

Rethinking and Revising: New Approaches for New Challenges

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Isaacs, Emily J. *Writing at the State U: Instruction and Administration at 106 Comprehensive Universities*. Utah State UP, 2018. 229 pages.

Janangelo, Joseph, editor. *A Critical Look at Institutional Mission: A Guide for Writing Program Administrators*. Parlor P, 2016. 241 pages.

Siegel Finer, Bryna, and Jamie White-Farnham, editors. *Writing Program Architecture: Thirty Cases for Reference and Research*. Utah State UP, 2017. 479 pages.

On college campuses across the United States, WPAs work to cultivate a culture of writing among all university members. The goals of this shared culture of writing, and the form that it takes, may vary widely across local institutional contexts. Its construction is often determined at both the macro and micro levels: from the individual students served by the program, through the varying responsibilities of the program itself, up to the shared goals and values of higher administration and external benefactors. Yet, despite programs being situated within their own campus communities, there remain shared commitments and lessons connecting WPAs across contexts. This shared experience may include feelings of frustration towards budgetary or policy decisions, or feelings of excitement when innovative curricular changes pass campus committees. Responsible for everything from FYC to writing centers, writing minors to writing majors, the complexity and span of WPA work means that WPAs are often networked across a campus community. At the same time, WPAs may also find themselves as the singular or primary writing resource on their given campus. Being in this position often means little opportunity for localized support and resources and can lead to WPA work feeling solitary or isolating.

Despite this potential solitude, there is a large external community of WPA experience and resources to provide support. From regional and national conferences to journals and the connections forged in online spaces, WPAs can find the mentoring and support that might not be available within their given programmatic structures. Despite differences across

local institutional structures, this larger external network offers resources and potential solutions to be adapted within a localized context. The three texts reviewed here offer external guidance and pragmatic support for WPAs across institutional contexts. While WPAs work to nurture a culture of writing across their campuses, these texts foster a culture for the administrative work that goes into these initiatives and offer a source of community and support for WPAs across the US. Taken together, these books highlight the importance of localized context in writing program administration and demonstrate the benefits of transparency in WPA work, showing that there is much to be learned from prior experiences, both good and bad. By offering several examples of different institutional sizes, types, and structures, these texts are accessible to WPAs across US institutional contexts. They offer community, mentorship, and guidance through shared anecdotal experience, statistical analyses, and stories of success and failure. Across these books, writing program administration is explored in all its facets: from writing majors to FYC, creative writing to writing centers, and everything in between. These texts center the labor of WPAs: its variations, frustrations, joys, and rewards.

Emily Isaacs's *Writing at the State U: Instruction and Administration at 106 Comprehensive Universities* highlights the work of WPAs at state comprehensive universities (SCUs), while simultaneously demonstrating the benefits of and, the field's need for, bird's-eye studies of WPA work. Joseph Janangelo's *A Critical Look at Institutional Mission: A Guide for Writing Program Administrators* challenges WPAs to rethink their relationship with larger institutional mission and values, pushing past concerns of standardization to reflect on how these missions can help shape programmatic design and structure. Lastly, in *Writing Program Architecture: Thirty Cases for Reference and Research*, Bryna Siegel Finer and Jamie White-Farnham present thirty different case studies from institutions of various shapes and sizes; in doing so, they further highlight the joys and frustrations that WPAs share. Taken together, these books continue to make space for external guidance, mentorship, and pragmatic solutions to the problems that WPAs face at institutions across the US.

