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FIRST-YEAR WRITING PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AT SMALL LIBERAL ARTS
COLLEGES

by

Nathan W. Henton

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

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Dedication

For Alice, Miley, and Kate:

You've been very patient for a long time, and now I'm finished.

I couldn't have gotten through it without you.

And for Jason, who would have gotten a big kick out of seeing this project done.

Acknowledgements

I could not have completed this project without help from many people. Here are but a few of those to whom I'm indebted. My deepest gratitude to:

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First-Year Writing Program Assessment at Small Liberal Arts Colleges

Abstract

This project examines first-year writing program assessment practices at small liberal arts colleges and universities in an effort to understand how these practices resemble or diverge from prevailing scholarship on writing program assessment. There is extensive literature on best practices in writing program assessment, but nearly all of it by scholars and researchers working at public comprehensive universities who assume that type of institution as their model. At the same time, scholarship on writing program assessment at small liberal arts institutions is scant, amounting to fewer than ten publications in the last twenty years, even as these schools are structurally and philosophically different enough from public comprehensive universities that prevailing best program assessment practices often do not fit their contexts and needs. Small liberal arts institutions are historically important to higher education in United States, remain numerically significant, and serve hundreds of thousands of students per year. To better understand how they engage with best practices in writing program assessment, the author distributed a survey to more than 120 institutions, ultimately receiving responses from 42. Using these responses and in-depth interviews with the directors of first-year writing programs at three other small liberal arts universities, the author tested his hypothesis that these schools are either not engaging in writing program assessment or are not doing so in ways that are consistent with best practices. The combined results ultimately reveal that (1) the responding schools are shifting, including in their approaches to first-year writing and in their assessment of those programs; (2) many assessment projects show signs of interference from upper-level administrators; and (3) these institutions are engaging in writing program assessment, but often in ways that are out of line with prevailing scholarship. The study examines the possible reasons

for these themes, makes suggestions for how the directors of first-year writing programs at small institutions can gain better control of and improve their program assessment efforts and for how program assessment scholars might consider the small liberal arts experience, and closes with suggestions for further research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, Literature Review, & Argument

Prelude: Contact

My parents attended a small liberal arts college in the early 1970s. Back then, it was really little more than a community college—though never public and never claiming any form of that classification—offering only associate’s degrees and a third-year certificate in Bible. It owed the Bible certificate, which my dad completed, to its founding impulses as a teacher- and preacher-training college a century earlier. My parents moved from there once Dad completed the Bible certificate to another small liberal arts college so that my dad could complete his bachelor’s degree, and later towed three-year-old me and my one-year-old brother to a third small liberal arts college so that Dad could start work on his master’s degree.¹ I grew up hearing about pretty much only those three colleges. I had my first taste of the small college experience as a 10-year-old in the mid-1980s when we moved to the host town of Dad’s Associate of Arts alma mater so that my dad could serve on the faculty as a missionary-in-residence for a year, by which time the school had become a full-fledged college offering bachelor’s degrees. Five years later, after a total of ten years as evangelical missionaries in South America, we returned to the school, by then a university, so that my dad could resume the post as missionary-in-residence, a job he held from my second year of high school through my third year at university.² I opted to attend my dad’s school for my own bachelor’s degree on my beliefs that it was educationally

¹ I only discuss my father in this section because his education and work drove the family’s moves. My mother’s education was never given much importance for a host of reasons that are personally important but irrelevant to this context, though she did complete her bachelor’s in the early 2000s.

² This seems as good a place as any to note that my childhood educational experience overseas was chiefly at the hands of private schools run by British families and based on the British International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) system. As a consequence, much of my writing retains sporadic British spellings and mannerisms, most notably in the appearance of occasional *Us* in words that U.S. usage does not recognize. It seems I still spell words according to the way I first learned to spell them; hence, *color* doesn’t get a *U*, but *neighbour*, *behaviour*, and *curious* do, for example. I acknowledge that these spellings are counter to standard U.S. usage. I have opted to retain them, however, as markers of my individual voice and style.

solid and that the tuition discount I got for being a faculty kid made financial sense.³ Skip ahead twenty years, and I find myself beginning my tenth year of teaching at the institution where my dad completed his bachelor's degree, a school that continues to identify itself as a small liberal arts university. By contract, I will be here for several years more. Two of my siblings completed their undergraduate educations here, and the other two began their educations at my bachelor's institution.

In sum, I have spent a significant portion of my life in the orbit of small liberal arts institutions. I know them reasonably well. In my current roles as assistant professor of English (primarily of freshman writing) and director of the writing center, I have an ethical obligation to use what I have learned through graduate training to make my school better than it was when I arrived. As a scholar, I also have an ethical obligation to the discipline of writing studies to contribute what I can, particularly to areas that have not received much attention. As it turns out, small liberal arts colleges have much that needs better understanding, particularly their approaches to assessing their first-year writing programs.

Small Liberal Arts Colleges and Universities

Small liberal arts colleges and universities (SLACs) occupy a limited but important position in U.S. higher education, particularly in its history: Harvard, Yale, and most of the other earliest universities in the country began as SLACs, as did many other more modern prestigious institutions, among them Duke and Baylor. It was the small liberal arts college that first brought to the U.S. the German idea of the research doctorate and of universities as sites primarily of scholarship rather than of teaching. The very notion of the uniquely-U.S. idea of first-year

³ Ultimately, not so much on both counts.

writing courses and programs traces back to Harvard and the other Ivies—again, mostly SLACs—in the late 1870s. Much of what currently defines higher education in the United States, in other words, originates at small liberal arts institutions.

Jill Gladstein and Dara Rossman Regaignon’s 2012 *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges* defines small liberal arts colleges and universities as generally having fewer than about 5,000 students (14-15); private (7, 213-214); religiously- or otherwise ideologically-affiliated, or were early in their histories (7, 8, 213-214); fairly homogenous student bodies (19); mostly undergraduate (213-214); and almost twice as likely as public comprehensive universities (PCUs) to have writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs (7).⁴

⁵ The prestige of the most prominent and historically-important SLACs further suggests that SLACs tend to be more selective in whom they recruit and/or admit, whether by academic achievement, ideological allegiance, gender, or other standards, or at least to be perceived as more selective than public colleges (10). Selectivity, real or perceived, leads to the common perception by the public that SLACs are more rigorous than public colleges. As a result of their

⁴ Gladstein and Regaignon and many other scholars position SLACs as something “other than” or oppositional to some other type of university, generally seeming to have large, public, research-oriented universities in mind as the thing that SLACs are not, even as SLACs also share several points of similarity with community colleges and agricultural-mechanical universities. As a convenient shorthand, non-SLAC colleges and universities are referred to in this project as *public comprehensive universities* or *PCUs* anywhere broad contrast is needed, a designation chosen because most SLACs are private and not comprehensive. I am indebted to the title of Emily Isaacs’s *Writing at the State U: Instruction and Administration at 106 Comprehensive Universities* for helping me arrive at the name.

⁵ Though Gladstein and Regaignon and, as will be seen, other SLAC scholars such as Rutz and Blair, frequently discuss writing across the curriculum in relation to SLACs, they never state clearly exactly what they mean by WAC. The closest are Rutz and Lauer-Glebov, who state that at Carleton College in the early 2000s “the writing requirement has taken the form of WAC in the sense that responsibility for writing instruction has been distributed among departments offering introductory courses and special writing-rich... seminars for first-year students.” They go on to explain that WAC is a good fit at their school because “Carleton students, like all students in liberal arts curricula, migrate among many disciplines, learning rhetorical forms and conventions along the way” (82), thereby implying that WAC makes sense for SLACs because a liberal arts education is inherently multi-disciplinary. Rutz’s later “Delivering Composition at a Liberal Arts College” presents a history of WAC at Carleton that confirms these definitions (61-62). Gladstein & Regaignon speculate that WAC is common at small colleges because of the close working nature of contact between students and faculty and the “complex rhetorical performances” small colleges often undertake (19-20).

smaller size, SLACs have limited graduate programs, smaller faculties, and different administrative structures and channels from PCUs (Gladstein and Regaignon 42-91, 137). These differences suggest that SLACs also approach writing program assessment differently from larger comprehensive universities.

The number of small liberal arts colleges and universities is surprisingly difficult to determine with certainty. In her foreword to Gladstein and Regaignon's book, Carol Rutz asserts that SLACs represent about five percent of institutions of higher learning in the United States (ix) a figure she arrived at in 2005 by analyzing data from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (CCIHE) ("Scholarship on writing program assessment at small liberal arts colleges?"). The CCIHE has changed in intervening years, however: The 2000 Carnegie Classification, from which Rutz drew her finding ("Delivering Composition" 60), lists "Baccalaureate Colleges—Liberal Arts" among its school categories, yet the 2005, 2010, and 2015 editions of the CCIHE (the 2015 survey being the most current at this writing) no longer use that classification ("2015 Public Data File"). Comparing the membership list of the Small Liberal Arts Colleges—Writing Program Administrators (SLAC-WPA) organization ("Member Institutions") to the CCIHE 2015 Public Data File reveals that 104 of SLAC-WPA's 111 member institutions are classified as "Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus" (code number 21) under the CCIHE's Basic Classification, suggesting that this new label is the equivalent of the pre-2005 classification. Under this equivalence, the CCIHE Classification Summary Tables identify 246 U.S. colleges and universities as small liberal arts colleges, 5.3% of the institutions of higher learning, together accounting for 409,682, or 2%, of collegiate students in the United States. For comparison, "Doctoral Universities," a category covering the top three tiers of the CCIHE, only account for 334 schools, 7.2% of the total (although they also

account for 31.6% of collegiate students). The CCIHE would seem to settle the count at 246 colleges and universities.

But some factors complicate the CCIHE count. First, the CCIHE does not provide a detailed definition of “Baccalaureate Colleges,” noting only that the category “Includes institutions where baccalaureate or higher degrees represent at least 50 percent of all degrees but where fewer than 50 master's degrees or 20 doctoral degrees were awarded during the update year” (“Basic Classification Description”). The subcategory “Arts & Sciences Focus” is defined as comprising “Institutions in which at least half of bachelor’s degree majors [were] in arts and sciences fields” (“Basic Classification Methodology”). Both of CCIHE’s definitions seem fairly vague compared to Gladstein and Regaignon’s characteristics of small liberal arts colleges, perhaps leading to both the inclusion of some schools and exclusion of others compared to Gladstein and Regaignon’s definition. Second, the flowchart appended to the “Basic Classification Methodology” page gives the count for Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus as 259, a difference of 13 schools from the Summary Tables that does not seem to be explained anywhere. Third and fourth, the 2015 CCIHE is drawn from 2013-2014 IPEDS data, and CCIHE gave some schools that were on the edge between classifications the option of choosing where to be grouped (“Basic Classification Methodology”), two factors that could skew the count in either direction for 2018 because of dated information or self-selection. Fifth, seven of the 111 members of SLAC-WPA, which selects its members, are not classified as Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus; nor is my own institution or any of its sister schools by religious affiliation included in this classification, despite most considering themselves small liberal arts colleges. Lastly, it is interesting that *U.S. News and World Report’s* “2019 Best Colleges and Universities” report methodology states that the publication draws its

categories from the CCIHE Basic Classification (Morse et al.) yet lists only 233 schools on its “National Liberal Arts Colleges” list, a difference of 13 schools from the current CCIHE Basic Classification.

At the very least, these varying numbers suggest that there is a fair amount of flexibility in the definition of small liberal arts colleges, and that flexibility is what makes an exact count challenging. A stricter definition would likely decrease the count somewhat, but a definition that included schools’ self-descriptions could well push the count to more than 300. For the sake of simplicity, then, the number of SLACs assumed for the present study is 246, the number of schools in the CCIHE’s Basic Classification as “Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus” because it is the number easiest to justify conclusively from the CCIHE’s own table, and because it sits at the midway point (13 schools on either side) from *U.S. News*’s count and from the number listed on CCIHE’s flowchart. Whatever the actual number, SLACs represent a large enough number of colleges and universities to be valuable for study. Perhaps more important than their exact numbers, many of these schools face similar challenges, including how to properly assess their first-year writing programs.

Writing Program Assessment at SLACs

Little published research exists on how these small colleges and universities manage the demands of writing program assessment. Most available scholarship on program assessment seems to assume large comprehensive universities as the target audience. This assumption is logical: many of the demands of writing program assessment could apply (at least in theory) to any university anywhere that undertakes the process of revising its first-year writing program. The comprehensive university also makes sense as a model because, as noted previously,

Doctoral Research Universities account for just shy of one third of university students, and that number suggests the authors of assessment scholarship tend to work at such universities, a point confirmed by a quick internet search of the researchers' current institutions.⁶ Of course, not all universities in the country fit the Doctoral Research University model, and the literature on writing program assessment at SLACs is largely scant and indirect.

An analysis of CompPile's records in July and August of 2017 using the terms *assessment*, *FYC*, *liberal arts*, *program*, *program-validation*, *self-validation*, *small college*, and *validation* alone and in various combinations yielded a total of 5,383 unique results from 1940 to the present.⁷ Of these, 233 unique entries dealt with writing program assessment and its facets, but only thirteen addressed writing program assessment at SLACs in any way (Appendix A). Even this number is a bit inflated, however. Brown's "Additional programs" includes three SLACs but is not focused on them. Eustace and Chambers authored dissertations that do not appear to have received any wider publication. Of the remaining ten works, only five—Cornell and Newton, Pinter and Sims, Rutz, Simon, and Tulley—have been published in the last twenty years. For reasons that are explained in full later in this study, it's worth noting here that although an additional twenty publications in CompPile's records focused on writing program assessment at community colleges, no works at all focused on writing program assessment at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), with only one HBCU receiving brief discussion in Gladstein and Regaignon (199-202). A review of *WPA Journal's* archives in

⁶ It should be noted that Associate Colleges account for 31.7% of students in higher learning, .1% more than Doctoral Universities ("Classification Summary Tables"). These schools, however, do not generally foster scholarship and research activities among faculty.

⁷ The following results include duplicates: *assessment*= 4,506; *assessment* and *FYC*= 150; *assessment* and *program* and *FYC*= 14; *FYC* and *liberal arts*= 17; *FYC* and *program* and *validation*= 30; *FYC* and *small college*= 2; *FYC* and *validation*= 61; *liberal arts* and *small college*= 7; *program* and *assessment*= 290; *program-validation*= 513; *program-validation* and *assessment*= 98; *self-validation*= 50; *validation*= 1,286.

October 2019 using the terms *writing program assessment*, *program assessment*, and *assessment* found fourteen entries on writing program assessment, only one of which—Kristine Johnson’s “Writing Program Assessment and the Mission-Driven Institution” from Spring 2014—acknowledges SLACs, and there only in the sense that SLACs are often mission-driven.

Other scholarship on SLACs beyond the results of the CompPile and *WPA Journal* searches does exist, but the relationship of those publications to writing program assessment is often, but not always, indirect. Proceeding chronologically by publication date, the first is Rebecca Blair’s “The Westminster Writing Assessment Program: A Model for Small Colleges,” a paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in March 1994. Blair’s conference paper is a thoughtful, detailed account of Westminster College’s assessment of its newly-formed writing across the curriculum program in the early 1990s, addressing both writing program assessment at the small college and the major considerations explored in the next section of this chapter. It’s effectiveness is limited for the present study, however, in that it details events that occurred nearly 30 years ago, it is a conference paper that as far as I have been able to determine was never published, it focuses on a WAC program rather than an FYW program, and not every college uses the WAC approach.

Susan Weil’s 1997 *College Teaching* article “A New Freshman Writing Curriculum in a Small Liberal Arts College” is a call to include greater emphasis on literacy in curricular revision—a noble goal, but one proceeding from her observation of need rather than from a program assessment effort. In a way, her account encapsulates something my experience working at SLACs makes me suspect: it seems that often curricular revisions are driven by intuitive perception of need, observation of a phenomenon, someone randomly picking up a journal article that blew their mind a little bit, or one of several other things that are never, or at

least seldom, learned from an assessment project because assessment projects of the type described in the overview of program assessment publications that follows don't happen that often.

Rebecca G. Taylor's 2004 "Preparing WPAs for the Small College Context" advocates for better graduate school training for prospective writing program administrators for their possible careers at places other than research universities. WPAs are key figures in program assessment efforts, so their training has implications for program assessment, but only indirectly. This, again, links to one of my suspicions about SLAC writing programs, specifically that few of them have a formal WPA (i.e. a faculty or staff member explicitly and specifically charged with managing a writing program and who has some measure of decision-making authority over the program) and/or a faculty member educated in composition/writing program assessment (Gladstein and Regaignon, discussed below, confirm as much), perhaps because, as Taylor suggests, few graduate programs prepare their students for the possibility of working anywhere other than a research university.

Libby Falk Jones's 2004 "Exploring the Paradoxes of Power in Small College Writing Administration" and Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt's 2011 "Writing Programs Without Administrators" both focus on power relationships and administrative constraints at small colleges and universities. Administrative concerns, interaction between faculty and various levels of administration, and power relationships are certainly party to all things at all educational institutions, including writing program assessment projects. These dynamics may be especially significant at small colleges: as one focus group participant in Gladstein and Regaignon's study hauntingly noted in apparent validation of Jones's and Calhoun-Dillahunt's observations, "These places run on relationships... and you ignore that at your peril" (137-138). Yet it's important to

note that neither Jones nor Calhoon-Dillahunt gives any attention to the effects of these small-college power dynamics on the processes of writing program assessment.

Lastly, Carol Rutz and Jacquelyn Lauer-Glebov's 2005 "Assessment and Innovation: One Darn Thing Leads to Another" and Rutz's 2006 "Delivering Composition at a Liberal Arts College: Making the Implicit Explicit" both offer slightly different renderings and analyses of Carleton College's 1998-2001 assessment of its WAC program. Both articles offer insightful, in-depth theoretical reflections on the effects of the assessment and offer models for other schools, but do not offer any insight into exactly how the program review was conducted, nor do they speak to any non-WAC programs.

Most recent is the much-mentioned 2012 *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges* by Gladstein and Regaignon. The work categorizes the types of writing program leadership at SLACs through in-depth examination of 100 schools. Their text is vital to the present study for its clear definitions and descriptions of SLACs, and for being the first (and thus far only) study to examine writing program leadership models at small colleges in detail. Moreover, it does include a chapter on assessment, and per the second sentence of that chapter, the authors do attempt to characterize the then-current state of assessment at small colleges (189). Their insights on assessment and other matters permeate the rest of this text.

It is important to note, however, a few limitations to their work that make it different from this study. First, their focus is on program leadership. Program leadership is essential to effective program assessment projects and is a point I will extend in the rest of this work, as it is central to two of my three initial hypotheses. Because the focus of their study is not program assessment, however, any statements they make are inherently restricted—and this leads to their second major limitation. The chapter on assessment covers a scant thirteen pages of the total text

body of 211 pages, only about six percent of the whole. It is, of course, possible to make important statements in few pages, and they do make several significant observations I will incorporate throughout. But in their brevity, the analysis they provide is summative and broad, skimming over the details of how writing program assessments operate at these schools, though their writing indicates that there are substantial participant responses behind their analysis. Third, their chapter skews heavily toward WAC/WAC-like programs and toward established, successful assessment programs, particularly in their case studies. While these are valuable, particularly given Gladstein and Regaignon's early assertion about the prevalence of WAC at small colleges (7) and the importance to the discipline of successful models, their lack of discussion of complicated program assessment contexts does not paint a complete picture of how these processes might play out across schools, a point Jon Leydens and Barbara Olds insist on in the introduction to their account of their own program assessment misfire at the Colorado School of Mines (247-248). Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, their data is close on a decade old: though published in 2012, they collected their information in 2009 (24). Many things have changed in the last ten years, among them the shifting emphasis on assessment and assurance arguments universities are expected to make brought on by one change in presidential administrations and three changes in national secretary of education, to say nothing evolutions in writing assignments, the advent of writing about writing curriculum and digital portfolios, and the ways the internet has grown and mobile computing has reshaped classroom practices. Valuable though they are in many respects, Gladstein and Regaignon's perspectives on program assessment at SLACs merit update and expansion.

Additional scholarship is even further to the periphery of writing program assessment at SLACs. The CWPA's "WPA Assessment Gallery: Assessment Models," Diane Kelly-Riley and

Norbert Elliot's "The WPA Outcomes Statement, Validation, and the Pursuit of Localism"; O'Neill, Moore, and Huot's *A Guide to College Writing Assessment*; and Mary Jo Reiff, Anis Bawarshi, Michelle Ballif, and Christian Weisser's collection *Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context* (particularly chapters 7 and 15) all acknowledge that colleges and universities have differences in their contexts and needs that should be considered when engaging in an assessment project, but none of them indicates how those differences may affect program assessment, nor is their content sufficiently detailed to be of use to a WPA at a SLAC. Even Edward M. White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham's 2015 *Very Like a Whale*, the most recent comprehensive work on writing program assessment, makes no mention of small colleges. The need for greater understanding of why and how writing program assessment proceeds at SLACs, then, remains largely unmet.

Research & Publication in Writing Program Assessment in Tension

Program assessment is a critical aspect of all writing programs, whether at PCUs, SLACs, or anywhere else. White, Elliot, and Peckham acknowledge this in their introduction, asserting that institutions of higher education are in a "new era of assessment" (3). They do not define this "new era," but they seem to mean an era of increased scrutiny of the practices and "products" (i.e. students) of educational entities that began for K-12 schools with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and that has extended deeper and deeper into higher ed. through accrediting agencies ever since. My own experience bears out their claim: Having gone through one re-accreditation process in a past teaching job at a community college around 2007, and now twice in my current position in 2013 and 2018-2019, I can attest that the pace of the re-accreditation process and the demands for assessment evidences increased markedly with each round. Writing programs are

not immune from these demands, nor should they be. Everything writing programs do must be defensible to stakeholders, among whom are not only university accreditors, but also students present and past, the WPAs who organize the programs that serve them, the faculty who teach in those programs, and the administrators who oversee the programs.⁸ White et al. insist that writing program assessment “needs to be an expansive and inclusive effort, one based in the local campus environment yet designed for comparative reporting” (7). This last point implies two truths: (1) writing program assessment and its components must be clearly defined in order to be carried out; and (2) these definitions must flex to some degree to accommodate local constraints. Yet the structural differences between PCUs and SLACs are such that modification to the best practices articulated by the scholarship reviewed following is necessary for SLACs to do the work they should do. At the same time, those responsible for assessment projects at SLACs may lack the guidance on what they ought to do or how because, as noted previously, disciplinary literature on how writing program assessment’s components can be, should be, or have been adapted to the SLAC context is severely lacking. What follows here is a summary and review of what that disciplinary literature identifies as the “best practices” essential to any writing program assessment effort, along with considerations of some of the challenges SLACs face on each point.

White, Elliot, and Peckham offer a thorough definition of *writing program*, summarized through a paraphrase of Donald Yarbrough et al.: “a program is a set of activities that uses managed sources to achieve specified, documentable outcomes” (18). A review of scholarly publications in composition provides several compatible definitions of *writing program*

⁸ In this project, the term “writing program administrator” (WPA) is used to mean the person who directs a writing program assessment effort. This looser definition is used because it is the simplest way of talking about the manager in charge of the effort while acknowledging that some universities lack someone in the formal position typically meant by the more common, stricter definition of WPA, as noted in Gladstein and Regaignon chapters 4 and 5.

assessment that in their intersection give a clear picture of the central concerns of writing program assessment. In his profile of his efforts circa 2008 at California State University, Fresno, Asao Inoue defines *program assessment* as “a large set of inquiries and data gathering” (254); Meg Morgan calls *program assessment* “an effort at improving quality” (145). Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot simultaneously affirm and focus these perspectives by noting that “assessment is about learning” (8) and is characterized by being “*regular, systematic, and coherent*” (11, italics in original). The most comprehensive definition is again provided by White Elliot, and Peckham, who describe it “as the process of documenting and reflecting on the impact of the program’s coordinated efforts” (3), adding that it “is a longitudinal process of accountability—of documenting all the efforts a writing program undertakes to create important consequences for its many constituencies” (4). All these assertions are additionally backed by the *NCTE-WPA White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities*. “How shall we evaluate writing?” Yancey says, is a question that “concerns itself not only with methodology, but also with behavior: which behavior should we examine?” (486).

The definitions of *writing program* and *writing program assessment* seem straightforward. But the definition of *writing program* can be more complicated if a university’s writing program consists of a single course required of freshmen, or is a single first-year seminar course, or if the university has a firmly established WAC program (as per Gladstein and Regaignon chapter 4 SLACs often do). Remedial/support courses may also complicate these definitions, particularly in instances in which they focus only on grammar and never require students to write, approaches not uncommon at SLACs. The definition of *writing program assessment* is also fraught. Because of their smaller faculties and high teaching load, it is possible that some SLACs have never attempted an assessment effort. Where should the WPA

begin? What should be evaluated? Is it desirable or possible to examine every aspect of the program at once, even if that program is small? When should the writing program be assessed: at a single point (e.g. freshman writing, mid-level, near graduation) or several points?

Woven throughout the definitions of *writing program* and *writing program assessment* is localism, the idea that local context should dictate the shape of all program-assessment-related concerns. Peggy O’Neill, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot state in the opening of their *A Guide to College Writing Assessment* that “good assessments are those that are designed locally, for the needs of specific institutions, faculty, and students” (4). White et al. assert the value of localism twice in three pages of their first chapter (7 and 10). Paul Walker and Elizabeth Myers, in their profile of their assessment effort at Murray State around 2008, affirm that “writing programs should be contextually designed, and the needs of different universities vary.... both historical practice and institutional needs determine how FYC is structured in any context” (289). Charles Moran and Anne Herrington defend their choices in WAC program assessment at the University of Massachusetts by clarifying early in their profile that “[t]he means of review that we decided on follow from our program’s history, structure, and goals” (125). In profiling the work done at North Carolina State in the 1990s, Michael Carter is most explicit of all: “Institutional context is, of course, critically important. The particular history and ethos of a college or university shapes its writing and/or speaking programs in particular ways” (269-270). The Association of Departments of English (ADE) peppers its 2009 “Checklist for Departmental Self-Study” with questions on the needs and constraints of the local context. Considering a university’s, department’s, and program’s history, in summary, tells the WPA what the program is, what its needs and expectations are, and who the stakeholders are, all of which should feed the construction of effective program assessment (O’Neill et al. 110-111).

The idea of localism also poses challenges. It may be difficult for a new WPA to establish the background of the current iteration of the writing program, particularly if they face hostility or resistance from their new colleagues. Gladstein and Regaignon's study shows SLACs are more prone to not having either a formal WPA or a history of program assessment, so a new SLAC WPA may face the additional challenge of the current writing program being established so long ago that no one knows why anything is the way it is. Further, O'Neill asserts that the local should always be "informed by current theories and best practices" (451), yet it may be tricky for the SLAC WPA to determine how to balance the local context with "current theories and best practices" if they are new to the institution and/or have no idea what current scholarship is because of not having formal training in composition. Similarly, if the SLAC WPA *is* familiar with best-practices scholarship, they still may not be able to translate those practices to their current context because that context might be alien to what scholarship describes as necessary pre-conditions to starting an assessment project.

