discussions, committee service and funding for professional development" but only if participation is "indirectly rewarded or evaluated" (96). While the suggestions in this chapter were written with a potential tenure-track faculty in mind, I would argue these reflect good practices in hiring and employee engagement, generally. As my tiny writing program's team has recently expanded to include permanent instructor positions, this chapter provided an essential reminder to, on the one hand, not create a teaching-only silo for our instructors, thereby cutting them off from the rest of the college, but on the other hand, be unwilling to ask them to do "more" without something in return.

One way to prevent the siloing of non-tenure-track faculty is to work to ensure there are opportunities for their voices to not only be heard, but included in the larger conversations of the program, department, or college. As Justin M. Jory's chapter, "Non-Tenure-Track Activism: Genre Appropriation in Program Reporting" shows, WPAs should consider ways in which they can use their training in and understanding of rhetoric to engage in such moves, which he describes as activism. Jory recounts that during his department's annual review, the tenure-track faculty wrote the report and subsequently didn't include the voices of non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty, who primarily taught in the writing program. Instead of grumbling among themselves, the contingent faculty banded together and wrote a counter-report. Jory writes, "As a genre and rhetorical tool for NTT activism, the program report is most interesting when thinking about how it sustains—through the subsequent responses, participation, and genres it compels—attention to, and continues to organize publics around, the departmental issues it reveals" (164–5). The ultimate purpose of the counter-report was to reveal to the outside reviewers the deep disconnects between the tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty. For those for whom writing a counter-report might be too risky, other genres to appropriate could include "committee meeting minutes, department guidelines, and even course descriptions" (165). This particular chapter was notable to me for its assertion that change isn't always painted with broad strokes. In my program, we have a name for the pointillism of activism: "tiny mischief." Tiny mischief may include working to ensure one of our classes is listed as a possible elective on the advising guide for biology majors or even something as seemingly obvious as having as much space on our program's webpage devoted to our instructors and their work as to our directors. This idea—that widespread change can start small, like the butterfly's wings in chaos theory—is one that eager, ambitious WPAs may have a hard time with, but as this chapter shows, should endeavor to understand.

Threshold concepts emerge from locations as well as the transinstitutional issues tackled in these two collections. To illuminate this claim, I now turn to *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges* by Jill M. Gladstein and Dara Rossman Regaignon. Published in 2012, this volume isn't a recent publication, but it remains the only book devoted specifically to writing programs and writing program administration at small liberal arts colleges. I first read this book six years ago when I was negotiating contractual details for my current position. Rereading it now alongside the other books in this review shaped my thinking in two ways: it helped me understand the ways in which my career transitions and non-tenure-track status may well work in my favor in my small liberal arts college context. And it made me even more aware of how the conceptual thresholds that I have passed through and come to understand may have been troublesome but ultimately transformative.

Throughout their book, Gladstein and Regaignon analyze the results of a mixed-methods study of one hundred small private liberal arts colleges. Those familiar with the National Census on Writing, which Gladstein and Regaignon also initiated, will recognize their approach. Gladstein and Regaignon contextualize their book with a succinct yet compelling history of higher education in the United States, focusing on the role writing and rhetoric has played throughout. They trace the history of what is now called writing across the curriculum back to eighteenth-century small colleges, such as the then-small Yale, where faculty members created a classical curriculum infused with writing and rhetoric. Rooting themselves in this origin story, the authors establish a through line from the earliest days of higher education in the United States to the modern small liberal arts college of today.

As small liberal arts colleges tend to be intensely mission driven, the authors employ Marxist theorist Raymond Williams by citing his idea of the “structures of feeling” (7), which Williams defines as “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systemic beliefs” (qtd. in Gladstein and Regaignon 7), applying this term to small liberal arts colleges. In other words, they write, “[T]he shared values and assumptions of small colleges are grounded in their material conditions and history” (7). When, in the nineteenth century, US-based colleges began to align with German universities focused on specialization or to see their mission as land-grant universities focused on professionalization, the small liberal arts college resisted these trends. Many of these institutions hold biases against bureaucracy and formalism, which continue today (7). This history is vital to the project Gladstein and Regaignon have undertaken, for to understand how writing programs function at small liberal arts colleges, it is essential to understand how these colleges came to be, and continue to be, in the United States. This particular portion of the book helped me better understand the culture of my own institution, a publicly funded honors liberal arts college that passionately privileges faculty governance, eschews majors for areas of concentration, does not give letter grades but instead relies on faculty narrative evaluations of each student in a given course, and uses a contract system in which students negotiate their course load—including what number of courses they must pass—with their faculty advisors. Reviewing the culture of my institution through the lens of Gladstein and Regaignon’s introduction has allowed me to see that the unique features of our program are not as idiosyncratic as I had previously thought but are connected to a long tradition of liberal arts education in this country. Perhaps more importantly for readers of this review, this opening framework builds solidarity on the commonalities among writing programs and offers those WPAs outside the small college setting the opportunity to learn from the differences.