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE SCU

The most recent of these texts, and the only single-author monograph, is Emily Isaacs's *Writing at the State U*. Unlike the other two texts which are both edited collections with contributions from WPAs representing all types of institutions, Isaacs's study is focused on a single institution type: SCUs. Isaacs argues that this perspective is underrepresented in WPA

research, writing “the scholarly conversation on writing program administration [is] so often set within the context of the research university, or, less frequently, the small college” (3). Isaacs’s study presents the opportunity to think more broadly across a singular institutional context, which stands in contrast to the two edited collections which offer more opportunity for cross-institutional research regardless of structure or institutional type. Despite being situated within a specific institutional structural context, Isaacs’s work is transferrable across contexts and institutional types, in no small part because of her commitment to methodological transparency and her detailed focus on research design. The edited collections, which I will talk more about in the following sections, are built around case studies, interviews, and anecdotal data, while Isaacs’s corpus is made up of publicly-available materials collected from 106 university websites. This “bird’s-eye approach,” not typical of WPA research, allows Isaacs to look broadly across institutions to consider the patterns and trends at SCUs. Although this approach “does not tell you *why* phenomena have occurred,” it can tell “you *what* occurred” (9). This focus on what creates opportunities for future research that can look more in depth at specific patterns to move into understanding the why.

From the start, Isaacs offers detailed discussion and explanations of her approach to this research and the methods employed. Regarding her study design, and arguing for the benefits of empirical research, Isaacs expresses a desire for “a method that would enable [her] to speak broadly about national trends” (5). She describes *Writing at the State U* as providing “historical context while capitalizing on publicly available data and fairly simple statistical analyses that have not been used by researchers who have conducted ‘status’ research of this nature” (12). What Isaacs offers throughout this book is a new way of analyzing writing programs and the work they do, demonstrating the usefulness and possibilities of empirical WPA research. This commitment to and focus on methods makes this book particularly well-suited for graduate students and other early-stage researchers, as it explores the process behind designing a study centered around empirical research. Isaacs carefully presents balanced reflection of her methods, recognizing both the limitations and potential of empirical WPA research and raising important questions for all researchers to consider. In advocating for empirical research, Isaacs points to the possibility of self-selection data skew, referring to data collection from only those who “opt in” to particular research projects. She argues that “any real understanding of the impact of our field requires that we gather and report on what is happening at institutions that are not part of our community as defined by membership in one of our field’s organization” (9). At the same time, Isaacs recog-

nizes the limitation of her large scope approach, noting that “the approach precludes a close view, so texture, details, and, most of all, explanations for choices made are not provided” (9). This weighing of options and possibilities granted by different methodological approaches both demonstrates the process behind designing a research study, while also serving as an example of innovative research and new ways of approaching WPA research.

In addition to her opening methodological chapter, Isaacs offers a detailed methods appendix. In the appendix, Isaacs briefly describes her training in research methodology, and how it has evolved over time. By providing an in-depth discussion of her methodological decisions and process, Isaacs illustrates the importance of the research process, granting it equal weight to the findings themselves. This attention to methodology is something Isaacs explicitly discusses when talking about previous research studies. Before delving into the findings from her own study, Isaacs presents readers with a history of prior, related research in her second chapter, “Assessment of Writing Studies’ Practices: 1927 to the Present Study.” While this historical overview provides important context of the studies that Isaacs draws on, it further highlights Isaacs’s belief that, while the findings themselves do matter, they can only be understood within the context of methodology. In discussing the focus and findings of this prior research, Isaacs notes that “I believe research findings on such topics as class size or institutional home is best understood in the context of the methodologies researchers employ” (34). This is further illustrated through the accompanying table of “Major studies of the state of writing programs, instruction, and administration,” which—by including the title, author, year of data collection and publication, and the method details—places emphasis on the data and methods, with little focus on the findings (35–37). Unlike much of the research on writing programs and WPA labor that exists, Isaacs presents quantitative and statistical analyses, offering new ways of discussing and presenting WPA practices as well as conducting this kind of research. It is this detail that, again, makes *Writing at the State U* a particularly useful resource for graduate students and early-stage researchers, especially those looking to do quantitative work.

Following these introductory chapters are three chapters presenting Isaacs’s key findings related to the institutional support (infrastructure, policies, and resources) provided to FYC, FYC curriculum and classroom practices, and the kinds of writing that happen beyond FYC. Although the theme of these findings can be seen across other research studies, Isaacs’s bird’s-eye scope and focus on SCUs offers a new lens for studying WPA labor and conditions as well as FYC programs in specific institutional settings. By focusing on publicly available materials, Isaacs analyzes what pro-

grams “promise” their external audiences as well as what happens within classrooms and across curricula. Rather than focusing on interviews, which may potentially be skewed by an individual’s hopes and visions for a program (Isaacs talks about this potential skew in chapter one), these materials are more objective, identifying the program’s mission and goals. While this objectivity may not always reflect the practiced reality, it illustrates programmatic goals and shared interests, as well as highlighting what gets communicated to external audiences.