A first component of effective writing program assessment is a mission statement for the program. The ADE opens its "Checklist for Departmental Self-Study" with a section on program aims (130). "Program mission, vision, and goals statements" is also the first item in Douglas Hesse's list of documents and information that every WPA should have in their "Digital Cupboard" (155). Morgan likewise is direct: "To document the achievement of quality, a program administrator must be able to lead stakeholders to articulate a mission statement" (148). Inoue observes that one of his initial obstacles in his program assessment effort in his first year at California State University, Fresno, was the absence of a mission statement (252); the subsequent development of a statement significantly clarified the assessment's goals (257-258). White et al. are, as ever, thorough:

[W]e define consequence as the impact, judgments, and changes that stem from the articulated mission, priorities, and practices of a writing program. With attention to the fairness of the assessment, consequence emphasizes that writing programs must use contemporary instructional and assessment practices mapped from the institutional mission statement to the syllabus with the sole aim of advancing student learning. An emphasis on consequence and fairness demands that writing programs be judged by their own articulated mission. (156)

Not only does their definition show the value of a mission statement and validate both Hesse and Morgan, it also articulates clearly the connection between a program's mission statement and its assessment efforts. WPAs can't know how to assess until they know *what* they are assessing and by what standard (O'Neill et al. 111-113).

Second, WPAs must consider the objectives and outcomes that follow from the mission statement. The challenges of this part of assessment are differentiating objectives and outcomes and understanding their relationship to each other and to the wider picture of assessment, and how to write them in such a way that they address local concerns, mission statement, and scholarship, and that they are demonstrable and measurable. Objectives and outcomes are closely related and lie at the intersection of current scholarship, local context, and program mission statement. Per White et al., *objectives* are goals for a writing program (173), statements of what the program itself intends to accomplish. White et al. argue that although objectives are for and about the writing program, they should be available to students and to faculty so that the former can see that their writing courses are connected and in what ways, and for the latter so that syllabus design for individual courses conforms to the program's vision (38). *Outcomes*, in

contrast, are broadly-defined goals about what students should be able to do, both at the end of any given course and at the end of the program (ADE 130; Carter 268-273; White et al. 173).

Mission statements, objectives, and outcomes present related complications for the SLAC WPA. A mission statement may not exist, and a new one may be difficult to produce if the program's nature and history are not known, if faculty are few and already overextended, if faculty are not interested in creating a new mission statement or updating an antiquated one, and/or if current scholarship is not known. Objectives and outcomes, pegged as they are to mission statements, may be similarly difficult to update or create from scratch. Because of the interactional proximity between administrators and faculty at SLACs (Gladstein and Regaignon 16) and the small numbers of faculty, it is also possible that any existing objectives and outcomes were created by someone who does not know writing as well as English faculty do and/or that the objectives and outcomes do not address local context and constraints.

Third, WPAs should consider people, specifically who should initiate and conduct the assessment project, who should be involved in the broader process of assessment, and when they should be brought into the process. Depending on the local situation, these decisions may precede or follow the creation of the program mission statement, objectives, and outcomes. Who is included in the process and when is likely to shape the assessment process in significant ways, so WPAs need to consider their team members carefully (O'Neill et al. 113-114). Morgan (143) and White et al. (3) concur that program assessment is most effective and least intrusive when it is conducted by members of the writing program because they are the members of the university community who understand the program best and who are most invested in its success. O'Neill et al. argue that because the goal of assessment is ultimately to improve teaching, it is wise for an assessment effort to include those who teach (14). Morgan further insists that the writing

program team be incorporated from the moment of writing a mission statement and objectives (148), answering both the who and when of staffing.

What people to include in a program assessment effort is perhaps the trickiest question for the SLAC WPA. It's tricky in any environment, but features of the SLAC context may heighten the difficulty. Starting an assessment effort by involving faculty who teach writing, presumably the WPA's own department or peers, makes sense, but doing so is difficult if the department is small and heavily segmented—for example, only one professor teaches writing, only one professor teaches British literature, and only one professor teaches U.S. literature, a design not uncommon at the smallest of SLACs. As noted in the definition of small liberal arts colleges, the SLAC WPA is unlikely to have graduate students to draw into the assessment project (Gladstein and Regaignon 213-214). The WPA may be the only faculty member with any training in writing and assessment, either through degree or self-education. A program assessment led by the English department, or by a writing program consisting mainly of part-time faculty and TAs, is also potentially fraught for the small college because “the institution says by what it does that writing is the province of the overworked and underpaid, the least prestigious members of the academic community” (Moran and Herrington 123), and therefore not that serious, a point Gladstein and Regaignon note as particularly challenging at SLACs (101, 131-132). In the case of a small department with no grad students to draw on, of a WPA working basically in isolation, and/or of a WPA coordinating assessment of a WAC program scattered across campus departments (Walker and Myers 285), initiating a program assessment effort by first involving university administration might be wiser (Jones 81). Unless it isn't. At SLACs, often “the rhetoric of assessment arrives on campus through accrediting agencies: as a result, ‘assessment’ is associated with accountability—and not with teaching and learning”

(Gladstein and Regaignon 194), so involving administration before the SLAC WPA's own colleagues could potentially make the assessment project more difficult. SLAC WPAs, then, must consider carefully whether beginning with faculty or administration is wiser and at what point to include them, especially because there is little scholarship to provide them with guidance.

Many writing program assessment scholars next state that the assessment tool is the fourth point the WPA should consider. White et al. (70-71) and O'Neill et al. (119-120), among others, consistently state that something other than course grades should be used to assess the writing program because course grades tend to depend on class features other than writing proficiency. Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, Asao Inoue, Jon Leydens and Barbara Olds, and Irvin Peckham also insist in their separate works that the best way of assessing both courses and the programs that house them is through some variety of blind sampling of polished student work that is never a timed essay and ideally a portfolio that is evaluated (not graded) by members of the writing program.

Once again, best-practices publications hardly settle the questions of assessment tools at a SLAC. WPAs must consider their local contexts and needs. Gladstein and Regaignon refer to the portfolio assessment as "comfortable for small colleges" (104), and according to what they describe, perhaps it should be, especially given their finding of the prevalence of writing across the curriculum at SLACs (7). What they fail to consider, however, is how staffing might make portfolio-based assessment uncomfortable or even unworkable. My observations of the difficulty of getting faculty at my current institution to cover summer tasks make me seriously question Gladstein and Regaignon's findings on this point. SLACs tend to have small teaching faculties, few adjuncts, and no graduate students to help do the work of assessment. The WPA may

struggle to get faculty to do extra work in the summer or at the end of the semester, especially if there is no budget for bonuses. It isn't uncommon for professors at SLACs to teach 4/4 loads or more, so semester or grading fatigue may play an additional complicating role in the evaluation process. Two common policies in portfolio-based program assessment are to remove all identifying information from the portfolios and to bar teachers from reading their own students' work (Leydens and Olds 255, Inoue 262). These policies make sense in theory. With small faculty, however, it might be impossible to prevent *all* professors from evaluating a portfolio from one of their own students. Finally, *portfolio* generally implies a multi-work collection—but given the time and energy constraints on SLAC professors, they may instead consider a single polished essay, or even a single timed essay (as many small schools continue to require first-year writing courses to conclude with a timed-writing final exam).

Closely related both to staffing and assessment tools are the financial implications of executing an assessment effort. “If good assessment is important to a university,” say O’Neill et al., “they [university administrators] should be willing to pay for it” (114). At the same time, whoever is responsible for program assessment must make decisions for assessment based on fiscal reality. Peckham (172, 176-177), Mary Soliday, and Walker and Myers (286) each describe scenarios at their respective institutions in which changes driven by assessment increased expenditures which had to be justified, or led to reconfigurations of the writing program that caused significant reshuffling in program costs. Money is always part of the equation. WPAs and their assessment teams cannot ignore it.

The SLAC WPA may need to do more than just not ignore money: they may need to be proactive in ways that their PCU counterparts do not. The plan for conducting program assessment might be excellent from an assessment theory or a statistical standpoint, but the best

program assessment plan is worthless if it is too expensive to implement. The same is true of innovations brought on by program assessment. Fiscal realities are challenging at most educational institutions. SLACs may face tougher choices in facing those realities than do PCUs. Their size suggests they have smaller endowments and operating budgets to begin with, save at all but expensive, elite institutions. Being private means these schools may have less access to state and federal dollars, further reducing available funds. Even where money is available, it may be available from administrative units such as the provost or college dean rather than from the SLAC WPA's home department, in which case soliciting funds can become difficult and politically fraught, even more so than at PCUs because of the proximity between faculty and administration at SLACs. Yancey and Huot "advocate a contextualized, purposeful use of methods and materials in which both the mode of inquiry and data—interview or observation or a review of sets of student texts, for instance—are selected because they provide the best vehicle for answering the assessment questions" (9). If that is the right way to approach assessment, and if localism and program mission are also key considerations, the SLAC WPA might need to consider alternative program assessment tools and funding streams.

Sixth, WPAs need to account for diverse populations, the three most obvious being students with special needs, ESL writers (Paul Kei Matsuda and Tony Silva's term for this population), and minorities. The *NCTE-WPA White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities* bullet point 5 makes clear that students in the last two categories must be considered in course and program outcomes: "Writing assessment should recognize diversity in language." As recently as 2012, however, Paul Kei Matsuda and Ryan Skinnell report finding almost no scholarship on the implications of the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition* and ESL writers, even as more and more international students attend U.S. colleges

and universities (231). Matsuda and Skinnell argue that universities must find a way to address the needs of these students (235-236). A related consideration is that, according to Matsuda and Silva, ESL writers often feel “threatened” or intimidated by mainstream writing classes in the U.S. (16-17). Program assessment must find ways to navigate that sense of intimidation fairly while still evaluating outcomes effectively. Finally, program assessment teams must exercise great care in choosing and designing their tools. In their reconsideration of White and Thomas’s 1981 analysis of the EPT, Asao Inoue and Mya Poe note that bias against racial and socioeconomic minorities, however unintentional, may be inherent in the assessment tools (345), reporting (346), and consequences (352-353).

Like their counterparts at PCUs, SLAC WPAs need to consider diverse student populations in designing the program assessment effort and choosing an assessment tool. But this, too, is difficult from the beginning. Because many small liberal arts schools are private, they are often exempt from federal regulations, including those on support services, and thus may choose to take advantage of that exemption as a cost-saving measure. Even when they choose to follow federal regulations, liberal arts colleges may not have well-developed disability services offices or support systems for ESL writers and/or international students because of their small sizes. Should the school require faculty and staff to have specific ideological affiliations—such as belonging to a particular religious denomination, as my institution does—the school may end up staffing what support services it has with people who are less qualified for the job by education or experience but who meet the affiliation requirement. Further, Gladstein and Regaignon note that “small colleges resist labeling underprepared students; in a small, residential community, such labels can easily become stigmatizing” (73-74), which suggests that SLACs likely do not do a good job of recognizing this population in general, and probably fail to note it

in their program assessments. They may, likewise, not do a good job of recognizing the ethnic, religious, gender identification, or other minorities present in the student body: exemption from federal law, the service limitations of being a small institution, the hesitance to label, and/or historically only recruiting students from certain limited pools may make a SLAC ignorant of how to handle any “non-standard” students who show up. I have, unfortunately, witnessed all of these mishandlings.

WPAs must manage how quickly to implement the program assessment effort and its results. As Stephanie Boone et al. note at the close of their description of their attempts to transform Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric into a transfer-based program, “Writing programs... are not known to be nimble adaptors. The institutions into which they are integrated are more often cargo ships than schooners. A new program design might not be able to flex with the new knowledge that develops in the field. Simultaneously, new knowledge might be too quickly accepted” (188-189). Kimberly Harrison echoes the wisdom of taking a measured approach in her account of moving Florida International University from a literature-focused to a writing-focused first-year writing program between 2001 and 2005. Quoting David Blakesley, Harrison agrees that “[W]e’re better off sacrificing efficiency in the early going, on the promise that our programs in the long run will be much better because of our efforts to involve stakeholders at every stage” (35). The consensus seems to be, then, that although rapid implementation of changes suggested by program review seems desirable, programs will likely be better served by slower changes.

How quickly to implement the program assessment effort and its results may be the point at which SLACs and PCUs are most similar. Both types of schools are likely to suffer, as noted by Boone et al. (188-189), from some measure of adapting too quickly or too slowly. But it is

possible they will do so for different reasons. Smaller faculty and more proximate administrative structures should, in theory, make liberal arts colleges quicker adapters by creating fewer human and bureaucratic hoops to jump through. These same qualities could also make SLACs slower adapters because of having fewer available bodies to carry out the assessment effort and who are not already heavily committed to teaching and service requirements, and because proximate administrators could interfere in the assessment effort.

Any assessment effort must, of course, produce something, and WPAs should look for those products and manage them. As Moran and Herrington put it, “what happens as a result of each review is more important than the review itself” (138). At very least, program review should always produce information, even if that information is unexpected (O’Neill 453). Hesse’s “WPA’s Digital Cupboard” (155-156) offers a thorough list of the information a WPA should always have on hand, most of which is generated by or collected as a result of program assessment. Program assessment should also produce programmatic changes, but only those that data support (Walker and Myers 284). The *NCTE-WPA White Paper* insists adamantly that assessment should inform the writing program, and the writing program should inform the assessment.

WPAs must anticipate and consider the effects of the changes brought on by program assessment on the teachers and students in the program. Harrison, in reflecting on her experience at FIU, notes that one of the consequences of assessment is that “by making visible what goes on in the classroom, and by discussing and attempting to reach consensus on learning outcomes, we might invite interference, regulation, and critique. We might infringe upon instructor individuality and personality” (35). Students may also experience consequences from program assessment and those effects may be disconcerting or even appear negative. Anticipating human

consequences should be an important consideration for WPAs as they begin the work of program assessment so that in their planning they can maximize the good and minimize any harm or uncertainty that may come from assessment-induced changes.

Although SLACs may not struggle with producing information through their assessment projects or processing that information any more than PCUs—save for localized physical and/or technical limitations related to budgetary differences, and to the aforementioned differences in available workers—they are likely to face different consequences from the assessment project. A college that does not have a long history of program assessment, or that carries out an assessment project for the first time in its known history, both of which are more likely at a small school than at a PCU, may face more pushback from teachers than schools with established program assessment efforts. Fulltime professors may resist the idea that they need the training that will be given at professional development sessions that assessment reveals are needed; their course loads may also be so time-intensive that attending one more meeting is just too much. Contingent faculty may be excluded from professional development if they are not part of the usual lines of communication, or if professional development sessions are offered during semesters that they do not teach. Teacher-training sessions themselves may be problematic because of identifying who will lead them and securing the funding and time necessary. Reduced distance between writing faculty and college administration may mean that administrators become aware of the assessment efforts and results much more quickly and completely than their counterparts at PCUs, and may attempt more actively to interfere in the program or teacher-training efforts regardless of their knowledge or training in writing, assessment, or teaching.

Lastly—or perhaps firstly—WPAs should consider and question their attitude(s) toward program assessment and why they do it. For all the valuable pragmatism of White et al. and of

Haswell's "Fighting Number with Number," they and other scholars also imply a fair amount of cynicism toward the program assessment process: their work could be read to mean, in essence, that programs should be assessed to create enough quantifiable data to throw at administrators and accreditors to keep them swimming in circles for a couple of years (as though distracting sharks with raw meat), during which time WPAs and writing teachers can safely go back to the business of teaching and conducting their own research without interference. In contrast stands the approach articulated by Yancey and Huot previously noted: "assessment is about learning" (8)—learning what our students are learning and how well we are teaching what we want them to know. This attitude focuses on students, those whom writing professors and administrators ostensibly exist to serve. Paraphrasing oft-quoted White's Law of Assessodynamics, assessing ourselves to learn and improve rather than to prevent it from being done unto us will likely lead to differences in approach. In truth, of course, WPAs should attend to each attitude without losing sight of the other, and context will likely determine how much each attitude is most in play. Because of the proximity between SLAC administrators and faculty, SLAC writing programs may be particularly susceptible to administrative mandates to engage in assessment to satisfy accreditors, even as these programs may be the least equipped to resist those demands for lack of best-practices guidance.

Taken together, the preceding collection of scholars articulate a cohesive vision of what WPAs undertaking an assessment project anywhere should consider before, during, and after the process. The career length and reputations of many of these scholars make a good case for these as points that all WPAs everywhere should contend with. In all these aspects of writing program assessment, best-practices scholarship on writing program assessment can guide and help SLAC WPAs generally. But it cannot speak to the unique conditions present in the small liberal arts

college context because none of it addresses that context specifically. That hole in scholarship is worth addressing for the sake of the 246 or so small liberal arts colleges in United States and the 409,000 students they serve.

A Complicated Relationship

The present study, then, seeks to contribute to the body of writing program assessment scholarship by examining the assessment practices in the first-year writing programs at several small liberal arts colleges. The present study proceeds from four fundamental conclusions. First, the substantial body of research on writing program assessment assumes comprehensive universities, not SLACs. Second, the research on writing program assessment at SLACs is scant. Third, the differences in the structures of comprehensive universities and SLACs suggest that there are at least some differences in the ways SLACs can and should apply writing program assessment scholarship, and possibly even limitations to what can be applied. Fourth, these differences need to be better understood so SLAC administrators can assess their programs more effectively.

To understand how the elements of a program assessment effort enumerated in the preceding review manifest at SLACs, I distributed two questionnaires approved by the University of Memphis's Institutional Review Board. The first, which I call the General Survey on FYC Program Assessment at SLACs (hereafter "the General Survey") (Appendix C), was distributed electronically in the summer of 2018 to determine what first-year writing programs look like at small liberal arts colleges and, broadly, what program assessment practices, if any, are commonly used. Full methodology and results are explained in chapter 2.

Chapters 3 through 5 each present an examination of an individual SLAC interviewed through the second questionnaire, presented in Appendix E. Designed to explore in depth the practices, decision-making, challenges, and opportunities of writing program assessment at small liberal arts colleges, this second questionnaire required a three-hour interview via Skype with Dr. Will Dell of Worthman University (interviewed on June 12 and 13, 2018), Dr. Cassandra Brown of Armstrong University (interviewed on June 18, 2018), and Dr. Helen Campbell of Wellington University (interviewed in July and August of 2019).⁹ Additional background data was culled from each school's website before the interview and confirmed with interview subjects. All interviews were audio recorded. Participating institutions were each selected through different means: Worthman was recruited through a colleague who knows Dell; Armstrong was selected as a peer institution to my own and recruited through direct contact; Wellington, an HBCU, was the one school that responded to direct email solicitation of several HBCUs. Each chapter is divided into three sections. The first details the relevant university, department, and program context by answering questions 1-19. The second section of each chapter provides a detailed account of the program's most recent assessment effort, answering all parts of question 20. The third analyzes the program assessment effort in light of the overview of published scholarship presented in this chapter and of the findings of the General Survey presented in chapter 2. The information presented in these chapters is limited to that gathered from participant interviews and school websites because document analysis was simply not an option: I never received documents from Dell at Worthman despite repeated requests, Brown at Armstrong had no relevant documents to share, and Campbell at Wellington had access to few documents and was protective of what she could access.

⁹ All personal and institutional names are pseudonyms, as required by IRB.

In the interest of full transparency, two other schools inform much of what I say: my current employer (already deployed for comparison/contrast) and my undergraduate alma mater, schools virtually identical save for size, my role at them, and the twelve years between ending one experience and beginning the other. As the saying goes, I see SLACs as I am rather than as they are, and I confess this as a significant shaping force on my interpretation, though I have done my best to limit my biases.

Based on the sum of my experiences at small liberal arts colleges, my initial hypotheses in approaching this study were as follows:

1. Small liberal arts colleges and universities are largely not engaging in writing program assessment.
2. Those SLACs that are engaging in writing program assessment are not doing so regularly or systematically, their practices are not in keeping with current scholarship on writing program assessment, and assessment projects are largely initiated by administrators or in response to requests from administrators related to accreditation pressures.
3. Most small liberal arts colleges lack a professionally trained compositionist to direct their first-year writing programs or assessment efforts. That absence puts program assessment projects at a disadvantage.

But the data collected from my two questionnaires suggest that something else entirely is happening in SLAC first-year writing (FYW) programs with regards to assessment practices and the programs themselves, findings which I divide into three broad conclusions. First, SLAC FYW programs are shifting, both in their construction and in the manner and frequency with which they assess themselves. Second, upper-level administrators are exerting significant

influences on these FYW programs, particularly with regards to assessment. Third, SLAC FYW programs are engaging in assessment efforts that do broadly follow the needs and priorities outlined in this chapter, but with varying levels of success. I argue that these three findings are the best ways of understanding the current state of first-year writing program assessment at small liberal arts colleges and universities (at least among those in my sample), as explored in depth in the remainder of this work.

Chapter 6 collates and analyzes the data from the General Survey and the case studies to fully explore these findings to address how SLACs are engaging in program assessment best practices and what SLACs and program assessment researchers can learn from each other to enrich the field's literature and practices. Embedded in these analyses are suggestions for future investigation.

The scope of this study in both questionnaires is limited to first-year writing for three reasons. First, this area of writing is one of my interests. I have taught some version of first-year writing in almost every one of my fifteen-plus years as an educator. I know it well, yet I continue to wrestle with it and want to understand it better. Second, the project had to be manageable for me and the subject schools. Asking about all writing program assessment efforts at these colleges and universities was likely to result in too chaotic a data set to process effectively. Both questionnaires were also certain to be longer than they are in their current configurations if a broader definition of writing program were considered, and that length would have demanded more time from respondents. Limiting the completion time of the General Survey to less than 30 minutes and of the in-depth questionnaire to around three hours seemed more respectful of participants' time, and more likely to gain participants. Third, first-year writing is a constant in higher education and, thus, seemed a better means of capturing current writing program

assessment practices at small liberal arts colleges. Yes, there is variety in the collegiate writing landscape and wide-ranging answers to the questions of what first-year writing should look like or whether to have it at all, and SLACs, PCUs, community colleges, and every other type of collegiate institution are part of that conversation. But first-year writing persists, whatever its variety at a particular school. The persistence of Advanced Placement and dual-enrollment writing courses in high schools, of writing portions on the ACT and SAT, and of the expectation of all prospective college students and their parents that they will have to contend with this requirement says quite a lot about the ubiquity of the first-year writing course. Gladstein and Regaignon, as has already been noted, do indicate that SLACs are more likely than other types of colleges and universities to have writing across the curriculum programs (7). But that predisposition does not mean that every small college has a WAC program, nor does having WAC automatically exclude some other variety of first-year writing program. For these reasons, a focus on first-year writing seemed the most appropriate way of exploring how small liberal arts colleges approach writing program assessment.

Chapter 2: The General Survey

Introduction & Methods

A basic tenet of knowledge-building is that you can't interrogate material that doesn't exist. Since there are only a handful of somewhat recent publications on how, if at all, small liberal arts colleges and universities are engaging in writing program assessment, and none that engages in a comprehensive examination of these schools and practices, my first step was to ask those questions of the institutions to be studied. To understand how the elements of a program assessment effort enumerated in chapter 1's review manifest at SLACs, I distributed what I titled the General Survey of FYC Program Assessment at SLACs, approved by the University of Memphis's Institutional Review Board, via Qualtrics from May 31 to July 6, 2018.

The General Survey's purpose was to determine what first-year writing programs look like at small liberal arts colleges and, broadly, what program assessment practices, if any, are commonly used. As seen in Appendix C, all questions (save those about program demographics) correspond to and were determined by the points of writing program assessment scholarship discussed in chapter 1. The version shown in Appendix C also includes parenthetical citations on which specific scholars and publications informed each question (the version of the questionnaire sent to the participants had the citations removed for the sake of conciseness).

Participants were solicited through posts to the WPA-L, NEXTGEN, and NCTE Teaching and Learning Forum listservs on May 31 and June 26. Participants were also solicited through Facebook and Twitter posts on the same days, and through direct email solicitations to 123 schools; the schools that were directly contacted were taken from the SLAC-WPA member list, from schools which I already knew about or had prior relationships with, and from referrals from colleagues. Data were collected anonymously, using a consent form (Appendix B) that

stated that survey completion implied understanding of the study's risks and consent to participate, and with Qualtrics configured to not request or collect any participant data; some participants still volunteered institution-identifying information in their responses.

Qualtrics shows that 77 schools initially engaged with the survey by opening it. Of those, only 42 proceeded to answer any of the questions, a response rate of 17% based on the CCIHE's count of 246 small liberal arts colleges. Additionally, survey question 14 ("How often in the past has your FYC program been formally assessed?") was configured in Qualtrics to send those respondents who answered "Never" directly to the end of the survey because the remaining questions were about the most recent program assessment effort, something they obviously could not answer about. This configuration eliminated ten more schools from complete participation in the survey, leaving 32 institutions, or 13% of CCIHE's SLAC count, that answered the survey in full.

Responses, with a Few Observations

The questionnaire presented some questions that required open-ended responses that were difficult to categorize, while others offered short, easily quantifiable answers. Responses are presented question by question, an approach that allows full exploration of open-response questions and only slight awkwardness for the briefest of the fixed-answer questions. General Survey questions are presented in italics in the same order given on the survey; responses are presented in Roman type.

How does your department define its first-year composition (FYC) program? What courses are included?

The wording of this question proved challenging for many respondents, an issue explained in the limitations section. That issue aside, the 41 usable responses suggest significant variety in approaches to instruction in introductory writing at SLACs.¹ One department chair who replied to my request to participate in the survey speculated that this variety might be part of the reason for the lack of scholarship on writing programs at SLACS. Findings are summarized in Figure 1 below, with the narrative following.