In this invitational vein, Gladstein and Regaignon offer a definition of *writing program* that is expansive: “A ‘writing program’ is the material form of an institution’s culture of writing. It is 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” (35–6). Conceptually, writing programs are easily thought of as interchangeable with their administrative structure, but a more elastic definition is necessary when talking about idiosyncratic writing programs at small liberal arts colleges that often don’t capitulate to easy categorization. Here too, perhaps, is one of those differences helpful to all WPAs, who may find it useful to consider everything and everyone that makes up their program; all these elements comprise a program type.

Based on the results of their study, Gladstein and Regaignon use Chapter 4, “Configurations of Writing Program Leadership,” to describe the most common “leadership configuration” at small liberal arts colleges. They found that there is often an “Explicit WPA” who is responsible for curriculum, often including faculty support, and an “Explicit Writing Center Director,” who is responsible for student-focused support (49). Other configurations include

- a “Solo WPA/WCD,” or individuals who do the work of multiple positions and who can “look like caretakers with little actual authority” (53)
- an explicit WCD only
- an embedded WPA (often a chair or Gen. Ed. coordinator whose responsibilities include overseeing writing instruction) with an explicit WCD
- an explicit WPA only
- no WPA or WCD

When reflecting on this variety of formulations, the authors assert that “how an institution assigns human resources to the task of leading its culture of writing reveals which aspects of that culture it emphasizes” (44), which is, frankly, a harsh truth for any WPA to realize. The truth of this assertion can be tested through the range of small college configurations documented in this book. A college with only a writing center director, for example, may reflect institutional priorities that student support is more necessary than faculty support or curricular development. Another college with an embedded WPA, such as English department chair, and an explicit WCD might reflect a belief that writing program administration is a task, not a role with disciplinary affiliations. Prior to my position being created, New College had had a WCD-only configuration. Had I thought about how the configurations reflected the culture, I might have asked more questions in my campus visit about the faculty support for a new position that was, in part, designed to better support faculty writing pedagogy. Did the faculty want this

support, particularly if that support asked them to revisit their own pedagogical choices? Regardless of whether a candidate is applying for a WPA or WCD position at a small college or an R1, I would argue that an essential threshold concept to understand is the ways in which human resources allocations should be read rhetorically as an argument about the institution's beliefs about writing.

Just as the position responsibilities are not as clearly defined as they might be at more hierarchical institutions, the reporting lines for this array of positions are not as clear-cut as they might be at a larger university. Small liberal arts colleges tend to have flatter structures, so WPAs may report to upper administration, like the provost or dean, a department chair, or other on-campus offices like a center for teaching and learning or library. The flatter structure of small liberal arts colleges "make it simultaneously easier and more tempting for individual WPAs and WCDs to expand the scope of their positions . . . [they are] often invited to serve on major committees or task forces, with easy and regular access to upper administration" (54). This is one of the best arguments for someone considering making their career as a WPA to choose a small liberal arts college over a potentially better known R1. Whereas at a large university, my work was constrained to one program—the writing center—I compare my current work to managing a multi-ring circus. In doing all of the jobs that at a larger school might be held by a phalanx of individuals, as well as serving on committees focusing on things like enrollment management and general education revision, I have a sense of how all of these pieces work, or don't work, together. At the same time, it is easy for a WPA at a small, liberal arts college to be pulled in too many directions, and being able to say no can be much harder.

Additionally—and this is something specific to small liberal arts colleges that are resistant to hierarchies and who believe in faculty ownership of the curriculum—WPAs may be advised by a committee of representative faculty. The institution may choose to have a committee in addition to the solo WPA in order to maintain shared ownership of writing values, but "without expertise, this committee may not be able to provide faculty development or assessment" (53). While this has been my experience working with, and sometimes against, my own Writing Advisory Committee, the experience of being advised or supervised by someone without the WPA's disciplinary expertise is probably common across institutional contexts. In this way, this chapter presents another threshold concept that WPAs will likely encounter: those who are telling the WPA what to do may not know what the WPA knows. It is beyond the scope of this essay to answer the follow-up question "So what *does* a WPA do?" but it strikes me that the previous texts in this review each provide their own answers.