In her concluding chapter, Isaacs summarizes her study, suggesting that “it is clear that the influence of the field is felt across the country, at both large and small universities and in every region” (159). She goes on to posit that “the study also reveals that several of the core values of the discipline have deeply influenced the curricula of first-year composition” (161). Returning to some of Isaacs’s opening points, *Writing at the State U* does not explain why this influence is present or how it came to be a part of FYC curricula across the country. Rather, it identifies these overarching patterns across 106 institutions, and leaves the work of how and why for future researchers and studies.

Isaacs’s book can serve as a methodological beacon for those hoping to design their own project, showing us that how findings are achieved is just as important as the findings themselves. At the same time, Isaacs’s bird’s-eye approach offers new perspectives on old problems, challenging researchers to think about the work they do and how they achieve outcomes. The following sections will look at two edited collections, each of which shares with Isaacs’s book the usefulness and guidance for WPAs in need of solutions, while differing in approach.

CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES: A FOCUS ON MISSION

Unlike Isaacs’s focus on a specific institutional structure, Joseph Janangelo’s edited collection *A Critical Look at Institutional Mission: A Guide for Writing Program Administrators* presents case studies from a wide variety of institutions, including two-year colleges, religiously affiliated universities, and four-year public and private institutions. The case studies presented in this collection use locality to argue for the importance of explicit connection between a writing program’s mission and the broader goals and values of an institution, where one can be used to inform the other. In his introduction, Janangelo defines institutional mission statements as “markers of identity and hallmarks of accomplishment,” going on to argue that institutional mission can evoke “a legacy of scholarship and pedagogy that contemporary stakeholders can use to steward their departments, programs,

and initiatives forward” (xi). From this definition, Janangelo contends that mission “tells us *why* we do what we do” (xii). The case studies presented throughout the collection show the complexity and challenges of aligning with a given mission and explore how institutional mission situates WPA work within a given context. As Janangelo points out, where one works greatly impacts the how, why, and what of that work (xiv).

The book is divided into three parts: “Connecting and Contending,” “Designing and Discerning,” and “Relating, Reflecting, and Resisting.” The chapters within each part reflect the different problems WPAs face, and the ways that institutional mission might be used to address them. While this structure emphasizes the potential of and opportunities granted by aligning with an institution’s mission, I offer in my following discussion an alternative thematic organization of chapters as another way to think about alignment with institutional mission. This edited collection, while addressing the challenges aligning with an institutional mission, argues that WPAs can make these statements more than empty words used on recruitment documents by integrating university mission in curricular and programmatic design. The chapters in this book show how, because it is tied to personal beliefs, both religious and not, institutional mission can lead to a deeper connection within a community; how mission statements can be used to frame assessment and program design in ways that connect interdisciplinary audiences across campus; and lastly, how institutional mission serves as an important framework for undergraduate experience and expectations.

Throughout this collection, many authors speak of institutional mission as the values that drive both the institution itself and those who make up its community. In his chapter on the writing program at West Point Academy, Jason Hoppe argues that it is institutional mission that both fosters West Point’s unique focus, while simultaneously making West Point more like other colleges and the “traditional” college experience. Throughout, Hoppe recognizes the markedly different student experience offered at West Point but notes that, by drawing upon the mission of the school, he was able to foster similarity and “diminish” some of the difference (93). As a United States Military Academy (USMA), West Point’s mission is a balance of educating and training, a “perpetual tug of war between what it means to . . . foster academic pursuits and heed martial imperatives” (92). Hoppe describes his process of using this mission as a framework for the school’s first writing fellows program and writing center, connecting these programs to not just the educational goal of the institution, but the martial and practical ones as well. He writes of designing a “strategic plan” for each of these programs that “ties the expansion of these endeavors to the

increasing engagement of other members of the USMA community” (95). Using the larger institutional mission, Hoppe was able to gain support for both the writing fellows program and writing center, connecting these programs to broader campus initiatives, student needs, and the concerns of higher administration.