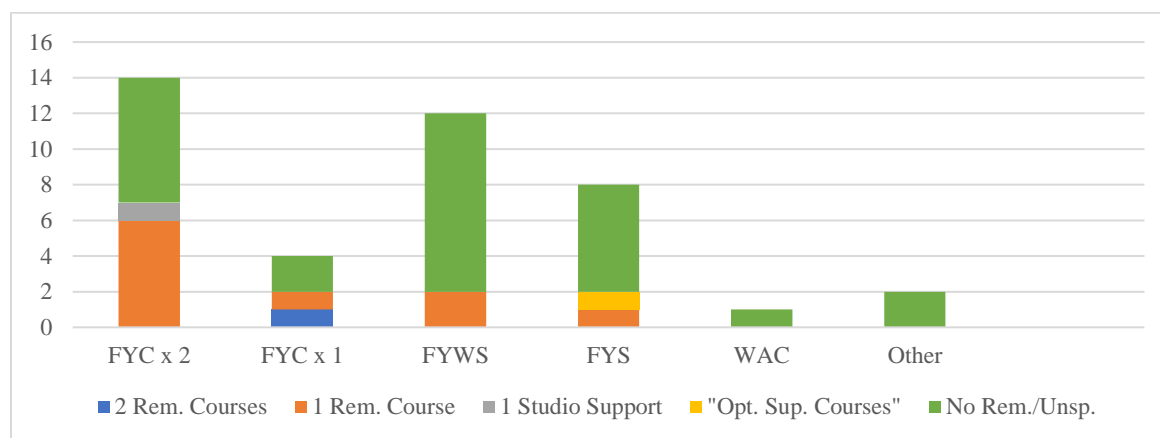


Figure 1: SLACs by First-Year Writing Program Type

Fourteen schools use a two-course freshman composition sequence housed within their English departments (FYC x 2).² Of these, none include an additional two courses of remediation, six include one remediation course (1 Rem. Course), one has a co-requisite studio (1 Studio Support) with each of its courses for underprepared students, and seven state no

¹ One respondent typed only *f* in every open-response question, thereby reducing by one the number of usable responses on those questions.

² As used in this project, by *composition* when used for a writing course I mean that approach to collegiate writing instruction that is housed in English departments, assumes a general approach to writing (at least in that the course is not taught by specialists from disciplines other than English and in that it presumes broadly to prepare students to write successfully for writing tasks in any and all other disciplinary fields), and, in the case of first-year composition, is premised on the belief that incoming students need to be shown how writing for the collegiate level is different from writing for the high school level.

remedial courses (No Rem./Unsp.). Four additional schools require students to satisfy a one-course writing requirement from the English department (FYC x 1), of which one requires up to two remedial courses of underprepared students (2 Rem. Courses), one school offers a single remedial course, two state no remedial offerings, and none state a studio co-requisite.

The second-largest category, the writing-intensive group, is also the most diverse. This group seems to correspond with the first-year writing seminar (FYWS) model. Twelve schools operate on the model of a single course that is explicitly focused on writing. Beyond that quality, the programs vary widely. Nine schools explicitly state that the course is required of all students, while the remaining three are unclear on the requirement status. Five of the nine require all students to take the course in the first year, two say the course is required of all students at some point, and two require it for all save those who have approved test or transfer credit. Two of the twelve indicate the existence of a remedial/support course but are unclear on whether the course is required or for whom. Two of the twelve have students satisfy the requirement in three-week intensive courses taken before the semester (one states this explicitly, the other seems to imply it), while the rest presumably occur during the regular term. One school specifies that the course counts for four hours, while the others do not indicate the amount of credit students receive. Five schools indicate that their writing-intensive courses are part of a defined program that involves many disciplines; one school states explicitly and three others suggest by their wording that the writing-intensive course is managed by a discrete academic unit such as a department; the three remaining schools do not define the management of the course. All of the respondents speak of the content and expectations of their courses in general terms, but also with just enough detail to make clear that content and expectations vary widely across schools.

Only one school identified itself primarily and explicitly as a WAC program. Based on the description the respondent provided, this school's program may fit in the third largest category of respondents, the first-year seminar (FYS) approach. Eight schools use a single course in students' disciplines that includes a writing component. Two of the eight schools require all students to take a writing course; three do not require students to take the course, two of which, curiously, are the only ones that explicitly identify themselves as WAC-oriented; three schools are unclear on whether the course is required or not.³ One school requires a single remedial course for underprepared students, while a second school offers "optional support courses that are credit-bearing"; six schools do not identify any remedial or support courses.

The two remaining schools approach writing in ways different from the other 39 institutions and each other. One notes that the school has no first-year writing requirement, but 40 to 45% of students are required by their programs to complete a writing course, the most popular option being a college composition course. The other response is a bit murky, saying that it offers "tutorials with advisors" in what seems to be a first-year seminar format, but also stating that it offers one or two sections of "intro to writing" each semester that are limited to first-year students and include assignments consistent with a composition course; the description is unclear on whether the "tutorials" and "intro to writing" are the same thing or different things.

At 44% of the total, first-year composition still dominates SLAC approaches to first-year writing as the largest single category, at least in this sample. But given the difficulties posed by the wording of the question and Gladstein and Regaignon's finding that SLACs were about twice

³ To clarify, only one school identified itself as having a WAC program, while two others identified as *WAC-oriented*. The distinction may be insignificant, but without further information about the schools or their programs, it seemed wisest methodologically to err on the side of preserving the distinction than to assume these were just different ways of saying the same thing.

as likely as PCUs to take a WAC approach to writing (7), my results may be a function of the way the question was worded—in other words, because the question asked specifically about FYC programs, it may be that I only got exactly what I asked for. For additional perspective, I further compared my results to Gladstein and Fralix’s ongoing National Census of Writing (NCW).⁴ My findings that 95% of responding institutions do have some form of first-year writing were consistent with the NCW’s finding of 97%. But my results differed from the NCW’s findings on the prevalence of WAC, which found that 61% of 99 responding SLACs have WAC programs. The NCW also differs slightly from my findings on type of program, where the question “How would you describe your first-year writing requirement?” (92 respondents) was answered 44% (n=41) first-year writing seminar (compared to 29% writing-intensive in my study), 39% (n=36) first-year composition (compared to 43%), and 34% (n=31) first-year seminar (compared to 22%). Preference for first-year writing restricted to a single course rather than two seems to be rising according to my results, with 25 schools (61%) preferring this approach over the traditional two-course model, a finding confirmed by NCW’s results of 69 of 91 (76%) responding SLACs preferring the one-course approach. Separate remedial/support classes, meanwhile, seem to be falling out of favor, as evidenced by their use at only 10 of the 41 responding schools; of those that do offer or require remediation by coursework, nine schools do so through a single course. It also seems worth noting that six of the ten schools that offer remedial writing courses follow the English composition model. Although the NCW divided the question of remediation and support for underprepared students into “basic writing” and “support for English Language Learners,” it seems to confirm the trend my study

⁴ Information from the NCW was viewed with the Small Liberal Arts Colleges filter enabled.

observed, with 87% (13 out of 18) of responding programs preferring a single basic writing course.⁵

How many students does the FYC program serve in a typical year? <100, 101-400, 401-700, 701-1000, >1001

As seen in Figure 2, of the 42 respondents to the question on the number of students the FYC program serves, 45.2% (n=19) work with 401-700 students, and another 35.7% (n=15) with 101-400 students per year. Schools serving fewer than 100 and 701-1,000 students per year each represented 9.5% of the total (n=4).

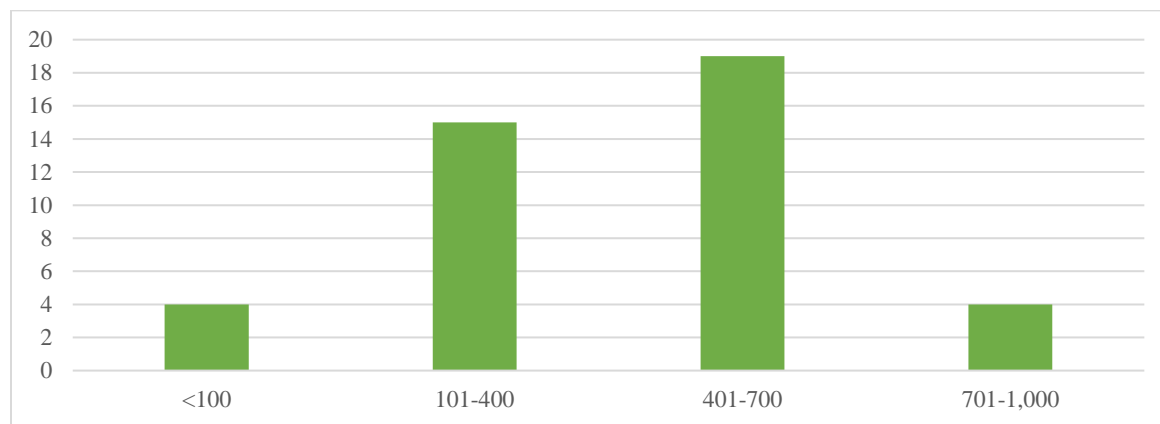


Figure 2: SLACs by Number of Students per Year by First-Year Writing Program

⁵ The organizational home of the first-year writing in this survey was also different from the NCW's results: 48% (n=18) were found in English departments, 31% (n=13, including the eight schools that use the first-year seminar model) in broad programs, 10% (n=4) in a discrete academic unit such as a Writing department, and 10% (n=4) unclear. The NCW broke the issue of program housing across two questions, the first being "Is first-year writing part of the writing program or department?", to which 41% (n=39) of 95 respondents answered yes. The second question, "If not part of the writing program or department, what is the institutional home for first-year writing?" answered by 59 institutions, found 42% (n=25) in the English department, 17% (n=10) in an independent program, 3% (n=2) in another academic department, 17% (n=10) in the office of the chief academic officer, and 20% (n=12) somewhere else.

How many FYC course sections does your department teach on average each semester? ≤ 5 , 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, ≥ 31

Answers were distributed almost evenly across the possible categories: eight schools each (19%) reported offering 11-15 and 31 or more sections of FYC each semester, seven schools (16.7%) offered 6-10 sections, six schools each (14.3%) offered five or fewer and 16-20 sections, four schools (9.5%) offered 26-30 sections, and 3 schools (7.1%) offered 21-25 sections. Figure 3 provides the visualization.

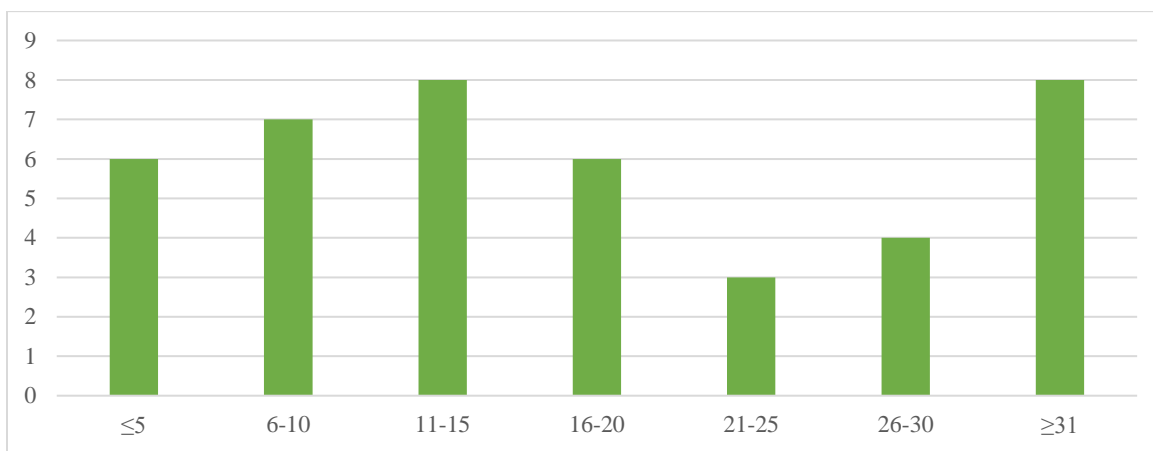


Figure 3: SLACs by Number of First-Year Writing Sections per Semester

How many faculty members are part of your department? 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, ≥ 21 and How many faculty members teach FYC courses? 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, ≥ 21 , all of them

These two questions are combined for reporting because of the close relationship between answers, because the answer choice “all of them” on the second question must be understood in light of the number of faculty in a department, and because the smallest departments dominated both answer sets. Twelve (28.6%) of the 42 responding institutions report departments of 1-5 members, 10 (23.8%) have 6-10 members, and 11 (26%) have 11-15 faculty. Only four schools (9.5%) had 16-20 faculty, and an additional five institutions (11.9%) had 21 or more members. As for number of faculty who teach first-year writing, eleven schools (26.2%) have 1-5 faculty

teaching FYC courses, and another eight each (19%) deploying 6-10 and 11-15 for the task. Five schools (11.9%) make use of 16-20 faculty for FYC, and ten (23.8%) have more than 21. Yet curiously, these numbers do not necessarily line up. As illustrated in Figures 4 through 8, sometimes the number of faculty members who teach FYC courses far exceeds the number of faculty in respondents' departments.

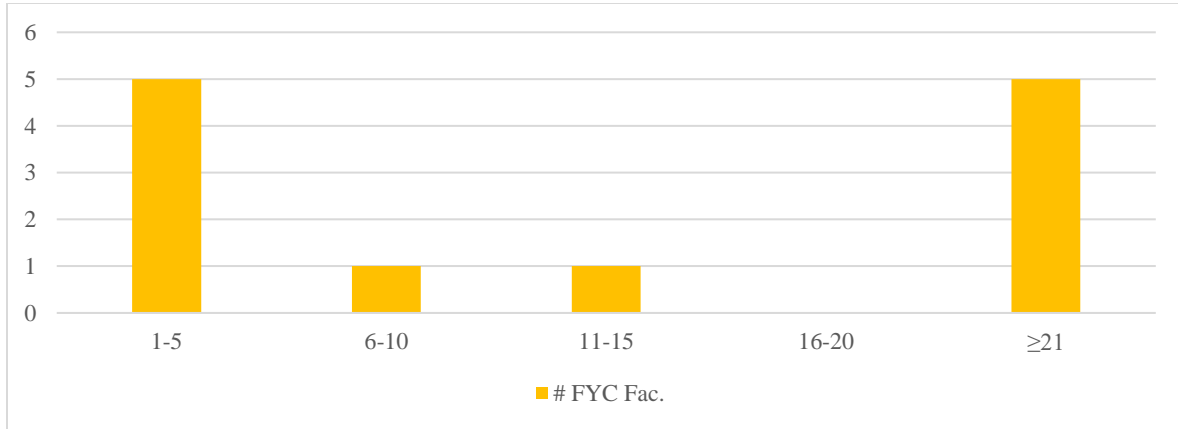


Figure 4: SLACs by Number of Faculty—1-5 (n= 12)

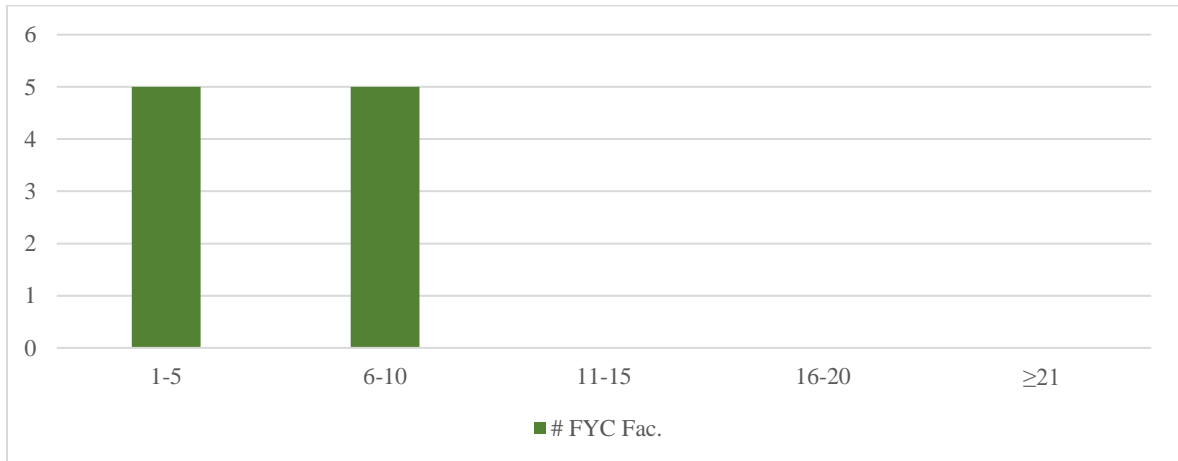


Figure 5: SLACs by Number of Faculty—6-10 (n= 10)

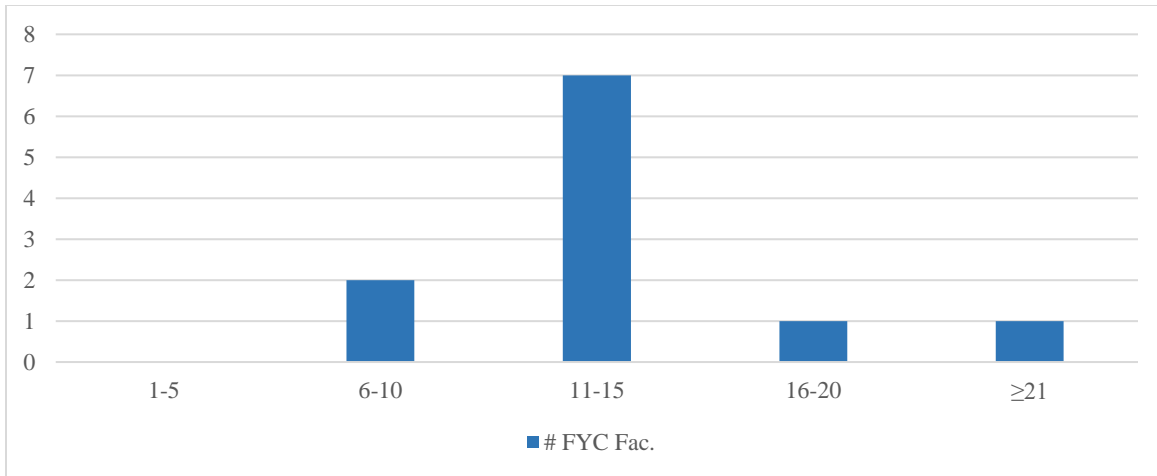


Figure 6: SLACs by Number of Faculty—11-15 (n= 11)

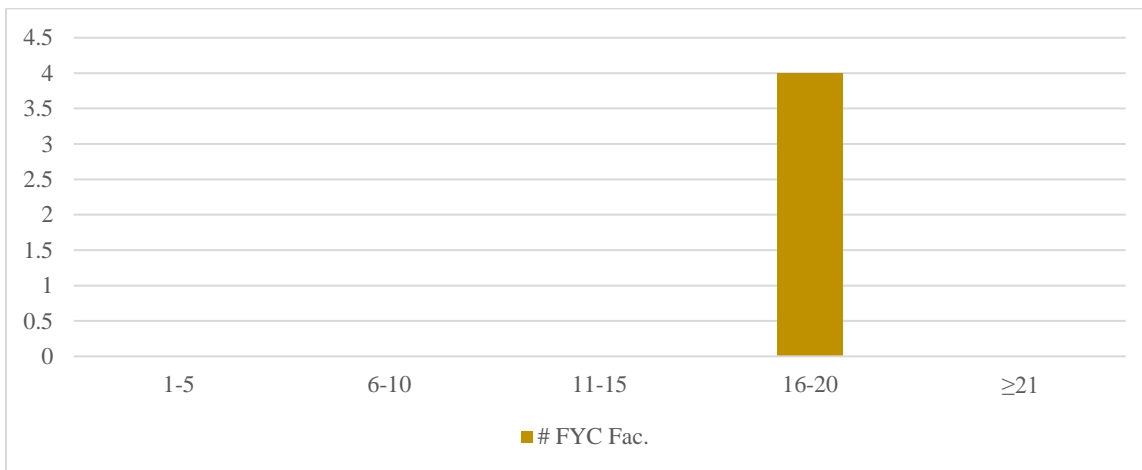


Figure 7: SLACs by Number of Faculty—16-20 (n= 4)

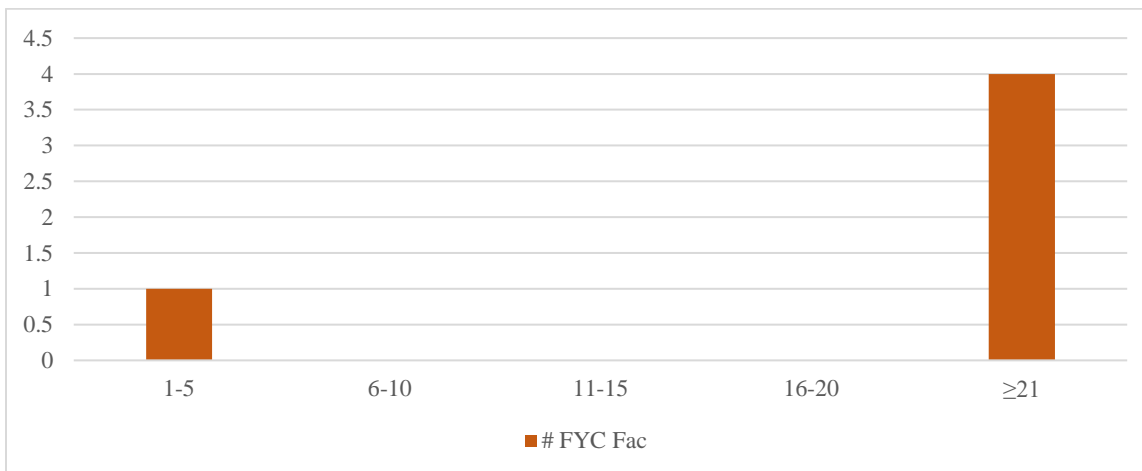


Figure 8: SLACs by Number of Faculty—≥21 (n= 5)

It is worth noting that all the institutions with 16 or more faculty members follow the first-year writing seminar or first-year seminar models and serve 401-700 students, so while they claim the largest faculty, these programs do not correspond to the largest schools in the survey.

*What is the status of your FYC teachers? Adjunct? Full-time? Tenure-track? Non-tenure track?
Select all that apply.*

Twenty institutions indicated that their first-year writing courses are taught by adjunct and full-time faculty who are both tenure-track (TT) and non-tenure-track (NTT). The configuration of the response choices makes it impossible to know whether NTT faculty are only adjunct or may also be full-time. One school indicated that FYW courses are taught by adjuncts only, three schools use both adjunct and full-time faculty with no indication of tenure status, and four schools use only TT (therefore, presumably, full-time) faculty. One institution uses only full-time faculty with no indication of tenure status. One institution uses only full-time, tenure-track faculty. Two schools use adjunct and tenure-track faculty who are presumably full-time (a tenure-track adjunct sounds like a forgotten circle in Dante's vision of Hell). One school uses adjunct and full-time faculty, all of whom are non-tenure-track. Three schools use full-time, TT and NTT faculty. First-year writing courses at two schools are taught by adjunct, full-time, and tenure-track faculty. One institution uses TT and NTT faculty, presumably all of whom are full-time. One school's FYW courses are only taught by adjunct, non-tenure-track (do they mean full-time?) faculty. These distributions are shown in Fig. 9.

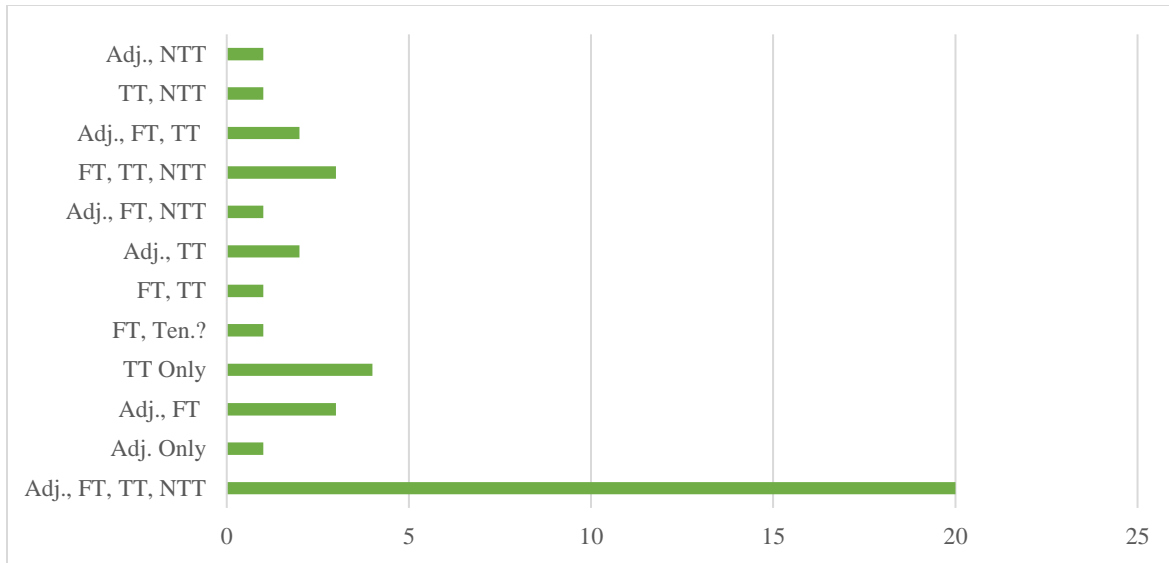


Figure 9: SLACs by FYW Faculty Status

The intent of this question was to determine to what degree SLACs rely on full-time faculty to teach first-year writing and how much they rely on contingent faculty. Per Gladstein and Regaignon, one of the points SLACs often use to market themselves is the claim that students are mostly taught by full-time faculty rather than by graduate students or adjuncts (15). It seemed fitting to determine whether this claim is true of first-year writing, one of the few subjects within colleges and universities most likely to be taught by someone other than a full-time faculty member. My experience with SLACs also indicates anecdotally that at least some do not have a tenure system, so I wanted to know whether my observation matched reality. With respect to both permanence of employment and tenure status, it seemed most likely that small programs are more likely to engage in regular, theoretically-informed writing program assessment if faculty were mostly full-time, and more likely still if those faculty had the job security afforded by tenure. As it stands, the configuration I chose for answer choices created response combinations that were so muddled that it's hard to reach any conclusions about the nature of FYC faculty at responding institutions.

Do any of your faculty members have formal training in teaching composition, either by degree or other formal, certifiable means (graduate course work, participation in a National Writing Project summer workshop, etc.)? 0, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, ≥ 7 , all of them

The response choice “All of them” was interpreted in light of the previous question on the number of faculty in a department. Faculty with training in writing instruction are either more common than I hypothesized, or many respondents did not understand the question. Only two institutions report having no one with formal training in teaching composition, and though they are FYS schools, they also serve 401-700 students, the mode average for this study, so nothing in their responses suggests a reason for lacking faculty with formal training in composition. Seventeen institutions report having 1-2 faculty with such training, while nine claim 3-4, five have 5-6, and nine schools have more than seven faculty with formal training in composition teaching. Results are shown in Fig. 10, which indicates number of respondents and percentage of the whole.