Given these various leadership configurations and the murky nature of reporting lines, it is not the case that a WPA who has been given authority, either

by title or by place in the institution, necessarily has influence. Gladstein and Regaignon write, “[T]his emphasis is not useful in the small college context” (47), and further quote Thomas Amorose: “[I]nfluence is easily the most necessary to the small-school WPA, while authority may be the most available” (47). In the flat structure of the small college, WPAs who lead from within, “by exerting influence, rather than looking for power . . . can transform writing instruction at their institutions” (53). Of all the takeaways from this book, this is the most meaningful and resonant to me at this point in my career and the one that challenges some of the assumptions many hold about the status of a position. In my current context, if peak status is tenure track, I’ve traded status for influence. For a variety of reasons, had my position been ascribed with tenure-track status, the resistance to my position (and thus, me) would have possibly prevented the work that has since been accomplished.

Having described the ways in which WPA positions at small liberal arts colleges are configured and the benefits and limitations of each configuration, Gladstein and Regaignon then report how the power and/or status ascribed—or not ascribed—to these positions impacts the efficacy of the WPA’s work. It is not what most aspiring WPAs groomed for tenure-track lines at research intensive universities would expect. At small liberal arts colleges

most faculty still teach with writing, and many of them think of themselves as teaching students how to write . . . as a result writing program administrators of all types must persuade their colleagues across the college to evaluate the way they teach and, periodically, the way they structure writing curricula. Power—with its connotation of compulsion—is a misleading metric in this structure of feeling; small college writing administrators lead most effectively by quietly demonstrating their expertise. (68)

The idea of a WPA quietly demonstrating their expertise can be anathema, particularly as our colleagues in other disciplines are celebrated for doing the opposite. While it is never a simple binary, WPAs at small liberal arts colleges may find themselves having to move away from wielding power in order to gain influence. That is not to say WPAs cannot have both, but this book helped me understand how the antagonism toward a hierarchical administration, the “structure of feeling,” the fact that many faculty may already consider themselves to have expertise in teaching writing simply because they think they have been doing so for years, if not decades—all of this provides a different sort of rhetorical ecology for doing the work of the WPA.

The authors wonder: “[I]s it better to have a tenured faculty member manage a writing requirement or the writing center, or to have a non-tenured faculty member serve as a leader?” (87) and then detail how different answers to

this question could impact a hypothetical college. Ideally it would be a tenured faculty member serving as leader, but few small liberal arts colleges even perceive rhetoric and composition to be a discipline. Being a tenure-track junior WPA at a college that is not prepared to evaluate WPA work . . . the risks are clear.

Questions about staffing writing courses at a small liberal arts college may veer sharply away from the concerns discussed widely in *Contingency, Exploitation, and Action*. They become concerns of “intellectual expertise rather than labor conditions” (121). A small liberal arts college’s writing requirements may be either liberated or divorced from the state-imposed requirements that confine WPAs at other institutions. Colleges in the study either explicitly required writing instruction in courses like first-year composition, first-year writing seminar, or writing-intensive courses, or expected writing instruction be embedded in courses like first-year seminar or general education, as well as in theses and capstones. The challenge for a WPA working at an institution with embedded but not explicit writing instruction is that there can be “an institutional mandate to *assign* writing, but little faculty development on how to *teach* it” (105). Further, as most small liberal arts colleges pride themselves on the percentage of courses taught by tenure-track faculty, the tenure-track faculty members who teach writing are not likely to call writing studies their home discipline. Within this context, Gladstein and Regaignon note that the small liberal arts college WPA may need to think about the ways in which they enact their expertise, suggesting they may need “to infiltrate teaching practices across the college in order to infuse writing instruction throughout” (131).

Ultimately, the three texts I have taken up in this review approach the work of being a WPA from different points of entry: transitions, labor, and small college contexts. They can each be read on their own, and each offers more than space here allows me to discuss. At the same time, reading them as collaborating texts—if not directly in conversation with each other, then at least talking in the same room—offers a richer, more nuanced way of thinking about each individual book’s primary concern. Further, reading them while thinking about possible threshold concepts for being and doing writing program administration not only gave me new ways to think about the work I have been doing for the past fifteen-plus years, but also an awareness of what knowledge I have gained and where along my journey I gained it. Would knowing about these thresholds have accelerated my understanding of them? Would I have made as many mistakes, or would I have made different ones? It is impossible to say. Still, I recommend reading WPA texts with this lens, and I hope this review serves to spark a discussion among WPAs about our own threshold concepts.

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