Like Hoppe’s use of institutional mission at West Point, authors at religious-affiliated institutions see their schools’ missions as useful frameworks for designing programs and meeting external expectations. Kristine Hansen writes of student experience at Brigham Young University, a university affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In her analysis, she explores how institutional mission is used both to maintain ideologically driven goals and steer the university into the future, despite increasing secularism across most university campuses in the US. Similarly, Andrea Rosso Efthymiou and Lauren Fitzgerald explore how mission shapes student experience at Yeshiva University, “the first and largest US institution of higher education under Orthodox Jewish auspices” (169). Centering on the experience of undergraduate writing center tutors, they argue that mission can be used to help tutors see themselves as “rhetorical actors” who can both abide by and expand beyond institutional mission. Lastly, Joseph Janangelo’s chapter about Loyola University Chicago highlights how institutional mission and students’ expectations can clash with a university’s other affiliations or identities. Loyola, a Jesuit Catholic university, faced criticism after refusing to host same-sex marriages at their on-campus chapel. Critics, including alumni, current students, and a host of online supporters, pointed to Loyola’s mission statement which “embrace[s] social justice” and posits Loyola as a “home for all [students]—embracing all races, sexes, gender identities, . . . [and] sexual orientations,” arguing that this refusal was antithetical to the university’s mission (205). At the same time, others pointed to Loyola’s identity as Catholic institution, seeing this as “an adequate basis” for such refusal (208). This example highlights the various identities that institutions may have, as well as the various stakeholders they serve. Janangelo goes on to offer suggestions for institutions trying to balance conflicting identities, and how they might strategize institutional mission to better serve their campus communities.

In other contexts, institutional mission provides a framework for assessment and design across programs and campuses. While this use of mission as a framework can raise concern over institutional standardization and loss of departmental agency, the authors in this collection argue against these concerns. In his chapter on “Strategic Assessment,” Nicholas Behm describes his work using mission statements at Elmhurst College to engage faculty across campus and develop an assessment methodology. Behm rec-

ognizes the difficulty of being the lone “assessment person” on campus, which is further troubled by resistance from his colleagues to both mission and assessment, again drawing attention to concerns about standardization. Nonetheless, Behm argues that “effective writing assessment develops organically out of the conditions, circumstances, curricula, and student needs that pervade institutional context” and advocates for an approach to assessment that is particular to a local context and shaped by a given institution and its own values (55). Like Behm, Anita M. DeRouen similarly explores mission-driven curriculum reform with her institution’s General Education program, highlighting throughout her chapter the important lessons, or “Learning Points,” from her experience. These learning points—which include the ways institutional mission can “provide valuable focal points” for reform (132), remarks on the importance of feedback and collaboration, and the time and patience involved with any level of reform and change—aim to help other faculty members facing similar reform at their own institutions. This sentiment is shared and expanded upon by Andrew Jeter, who, unlike other authors in the collection, moves outside of the university to show how his institution’s mission was used in external community spaces, specifically an academic literacy program for a public, suburban high school.

Although there are no chapters wholly against mission-driven assessment, there are some authors who are more skeptical of these initiatives and who they serve, pointing to what they see as potential hazards of such work. For example, Jeffrey Klausman, in noting the shift toward a neoliberal vision of the future at his own two-year college, argues that any assessment or design led by institutional mission will only work to further the objectives of the neoliberal university. Similarly, Rita Malenczyk and Lauren Rosenberg show how an emphasis on mission at a public liberal arts school poses specific challenges, as institutional mission at these institutions is often “dictated by legislature” and external actors (151). In both cases, mission-driven curriculum and assessment may not align with the best practices of a discipline or the expectations of faculty. Rather, in these instances, institutional mission can be used to further support the goals of higher administration, goals that may conflict with those of WPAs and other faculty across campus.