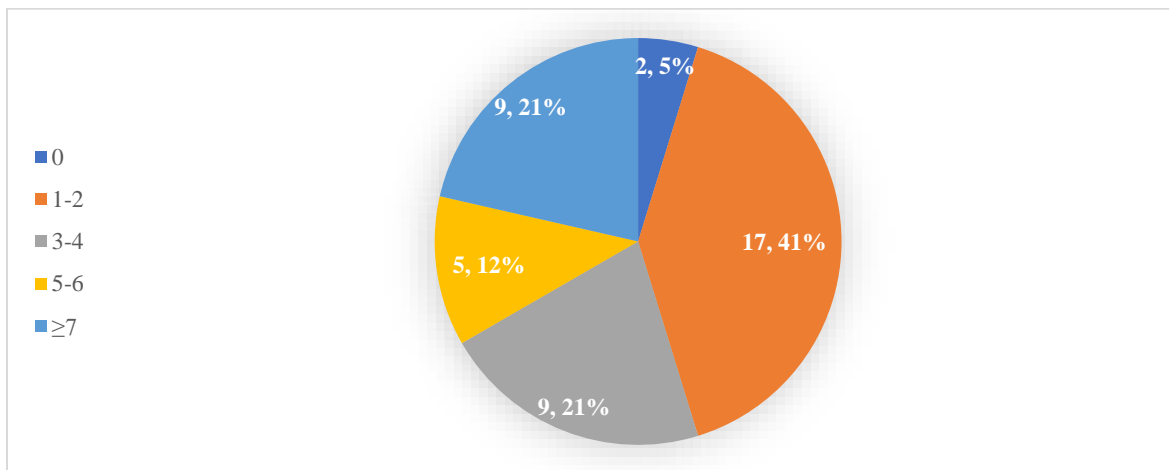


Figure 10: SLACs by Number of Faculty with Formal Training in Teaching Composition (n=42)

The goal of this question was to determine how common composition-trained faculty are at SLACs under the dual hypotheses that (1) composition faculty are actually as rare at SLACs as my observations from contact with such schools suggests they are, and (2) formally trained

compositionists are more likely to direct writing program assessment projects in accordance with best practices. While, to be sure, not all compositionists are extensively educated in program assessment practices, it still seems reasonable to assume that most would have at least been made sufficiently aware of it while in their graduate programs to know where to start reading when an order for program assessment came. The responses given here don't line up with responses to subsequent questions, particularly those about who/what initiated an assessment project and what theory/ies informed the project. The mismatch suggests either that many respondents to this question interpreted the question differently from my intent, or that other forces that are more powerful than composition faculty are shaping these programs.

What is each teacher's average FYC course load per semester? 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥5

As illustrated by Fig. 11, eighteen responding institutions indicated that their teachers only teach one first-year writing course per semester. Faculty at another seventeen schools teach two courses a semester. Six schools require faculty to teach three sections of writing, while one school's faculty teach four sections on average. No school requires faculty to teach five or more sections of freshman writing.

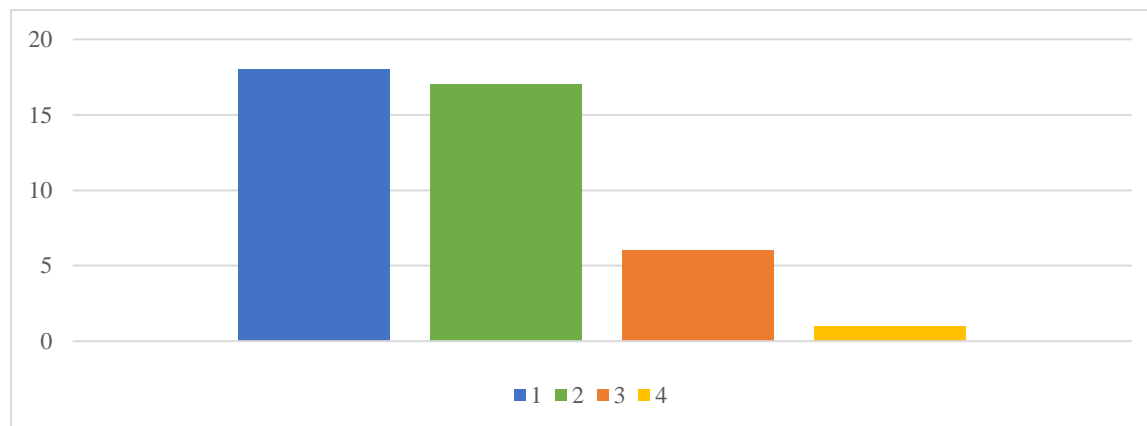


Figure 11: SLACs by Avg. FYC Load/Semester

What are course enrollment caps? ≤ 15 , 16-20, 21-25, 25-30, ≥ 31

No institutions cap their first-year writing courses at more than 31 students, and only one caps courses at 25-30. Nine schools (21.4%) cap their classes at 21-25 students, and another nine have caps of 15 students or fewer. As shown in Fig. 12 (showing both number of respondents and percentage of respondents per category), the clear majority of schools, 23 (54.8%), cap classes at 16-20 students.

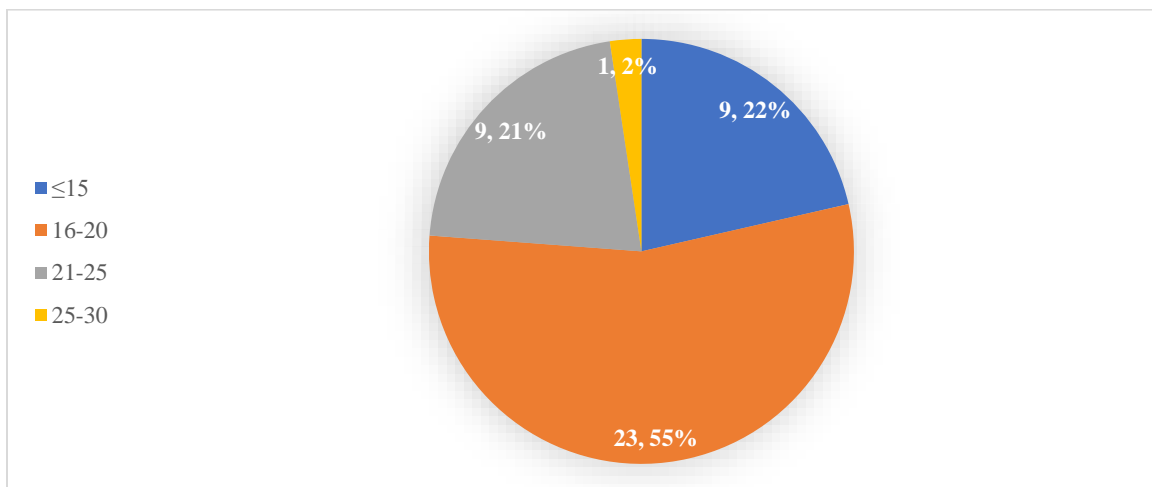


Figure 12: SLACs by FYW Course Enrollment Caps (n=42)

The good news on the number sections of FYW faculty are required to teach and the enrollment caps on those courses is that most responding institutions are operating within the bounds of the ADE’s recommendations of no faculty member teaching more than three sections of writing (“Guidelines for Class Size and Workload”), with only seven schools requiring heavier loads. Likewise, most schools also satisfy the ADE’s recommended course cap of fifteen students or fewer and a maximum of twenty students in writing courses—but only just, as more than half of responding institutions fall within the ADE’s upper limit, and slightly more than a fifth exceeding the recommended caps. These figures’ obvious chief implication for writing assessment projects is that teaching faculty carry fairly heavy classroom loads, likely making

them indisposed or unable to participate in an assessment project without some incentive attached.

Who directs your FYC program? Department/division chair; formal WPA; informal WPA; formal writing center director; informal writing center director; department/division committee; college dean; other:

No schools rely on an informal writing center director or a college dean to direct the first-year writing program. Only one relies on a formal writing center director to do the job, while two institutions depend on an informal WPA, three use a department/division chair, and four rely on a department/division committee.⁶ The two dominant configurations of first-year writing program directors were the formal WPA and “Other” at 19 (45.2%) and 13 (30.9%), respectively, of responding institutions, Fig. 13.

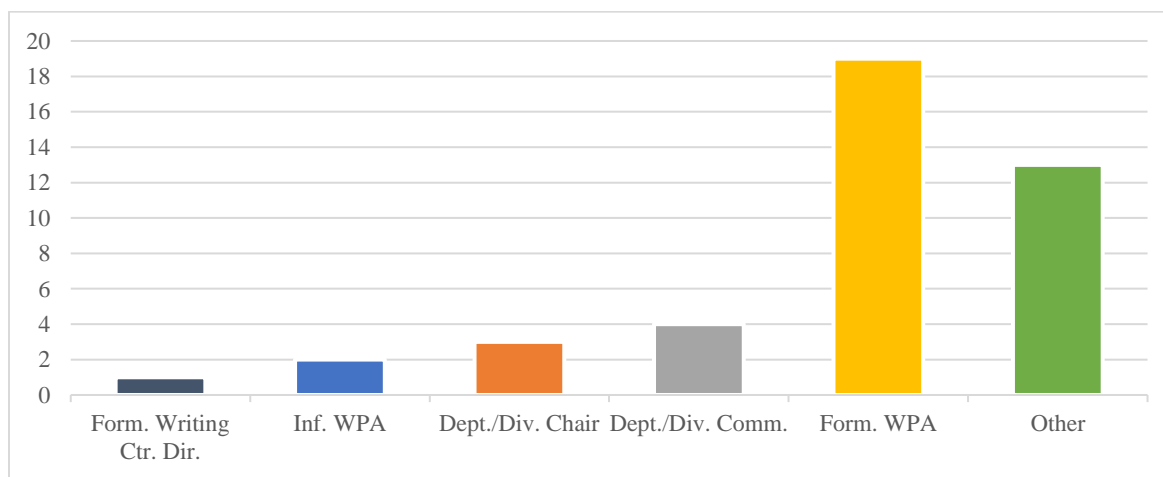


Figure 13: SLACs by FYC Program Director

Answers under “Other” reflect a variety of administrative configurations that largely resist neat categorization. Three colleges have a single director of first-year writing or first-year

⁶ Per Gladstein & Regaignon, an informal WPA is “a single position which is not labeled ‘WPA,’ but whose portfolio of responsibilities includes the work of administering some aspects of the curriculum-centered writing program.... Most often, these... are... directors of general education or chairs of English departments” (58-59).

seminar. Two others have a single director but who works in collaboration with the directors of other writing programs at their institutions. One relies on a committee of three members who are half faculty, half program staff. Another uses an undefined faculty committee, while two institutions coordinate their programs through department consensus. Two schools rely on collaboration between a formal WPA and an unspecified department chair. One program is directed by an associate provost. The final institution made the statement “No one—there is no program. Please disregard questions 3 and 4: we have no department so these questions were invalid for us,” yet oddly answered every other question on the survey, even initially identifying their program as “First-Year Seminar, required of all students,” making it a bit hard to determine what to do with this answer.

This question is the one that Gladstein and Regaignon’s work, so crucial to the whole of this project, can answer best, so an examination of my findings in light of theirs seems appropriate. “Identifying the leadership configuration of an institution’s writing program” is, as they put it, “a key step in understanding not just the local culture of writing but also the material conditions that shape it” (64); put in a way more relevant to the present context, program leadership can reasonably be expected to play a significant role in shaping assessment efforts.

The responses to my survey are broadly consistent with Gladstein and Regaignon’s in that my question and their study reflect a wide variety leadership arrangements and program configurations. Using an extensive questionnaire to evaluate leadership at 100 responding SLACs, Gladstein and Regaignon ultimately determined that SLACs fall into one of six leadership arrangements (42-66). Their categories are different from mine, but some general equivalencies for comparison and contrast are nonetheless achievable. Gladstein and Regaignon’s “Explicit WPA + Explicit WCD [Writing Center Director]” (n=38) and “Explicit

WPA only” (n=2) are sufficiently like my Formal WPA category (n=19). Their “Explicit WCD only” (n=16) is an exact match to my Formal Writing Center Director (n=1). My categories of Informal WPA (n=2) and Dept./Div. Chair (3) are closest to their “Embedded WPA + Explicit WCD” (n=13), and both fit under the combined banner of Informal WPA. The remaining categories on both sides can best be equated by label of “Others”: “No WPA/WCD” (n=2) and “Solo WPA/WCD” (in which a single person manages the program *and* the writing center; n=29) on their side, and Other (n=13) and Dept./Div. Committee (n=4) on mine. The head-to-head comparison is presented in percentages in Fig. 14:

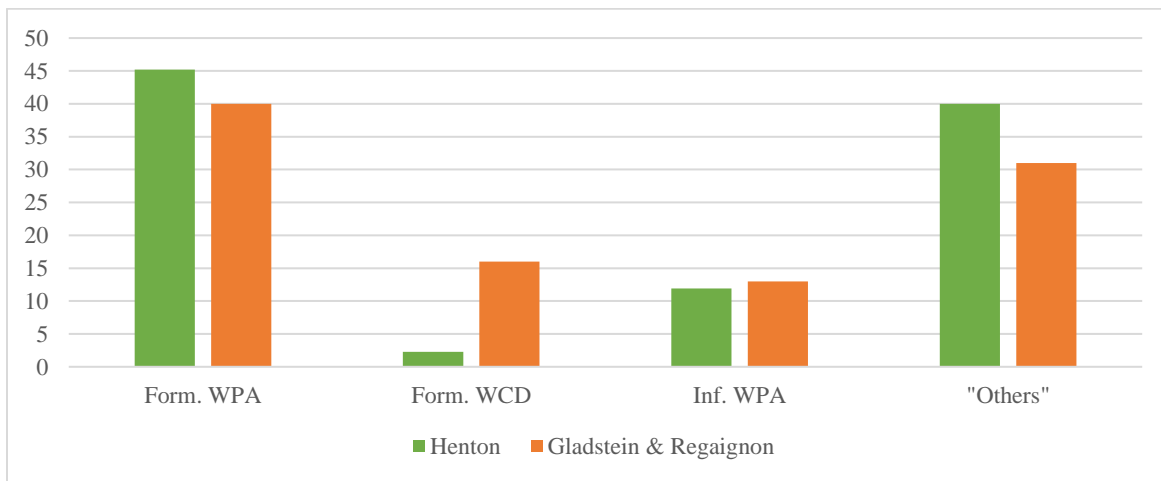


Figure 14: Comparison of Writing Program Leadership Approaches

Again, the comparison is not exact because of the differences in our approaches, methodologies, and foci. It still seems, however, that there have been some shifts in writing program leadership between Gladstein and Regaignon’s data collection in 2009 and my data collection in 2018. The nine-year gap alone may explain it: as Gladstein and Regaignon note toward the close of their chapter defining leadership configurations, “The most significant trend we identified overall is that leadership configurations are changing and expanding as institutions realize that the very diffusion they value can produce a leadership vacuum and unrealized goals” (65). The apparent uptick in programs directed by a formal WPA is certainly positive, as is the

possible decrease in programs relying on writing center directors and informal WPAs.⁷ But the potential increase in Other program leadership configurations seems less positive, and may explain the variety of approaches to writing program assessment and may reflect the increased administrative pressures that the rest of my survey's findings suggest.

Does your FYC program have a mission statement?, Does your FYC program have explicitly stated objectives?, and Does your FYC program have explicitly stated outcomes? Yes; No to each

These three questions are combined for reporting because writing program assessment scholarship draws a fairly clear line through the three items, as explained in chapter 1: Objectives and outcomes should be informed by the mission statement, and should also be related to each other. Twenty schools state that their first-year writing program does have a mission statement, while 22 do not. Despite more than half of responding schools lacking a mission statement, 33 do have explicitly stated program objectives, while only nine do not. Similarly, 31 colleges and universities have explicitly stated program outcomes, compared to eleven that do not. Figure 15 visualizes the comparison.

⁷ I use qualifiers out of respect for the statistical limitations of my study, discussed later in the chapter.

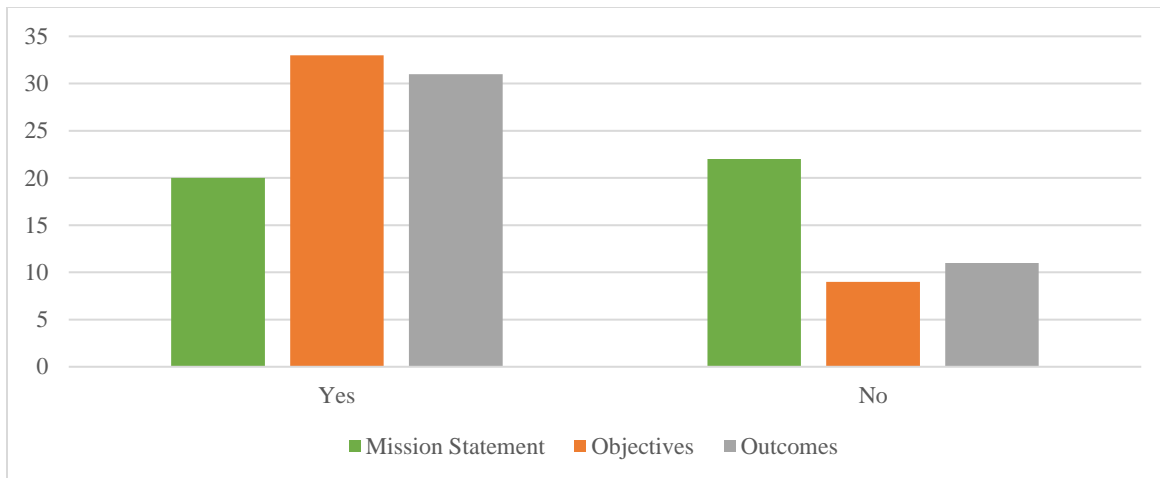


Figure 15: SLACs by FYC Mission Statement, Objectives, and Outcomes

These responses seem somewhat at odds with each other and with responses to other questions. What do the thirteen programs that have objectives but not a mission statement base their objectives on? Why are there two fewer programs that have outcomes than have objectives? While the number of programs that have mission statements lines up well with the number of programs directed by a formal WPA, the lack of a mission statement in 20 of the programs seemingly belies the 40 programs that claim faculty with formal training in composition: composition-trained faculty are not necessarily in positions of control over their programs, but it still seems reasonable that they might exert some influence on these small programs in the creation of mission statements than the responses to these questions suggest. This mismatch may point, together with the additional mismatch of programs that have objectives and outcomes but not mission statements, toward some other influence shaping these first-year writing programs.

How often in the past has your FYC program been formally assessed? Never; every year; every 2-3 years; every 4-6 years; every 7-10 years; less often than every 10 years

Most colleges and universities in this survey report regular first-year writing program assessment, with 15 indicating that their assessment is yearly, and another 11 completing

program assessment efforts every two to three years. Five programs complete their assessments every 4-6 years, one does so every 7-10 years, and two less often than every 10 years. Curiously, eight institutions report never having assessed their programs. Figure 16 illustrates the breakdown.

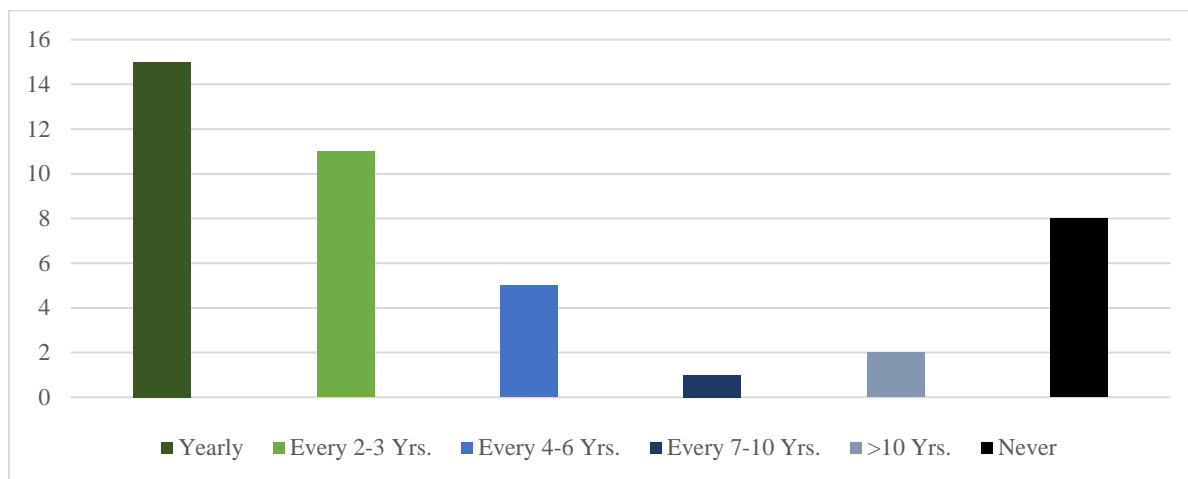


Figure 16: SLACs by Frequency of FYC Program Assessment

This question was also set as a killswitch question: any institution that answered “Never” was automatically redirected to the survey’s exit question. As a result of that constraint and of two schools opting not complete the rest of the survey, the remaining questions only had 32 respondents, except where that number was further reduced by one because of the single respondent who typed *f* in every open-response answer.

All of the following questions were set up by the context statement *Considering your most recent FYC program assessment effort:....*

Was the assessment effort initiated by...? Curiosity about some facet of student learning; a mandate from college/university administration; a combination of the two; other:

Fig. 17 shows the response distribution to this question by percentage and number of respondents for each category.

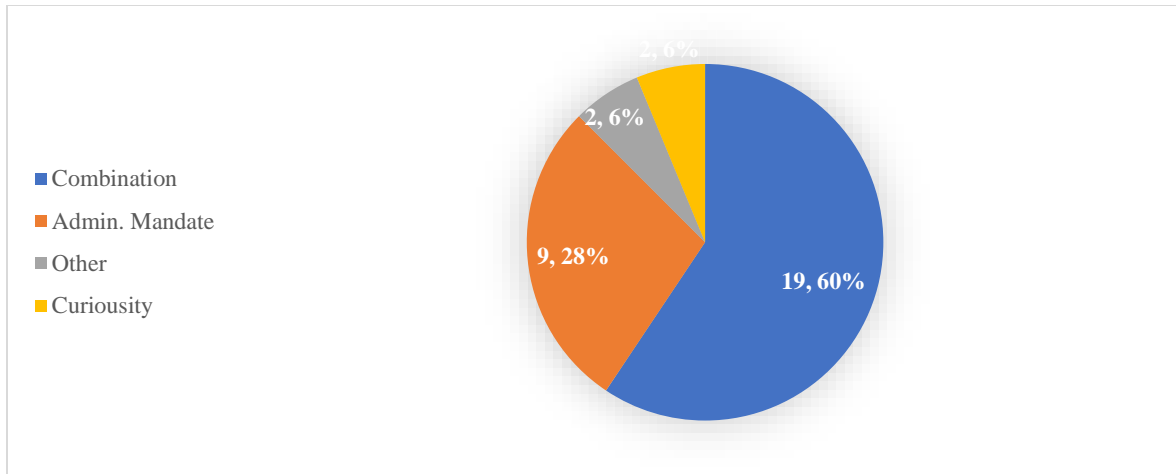


Figure 17: SLACs by FYC Program Assessment Motivation (n=32)

The clear majority of responding institutions indicate that their latest assessment effort was initiated by a combination of curiosity about student learning and a mandate from institutional administration, with 19 schools (59.4%) choosing this option. Nine other institutions (28%) engaged in assessment at the direction of administration, while just two did so because of a desire to learn what their students were learning. Two institutions marked the Other category, indicating in their responses that one effort was initiated by “mutual desire of program members” and the other by the WPA, responses that indicate an interest in student learning was most likely, though not definitively, in the driver’s seat.

How formal was the assessment effort? Completely formal: the entire process took place according to established, written protocols and procedures known and understood by all faculty and staff participants⁸; Mostly informal: while the products of our assessment effort provided reliable data that satisfied our stakeholders, the procedures and/or protocols and/or participants were largely determined on an ad-hoc basis through departmental meetings and “water cooler”

⁸ The definition assumed from this point on for the term *formal assessment*.

*conversations—we probably could not reproduce this exactly for our next assessment effort*⁹;
Mix of formal and informal: some of our procedures and/or protocols and/or participants were determined by established, written, known, reproducible means, but others were determined on an ad-hoc basis.

Half the responding schools (16) indicated their process was completely formal. Four (12.5%) operated mostly informally. Twelve, or 37.5%, engaged in mixed processes. The answers to this question were surprising on multiple levels. Gladstein and Regaignon's aforementioned observations about the close, relational nature of SLAC administration anticipated a much higher degree of informality in the program assessment effort. A low number of schools acting largely informally runs counter to this forecast. Simultaneously, the number of responding institutions indicating well-developed programs and administrative structures would have anticipated more schools with completely formal assessment processes. The middle ground of colleges and universities that engaged in a mix of formal and informal processes may indicate that SLACs are moving from informal, ad-hoc programs and program assessments to formal, structured first-year writing programs. Fig. 18 makes the distribution clearer through number of respondents and percentages.

⁹ The definition assumed from this point on for the term *informal assessment*.

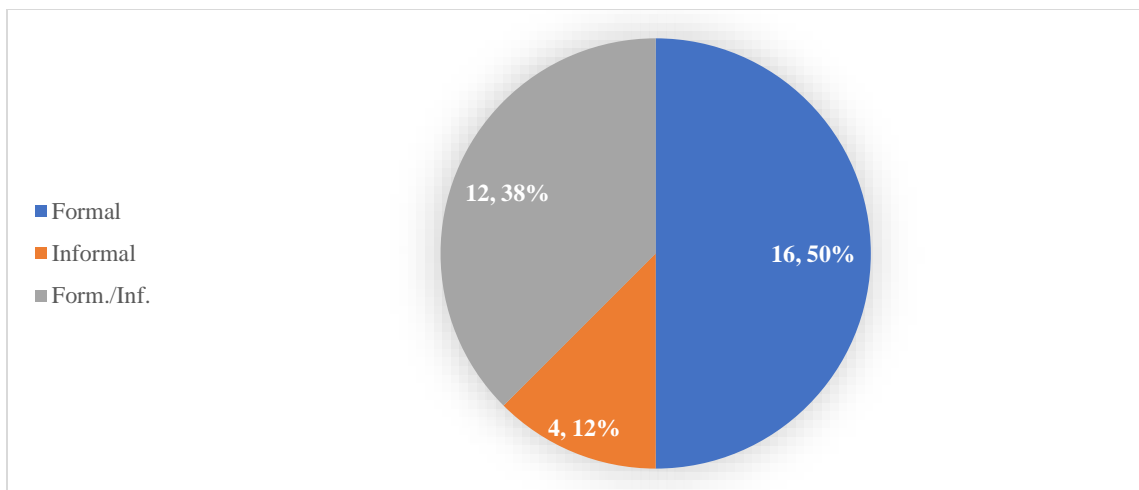


Figure 18: SLACs by Formality of Writing Program Assessment Effort (n=32)

What aspect of your program did you evaluate?

The intent of this question was to capture the particular focus of the most recent program assessment effort: how well students can document academic sources, for example. The broad and vague answers many respondents gave suggest that either respondents misunderstood the question or there is something about the ways program assessment is pursued at small colleges that makes this question alien. In any case, a few patterns do emerge, as shown in Fig. 19.

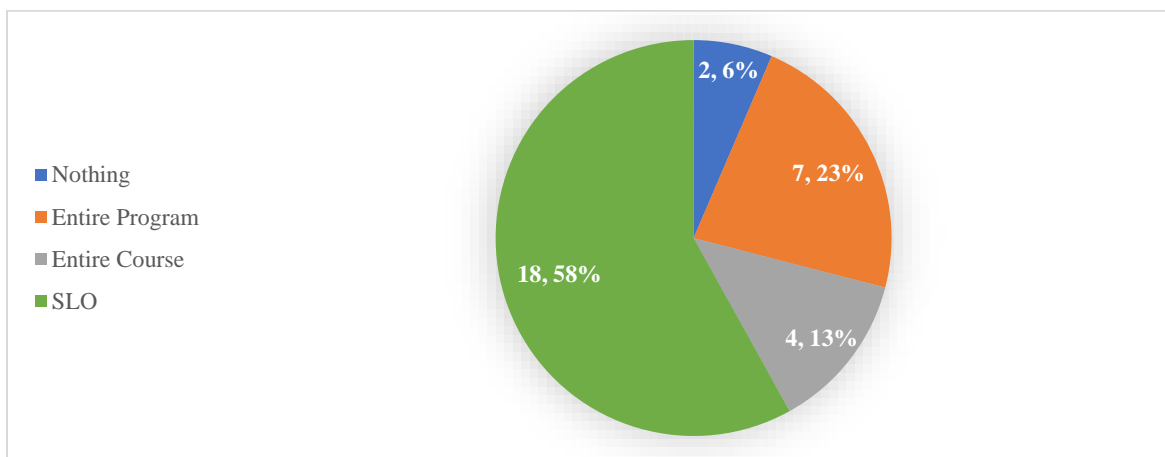


Figure 19: SLACs by Program Aspect Evaluated (n=31)

Two institutions indicated that they did not evaluate any aspect of their program (odd, since the point of program assessment is to evaluate *something*), while seven gave answers that

indicated they attempted to evaluate the entire first-year writing program. Four additional schools indicated that they evaluated an entire writing course. The remaining eighteen colleges and universities—the clear majority—evaluated a student learning outcome (SLO). While most answers on student learning outcomes were not clear enough to determine the nature of the outcomes evaluated, in all but five cases one to five outcomes were evaluated, the plurality of these (six) evaluating two outcomes. Within the less clear respondents, one institution evaluated “all” of its outcomes, while four were unclear on how many outcomes they examined.

Who was involved in the assessment effort?

An open-response question, no other survey item better reflects the diversity of the small liberal arts college ecosystem. Answers varied so widely that they resisted multiple attempts at classification. Describing trends across all responses seems a more effective approach to articulating what I received.

Of the 31 usable answers, twelve explicitly named the WPA or equivalent as a participant; curiously, at 38% of respondents, this is a bit shy of the 45% of programs led by a formal WPA, though the difference may be due to the higher number of respondents to that previous question. In no cases did this person work alone. Writing program faculty (plus or minus a WPA) were responsible for the effort at eleven of the 31 schools, and were named as being involved in conjunction with others beyond the WPA at one other school. Five respondents explicitly identified a non-WPA administrator as involved in the process. Committees and teams, whether comprising writing faculty or from outside departments, were involved in the effort at eight schools. Eight colleges involved faculty from across campus in the assessment effort. Only two respondents mentioned paying assessment participants. Two colleges included students in

the assessment project. Two drew on writing center personnel. One school required faculty to submit an evaluation form for each of their classes at the end of the semester.

The signal-to-noise ratio in these answers skews too much in favor of noise to articulate much more than this description, except, perhaps, that whatever else these SLACs are doing with respect to best practices in writing program assessment, they are at least staffing those projects based on local constraints. When considered in light of responses to the questions about program leadership, formal composition training of faculty, and frequency of assessment, however, the choices in personnel seem to again hint toward administrative involvement in assessment projects and perhaps other energies as work. Of particular interest are the discrepancy between reported number of formal WPAs and the number of formal WPAs actually involved in program assessment, the number of committees/teams leading assessment efforts, and the scattered presence of non-WPA administrators. These findings all point toward greater administrator involvement. So do the combined facts that program assessments are generally occurring more frequently even as only two programs mention paying their personnel for the extra work: it may be that more programs are paying their personnel and simply didn't mention it, but as given, the answers suggest together that those who initiate program assessment projects have found a way of compelling participation.

Did any current theories and best practices inform your assessment effort? If yes, which one(s)?

Responses to this question also varied widely, though three broad categories do emerge, as illustrated in Fig. 20.

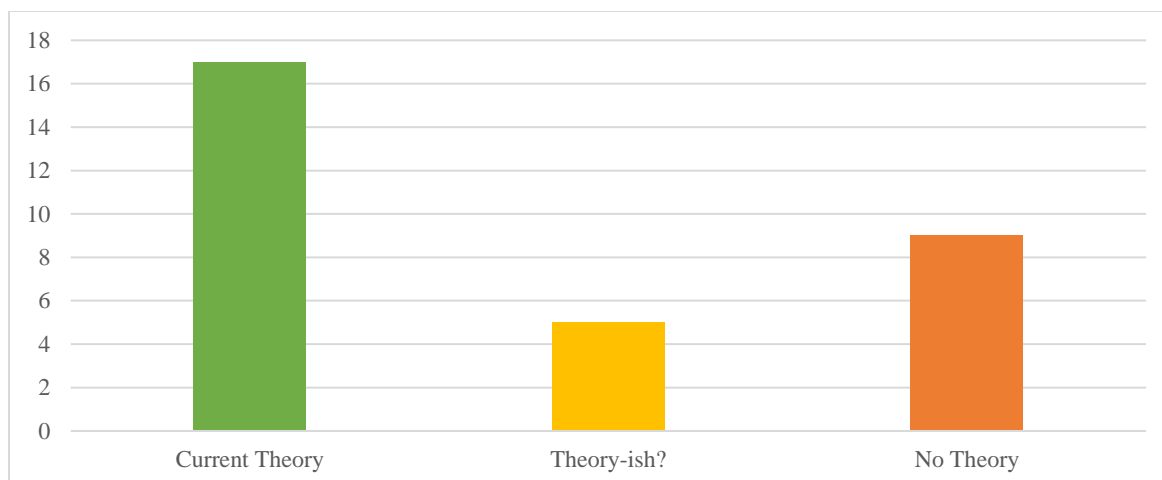


Figure 20: SLACs by Theory Informing Program Assessment

Seventeen schools said that their efforts were informed by current theories, and they referenced a variety of sources, among them the CWPA’s first-year writing outcomes; the WPA outcomes statement; AACU Value rubrics; White, Elliot, and Peckham’s *Very Like A Whale*; directed self-placement research; Inoue’s *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*; Slomp and Fuite; Teagle Assessment; AP grading practices; and works by Rich Haswell, Barbara Walvoord, Liz Wardle, Ed White, Norbert Elliot, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Five institutions curiously insisted that their work was also informed by theories and best practices, but only mentioned the idea of rubrics generally (one also mentioned “equity and inclusion”) as evidence of such, claims that beg for more detail. The remaining nine institutions answered that their efforts were not informed by any current theories or best practices.

The majority percentage of responses shows clearly that most responding schools are engaging with published scholarship on writing program assessment. Still troubling, however, is that a combined 45% of responding schools seem to be engaging in program assessment efforts without a clear understanding of what they’re doing, why they’re doing it, or how to properly execute an assessment project. These responses call into question the veracity of prior responses about faculty with formal composition training and seem to push back against the influence that

the formal WPAs—that so many of these schools claim—presumably have in directing the first-year writing programs at these schools or in shaping program assessment efforts.

What evaluation tool did you use?

The goal of this question was to determine what writing product the responding colleges assessed (e.g. a portfolio or a single essay). But most respondents seem to have interpreted the question to mean “Which tool did you use to evaluate the writing product?”, which explains why seventeen of them did not give an answer from which a writing product could be determined. The remaining fourteen institutions split pretty evenly, with three using a single essay, five using some version of a portfolio, and six others evaluating student surveys, focus group responses, or a combination of written assessments and oral interviews—in other words, there is no writing product commonly assessed at SLACs, at least among the respondents to this survey.

It also seems notable that sixteen of the 31 respondents specifically mentioned rubrics again. This respondent pool somehow seemed particularly fixated on the idea of rubrics as keys to writing program assessment in ways that the current publications reviewed in chapter 1 do not seem to emphasize.

At what time of the academic year is/was the assessment performed?

Eleven responding institutions indicated that they performed their program assessment at the end of every semester; this figure includes those institutions that responded that their assessments were year-round, and those assessing summer courses. Thirteen schools indicated their review occurs at some point during the spring semester or over the summer. One of the two remaining colleges answered that assessment occurs in June or December, while the other

answered with a question mark. These responses closely matched responses to the prior question on frequency of program assessment.

Approximately how long does/did your assessment take?

Seven institutions completed their most recent program review in a day or less; another seven took up to a week. Three took up to a month. Eight took longer than a month. Six either did not know or chose not to specify how long the project took.

When is your next round of FYC program assessment scheduled to occur?

Eighteen schools will complete at least one more round of program assessment within the next year, the clear majority. Five other institutions will complete their next program review in the next two to three years, while one institution anticipates revisiting their program in the next 4-5 years. Interestingly, seven schools—slightly less than a quarter of the sample—do not know when their next round of assessment will occur.

Statistical Analyses

Answer counts alone reveal quite a bit about the current state of first-year writing program assessment at responding small liberal arts institutions, more on which in the next section. But those data do not by themselves illuminate relationships that answer my research questions or that might tell more. Some statistical analysis was necessary to interrogate responses more deeply. To do this, I proposed the following four questions:

1. Is there an association between program type—FYC, FYS, or FYWS—and the frequency of assessment?

2. Is there an association between program direction—formal WPA or other—and the frequency of assessment?
3. Is there an association between the motivation for assessment (curiosity about student learning, administrative demand, or a combination) and who directs a program?
4. Is there an association between the motivation for assessment and with the frequency of assessment?

These questions were input into SPSS (and when necessary into Vassarstats.net) for statistical processing. The reason for examining these statistical correlations was, really, to interrogate my biases and assumptions, to see if my instincts were correct or not in order to draw clearer conclusions from responses. For all analyses, the number of categories in each response had to be limited to a maximum of three, so many questions required some consolidation of data categories and occasional ignoring of some responses.

My first hypothesis—that there might be a correlation between program type and the frequency of program assessments—derived from my suspicion that FYC programs are more likely to engage in more frequent program assessments. The assumption has its base in a bit of disciplinary hubris: programs that identify as first-year composition programs tend to be housed in English Departments; English Departments, in turn, tend to be home to graduate programs in composition/writing studies, programs which tend to include some training in assessment; thus, English Departments at SLACs, I reasoned, were more likely to have faculty trained in program assessments, and were, therefore, more likely to engage in frequent program assessment than first-year seminar or first-year writing seminar approaches housed who knew where and likely staffed by faculty without much composition training. To reduce the number of writing program types, I combined FYC x 2 and FYC x 1 schools into the single category FYC, and I ignored the

single WAC program and the two programs initially classified as Other, for a total of 38 analyzed. Assessment frequencies were reclassified from the six options available to respondents to Every 1-3 Years and Every 4+ Years (those that responded Never were counted in the latter category). There was no statistical correlation between these two variables. While FYC schools are slightly more likely than FYWS and FYS colleges to engage in assessment projects every 1-3 years than every 4+ years, most responding schools of all types (63% of the total) tended to conduct assessment efforts every 1-3 years. About the only meaningful result that can be distilled from this comparison is that many SLACs are going a long time between assessments of their first-year courses.

The second hypothesis, that there might be a correlation between how frequently a program engages in an assessment effort and the presence of a formal WPA, was based on similar assumptions to the first: a formal WPA was, I suspected, probably trained in program assessment by graduate education, and, therefore, more likely to engage in assessment efforts. All 42 responding schools were considered for this analysis. Frequency of assessment was reduced again to Every 1-3 Years and Every 4+ years. Program direction was reduced to the two categories Formal WPA and All Other Configurations. There is a statistically-valid correlation in these findings, which reveal that 79% of formal WPA-led programs engage in assessment every 1-3 years, compared to just 48% of programs with other leadership types. These data suggest, then, that program leadership configuration does make a difference to the frequency of assessment, at least in the sample of these respondents.

This statistical analysis confirmed what, as it turned out, my raw responses already showed on their own. As noted previously, Formal WPA is the dominant configuration of program leadership in this sample. It is also the configuration that best aligns with more frequent

program assessment efforts, and by a significant margin. Of the fifteen institutions that assess their programs every year, nine have a formal WPA, as do six of the eleven institutions that assess every 2-3 years. Considering these two assessment frequencies, colleges and universities with FYW programs directed by a formal WPA account for one third of the institutions represented in this sample. The colleges/universities relying on the constellation of writing leadership categorized as Other, in contrast, show program assessments occurring across every frequency except every seven to ten years. Further, half of the Other programs (six of the thirteen) have either never been assessed (four) or conduct their assessments less often than every 10 years (two). These raw data confirm, then, that SLAC FYW programs directed by a formal WPA are more likely to engage in regular assessment efforts than those that rely on other leadership configurations.

Similarly grounded is the hypothesis that a program led by a formal WPA was more likely to engage in an assessment project out of a desire to learn what students are learning and how well they learn it than merely to answer administrative demands. Formal WPAs, again, seemed more likely to have formal education in program assessment theory. As discussed in chapter 1, the reason(s) writing programs carry out assessments are important, and genuine curiosity about teaching and learning seems a higher, better motivation than satisfying administrative mandates. Pursuing assessment for the sake of learning produces (or ought to produce) information useful to satisfying administrative mandates, as demonstrated by the examples of Inoue at California State University Fresno (“Self-Assessment as Programmatic Center”), Jon Leydens and Barbara Olds at Colorado School of Mines (“Complicating the Fail-or-Succeed Dichotomy in Writing Assessment Outcomes”), and Peckham at Louisiana State University (“Assessment and Curriculum in Dialogue”). Conversely, an assessment aimed only

at satisfying administrative/reaccreditation imperatives, at least in my experience, doesn't necessarily produce any information useful for improving teaching. As with the second hypothesis, program leadership models were reduced to Formal WPA and All Other Configurations. The reasons for initiating the most recent assessment project were reduced to Curiosity, Administrative Mandate, and Combination, thereby putting the respondent pool at 30; the category Other was omitted because although it is likely that the two schools that used that option were motivated by curiosity, as discussed previously, the answers were not clear enough to definitively establish curiosity as the project's driving force. SPSS's analysis did not find a statistically significant correlation between these variables. The results were interesting, however, from a purely descriptive standpoint: 28 of the 30 respondents stated that either administrative mandate (n=9) or a combination of curiosity and administrative mandate (n=19) motivated the assessment project. That distribution, split evenly across both program direction models considered, suggests that administrations played a significant role in initiating program assessments among responding schools.

My final hypothesis speculated that there is some sort of connection between motivation for assessment and frequency of assessment project. I believed that a program driven by interest in teaching and learning would conduct assessment efforts more often than those programs that were, in a sense, merely checking a box for administration. Using the reduced categories already established and a respondent pool of 30, statistical analysis found no meaningful correlation between these two variables. But there are still some interesting points to be seen in the variable comparison. First, this comparison confirms, in however limited a fashion, the findings of preceding analyses that most responding schools have conducted assessment projects within the last three years and that they did so for the combined motivation of curiosity about student

learning and administrative mandate. Second, no schools that have assessed their programs less frequently than every three years cite interest in learning as a motivation. While only two programs that conducted more frequent assessment cited curiosity as their sole motivation, and a longer interval between program evaluations doesn't necessarily indicate lack of interest in student learning, the absence of curiosity as an independent motivator among long-interval programs is interesting. Third, even among the 23 programs that have examined themselves more recently, 21 did so at least partially in response to a push from administration. Taken together, these numbers hint that there might be something to the idea that many of these programs don't evaluate themselves unless an external force pushes them to it.

In sum, then, my hypotheses were largely wrong. But they were wrong for interesting reasons, and nonetheless help point toward a few conclusions that the survey can reveal about first-year writing program assessment practices among the responding colleges.

Implications & Conclusions

In the end, a few points of the survey ended up being irrelevant: questions on the number of students each program serves per year, the number of FYW sections per semester, the number of faculty members in the department, the number of faculty who teach FYW, the status of FYW teachers, course enrollment caps, the time of year an assessment was performed, and the amount of time the assessment took to complete simply didn't yield answers that could be interpreted with any clarity or that illuminated any of the program assessment practices of responding colleges and universities.

Looking over my notes and scribbles from early stages of this investigation, I clearly came into the project expecting to find patterns that would predict what kinds of SLAC first-year

writing programs were most likely to follow the best practices in assessment, or that no programs were engaging in best practices for program assessment and that the whole idea of writing program assessment was effectively lost on SLACs, or, most optimistically, that there were entirely new protocols for program assessment out there that SLACs have been quietly following all along unnoticed by the main line of scholarship. This survey found none of that. Whether it's because I didn't ask the right questions, or asked the right questions the wrong way, because all of these schools are just muddling through as best they can on their own, or because my somewhat narrow experience with small schools kept me from considering the possibility that many SLACs are engaging in more frequent and better assessments than those I know, I can't say for sure. It's probably some mix of all. Still, there are three broad conclusions about the current state of first-year writing program assessment at responding SLACs that the results of this survey do allow:

1. FYW programs at these SLACs are shifting, particularly in their leadership configurations and in the sophistication with which they engage in program assessment.
2. Administrative pressures, mainly upper-level administration and possibly accreditors, often play a significant role in when and how these programs assess themselves.
3. Sometimes these programs adhere to published best practices, and sometimes they don't, often as a result of local constraints. But neither is there any consensus on alternative practices. Thus, SLAC FYW programs show mixed results in how well they follow program assessment best practices.

Shifting Programs & Perspectives

The changes to these programs are visible in several ways, starting with how these schools define their programs. While the traditional two-course freshman composition course still dominates in this sample by number of schools in a single category, it doesn't by much, and it doesn't at all when compared to the total number of other configurations. Since the composition model is the oldest form of first-year writing, pursuing any other model indicates change: at very least, the prevalence of single-course over double-course models shows some sort of movement. The variety of approaches to remediation also suggests shifting attitudes toward program construction. Where Gladstein and Regaignon found a prevalence of WAC programs among small colleges (7), the appearance of only three WAC programs in my sample means that either I found all the outliers in their survey or that small colleges may be moving in new directions.

Change is also evident in the number of faculty these programs claim to have who are formally trained in composition. My experience in nine years as a writing professor at a small college, including a formal investigation into several peer schools in 2013 as part of our own program assessment effort, led me to believe compositionists are fairly rare at liberal arts schools. Yet when 40 out of 42 respondents claim to have such faculty, either my experience was not representative of reality, or these institutions are over-reporting their numbers of composition-trained faculty, or something has shifted that has allowed more of these programs to hire such faculty.

My experience similarly clashed with the findings on average first-year writing course load. I have lived and have known most others in similar positions to live the cliché of the overworked professor carrying three or even four sections of freshman composition each

semester with maybe the gift of a single upper-level course on top. To find that faculty at 35 responding schools carry only one or two first-year writing courses must mean a powerful shift is afoot at small colleges.

More quantifiable is the contrast in program leadership between my respondents and Gladstein and Regaignon's findings. Yes, the differences are statistically limited and in some ways slight. Nonetheless, the apparent move toward formal WPAs and other dedicated administrators and away from writing center directors, informal WPAs, and others with divided duties suggests small colleges are taking their program leadership more seriously than they did as recently as 2009-2012.

Inference permits a few more points suggesting change in first-year writing program constructions. The presence of program mission statements, outcomes, and objectives also demonstrates evolution. More than half of responding schools have mission statements, and three-fourths have outcomes and objectives. I have not located any outside data to compare these numbers to. But it seems logical that programs would *add* these features over time rather than remove them. Examining how recently in the past these programs assessed themselves and when they plan to do so again reveals that an increasing number of these programs are evaluating themselves both regularly and with increasing frequency. Again, it seems more logical in light of White, Elliot, and Peckham's assertion that colleges and universities are in "a new era of assessment" (3) that the frequency of program assessments would accelerate rather than decelerate. The same logic applies to the formality of the most recent assessment project, which is more likely to become formal rather than informal over time. A similar trend can be inferred from the seven schools that evaluated their entire first-year writing program, the four that evaluated an entire course, and the seventeen that evaluated student learning outcomes. The

differences in foci suggest a movement from assessment of the general to assessment of the specific, a more logical progression over time than from the specific to the general. Evolution and change in program construction seem implicit on these points.

These changes have profound implications for program assessment at these schools. A change on any one of these points from one year to the next could completely alter how a college enacts its next assessment project. These evolutions likely explain the diversity in approaches to program assessment that preclude painting a single, clear picture of current practices. While many forces are likely behind these changes, the responses suggest one playing an especially powerful role: pressure from administrators.

Administrative Pressures

College administrators are always a factor in every college/university operation. That is, of course, their job. But there is some evidence among the responses that their influence is unusually powerful in the first-year writing program assessment practices at the survey's participating institutions. Upper level administrators do appear in the leadership configurations of some schools, but not commonly enough to explain what can be seen in the responses. Much like the black holes thought to power the movements of galaxies, they cannot be observed directly, yet their gravitational influence is hard to miss.

The first such manifestation is at the intersection of number of faculty with formal training in composition, what initiated the assessment project, and what theory/ies informed the project. As I observed at the end of reporting results on faculty with composition training, the high numbers of such faculty seem at odds with most schools initiating their assessments from an administrative mandate or a mix of mandate and curiosity (implying, as I noted, that this still

means that mandate has the majority influence) and the fourteen programs out of 31 that based their assessment projects on either “rubrics” as a current theory or on no theory at all. The expected outcome based on the number of composition-trained faculty reported is that more program reconsiderations would be based in curiosity about teaching and learning and on scholars and scholarship like those mentioned by 17 responding schools. The fact that fourteen schools do not show evidence of the expected influence of composition-trained faculty on motivation or theory suggests that either the number of compositionists is over-reported or that they are overruled in matters of programmatic review. Senior university administrators have the power necessary to overrule their faculty, and in my experience through two program reviews at my current job and one at my previous employer, they do not hesitate to do so when they are themselves under the gravitational effects of accreditors. Such overruling may also explain why fourteen of 31 respondents do not clearly identify any current research or theory that informed their assessment effort. If administrations signaled to the programs that they didn’t really care what the program evaluated as long as it did so quickly, they would have de-incentivized the assessors from engaging in careful preliminary research.

The discrepancy between the number of schools that have mission statements and the greater number that have objectives and outcomes also bears witness to the influence of senior college officials. As noted in that section of the results, it seems odd that these programs have things to measure—objectives and outcomes—but nothing to calibrate those measurements to, especially in light of the 40 programs that claim representation of composition-trained faculty in their ranks. Once again, my experience with program reviews thus far indicates to me that this is a sign of administrator and/or accreditor influence. From what I have observed, accreditors and administrators often seem to care more about whether programs have *something* they can

measure regardless of what it is or what the basis of that something is. Richard Haswell confirms as much in his “Fighting Number with Number” when he asserts (albeit a bit cynically) that in assessment scenarios, whoever counts first wins, regardless of what’s counted (416-423).

Objectives and outcomes sans-mission statements bear the signature mark of administrator influence: either they handed these to a program, or pressured the program to generate objectives and outcomes more quickly than the program might have preferred.

A final area that suggests administrator influence on assessment processes is in their frequency of recurrence. Twenty-six of 42 responding programs do report having previously assessed themselves within the past three years, and 23 of 31 expect to do so again within the next three years. It’s the remainders that are relevant to this point. There may be other reasons that sixteen of the 42 respondents in the first half of the survey had been assessed longer ago than three years or never at all, and that same variety of reasons could apply to the eight schools from the second half of the survey that expect to wait four years or more for their next round of self-evaluation. But it is curious that intervals of five to ten years correspond roughly to accreditation cycles, which can vary between five and ten years depending on the accrediting agency, the school type, and other factors. If that is the case for these long-interval institutions, it suggests that they are only assessing their first-year writing programs when their administrators make them do it, and these administrators, again, are most likely to force such a move when accreditation is on the line.

While much of this conclusion is conjectural and inferential, it does replicate Gladstein and Regaignon’s findings to some extent, even as it also disagrees with them. As exemplified by 72% of the respondents to their study, Gladstein and Regaignon found that program assessment at SLACs “is more often driven by re-accreditation” than it is at PCUs, at which “assessment is

often driven by government mandates and bolstered by hierarchical structures such as offices of assessment” (190). Our findings match on this point, important because of the statistical validity their study has. But later in the same section, Gladstein and Regaignon also assert that small colleges are more likely than PCUs to engage in direct assessment of student writing, and that such direct assessment “is clearly tied to teaching and learning, and therefore speaks to the small college structure of feeling” (190).¹⁰ In other words, SLACs are more likely to pursue program assessment efforts out of interest in student learning and improving teaching, though Gladstein and Regaignon also concede that small colleges that have never engaged in assessment before are more likely to associate it with accountability rather than teaching and learning (194). The latter is more consistent with what many of my respondents show. The issue of direct assessment aside (since I had trouble getting participants to answer that question clearly), the level of administrative influence apparently at work among my respondents points toward program assessment efforts that will primarily satisfy administrators and/or accreditors rather than inform decisions about teaching students.

No discussion of administrator influence or interference is to say that administrators are simply jaded box-checkers who are the enemies of writing programs. Some may be, but that’s beside the point. University administrators have many tasks to consider, not least of which is the big-picture health of the institution. Particularly at small schools, where there are fewer of them, they are more likely to wear more hats and to experience the pressure of outside influences more than their counterparts at PCUs. Perhaps more importantly, many do not have backgrounds in

¹⁰ “Structure of feeling” is Gladstein and Regaignon’s term for the “the central tendencies of this diverse and heterogeneous set of small schools” (7) and which encompasses everything from administrative structures to view of students to college configuration to educational approach and ultimately speaking to overall identity (14-22). Structure of feeling is also central to small colleges’ sense of uniqueness, as something different from PCUs and even from each other, an idea crucial to the next several chapters.

writing, and thus are not qualified to make decisions for writing programs about assessment efforts or anything else.

The combination of program shifts and administrator influence may be part of the reason that small liberal arts colleges are mixed on adherence to best practices in writing program assessment.

Mixed Results

Because of its intentional brevity, the General Survey only captured information on five of the ten essential components of program assessment projects explicitly discussed in chapter 1—mission statement, objectives and outcomes, people, assessment tool, and attitude toward assessment—but it did also reveal trends in two attendant issues implicit in chapter 1's discussion. The survey reveals mixed practices in dispositions across the respondent SLACs.