Though many chapters consider how mission can be used for upholding values or curricular assessment, it can also play an important role in student experience and guiding students’ expectations. Institutional mission statements frequently appear in recruitment materials, and while certainly not the driving force for students’ decisions, can play a large part in what students expect from a given institution. In thinking about this relationship, Dominic DelliCarpini draws on physics to show how institutional mission defines rela-

tionships with internal and external stakeholders. He describes institutional mission as “the centripetal force that attempts to keep individual initiatives balanced between innovation and ‘mission creep’” and credits institutional mission as being the drawing force that brings many different campus initiatives to a common focal point (4). Represented visually in the chapter, the mission statement serves as the center focal point of the larger campus community. It is the “centripetal force,” drawing upon numerous campus initiatives and curricular design choices to bring together different aspects of the campus community. It becomes the anchor for student experience, where students’ various campus encounters connect to a larger shared mission.

Putting this centripetal force metaphor into practice, Joyce Kinkead discusses how she used institutional mission at her US land-grant institution to create a new general education course that allowed students to better connect with the “*culture*” of their institution, its history, and the overarching mission. Kinkead describes how student experience was shaped by and benefited from drawing on the mission and shared history of land-grant institutions. While DelliCarpini and Kinkead both address the larger cultures and community of institutions, institutional mission can also be used to target and directly benefit underrepresented groups of students. Farrell J. Webb and Anita R. Cortez demonstrate this by showing how institutional mission served as a framework for creating “success programs” for underrepresented students at their research university, benefiting marginalized students and further enhancing their undergraduate experience.

Across *A Critical Look at Institutional Mission*, readers will find a variety of institutional types and structures, as well as different ways to engage institutional mission in programmatic design choices. This variety of institutional structures and different “ways in” to the text is shared in *Writing Program Architecture*. However, in this edited collection, readers move beyond engaging institutional mission to explore the vast expanse of WPA work and the very different responsibilities that WPAs face depending upon their local institutional context.

WHAT WE’RE MADE OF: PROGRAMMATIC ARCHITECTURE

Bryna Siegel Finer and Jamie White-Farnham’s *Writing Program Architecture: Thirty Cases for Reference and Research*, like the books previously discussed, serves as a substantial resource, offering pragmatic guidance for new and veteran WPAs alike. It is likewise helpful to graduate students who may find themselves in WPA positions in the future, as the collection illustrates the complexities and span of WPA labor. The collection, with its inclusion of different institutional structures and writing program designs, shows

how different programs can approach the same issues as well as how varied the challenges are across different programs. Like Janangelo's edited collection, the authors throughout continue to highlight the importance of localized context, and while solutions are adaptable to different contexts, the where of WPA work remains of the utmost importance. While each case study recognizes its uniqueness to a given institution, this collection aims to reach WPAs at all career-stages, and "inform, inspire, and otherwise help [them] build new programs and sustain existing ones" (4).

From the start, Siegel Finer and White-Farnham establish their architectural metaphor as twofold, using it "both as a way to understand writing programs and as an organizational feature" for the book itself (4). They go on to argue that "exposing the architecture of writing programs," the goal of this edited collection, "has three purposes" (5). These purposes include foregrounding "elements of a program that are oftentimes treated as mundane background information," "serving a research function . . . [that] provides jumping off points to address and inspire myriad research questions," and lastly, modeling "a method for WPAs to consider and articulate their own programs' architecture" (5). The chapters in this collection, taken together, successfully serve these purposes in a way that is accessible and productive for readers.