As far as explicit essential components, the last item on the list is also the first—how we feel about something often predicts how we will approach it, and assessing first-year writing programs is no different. In attitude toward assessment, pursuit of assessment projects because of interest in teaching and learning or because of accountability and institutional mandate will produce different results. As observed in chapter 1, WPAs should ideally tend to both, even as their prime concern should be with what their projects tell them about teaching and learning. In a purely numerical sense, most respondent SLACs are doing reasonably well on this point, with nineteen of 32 institutions indicating that both curiosity and administrative mandate motivated their most recent projects. Still, nine institutions report engaging in program evaluations only because their colleges' administrations forced them to, a concerning trend, more so in light of the other indications of administrative intrusion already discussed.

The news is less good on mission statements, with slightly less than half of respondents asserting that their program has one. Local concerns, of course, supersede all, so a case could be made that maybe these writing programs don't need mission statements to function. Perhaps they even function well without a mission statement. But it's still hard to dismiss the arguments made by so many in favor of program mission statements. Adding mission statements to the programs that lack them can hardly do more than improve them (though the process of creating one may be painful for the program, particularly the faculty, if the act of creating a statement forces programmatic change).

SLACs seem better positioned on objectives and outcomes, at least among these respondents. About 75% of them have both. This is encouraging, as programs cannot measure themselves without something to measure against. The presence of objectives and outcomes suggests most of these programs understand this point of program assessment best practices. But 25% of responding schools lack one or both, probably complicating whatever efforts they make toward program evaluation.

Writings on assessment tools reviewed in chapter 1 are focused on what means of data collection to use, even as they also imply discussion of what part of a writing program to examine and the need for both of those considerations to be theoretically informed. The General Survey collected information on all three. The question of the actual tool used was the murkiest, with only 14 of 31 respondents answering clearly. These use a mix of portfolios, single essays, student surveys, and focus groups, all perfectly valid tools for program evaluation on their face and no doubt informed by local constraints. For best practices, it's good news for these SLACs. We are left to wonder what's happening at the other 17 programs, however, and that is not good news. Twenty-nine of the 31 evaluated a specific aspect of their programs, ranging from single

student outcomes all the way out to the entire program. This is again, a positive sign for SLACs with regard to best practices. And while the evaluation of an entire program in a single project might seem daunting to a PCU WPA, it's a move that makes sense at a SLAC if the program has never been evaluated; further, Gladstein and Regaignon point out that "[t]he scale of these institutions... makes it easier for them to implement assessments that would result in overwhelming amounts of data at larger schools" (190). Seventeen institutions demonstrate explicit engagement with current best practices theories, while fourteen do not. Maybe those fourteen don't have to. If localism is truly the key to effective program assessment, then perhaps it's enough for these programs to understand themselves deeply. Why wouldn't they want to take advantage, though, of available knowledge and thought that might save them time and money? Do they not know what's available? Do they not care? Do they just not need it? The division between colleges that do and do not take advantage of published research and theory seems to beg for some explanation.

The question of people as an essential element of program assessment is probably the point on which SLACs are most in line with best practices. The variety of responses, maddening though it was for any effort at neat classification, reflects institutions working within their local contexts and choosing program participants based on the needs of those contexts. Assessment scholars could hardly ask them to do better.

Formality of assessment effort and regularity of program assessment are implicit issues woven throughout the explicit components discussed in chapter 1, and on both, respondent SLACs are performing reasonably in line with best practices. Half of the respondents had completely formal projects in their most recent program reviews; as discussed previously, there is some indication of a move toward greater formality. While a formal assessment is not an

essential requirement of evaluation projects, and Gladstein and Regaignon insist throughout their work that SLACs often accomplish many tasks effectively though informally because of the proximity between administrators and faculty, a formal assessment project is still potentially beneficial because it is more easily replicable thanks to the better records it produces. If there is movement toward greater formality, it may be a result of small colleges beginning to see the benefits of doing so. The idea of regularity in assessment efforts is also central to most discussions reviewed in chapter 1, yet it is never defined. Repeating projects on a regular schedule seems more important than the frequency, even as the argument for regularity is hard to make in this context when program evaluations are four to six years apart. That said, with most programs re-evaluating themselves every two to three years or even every year, those in charge seem to have discovered that shorter intervals between assessment projects can make their lives easier, if for no other reason than a shorter span makes it easier to remember where they stored the files from last time.

One final point: though the General Survey did not ask about the financial issues surrounding program assessment, two respondents did volunteer information about paying participants. It's not enough of a sample to draw any conclusions from and there are plenty of legitimate reasons no other respondents addressed the topic, but the comments from these two do reinforce the idea money is always a consideration in program assessment. SLACs would do well to think about paying their project participants, especially if many of them already carry high teaching loads or have extra responsibilities.

Limitations

As with all studies of this type, there are a number of limitations to the survey's findings, as well as a few methodological issues I would not repeat were I to administer this survey again. The most significant limitations are sample size and type. The sample size is too small for any statistically meaningful generalization to the full population of SLACs, even as the number of respondents represents a fairly large proportion of the total number of SLACs.¹¹ Put another way, in 20 years I will be able to tell from the snapshot what my five friends in the kitchen wore to my graduation party, but not how well what they wore conformed to what the other ten people at the party were wearing. Closely related to this point, the smaller the sample size, the greater the chances of analytical error become as more and more questions are asked of the sample. This means that the number of statistically-valid cross-referential questions that I could ask of my survey data was limited. The type of sample I collected is also a limiting factor. True statistical significance can only result from a random sample of a given population. Because the survey contains answers exclusively from programs that voluntarily replied to my direct solicitation, the sample qualifies only as a convenience sample, useful in its own way but too weak statistically for generalization to the full population of SLACs.

A third limitation is that I assumed too much similarity among SLACs in constructing the survey. I believed that because there is such a thing as a SLAC, there were many more features in common across them than it seems there are, particularly in first-year writing programs, and I did this despite Gladstein and Regagnion's caution on small colleges' "strong sense of exceptionality" (22). *SLAC* is much like the term *Hispanic*: though there are colleges and

¹¹ I am indebted and grateful to my institutional colleague Dr. Usenime Akpanudo for his assistance with processing and understanding the survey data, as well as for his gracious explanations of statistical theory and limitations used throughout this chapter. Any wisdom or insight derived from the statistical analysis is thanks to him, and any errors are strictly mine.

universities with small campuses and small student bodies that follow a model of education that emphasizes the liberal arts, just as there are people in United States whose ancestors came to Central and South America from Spain, the term as a category was given by someone outside the group and either assumes or suggests similarities that may not exist. My assumption led me to ask survey questions in ways that confused some respondents and prevented others from participating, something I learned through comments made in the answers to the open-response questions and in emails I received. Similarly, I assumed that many terms used in my questions had common, well-understood meanings, when, in fact, they had broader meanings and interpretations, and sometimes no clear meanings of any kind. This assumption also led to confused and confusing responses. These difficulties were most notable in the questions on how the department defines its “FYC program,” on FYC faculty status, and in the question on the number of faculty who had formal training in composition.^{12 13 14} No survey design is perfect, of course. Were I to do this over again, I would be much more careful and thoughtful in writing the survey questions.

¹² The term *first-year composition* clearly led many respondents to mistakenly believe that the survey was strictly interested in composition programs rather than first-year writing programs broadly-defined. The confusion was evident in the responses and in ten email queries on whether or not to participate, two of which advised me to change the wording of the question. Even had a change been possible, the broader terms *first-year writing* and *freshman writing* would still have proven problematic because they exclude writing-intensive first-year seminars, and though the seminar approach still fits the broad construction of writing instruction at the beginning of students’ collegiate educations I set out to examine, many academics perceive them as distinct course models. Perhaps the best way to have worded the question might have been “Does your school have any mandatory sequence of writing courses primarily intended for freshmen? If so, what courses are included?”

¹³ The question on faculty status needed better wording, and might have provided better data if it had been broken into two or three separate questions.

¹⁴ The question on faculty with formal training in composition needed more specific wording on exactly what I was looking for.

Going Deeper

The General Survey thus gives us this picture of the current status of program assessment practices at small liberal arts colleges, or at least among these responding institutions. The wide view is necessary to establish a baseline context. A closer inspection of that broad context, however, can show more of what is happening and may explain some of the discrepancies observed. The next three chapters will do just that through interviews with WPAs at three widely differing SLACs.

Chapter 3: Worthman University

The interviews presented in this chapter and the two that follow examine the findings of the General Survey in greater depth. Presented in the order they were interviewed, the first is Worthman University.

Institution

Worthman is a private, residential, liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest. Founded in the 1890s, it has been in its current location since the 1910s. It retains its affiliation with a mainline protestant denomination but is not sectarian. Coeducational from the beginning, Worthman changed from college to university in the late 2000s. The university is home to around 3,000 students. Roughly 500 of these are graduate students in one of Worthman's nine master's or certificate/certification/endorsement areas, while the rest are undergraduates in its 60 or so majors; a CCIHE-classified "Master's Colleges & Universities: Small Programs," it offers no PhD programs. Worthman claims a student population from 26 states and 42 countries; 26% of students are from "domestic underrepresented racial/ethnic [groups]." Per the institution's website, source of all general information, the average SAT score of the class of 2021 is 1280, and their average high school GPA is 3.72. Students enjoy a 12:1 student-faculty ratio.

Writing Program

The University Writing Program is an academic subunit housed within the English Department comprising one first-year level writing course and one junior- or senior-level writing course within each major. All students are required to complete both requirements at Worthman, though two to three percent of Worthman's students somehow earn their FYW credit elsewhere.

The program traces its origins to a WAC approach that began thirty to thirty-five years ago, but it began shifting to a Writing in the Disciplines approach in the mid-2010s as a result of programmatic review discussed following.

Personnel

Will Dell directs the writing program. A graduate of a well-regarded PhD program in Composition Studies, he came to Worthman in 2012 after stints at another SLAC, then at an upper-tier PCU. He works closely with Clementine Sanchez, director of the Composition Commons, a separate academic subunit within the English Department comprising a writing center and facilities that assist students with speeches, short videos, podcasts, and other creative project modalities. Sanchez is also a PhD in Composition Studies, and she and Dell work in what he describes as a productive partnership. They are the only members of the English Dept. with formal education in Composition and have done their best to maximize their relationship and use. They have attempted to integrate the Composition Commons into the writing program as much as possible (such as in the creation of a writing fellows program in which consultants are assigned to specific instructors and provide their students with extra help), even as they also have tried to keep the positions distinct to leverage the most sway on campus by maintaining a two-pronged approach. Dell gets one reassigned course per semester for his work as director, Sanchez gets two. Both are nine-month positions paid over twelve months.

First-Year Writing Program

The present iteration of Worthman's first-year writing program is best characterized by its somewhat nebulous origin and its entanglement in program assessment. Three courses satisfy

the first-year writing course requirement: EL 110, EL 210, and a journalism/mass communication course. Students are only required to complete one of these courses. There is no remedial or support course offering; about once a year there is, however, an ELL course offered for the handful of students who arrive with low levels of English, though Dell led me to believe that the course might be optional. Dell did not know the exact date the program originated but thought it was sometime in the 1980s. He did know that at one point the first-year writing program required two courses as well as a remedial course. The decision to cut the requirement to a single course was largely a combination of a PR move to attract students and of a consultation with an outside expert (possibly Barbara Walvoord—Dell wasn't sure); the remedial course was cut because of student cost savings. Dell is the first compositionist to serve as WPA. Prior to him, there was one comp./rhet. person who ran the writing center, while the WPA position was managed by a medievalist. A second compositionist was hired before Dell but only stayed for one year and left the year before Dell was hired. The writing center director left at the same time. Dell and Sanchez were hired simultaneously to fill those two vacancies.

The journalism/mass comm. course that satisfies the FYW requirement was added as an option before Dell's arrival chiefly to attract journalism majors. Only 30 or so students take it each semester, and it is not administered by Dell's program, so it is not considered in any of the discussion that follows.

Student Placement

EL 110 Writing & Design is taken by 75-85% of students. In its current iteration, the course emphasizes "research skills, information literacy, and rhetorical awareness." The course has a shared curriculum with themes that vary by instructor. Required assignments include a

rhetorical analysis; a makers project; a classic research-based argument assignment of 10-15 pages focused on information literacy and research skills; and a digital rhetoric project that converts the research-based project into infographics, websites, or some sort of podcast/video.¹ Dell set about renovating the course through an assessment project on his arrival at Worthman in July 2012, and the current iteration of 110 as “Writing and Design” is the result of that assessment. That assessment project is the subject of the next section.

Worthman does not accept AP credit to satisfy the first-year writing requirement. Instead, it offers EL 210 for students who earned AP credit and grants them a generic three-hour credit toward graduation. Like 110, course sections share a common curriculum across sections that vary thematically by instructor. The course catchphrase is “critical, digital, professional,” and pursuant to that catchphrase the course requires students to complete a research-based argument, a digital design assignment, and some sort of professional assignment (e.g. whitepaper for a nonprofit, designing event posters, marketing document). The course places greater emphasis on different ways of composing in different modalities, amplifying and intensifying the work done in 110. Dell is currently examining EL 210 in light of the assessment work done on 110.

Students place themselves into one of the courses, and not necessarily at the beginning of their academic careers. Worthman dislikes putting boundaries on anything, so students are not forced to complete 110/210 early in their academic careers, to Dell’s frustration. He would very much like to see students forced into taking the course in their first two semesters. The result of this institutional aversion is that students on scientific tracks, especially pre-med students, often take the course as juniors and seniors, and their evaluations of the course invariably skew lower, leading to misrepresentation of course effectiveness in assessment. A second frustration for Dell

¹ As Dell explained, in the makers project “students take something from the rhetorical analysis and change the modality,” e.g. a website becomes a brochure or a podcast.

is that the numbering of the courses suggests a sequence, leading some students to take an extra FYW course they do not need. The problem is particularly pronounced among pre-med majors, who are encouraged to take a second writing class to aid their application to med school: many of them take 210 after taking 110 instead of an upper-level writing course in their disciplines that might actually help them. Dell is working to differentiate the courses to make them no longer seem sequential and toward developing a writing in the sciences course to better aid the pre-med majors.

Faculty Load and Support

Worthman's FYW program serves 550-600 freshmen per year according to Dell, 80-85% of them taking 110/210 and the remainder taking the journalism course.² The English Department all told teaches around 45 courses per term, approximately 20 of which are sections of 110/210, with slightly more sections of 110/210 offered in fall than spring. Sections of EL 110 are capped at 18 students; sections of 210 at 15. All twelve current tenured department faculty teach FYW, along with five lecturers (fulltime non-tenure-track faculty who receive benefits) and two to three adjunct faculty.³ Fulltime faculty are assigned 3-1-3 loads (Fall, a three-week January term, Spring), of which one to two courses per year are 110/210. Lecturers teach five 110s per year, though Dell does his best to keep their course distribution to fewer than three per semester, because, in his words, "being humane is important." No writing courses are taught in

² Dell provided all figures orally in our interview mostly from memory, so there may be some slight inconsistencies here and there.

³ Dell explained that Worthman makes it an institutional priority to give all adjunct faculty who want them the courses they need to earn fulltime lecturer status, a priority he shares. The adjuncts the writing program does use largely want only to be adjuncts.

the January term because of the term's length, and Dell has fought to keep from offering writing courses then.

Dell supports FYW program faculty through a yearly day-long retreat before classes start in the fall; monthly writing faculty meetings geared around what assignments are scheduled at the moment and to discuss a common article/professional issue in the field; a monthly stand-up for "recipe sharing" among writing faculty with coffee and donuts; and semester-end three-hour meetings to conduct assessment, the latter an innovation that began Spring 2018 and explained in full following. Dell and Sanchez offer workshops once or twice a year for all those who teach writing-intensive courses. Dell and Sanchez also engage in some professional development through the writing center. All of these activities are intended to maintain a consistent faculty development program. Though the mid-semester activities get mixed reviews, faculty do take the fall retreat seriously. Dell is limited in what he can do for faculty development by a total University Writing Program budget of \$1,100 per year. He makes it work as best he can, but money has been a challenging point for his assessment and professional development efforts.

Mission, Objectives, and Outcomes

Dell asserts that the writing program does have a mission statement, though he did not communicate what it is. The mission statement, as he reports it, is drawn from guidance from professional organizations such as WPA and NCTE, and ties to Worthman's institutional mission statement. The English Department may or may not have a mission statement, and if it does, Dell is confident that it is fairly broad; the point matters because for an academic unit embedded in another academic unit, such as Worthman's University Writing Program within the English Department, the mission statement of the smaller unit should align itself to some degree with that

of the larger. The program mission statement is communicated to program faculty at the fall retreat and redistributed prior to assessments. There is also an effort to get the mission statement made into posters and “tech start-up-y” approaches, as Dell puts it, a nod to Worthman’s location within the spheres of influence of several tech hubs in the region. Dell is attempting to create an environment in which students and faculty see themselves as part of a program that has a mission and share a sense of collaboration to reach it. It is becoming clear to Dell that a mission statement written well can become a rallying point for all involved in the program, and is, thus, a useful tool for attaining the program’s goals.

Objectives and outcomes are likewise present though not communicated to me, and also derived almost completely from national organizations, with the limitation that Worthman has a single course. These objectives are all posted on course syllabi. Faculty are reminded of objectives and outcomes at the annual retreat, at monthly meetings, and through interacting with them as a regular part of their classes. Dell also produces an annual unsolicited report to the department chair and dean, thereby communicating objectives and outcomes to those stakeholders. Creating a sense of professionalism in the program by communicating these objectives and outcomes has been of central importance to Dell as he has rebuilt Worthman’s writing program.

Challenges

Like all programs and WPAs, Dell and his program face some obstacles in the operation of the program and in the assessment, many resulting from some of the quirks of Worthman’s culture and particularly as concerns the reception of assessment results. As already noted, student placement is a sore spot for Dell because of the number of students who postpone taking EL 110

or 210 until late in their academic careers, and because of the students who mistakenly take 210 after taking 110 because of misperceiving a sequence that doesn't exist. As will be shown in the next section, Worthman's placement procedure is also problematic because it fails to consider developing writers and students whose first language is not English, something Dell did not think about when first describing the program. The writing program's budget is also a point of concern for Dell, and this limitation posed challenges to his assessment efforts, a point to be explored following. Lastly, Dell continues to encounter what he described as strange reactions to the notions of program assessment and results reporting related to Worthman's structure of feeling, also explained below. It should be noted, however, that the limitations Dell and his program face are trivial compared to those confronting the programs at Armstrong and Wellington universities.

Most Recent Assessment: EL 110, Spring 2013-Spring 2017

The timing of my interview with Dell coincided with an interesting moment for him and for Worthman. Dell had completed a full, multi-year assessment of EL 110 in the summer of 2017 and immediately begun a pilot assessment of EL 210 in August of the same year based on what he had learned in the effort with 110. The focus of our conversation was ultimately the EL 110 assessment, but the temporal and theoretical proximity of the two assessments meant that often our conversation held one eye on the past assessment and the other on the EL 210 pilot.

Worthman's FYW program is not known to have been assessed prior to Dell's arrival in 2012, primarily because of lacking a person trained in composition to serve as WPA and a generally laid-back approach from the university's accrediting agency—Dell recalled that the closest thing to any sort of program assessment he found from his predecessor was a single paragraph that said something to the effect of “We discussed changing course themes.” Thus, Dell made it a priority to begin assessing the program right away, and has incorporated ongoing

assessment ever since. He set out to make changes to update the program as early as his interview, gathering information and doing preliminary research during his campus visit. Once hired, he implemented changes and immediately set out assessing them. “The best strategy for [updating the program],” he noted, “[was] going to be to demonstrate some agility and say we can make changes quickly.” He continued, “We’re small, there’s not a lot it would take. So let’s make those changes and then use assessment for what assessment is for, right, it’s formative, it should tell us something about our teaching. It wasn’t to, like, cross our *Ts* and dot our *Is* here. It was really part of a leadership strategy to encourage folks to try and do some new things.” He had significant latitude to develop new material and protocols because although the administration had asked Dell to “put together some assessment stuff,” as he phrased it, his predecessors had left him little to work with or from. Assessment was important from the beginning because of that empty space, and that empty space allowed program reshaping. It was also important to start fresh because, as Dell put it, he knew what he would find if he had started by assessing what had been done prior to his arrival. The request for “some assessment stuff” aside, Dell faced a fair amount of ambivalence from his departmental and institutional superiors that both aided and hampered his efforts, a factor he continues to contend with.

Starting in the fall of 2012, Dell and his colleagues engaged in a direct assessment of the student research-based argument examined through a rubric that examined the three traits of quality of argument, quality of research integration, and grammar/other communicative features. This assignment included a student reflective letter, a modified form of Phase 2 assessment, which allowed Dell and the program faculty to assess student understanding in more nuanced ways.⁴ The assessment design was modeled from documents that were part of the well-developed

⁴ An additional component of assessment was a student survey on their knowledge of the program’s learning outcomes, though Dell did not discuss this measure beyond mentioning it.

assessment protocol at Dell's first job at another SLAC and from statements from NCTE, CCCC, WPA, and professional organizations on first-year writing program student learning outcomes; the idea for the program sequence redesign was taken from his second job at a PCU. Though using a modified form of Phase 2 assessment, Dell decided against using portfolios in favor of a single essay because the workload demanded by portfolios was too high to suit Worthman's local needs. The assessment rubric was based heavily on the AACU Values rubrics and work by Huot, particularly on evaluating local conditions.

Collaboration is theoretically significant to Dell, so he produced the initial rubrics and other documents needed for the assessment in the fall of 2012, then workshopped them with faculty in calibration sessions over the semester to determine overall best solutions, gain buy-in, and create inter-reader reliability. He and writing faculty tested the assessment in December of 2012, ultimately applying the assessment to the full run of EL 110 courses every semester from Spring 2013 through Spring 2017. In executing the assessment procedure, faculty read *all* of their own students' work, another theoretical adjustment to best practices based on local context that generated hundreds of evaluated papers over the three-year run of the assessment project. Individual faculty chose whether to assess on paper or electronically. All paper evaluation forms were scanned as PDFs for archiving, then shredded. Assessment materials were collected and stored as password-protected digital files on a university server as evidence to accreditors that the program had the information while protecting students' FERPA rights. The digital files were accessible to Dell and the program assistant; access was shared as needed with Worthman's accreditation liaison officer and other qualified administrators.

In a one-course FYW program, Dell explained, the single course has to do a lot of heavy lifting, so part of the assessment was to show that the course was capable of doing a lot for the

students and the school. The assessment demonstrated that the program was effective at preparing the majority of students to be successful college writers, with about 80% of students meeting the rubric's criteria for "ready for success in college writing," and about 75% satisfying the information literacy competence, good numbers overall. But given the small university and the relatively small sample size, even considering the hundreds of papers generated over the three years of the full assessment project, a discrepancy of 5-6% between scores was statistically significant and concerned Dell. It seemed to Dell and his colleagues that students were not self-identifying their comfort level with various digital modes, or at least were not reflecting in their work an understanding of digital composition or of different modes. It also found the need for more work in building media literacy. The study further raised the question of how much more preparation might be possible if students were required to complete a second course. While Dell and his team generally anticipated the deficiencies the assessment found, they were surprised by how deep the deficiencies were. The level of deficiency in media literacy was particularly frustrating to Dell because he had invested considerable effort in improving information use and literacy but had also encountered resistance from the library staff, who did not want to alter their instruction methods.

The primary actors in the assessment project were, of course, Dell, Sanchez, and writing program faculty. But Dell ultimately involved his dean and Worthman's accreditation liaison officer, chiefly to keep them informed of his progress and as a source of funding. The assessment project did not require any sort of negotiation with administration over what to do, how to do it, or whom to involve because of their relative lack of concern for the effort. Dell did as he wished and administration accepted it. Dell did have to go to the provost and assessment liaison officer to push for additional funds for the assessment effort because the writing program's tiny budget

was inadequate to the scale of the assessment project Dell pursued. Funding was particularly important for lecturers because they were not required to work during, nor were they paid for, the week to week-and-a-half leading up to the beginning of fall classes, when the summer training sessions for the fall assessments took place. Dell pursued \$100-per-faculty stipend funding out of ethical integrity, knowing that it was unethical to ask lecturers to do the assessment work during time they were not paid for. He was ultimately granted \$1,800-\$2,400 per summer every other summer for stipends and resources for the norming sessions. To make the case for funding, Dell framed his argument in terms of the extra nature of the work faculty did for the assessment project being a fairly cost-effective approach for the university, especially in light of the service the assessment project ultimately provided to the university's accreditation argument. Dell also managed to fund lunch for assessment participants in the end-of-term project from within the writing program's budget by canceling the final two monthly meetings and redirecting those funds. Otherwise, the assessment project did not change the costs associated with operating the writing program, though it did give the arguments to show that the program needed more funding. The assessment project overall gave the data to show that Dell and his colleagues were delivering well a contemporary writing program that faculty and students took seriously, but it also showed that doing so requires some resources. Dell keeps asking for \$2,500 per year for the writing program; so far he hasn't gotten it.

The weakest point in the assessment project, by Dell's own admission, was accounting for students from minorities and who have special needs, including ESL students. Dell did not address in our conversation the 26% of the student body that Worthman claims are from domestic minority groups. All students whose first language is not English are placed into 110 regardless of ability. Dell's assumptions were that the assessment accounted for all students in

110, and that all students in 110, including all internationals, had the capacity to pass the course. Hearing himself state those assumptions out loud during our interview, however, Dell was immediately unhappy with his answer, even as he also acknowledged that Worthman does not have the resources to handle differently from the general population any students who have special needs. Some conversations had started about revisiting the decision to eliminate the remedial writing course, but these had not developed further at the time of our interview. Offering an ELL course for international students is also challenging because Worthman's claims about its international representation are often based on a single student from a country; thus, there are too few students to justify an ELL 110 class, and too few students from any one language/culture to be effective. As it is, the question of how to account for students with diverse needs in the program assessment remains unanswered for Dell and Worthman.

The EL 110 study led to changes in three aspects of Worthman's first-year writing program. First, a new curriculum with greater emphasis on digital design was implemented in the 2017-2018 school year. One specific alteration was that an assignment was removed to create more space in the curriculum for that emphasis. Another was the implementation of design language to inform how the program discusses student work, especially because of Worthman's location near major computer technology hubs. Most lecturers have MAs in literature, so the change has been a bit challenging for them, even as it has also led them to see the program as more beneficial to the students and their futures. Writing instructors have asked for more tech-oriented faculty development on digital tools in monthly meetings because they want to understand those technologies and modalities better. The assessment has created, further, a growing sense of a professional staff in a formal program who work together toward a common goal: they are a unit, not just people who teach the same subject at the same place. According to

Dell, the idea of a program that shares a mission seems novel at SLACs, especially because of their prioritizing of the autonomy of individual faculty members. Dell is proudest of this change. He has, in essence, invented a writing program.

The second aspect is in the relationship between Worthman's writing program and the broader institution. Dell produced a report for the accreditation committee and his dean. The report, of course, led to the curricular changes to EL 110, but it was also rhetorically important for situating the writing program within Worthman and for the role the report played for the institution. Most immediately, the report was Dell's way of saying "English doesn't own the writing program—writing is something that belongs to all of our students," thereby promoting a reason for the entire university to care about what happens in it. This particular point echoes Gladstein and Regaignon's assertion that programmatic assessment can "be a way for a WPA (and an institution) to own embedded sites of writing" (189). The rhetorical value of the report was enhanced for the accreditation-related service it provided Worthman: Prior to Dell's arrival, Worthman's accrediting body had dinged the school on its assessment practices. The most recent university accreditation visit, however, was heavily swayed by the extensive program revision Dell implemented and the formality of its execution.

Third, the EL 110 assessment led to the creation of the new EL 210 assessment project piloted in the Spring 2018 semester and scheduled to be rolled out in full in Fall 2018. The findings on digital modes and media literacy, in particular, drove the creation of a new five-trait rubric. A second driving force was accreditors asking whether Dell and his colleagues believed that only 80% of their students were capable of writing well enough for university classes. The obvious answer to Dell was of course not, but it still pushed him and his colleagues to consider what they were evaluating and how. In the new iteration of assessment, the research-based

argument and reflection is collected and examined via the new rubric. Another key difference between the projects is that Dell consulted with a colleague in the sociology department to determine a statistically-significant number of papers to read, now 20-30 instead of hundreds. The reduction was possible because of the previous years of exhaustive work which established necessary baselines. The 20-30 papers will be read as a group in a single three-hour session, each paper getting two readers with a third reader in case of significant difference in score.

Dell acted according to his doctoral training by engaging in a high degree of formality in his construction of the assessment and the report, which in turn created a climate of good will that has set him up for subsequent success in directing his program and conducting ongoing assessment. His experience has also given him valuable insights about assessment practices at SLACs.

Implications and Connections

Worthman's story and Dell's comments and observation have much to say about the three broad conclusions about the current state of first-year writing program assessment at the SLACs that responded to the General Survey.

Shifting Programs & Perspectives

Worthman confirms the idea that FYW programs at these SLACs are shifting, starting with the facts that (1) it hired two compositionists at the same time in Dell and Sanchez to direct the most writing-intensive portions of its educational programs, and (2) that they were the third and fourth such hires. Worthman seems to have recognized in some ways the value of hiring faculty with particular training. Dell was hired as the WPA to replace the medievalist who held

the job previously, suggesting a specific evolution in Worthman's view on writing program leadership. The leeway university administration allowed Dell in constructing a contemporary, sophisticated program review and in reconstructing the program also suggests evolution, even if that leeway is a sort of accidental byproduct of what Dell characterized as administrators' initial indifference to what he was doing.

Change inevitably involves tension, and there is plenty of it in Dell's context at Worthman. Despite his title, academic credentials, and experience—traits for which he was ostensibly hired—Dell has no inherent institutional authority: that is, he does not feel the university's administration trusts his judgment on the direction for the writing program just because of those traits. Everything he does with the program he has to do by persuasion, as illustrated in the narrative of Dell's most recent experiences, and in particular by his thus-far unsuccessful attempts to secure better funding for the program despite significant, demonstrable added value to the university. In my former career as a TV news producer some twenty years ago, I once came across an article describing the producer's role as having all of the responsibility for putting a show together and none of the authority necessary to make it happen. Dell seems to be in a similar position, and such an arrangement would explain the apparent disconnect the General Survey identified between the number of trained compositionists working at SLACs, first-year writing program leadership configurations, and the motivations for assessment projects.

Administrative Pressures

The tensions that arrive from program change are closely tied to the administrative pressures that seem to play a significant role in when and how SLAC FYW programs assess

themselves, and Dell was perhaps most insightful on what drives those administrative pressures. In Worthman's case, however, administrative pressures came to bear on how to understand and what to do with assessment results rather than on the assessment itself. What these pressures seem to come down to is a difference of opinion on the functions and value of programmatic assessment.

Dell clearly sees programmatic assessment as being, in his word, "formative," about identifying the strengths and weaknesses in a teaching program and then making changes to enhance the strengths and correct the weaknesses for the sake of the students the program serves. It was these interests that motivated Dell to start taking notes on the program as early as his interview. His superiors, however, initially approached him seeking an assessment because of the negative feedback they had received during Worthman's most recent accreditation. Beyond addressing that accreditor feedback, administrators' and accreditors' greatest concern seemed to be whether the assessment confirmed what they already believed about Worthman's students.

Dell learned this during the accreditation visit in the spring of 2018, his first ever. In reviewing his finding that 80% of EL 110 students were "ready for success in college writing," the accreditation site visitors asked Dell if he really believed that only 80% of Worthman's students were ready to produce college-level writing. He received similar feedback from Worthman's administrators, who asked him questions along the lines of "Do you think only 80% of our students are doing well in this one class?". These questions, of course, are about students, which Dell did not evaluate, and not the program, which he did. Dell saw this reaction as grounded in expectations derived from Worthman's student demographics and Worthman as a liberal arts college. Worthman's administrators and the accreditation visitors, who were drawn from Worthman's peer institutions, both seemed to assume that because most of Worthman's

student body is white, middle-class, and Protestant—a demographic group that historically has valued education, or at least educational achievement—the number of students reaching the target competence level in Dell’s assessment would be higher. Closely related were the accreditors’ and administrators’ assumptions about Worthman having better students than most other institutions because Worthman is a liberal arts college. Both groups seemed to believe that Worthman attracted better students because of their assumption that liberal arts colleges, or at least this particular liberal arts college, was more selective in admissions than the “average” college or university. Dell differentiated his approach to the assessment project from the way the accreditors and administrators approached it in this way: “I think people that look at the [assessment] material... are way less concerned with ‘What does this tell us about our writing program?’ and way more concerned about ‘What does this tell us about our assumptions regarding our students?’” What those outside the assessment project most seemed to want was confirmation of their beliefs that Worthman’s students are among the best in the country.

This belief is not a matter of institutional vanity, at least not vanity as typically construed. Gladstein and Regaignon discuss at length in ch. 1 the “small liberal arts college structure of feeling,” by which they mean that SLACs tend to have special visions of themselves as something other, something apart from other institutions of higher learning, because of their size, student selectiveness, and/or commitment to some greater mission. Gladstein and Regaignon summarize their findings and argument at the end of the chapter: “Many of our survey respondents insisted on their programs’ and schools’ difference from the norm, and this perception can lead to a strong sense of exceptionality—a sense that may well contribute to the elision of small schools from some of the national conversations about higher education” (22). Without meaning to be flippant, what this looks like in practice, at least in my experience, is to

imagine the most rabid college football fans, then turn down their volume, put them in business attire, and make them the president, vice-presidents, provost, and possibly the board members and a few deans and faculty of a university. There is an intensity of commitment to a specific vision of a university at SLACs, particularly among the highest governing members, that is rarely seen at other types of colleges and universities. This “structure of feeling” has two pragmatic implications for considering the results of programmatic review that small college leaders cannot ignore, in one instance, and have trouble seeing past, in another.

Dell asserts SLACs tend to be more tuition-driven than PCUs. Every move has to be calculated to bring in more dollars, and every dollar spent has to count. In those calculations, SLAC administrators are perhaps more bound to consider their schools’ reputations—in the excellence of their students, say—than their PCU counterparts. Because of this, program assessment and in particular results reporting is a difficult game for Dell. He wants to make public those places where the program is not effective so that they can be addressed, even as that move is politically fraught. He summarized some of the reactions he got as “How are you guys so bad at this (i.e. conducting a program that does not yield perfect results)?”. Delivering the good news is rhetorically difficult because unless the results of an assessment show that every student is performing perfectly and the program needs no changes, every bit of “bad” news requires acknowledging a situation the school may not have the money to address. Dell’s take merits quoting at length:

There’s just always this extra layer of “What are we going to do with this [assessment results]?” It’s not you do an assessment and you say “Wow, we have this problem. We’re going to have to resource this better so that we can help our students.” It would be “Hmmm. Well, we don’t have money for this, so we’re just not going to talk about this

for a while. So you just keep doing what you're doing and then see if you can whatever." But it's not as sexy as recruiting international students or working on diversity issues.... The other problem at smaller schools is that, like Gladstein and Regaignon say, people really appreciate faculty-driven initiatives and autonomy. What that really means is, while my friends in Political Science and Sociology might be sympathetic if I say "Look, we need to have another writing course because we have underrepresented students and they need more opportunities to think about themselves as writers and to develop, and that's really important at a liberal arts college," they might completely agree with that sentiment. But another writing course, does that take away from their department? Does that hurt them? So there's this kind of strange thing that happens where the argument in trying to create those constituencies of folks that share the same values, [when] that happens and it's wonderful and it creates really good conversations, but when the rubber meets the road, it's hard to make those kinds of changes because we're always tuition-driven, so we're always trying to make sure "Do we have enough classes in our departments so our faculty have jobs?"

The tuition dependence created by the small college structure of feeling contributes to financial pressures that SLAC administrators must factor into every conversation about assessment, particularly when those conversations require significant programmatic adjustment.

But even when they can afford a change, sometimes SLACs might be hesitant to do so because their structure of feeling creates a sort of philosophical/pedagogical blinders for administrators and others. In essence, sometimes SLACs are so convinced of their own specialness or difference that the notion of comparing themselves to any other school simply does not compute. Dell provided two examples from his experience at Worthman. In his first or

second year at the school, early in his EL 110 assessment efforts, he approached his superiors with the idea of having some of his friends from graduate school come to review the entire writing program, pitching it as especially beneficial for Worthman because the program could gain significant outside perspective for little cost. He characterized the response he received as “Eh. You could, if they want to come for free, but why do we need that?” Dell encountered a similar attitude several years later during the accreditation visit that concluded shortly before our interview. He had several side conversations with colleagues while the accreditors were still on campus that went along the lines of “Well, they just don’t know who we are. We do our own special things. So why do we care what other places are doing?” Dell described his own response to both of those incidents as “Wow, that is an *odd* view to have.” Dell cited Huot and his directive that assessment should proceed from local conditions several times in our conversation, so he clearly believes in the wisdom of Huot’s perspective. At the same time, and as demonstrated by his construction of the EL 110 project, Dell informs his work with statements from “AACU, NCTE, all these national places.” But he finds that he has to make more adaptations for the local context than he anticipated he would “because no one cares about those things”, i.e. scholarship drawn from other schools and perspectives. His superiors often want to know only about Worthman. This structure of feeling acting on Dell’s administrators, it seems, pushes them to limit him in what he does, a move counter to White, Elliot, and Peckham’s declaration that one of the purposes of an assessment project is to produce information that is intended “for comparative reporting” across institutions (7). If true at other SLACs, this limiting would explain why so many respondents to the general survey either have never conducted an assessment or did not draw on any published scholarship in program assessment best practices to inform their assessment efforts.

In short, the administrative pressures that seemed to play such a role in the General Survey's results may be more the result of legitimate, powerful forces working on SLAC administrators than they are of impulses to micromanage. Dell's own comments point to as much. Further, Dell confirms Gladstein and Regaignon's assertion on the relational and political dimensions of SLACs caused by the proximity between faculty, administrators, parents, alumni, donors and other stakeholders: "[The WPA] at [a PCU] is not thinking about the political or sort of public relations ramifications of doing writing program assessment. At a small school, those are conversations that you have to think about in terms of does this writing assessment and the way that I'm doing it, is that gonna help me with my colleagues in these other departments who I don't have any authority [over] to get what I want."

Mixed Results

In his assessment projects and in our conversation, Dell clearly addresses all the major points of program assessment best practices discussed in chapter 1, even as not all are fully accounted for. Worthman has a definition for its first-year writing program that Dell has adapted according to his training and Worthman's local constraints. Dell has likewise constructed a definition of program assessment based on the intersection of his education, past work experience, and current context. The program has a mission statement, objectives, and outcomes that Dell and his colleagues have engaged with, responded to, and adjusted based on what they have learned through their assessment experiences. He has chosen his assessment project participants carefully and with an eye toward their current and future involvement in the writing program, as well as to what they needed to know, when they needed to know it, and how they needed information delivered. The tools he chose for the assessment project in the student paper

with reflective letter and the rubric examining specific traits in student writing reflect both Dell's knowledge of current published scholarship in assessment practices and his understanding of the importance of adapting that knowledge to Worthman's constraints. He has not failed to consider the financial needs of assessment nor the potential financial implications of the project, inasmuch as he has only been partially successful in persuading his administrators of the need for change on that front. As noted, accounting for diverse populations is a significant deficiency for Dell and Worthman, but at least it is only so in the ways chapter 1 predicted, and Dell is aware of the need to consider those students and their needs in future projects to the extent that Worthman will allow. Based on our conversation, Dell also considered both the potential effects of the assessment effort and the integration of changes in his design of the assessment projects, points that he was careful to incorporate into his thorough report to university administrators and to accreditors; it is perhaps in these points that he excelled the most. His information management practices also demonstrate care consistent with best practices. Lastly, Dell's approach to assessment follows the best of best practices, pursuing it to enhance teaching and learning but doing so in a rhetorically savvy way that recognizes the need to satisfy administrative needs.

Additional Insights

Dell shared several other valuable observations on liberal arts colleges and program review that may explain some of the quirks in the General Survey's results. He noted, first, that there may be two key differences between wealthy, prestigious SLACs and those that retain their religious affiliations. Where the former may be on fairly stable financial ground because of endowments, the latter, which depend on church support in some form to sustain their existence, may be even more subject to influencing their assessment projects to show they have excellent students or no major flaws because of the marketing value of being able to make such claims.

The second, specifically related to the information literacy practices he investigated at Worthman, is that the WPAs at religiously-affiliated SLACs may need to do more work than WPAs at other SLACs to train their writing teachers and students in how to use the Bible and personal faith as evidence in argumentative writings. These WPAs also need to consider how the use of such sources might show up in a program assessment.

Second, Dell repeatedly stressed the importance of “programmatically agile” particularly in the SLAC context. He meant this in two ways. Small programs should be able and willing to adjust quickly to new curricula, new assessments, or just about anything else. With few faculty and little supervision, they can afford to be, and they can affect great change through that flexibility. Similarly, WPAs need to be adept at working around the limitations of their departments, programs, and institutions. “Every smaller institution,” he insisted, “based on their commitments, based on their affiliations that they have—all of things create unique faculties that require the WPA to be so malleable and so, just... to have a really different orientation towards the work than I would argue at larger schools.” He concluded, “We are, it’s true, unsupported, but we are also untethered.”

Maybe the most important insight Dell shared in our conversation was a point he may not have realized he made. In acting pretty much unilaterally in the interest of learning about the program he had just been hired to direct through his specific assessment approaches and in the report he wrote, he has gained a growing measure of control over the program by setting its narrative. This seems an important takeaway for SLAC WPAs. As noted by Gladstein and Regaignon, as suggested by the General Survey’s findings, and as admitted by Dell in his specific situation, SLAC WPAs often lack the institutional authority to move writing programs of any sort in the directions they need to go, even as the SLAC WPAs are the most qualified to

make decisions about the program. Dell's move suggests a way forward: conduct an investigation no one asked for, then write and submit a report no one expected, especially when the findings can be shown valuable to administrators' concerns. It also falls in line with Haswell's assertion that rhetorically in program assessment, whoever counts first, wins, regardless of what's counted or how. Dell's slow approach over time further suggests that a willingness to work incrementally, scoring several small wins over time rather a few big wins quickly, may also be critical to SLAC WPAs gaining the institutional authority they need to do the jobs they are expected to do. Taking these approaches establishes the WPA as the most knowledgeable person on whatever was investigated, thereby placing them in a better position to direct whatever happens next.

An Exception?

Dell's frustrations aside, he has unquestionably been successful in creating a contemporary writing program based on current best practices. The results of the General Survey suggest that his experience may be in keeping with what is currently happening in most first-year writing program assessment efforts at SLACs, at least among responding institutions. But the General Survey also suggested that many SLACs and their WPAs struggle in constructing program assessments and maybe even in directing their programs. Such is the case for Cassandra Brown, WPA for Armstrong University, the next interview subject.

Chapter 4: Armstrong University

If Dell directs an FYW program at Worthman that is unsupported but untethered, Cassandra Brown at Armstrong University directs a program that is barely a program at all.

Institution¹

Armstrong is a private university in a major midsouth city. It was founded in the 1890s and has been coeducational from its creation. It operated as a junior college until the late 1940s, when it became a full college; the school became a university in the late 1980s. A CCIHE 2015 Doctoral Universities: Moderate Research Activity institution, Armstrong nonetheless continues to identify as a small liberal arts college. The university retains its affiliation with a small evangelical denomination mostly confined to the southeastern U.S.; though the school is not sectarian in student recruitment, it does recruit heavily within the denomination, all faculty and most staff are contractually required to be members of that denomination and attend church regularly, and the university does actively promote its sectarian views in every facet of its operations. According to the school's website, Armstrong currently boasts 4,500 students. Around 3,000 of these are undergrads, who can earn bachelor's degrees in more than 70 majors, among them many pre-professional programs; the 1,500 or so graduate students can earn one of 25 master's degrees, four education specialist degrees, and three doctorates in close to 60 disciplines. Armstrong also offers an evening and online adult degree completion program. The

¹ In full disclosure, I have several personal connections to Armstrong. Many friends and a few family members graduated from there, and a few friends currently work there. It is affiliated with the evangelical denomination I grew up in and that many family members have preached and/or served as missionaries for. Perhaps most importantly, it is a sister school to my current institution and to my bachelor's alma mater. While it is possible that these connections may soften my critiques in the following discussion, it is more likely that my critiques will be sharper than my assessments of Worthman or of Wellington. I have done my best to guard against both biases.

class of 2020 comprises students from 49 U.S. states, territories, and districts, and from 50 countries. One thousand seventy-five students from ethnic minorities attend the university (23% of the student body), an increase of 365% since 2005 largely owed to the speed of the urban area's growth, the influx of Kurdish refugees who were resettled in the city over the last 15 years, and Armstrong administration's efforts to recruit more international students. Three hundred twenty-seven fulltime faculty members contribute to a 14:1 student-teacher ratio. Armstrong also houses a 1,300-student k-12 private school on its campus.

First-Year Writing Program

Armstrong's first-year writing program is its only writing program. It is housed within the English Department but is not properly a subunit because it has no budget of its own.

Program Construction

The current iteration of Armstrong's first-year program comprises a mashup of approaches initiated in the 1990s and innovations introduced in Fall 2017. It consists of a single course requirement. Strictly speaking, Armstrong does not have a remedial or developmental course, but students who earn a low score on the placement essay (described following) or who do not submit a placement essay are registered for ENG 1113. The WPA characterizes this course as "taught as a traditional composition 101 course," though she did not fully elaborate what that means in Armstrong's context. Once they pass ENG 1113, students move on to ENG 1313, the course into which students who earn higher scores on the placement essay are enrolled and which satisfies Armstrong's first-year writing requirement. ENG 1313 can best be characterized, according to the WPA, as an "evidence-based" writing course featuring an

amalgam of writing about writing and technical writing curricula, with heavy emphasis on the former (instructors are required to use Wardle and Downs's *Writing about Writing* as a class text), and including such course assignments as a literacy narrative, a discourse-community ethnography, or an IMRAD paper. Curiously, there are no official syllabus templates. The WPA does have a collection of sample syllabi that she shares with her instructors on request. Nor are there any required assignments: as long as FYW instructors work within evidence-based writing and in line with the stated course outcomes (discussed following), the WPA does not interfere with their practice or dictate content. This approach allows faculty significant leeway in satisfying the courses' word production requirement, but also likely makes any attempt at a comprehensive program evaluation fairly difficult.

There is no requirement for students to complete 1113/1313 in the first year, though many do because advisors push students to complete the course early. According to the WPA, most departments understand the importance of taking the course early; Computer Science and Nursing have recently been a challenge on this point, but she speculates that their resistance is due more to being fairly new programs than to any disagreement on curriculum or course sequencing.

Personnel

Cassandra Brown is the WPA. She completed her BA & MA in literature in the early 1990s, spent a few years away from academia for family and other work, then completed a PhD in Composition in the late 2000s at a prestigious program. At her current post at Armstrong since 2010, she has prior experience in business, as adjunct faculty, and as a writing program director at a PCU. Brown was one of two compositionists hired in 2010, she to direct the writing

program, her colleague to direct the writing center. They were the first compositionists ever hired at Armstrong. Though Brown is recognized as the WPA, the title is unofficial and her 10-month contract includes no additional pay for the role and no course release from her 4/4 teaching load (though she was hopeful she would receive a one-hour course release in Fall 2018). Her usual semester load is one section of 1313, 2-3 sections of technical writing for Engineering, and one section of something else, examples of which are a law & literature gen. ed. course co-taught with her husband, an upper-level African American women's literature course, or an upper division writing course. Brown was granted tenure in 2017, largely for her WPA work and on the strength of her yearly conference presentations; Brown noted, however, that the sense among private schools, especially private Christian schools, is that tenure doesn't mean much: anyone can be fired at any time for any reason, nor is tenure required for continued employment at Armstrong and many other SLACs.²

Brown is the driving force behind all aspects of Armstrong's FYW program, both in action and in ethic, and chiefly as a result of her doctoral training. She initiated the full program review discussed following. She implemented the evidence-based approach and the requirement that *Writing about Writing* be used for ENG 1313 despite the pushback she has received from some faculty members. Brown thinks these approaches teach students more about how to handle evidence than does the traditional research paper (an assignment she strongly discourages). Brown further feels that the writing-about-writing/tech writing focus is appropriate because of its flexibility and her own beliefs about what students should learn in first-year writing courses. But Brown also does not have required assignments for FYW courses because she believes, like her dissertation chair, that instructors should teach to their strengths, which is why she does not

² At the time of our interview, an Armstrong Theatre professor resigned because he was led to believe that he would not receive tenure and might be fired if he didn't quit.

interfere in their courses provided they operate within evidence-based writing. Brown effectively *is* the writing program in every way that matters.

Student Placement

All incoming students to Armstrong must submit a sample of polished writing, preferably graded work, from any previous class, whether high school or college, an innovation Brown introduced as a result of the most recent program assessment. She and two adjuncts use a rubric she developed to assess the writing samples over the summers, awarding scores from 1 (low) to 5 (high); Brown conducts norming sessions with her staff before beginning each summer's round of evaluation of placement essays. Students who earn a 1 or 2 on the placement essay, about 30% of the 650 students per year who enroll in a first-year writing course, are placed into ENG 1113, a course that further requires students who score a 1 on the placement test to sign a contract stating that they will work with a writing center tutor for an hour a week during the semester. Students who score a 3, 4, or 5 on the placement test take ENG 1313. These 650 students equate to 30-35 sections of ENG 1113 and 1313 per year, around 28 of which are sections of 1313. Brown does not receive additional pay or any other consideration for her placement work, though she does work to secure funding from her department chair for the adjuncts who help her.

Faculty Load and Support

Sections of 1113 are capped at 15 students, while sections of 1313 are capped at 19. Brown is adamant about not overenrolling classes and has mostly been successful in holding that line against administration pressures, though from time to time courses have enrolled up to 21 students.

Brown is the only one of the English Department's nine fulltime members (assistant prof. or above) who teaches first-year writing, with one other occasionally filling in on one course in the spring. Brown usually teaches one section of 1313 each semester, while all other sections of 1113/1313 each semester are taught by four to five of Brown's regular adjuncts. One adjunct is a PhD in comp/rhet, while another adjunct recently dropped out of a comp/rhet PhD program. Armstrong's teaching-load limit for adjuncts is three courses per semester, and Brown tries to give her adjuncts the full load; adjuncts occasionally teach upper-division courses as needed in addition to first-year writing.

Brown's chief means of supporting her FYW faculty is pre-semester orientations. She tries to have faculty orientations before the fall semester and sometimes manages one before the spring. Scheduling is difficult for Brown because instructors, in her words, "don't get paid enough to have required meetings," a point on which she echoes Dell. Though the department chair is generally willing to pay instructors for coming in if Brown asks her to, Brown seemed to imply that she tries not to ask for extra funding, perhaps because of the financial pressures facing Armstrong that Brown revealed toward the end of our conversation. Brown's staff does not have much turnover, which reduces the amount of extra orientation work she must do. Fall orientation content depends on the incoming freshman population, but generally includes norming sessions, areas of professional development, and discussions of writing prompts and assignment types. Sessions are generally two to three hours long because she does her best to be respectful of adjuncts' time. Brown tries to focus on issues that might be alien to non-compositionists or of which they might be less aware than compositionists. Armstrong also has some expectation (Brown did not know how formal) that faculty present at a conference at least once a year. Brown herself always attends the AACU conference in February, has participated in the Rocky

Mountain MLA, and regularly attends and occasionally presents at CWPA. Historically, the English Department has tried to provide some funding support to adjuncts who are interested in scholarship and want to travel to conferences because the Department sees these as important forms of professional development; per a follow-up email from Brown in August 2019, this funding support was cut over 2018-2019 due to budgetary concerns across the university. Until funding was withdrawn, Brown did her best to encourage adjuncts to take advantage of any conference opportunities they get.

Mission, Objectives, and Outcomes

The English Department's website has what appears to be the department's mission statement (or "as close as we've come to developing one," says Brown). The writing program itself does not have a mission statement, chiefly because Brown lacks the time and resources to create one. ENG 1113 has no outcomes; it does have objectives, but Brown does not know who developed them or when. ENG 1313 has outcomes and objectives developed by the English Department faculty in 2012. There is departmental consensus of the need to revise 1113, and Brown is confident she could design outcomes and create new objectives and get them passed easily, but she lacks the time to do so.³ Outcomes for both courses are communicated to faculty during the fall orientation sessions, and to students on class syllabi.

³ Per an email on 5 August 2019, Brown was able to implement new outcomes and objectives for 1113 over 2018-2019. She did not explain anything about that process in her correspondence.

Challenges

Brown faces several notable challenges to her job beyond lack of control of her program's budget, lack of release time and additional remuneration for her work, lack of job security, and near-total reliance on adjuncts for teaching in the first-year program—issues by themselves that make Dell's situation at Worthman seem charmed.