Despite representing a wide variety of institutional types and writing program structures, the chapters in *Writing Program Architecture* follow a template, with the architecture of each chapter built by the same elements and focus. The elements included for each program, which are all explained in detail in the introduction, include: institutional demographics (type, location, enrollment, WPA reporting, funding, and a brief description of undergraduate students), a program snapshot, a WPA profile, program conception, population served, funding, operations, assessment, marketing, technology, role of research, pedagogical and/or administrative highlights, primary document description, and WPA's voice. This template helps illustrate shared concerns across institutional contexts and further demonstrates different ways of approaching similar scenarios. This construction helps demonstrate that, while on paper institutions may *seem* to have nothing in common, schools and programs across contexts might face similar or related challenges. It is additionally useful for doing cross-institutional research focused on a specific aspect of WPA work, but at locations with different demographics or hierarchical structures. This level of accessibility makes this book a great introduction to graduate students who might be thinking about WPA work across various institutional structures, while also serving as a great resource to new and veteran WPAs who may find themselves facing new challenges or who are situated in new contexts.

Accessible resources are at the core of this collection, reflected in both the introduction and its online compendium. In the collection's official table of contents, the case studies are organized by program type, including categorizations like "Writing and Communication Across the Curriculum" or "Integrated Programs." In their introduction, however, Siegel Finer and White-Farnham offer multiple "ways in" to the text with an alternative table of contents that directs readers to specific pages within each case study determined by the various template elements. This attention to alternative approaches based on each reader's needs makes the book more accessible to its many different audiences. Veteran WPAs may find it useful to target specific elements, like funding or assessment, while new WPAs may find it useful to read the book by program or institution type. Again, this level of accessibility also makes the book an ideal resource in a seminar or course on writing program administration, where students can be introduced to the many different program types and elements of a WPA position.

In addition to the expansive textual collection, this book also includes an online compendium comprising responses, reviews, and primary documents that accompany each case study. Within each chapter, there is a brief "primary document" description where authors describe their online compendium materials and why they chose to share these specific materials. Like the book itself, the online compendium is also a searchable resource, where users can search primary documents based on institution type, program type, or document type. This attention to search functionality further contributes to the accessibility of this book as a resource. Additionally, the online compendium's collection of primary documents illustrates that what is considered most representative or what matters most for any given program or institution can vary widely. Some examples of the document types shared include: annual reports, assessment related materials, evaluation forms (specifically those from writing centers), grant proposals, program/curriculum proposals, promotion materials, self-studies and evaluator reports, and syllabi and pedagogical materials, to name a few. These examples illustrate a few different points: First, they demonstrate the many facets of WPA work, from teacher training and curriculum design, to assessment, evaluation, and recruitment. Additionally, they further support the importance of local context. Within each case study chapter, the authors discuss the primary documents they included, and why they chose to share specific materials. What becomes evident is that what is most representative for a specific writing program is dependent upon a given local context, institutional history, and even point in time.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

From graduate student to veteran WPA, from fellow administrators across campus looking to better understand the work of WPAs and everyone in between, there is something for everyone across each of these texts. Taken together, these books offer guidance and serve as a resource for aspiring, new, and veteran WPAs alike. While WPA work can sometimes feel isolated, and while at times WPAs face an uphill battle against budgetary cuts or cross-campus resistance, books like these offer a reminder of the community and network of support already in place. The research across these books, from the empirical analyses of Emily Isaacs to the more anecdotally driven work of the edited collections, illustrate the importance of localized context, while also showing how seemingly different institutions may share many of the same challenges.

With a wide focus on aspects of WPA work including FYC courses at SCUs, using institutional mission statements to assist in programmatic decision-making, and what shared elements of a WPA position look like at different institutions, these books serve a diverse audience. Graduate students facing a future in writing program administration will find honest depictions and discussion of the responsibilities that accompany this job. At the same time, they can serve as models for designing a research study and taking seriously the methodology of a given project, or instituting new programmatic initiatives inspired by local context. New WPAs will find resources and, potentially, solutions, for approaching new challenges they may face. This is true also of veteran WPAs who may find themselves in a new context or within a shifting structure bringing about new challenges. These books expand our methodological processes, showing different ways to approach shared challenges, keeping localized context at the fore. With this emphasis on context, these texts and their contributing authors challenge us to reflect on the work we do at our own institutions, requiring us to consider the challenges we may face and offering a myriad of ways to approach these problems.

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