First, while she considers current funding for the English Department to be sustainable for current efforts, the university president has recently declared a 5% budget cut per department per year for the foreseeable future, despite enrollments holding steady.⁴ While she anticipates the short-term effects to be manageable, such a cut will no doubt affect her work significantly if it extends three years or more.⁵

A second challenge comprises two issues related to class scheduling, exemplified by an issue Brown had just discovered for the Fall 2018 semester at the time of our interview. Armstrong usually offers 13 sections of ENG 1313 and 3-4 sections of 1113 in the fall. These numbers can, of course, vary a bit based on enrollment and student need, but wider variation creates significant problems for Brown. Because of student demand, she had to offer six sections of 1113 for fall 2018. This meant closing three sections of 1313 and opening three sections of 1113. But a pervasive lack of classroom space at Armstrong ("There are almost fights on campus on days that [department] chairs have to sit down and schedule classrooms," she told me), rather than simply removing the three sections of 1313 and creating three new sections of 1113, Brown *converted* the sections of 1313 to sections of 1113 because the move allowed her to keep the

⁴ Asked what she attributed the budget cuts to, Brown speculated that it might be due to administrative bloat. "We have a lot of vice-presidents," she noted wryly.

⁵ The cut in funding to adjuncts' conference presentation support suggests that perhaps the budget reduction is already affecting Armstrong's English Department, though Brown never articulated that connection.

already-designated classroom space and the instructors. The change no doubt created a bit of a scramble for her instructors who thought they were going to teach one course and suddenly found they needed to shift their preparation to a different course. But it's telling about Brown's situation at Armstrong that those difficulties for faculty were easier to manage than finding new classrooms. A further difficulty in this case is that Brown lacks the computer system access to schedule her own courses: she could make the decision to convert the courses, but she could not enter the conversions into the computer herself and had to rely on her registrar and department chair to make the actual changes to the computer system. Good relationships with those two administrators made the process fairly simple, yet having all the responsibility for managing the writing program without the authority and access to actually do the job is frustrating for Brown, as it probably would be for most WPAs.

A third and more significant challenge for Brown is that Armstrong actually houses a second first-year writing program that Brown does not manage. The University's College of Professional Studies (CPS), home to the adult degree completion program, includes its own version of ENG 1313 that Brown has no access to or oversight of, thereby creating problems of instructional continuity. Brown has never met or had any contact with the program's administrator nor with the course instructor. Further, the CPS program, which is heavily online, allows students to work at their own pace with up to 18 months to complete a course. Brown understands the CPS's degree completion program to be a common challenge for all departments on campus, as the CPS seems to offer all gen. ed. requirements without consulting the originating departments. Brown sees the CPS's manner of operation as an indication that the university uses the degree completion program chiefly as an opportunity to make money.

Lastly, Armstrong has a reasonably diverse student body representing a variety of native languages and a spectrum of English proficiency. Although not addressed on the university website, it also seems statistically likely that at least a few students with special needs are present among Armstrong's general student population. Yet Armstrong does not have a particularly robust method of handling these students in first-year writing. While all students who earn low scores on the placement writing sample or who do not submit a writing sample are assigned to ENG 1113 with the lowest-scoring among them required to fulfill their writing center tutoring contracts, that expectation is pretty much the only way of accounting for diverse populations who struggle with writing, thus presenting a fourth major challenge for Brown. The lack of a better system for addressing the English-learning needs of international students has become a sudden point of concern for Brown, her fifth major challenge: Armstrong signed a contract in spring 2018 with an agency that places international students in U.S. universities. Armstrong administration did not tell faculty about the move, however, until after the University had signed the contract. Armstrong announced that they expected up to 35 students, or two sections of 1113, for the fall of 2018, but would not know the exact number until July 2018, a month after our interview and only four to six weeks before the start of the fall semester. Brown was not consulted, and thus found herself in the position of needing to cover at least two new sections of 1113, possibly more, but not being able to take any action towards staffing and housing those classes for another month, and with little time to do so after learning the number (besides being limited, again, by lack of a budget). Luckily, Brown had finally met with an administration representative the week before our interview and determined that she was likely only to have seven international students. In short, the writing program has been able until now to provide some supports for students with special needs through the writing center, but it's probable that

the coming years will require changes. Given the budget cuts Brown has been told to expect, it's possible that those students may not have adequate support.

Most Recent Assessment: Entire Program, Spring 2011, Plus Improvisations

Asked what evidence the program relies on currently or has relied on to determine program effectiveness, Brown replied “Historically, none”—to her knowledge, there was no attempt at writing program assessment prior to her arrival. Brown has wanted to conduct a formal assessment project but has lacked the time and physical and fiscal resources to execute one. She has, however, managed a few adjustments to the program through several small, mostly informally-constructed efforts. She is now known in the department as “the assessment person,” perhaps because of her efforts.

As Brown characterizes it, the entire first-year course situation prior to 2014 was a mess. When Brown arrived at Armstrong in the fall of 2010, there was only one composition course, ENG 1123, a second-semester, traditional composition course emphasizing the research paper. The department had given up the first-semester course, ENG 1113, for what amounted to a first-year seminar class in 2006, with the agreement that the seminar would remain writing-focused, and that training for faculty and the necessary funding would be provided. Neither the promised training or funding ever materialized, nor was anyone really directing or managing the 1113 program. By 2010, 1113 was taught by faculty from across the university with widely varying quality of instruction and workload demands—one course infamously had students create a fantasy football team. Students were aware of the disparity and often complained about it. Faculty likewise admitted ENG 1123 was a disorganized and dysfunctional first-year writing program. Many classes were literature-based, and, as with 1113, class content and instructional

quality varied widely. The department asked Brown to intervene. She secured around \$6,000 from unspecified sources to bring Anne Ruggles Gere and Joseph Janangelo for a WPA assessment in the spring of 2011. Their conclusion—though by Brown’s account largely drawn from anecdotal evidence—was that the program needed to focus on evidence-based writing.⁶

Brown was given full control of 1113 and 1313—or what passes for it—in 2014. She set about making changes to the program based on the 2011 Ruggles Gere and Janangelo report. Her first move in the fall of 2014 was to gain approval to allow concurrent enrollment in 1113 Armstrong Seminar and 1313 in both fall and spring. When she arrived in 2010, students had to take 1113 in the fall and 1123 in the spring. The result of that sequence was that so many spring composition courses had to be offered that Brown had to recruit adjuncts for the spring term but only for the spring term, and even with the extra instructors, 1123 sections often included up to 27 students, an excessive number by any standard. Concurrent enrollment allowed Brown to even out course distributions, thereby lowering class enrollments; hire dedicated, regular adjuncts; and give students greater flexibility in academic progress. In that process, Brown was also able to adjust the enrollment cap downward to 20 for ENG 1123 and to 15 for ENG 1113, making teacher workloads much more manageable. She would have lowered the 1123 cap further, but administration requested she make it no lower than 20 because of budgetary concerns, a request that came with the promise of not being asked to raise enrollment caps further.

That same semester, Brown rebranded 1123 as 1313. The change reflected the shift in focus from literature to evidence-based writing, increased the perceived rigor of the course, and

⁶ This is the total extent of Brown’s comments on the external review. I concede that the limited discussion seems odd, given Brown’s claim that every change she made to the program in subsequent years stemmed in some way from the external review, but she simply did not elaborate on that review.

established a hierarchy between the composition course and ENG 1113, Armstrong Seminar. Though Brown did not explain why it took her two and a half years to make the change, the delay may have been because it took that long for the Armstrong community to become aware to the point of action of the inefficacy of the system in total and of the construction of 1113 in particular. At some point in that process that she did not explain, Brown also managed to transform ENG 1113 from Armstrong Seminar into its current role as a non-developmental developmental course, thereby wresting control of it from whatever entity within Armstrong previously “managed” it and incorporating the course into the flow of the English Department’s first-year writing requirement.⁷

At some point after gaining control of both courses, Brown set about reforming the placement process, culminating in the fall of 2017. Historically, Armstrong relied on ACT scores for placement, with students scoring 19 or above placed in ENG 1123, and those scoring 18 and below enrolled in English 110, a developmental, no-credit course that no longer exists housed in and staffed by the adult degree program (ENG 1113 was not considered in placement when it was operated as Armstrong Seminar because it was required of all students). Brown objected to placement based on ACT for what she termed “the usual reasons” identified in scholarly literature relating to the validity of indirect versus direct assessment of writing skills and to the direct correlation between timed-essay length and score. Brown suspected that some students whose scores placed them in English 110 might be competent writers, and that some students who placed into 1123/1313 might benefit from greater support and development before attempting the course. She started requesting placement essays from incoming freshmen to test her theory. Armstrong administrators did not interfere with nor interdict her requests, but neither

⁷ Armstrong Seminar still exists as a required class for all freshmen, but under a new course designation arranged between Brown and the general education director that clearly separates the course from English and FYW.

did they support her; thus, only about one-third of incoming freshmen supplied the essays she requested. Brown was nonetheless able to pilot the new placement method using the placement essay process described previously from 2014 to 2017, scoring what essays she received by herself over the summers. She was ultimately able to show that students who tested at a developmental level on the ACT were still able to produce 3s and 4s on the writing placement test, which demonstrated that some students were competent writers who simply tested poorly, and vice-versa. The data she gathered in the pilot study enabled Brown to convince her administrators to change the placement method beginning in the fall of 2017. As already noted, Brown has become a victim of her own success on this point—though the University approves of her placement approach, it does not really support her save for the two adjuncts it pays to help evaluate around 650 placement essays each summer. Despite this challenge, Brown is pressing forward: she archives the placement essays and is now requiring students to submit a sample of their best written work at the conclusion of 1313 (though not necessarily from that class) to serve as entry and exit documents. She hoped to start using the placement and 1313 essays to engage in some sort of programmatic assessment in the summer of 2019 even as her heavy workload, lack of staffing, and lack of funding was likely to make such an assessment effort difficult if not impossible to execute. Brown's immediate next project, time permitting, is to revise ENG 1113, including the development of outcomes and objectives.

In short, Brown has made programmatic changes based on data and persuasion, but she has never engaged in programmatic change derived from an evaluative, information-gathering process described in chapter 1. And she admits as much. In her words, she's been so focused on what can be accomplished that she hasn't been able to give much thought to what she would like to accomplish. She feels her program has a good start in making moves to examine incoming

placement and outgoing performance in the documents she collects; in time, she may manage to do so.

Brown continues to dream about what might be possible for her program provided enough resources to execute a full assessment of Armstrong's first-year writing program. If given the chance to conduct her ideal program assessment, she would like to cross-reference writing samples with student ACT/SAT scores to see how they confirm or collide with each other. She would like to interview the students who have the highest and lowest scores on the placement test to discover their writing processes and what strengths and/or weaknesses they see in the current program. She would like to collect more data on students in 1113, including interviews, because that is the smallest group of students, but also the group of students that has the greatest needs. She would like to know more about student backgrounds because of the shift in student populations she has observed in her time at Armstrong. When she arrived in 2010, Armstrong "was a very white, private high school kind of campus, for the most part," she says; the current population certainly retains those students, but has diversified thanks to the fairly large population of veterans with the Yellow Ribbon program, a Muslim population that's surprisingly large for a sectarian Christian university, Kurdish students from the city's public schools, and a significant number of students who were homeschooled. Brown would also like to examine how the variety of geographical and cultural stories of her university's rapidly diversifying student body interact with "the cognitive processes that students go through to make connections, so that transferability, not just in writing but in the broader general education requirements that they have." She continued:

At what point do they think about Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* and connect that in history to what's going on in America around 1900, and philosophically

what's going on in the world,... all of those things as they're coming together. Do they make those connections? Do they silo them? So I think looking at the education background, whether they've come from a homeschool situation, whether they've come from a public school situation, we have a lot of charter schools that are just starting in [our area] and there's a lot of controversy about them, so I would probably broaden it to do some of that research as well, and how all of it affects their writing.

Brown's aspirations for comprehensive program evaluation, then, are limited by her material conditions, but not by her knowledge, training, curiosity, or imagination.

Those material conditions are sources of significant frustration for her, however. The rest of the university largely seems, to her, indifferent to her cause. Echoing Worthman's Dell, Brown thinks most departments would support having better writers, but feels those departments would also say that it was the English Department's problem to fix. From where she sits, no one really understands what she's doing or why. Not even her department chair gets it fully. In one way, the institutional apathy of her academic context gives Brown a lot of freedom. But it also constrains her significantly because there is almost no institutional buy-in to the writing program or its assessment practices, despite her best efforts to create that buy-in. "If something happened to me tomorrow," she observed, "all this would just go away, because I am the only person doing it." She concluded our interview summarizing the frustration of her position: "Most people on campus are happy to do what I ask them to do as far as advising their students, the new placement, they support me on it. But if somebody else said tomorrow 'Okay, we're going back to just taking ACTs,' they'd do that, too. Nobody would go 'Aww, that's a shame.'... Sometimes it's difficult to stay motivated with all the things I feel like need to happen."

Implications and Connections

Between the last significant programmatic review based largely on anecdotal data occurring seven years before our interview, and a piecemeal evolution of the writing program ever since, it's difficult to say much about the current state of assessment practices at Armstrong. But a few inferences still can be drawn related to the three broad conclusions of the General Survey.

Shifting Programs & Perspectives

Armstrong's first-year writing program is shifting, but it seems to be doing so almost exclusively by Brown's force of will, with a small bit of shaping in the last decade by faculty dissatisfaction with the program they had. In other words, the first-year writing program is shifting because Brown is responding to her academic training, but not because of shifts in Armstrong's sense of academic mission or the English Department's vision of what the first-year writing program should do, or any other force that suggests any sort of institutional buy-in of the program. And because the program is shifting as Brown is able to move it, it is shifting very slowly.

Worthman's Dell spoke of "programmatic agility," the nimbleness that small programs have for adapting quickly to new ideas, forces, or imperatives. Brown may have this in the odd form that she effectively is the writing program. Because it's just her and a few adjuncts, it's possible that she doesn't really need a full-blown program review such as is described in the scholarship reviewed in chapter 1. Maybe it's enough for her to ask her faculty what they're seeing in their courses and then say "Okay, everybody, we're doing X in the course from now on." Programmatic changes in this case are slow because of the demands on the WPA's time, but

they occur nonetheless. This kind of assessment and revision effort is less formal or even informal, but it might be enough to keep the program moving forward.

These traits may be what the General Survey reveals in the eight participating schools that have never had an FYW program review and in the additional three that were last reviewed more than six years ago. While it is possible that these schools have never engaged in programmatic review because they don't know that they should, the "current climate of assessment" discussed in chapter 1 makes that option seem unlikely. It could be, instead, that those programs haven't been formally reviewed because they're small enough that they don't have to be. They may have a WPA with no authority at an institution that has no investment or interest in its FYW program. In that scenario, a WPA who constantly thinks about her program and makes small adjustments as she can may sufficiently qualify as engaging in programmatic assessment, even if that work does not result in any "tangible" products. The current study cannot state whether this is the case with any degree of certainty, but Brown's experience at Armstrong opens the door for the possibility of similar circumstances at other institutions.

Administrative Pressures

The lack of administrative pressures is the most striking aspect of Brown's experience. Correction: the lack of administrative interest in the first-year writing program at Armstrong that lies at the back of the absence of administrative pressures on Brown is the most striking aspect of her story. What Brown's struggles reveal most clearly is that Armstrong has no institutional buy-in to the idea of a first-year writing program. But the whys are a mystery. Why is the institution so uninterested in one of the foundational and most complex courses in its required general education curriculum? Why is there no administrative pressure on Brown to show assessment

data? Even Dell was asked by his administrators to provide “some assessment stuff.” Further, why have a WPA with any level of formality if she isn’t given the authority needed to actually run the program? For all that, why even have a first-year writing program at all if the institution doesn’t care about it and won’t support it?

Armstrong’s situation seems strange, inconsistent with just about everything the General Survey found and my own experiences and contact with other programs. But again, it may provide answers to those things the General Survey did not find, specifically those programs that have never or rarely engaged in programmatic review. Perhaps they, too, have administrations that are indifferent to their existences and put no pressure on them to show evidence for their effectiveness. Perhaps these programs don’t engage in assessment projects because they simply aren’t made to. This, then, would suggest at least a modicum of administrative pressure—and the interest and institutional resources that would probably accompany that pressure—is necessary to allow assessment efforts to occur.

Mixed Results

For all Armstrong’s indifference to its FYW program and the largely informal, patchwork nature of what programmatic assessment has occurred, Brown has still managed to address many of the major elements of programmatic assessment. She has a clear definition for her first-year writing program in ENG 1313 with its emphasis on evidence-based writing, its placement essay, and pre-requisite course for those whose placement essays indicate they would benefit from more support. While the FYW program lacks a formal mission statement, Brown knows what she wants the course to produce in its students, and the course’s objectives and outcomes are reasonably well-defined, albeit maybe in need of reconsideration. Obviously, Armstrong’s ENG

1313 does not have a clearly articulated definition of its program assessment, and for that reason lacks definite tools that could be used for an assessment project. Yet Brown knows her training and what she ought to do, so she operates with a sense of how her “microassessments” should be defined and what means she should use for those investigations. She likewise knows who she can and cannot count on for help, she has a sense of what effects she should and should not expect in implementing her assessment efforts and in the integration of changes her investigations produce, and she knows how to secure any products related to her changes and investigations. She is well aware of her (lack of) financial resources and clearly does her best to work around them. While Brown knows that she needs to account for the diverse populations present on Armstrong’s campus, she also knows she is limited in doing so by the institution’s policies toward these students. It’s a mixed bag, to be sure, but Brown has found ways to do what she can to assess her program, if not what she feels she ought to do.

From the standpoint of the priorities reviewed in chapter 1, the only point not addressed is the local context. Brown clearly considers her context in all her decisions. But local context is also the most difficult point for Brown to account for. Local dictates all, scholarship and training tell her. But what if it can’t? What if the local context is such that it does not grant the WPA and the program the materials with which to conduct an assessment? What then? The scholarship on program review summarized in chapter 1 indicates that the WPA must respond to the local context in constructing assessment efforts. But Armstrong’s case suggests that sometimes WPAs may need to alter or create some new basic local conditions *before* they can respond to local conditions in crafting an assessment. In a way, Dell had to do this despite his overall favorable conditions. Specifically in this case, Brown will need to secure some sources of funding should she ever attempt a full-scale, formal assessment, possibly from outside Armstrong, perhaps

through a grant. She will also need to find ways to create buy-in from at least her department for the writing program to gain the other material elements needed to conduct a formal assessment. Before she does either of those things, she will need to find a way to gain the release time necessary to pursue funding and create buy-in strategies; one possibility for her might be a sabbatical semester, if Armstrong allows such. Worthman's Dell says that everything he does, he does by persuasion. There's something in that for Brown, and she's already had some limited success with it. But she is already so limited by her resources—how can she do more to get the results her training tells her she needs?

Whatever the solutions particular to Brown and Armstrong, it's doubtful that they are unique among SLACs. The eight WPAs who indicated on the General Survey that their programs had never been evaluated, as well as the three whose programs have not been evaluated more recently than in the last six years, may be in similar material conditions to Brown at Armstrong. Programmatic evaluation is a great idea on paper, but a worthless one without at least some material considerations. For all the merits of Dell's comment that SLAC WPAs "are, it's true, unsupported, but... also untethered," it remains true that there must be *some* support for any sort of assessment to be tenable.

An Assessment Fable

Brown's story at Armstrong proposes some legitimate reasons why some responding institutions to the General Survey have rarely or never engaged in an extensive, formal review of their first-year writing programs like those described in many publications. Her story shows that a determined WPA can still make some headway in shaping her program if she is determined enough to maintain the pursuit and wily in doing it. It suggests that there may be ways for SLAC

WPAs to engage in informed programmatic change without carrying out a formal, systematic review such as those proposed by scholars at PCUs. But Brown's story also shows the difficulty of not pursuing a formal review, and the importance of SLAC administrations investing materially in their FYW programs. At the same time, too much administration investment can also create challenges to program assessment, as illustrated by Wellington University.

Chapter 5: Wellington University

To my best determination, there are no publications on writing program assessment at historically black colleges and universities, HBCUs. Given the historical importance of these schools and the educational and cultural value they add to higher education in United States, this omission seems particularly egregious. The following discussion of Wellington University is my attempt at beginning to rectify that omission.

Institution

Wellington University is an HBCU SLAC founded in the early days of Reconstruction in the southern mid-Atlantic, the first HBCU to open in its region.¹ The school retains a strong connection to its founding affiliation with one of the largest and oldest evangelical denominations, yet it also places a high priority on diversity, as seen in the university's mission statement and a recent past president's public statement on LGBTQ students that stood in some contrast to the denomination's position. A CCIHE 2015 Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts and Sciences Focus, Wellington is, curiously enough, the only one of the three SLACs interviewed in depth that is formally classified as a small liberal arts college. Yet the university also states its mission is to be "a comprehensive institution of higher education," aligning itself, in this way, with some of the conflicting points of self-identity seen at Worthman and Armstrong. Wellington claims approximately two thousand undergraduate students from 24 states and 18 countries who

¹ Many of the details in this chapter are less specific than those in the previous two. For reasons that will become apparent, my interview subject for this university was much more concerned about preserving her and her school's anonymity than were my other interviewees, and she asked that I be careful about the details I included. The result may be a vaguer description, but one that I hope is still adequate to the purposes of this investigation while honoring her concerns.

enjoy a 13:1 student to teacher ratio in classes leading to bachelor's degrees in 35 undergraduate majors or two graduate degrees.²

First-Year Writing Program

Wellington's FYW program is, like Armstrong's, the only writing program at the university. The current construction is five to six years old, with various models tried before. Even within this construction, there has been a fair amount of intra-program fluctuation. As my interview subject put it, nothing about Wellington's writing program is typical, and change is constant.

Program Construction

Wellington's first-year writing program consists of three courses housed in the English Department—more precisely, two courses, one of which has two variations. The 2018-2020 undergraduate catalog describes a traditional two-course composition sequence that is part of the 40ish hours of general education requirements. Students must pass both ENG 101 and ENG 102 with at least a C to satisfy the writing course requirements. Per the placement procedure described following, students can be placed into either ENG 101 or ENG 101 Extended; ENG 101 is the traditional course, whereas ENG 101 Extended is a three-credit-hour course that meets five hours per week and is reserved for students who need additional writing support. The program requires that all faculty use Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst's *"They Say/I Say" with Readings* as the textbook for these classes, with ENG 101 and 101 Extended using the first half of the book, and ENG 102 using the second half. There are also standard required assignments:

² Information on undergraduate enrollment was surprisingly difficult to find, ultimately coming *U.S. News and World Report's* annual college rankings; no data were available on graduate enrollment.

ENG 101 tends to be literature-focused despite an external review (discussed later) which advised against the approach a few years ago; ENG 102 requires a summary of a scholarly article with proper documentation and a personal essay for a real scholarship or internship application.³

While there is no formal requirement for Wellington students to complete ENG 101 and 102 in their first year, most do because of advisors who funnel students toward those classes. An occasional student or transfer student may take the course later in their academic careers, but such appears to be fairly uncommon.

The English Department typically offers 55-60 total course sections per semester, first-year writing courses accounting for 25-30 of those sections. As is fairly typical at many schools that use the two-course approach, Wellington generally offers more sections of ENG 101 and 101 Extended (around 25) than of 102 (5-8) in the fall, and vice-versa in the spring (5 and 20, respectively); Wellington also generally offers two online sections of ENG 101 Extended each semester. The University's administration likes the current model of ENG 101 Extended, but my interviewee stated that some English Department faculty "oppose the use of a commercial software package used in [the course] that focuses on 'correct' grammar." The English Department planned to pilot a new model of 101 Extended in the fall of 2019 that will meet for four hours a week but have an additional online component.

Personnel

Wellington's English Department is home to eleven fulltime, tenure-track faculty (two of whom hold joint appointments in English and Theatre), with one additional non-tenure-track but ongoing faculty member and four regular adjunct faculty, all of whom teach FYC courses.

³ Students must identify a real scholarship or internship they would like to apply for, then write the personal statement, thereby responding to a real rhetorical situation with a real rhetorical genre.

Faculty work nine-month contracts, and thus are not required to teach in the summers. While Wellington does make use of adjunct faculty, it prefers to rely on fulltime over adjuncts as much as it can.

The English Department divides the responsibility for managing the first-year writing program between three coordinators, each of whom semi-autonomously manages one of the three courses constituting the program, with the department chair bearing ultimate responsibility for the entire program. Wellington finds itself in the midst of tragedy on the point of coordinators, as those for ENG 101 and ENG 101 Extended died suddenly a few weeks apart in Spring 2019, losses which have significant bearing on the future of Wellington's FYW program. Helen Campbell, the coordinator of ENG 102, was my interview subject in July and August 2019.

Campbell had been at Wellington for three years at the time of our interviews. Born, raised, and educated outside of United States, Campbell had little familiarity with HBCUs before applying for the job at Wellington, features which initially positioned her as something of an outsider at the institution and thus shaped and sometimes limited her perspectives on the school and its operations, particularly on matters of first-year writing. Campbell's role has evolved over her time at Wellington. She was named a co-coordinator of the program along with the now-deceased coordinator of ENG 101 from her first day because of her PhD in rhetoric. In her second year, each course in the first-year writing program was assigned a separate coordinator, and Campbell was made coordinator of ENG 102. She expected to keep her role as coordinator of ENG 102 for 2019-2020. At the time of our interviews, she was unsure how the other two coordinator roles might be reassigned or whether the department had even hired new faculty to replace the two who died; she did inform me in a follow-up email a month after our final

interview that the positions had been reassigned (though she did not say to whom). Campbell noted that such fluctuations and uncertainties have been typical during her time at Wellington.

Campbell has limited authority in her role as coordinator for ENG 102. The English Department chiefly operates by consensus on all matters, with the department chair giving final word. Campbell mainly shapes policies for 102 by offering her input and then working to build consensus. Citing the example of some recent revisions to the 102 master syllabus she hoped to enact, she explained that she would probably send a revision proposal to the composition committee and department chair, then circulate the proposal to faculty for approval.

Campbell and two other faculty members have PhDs in comp/rhet., and one other faculty member has a writing center background. A few other members of the English Dept.'s faculty who hold literature PhDs have taken an interest in composition and writing studies and have sought to educate themselves through attendance at CCCC and other means. A couple of other faculty members have education backgrounds, a point worth noting for discussions of programmatic assessment.

Student Placement

Students are placed into ENG 101 or ENG 101 Extended through an Accuplacer computerized timed essay administered at the beginning of the fall semester by the University's Assessment Coordinator. Campbell and other members of the English faculty help proctor the test, but otherwise are not involved in administering it. Campbell was not even sure what the placement criteria are or who makes decisions about student placement. As far as I could determine from interviewing Campbell and scouring Wellington's catalog, the university does not accept Advanced Placement scores or other credit by examination to bypass the first-year

writing requirement. Campbell indicated that transfer students who satisfied the writing requirement elsewhere are fairly rare.

Faculty Load and Support

All sections of ENG 101, ENG 101 Extended, and ENG 102 are capped at 20-24 students, variations due at least part of the time to classroom size. Faculty course load is officially 5/4, but assignment to sections of ENG 101 Extended and course releases for administrative work, grant positions, official mentorship, and other duties can reshape that load for some faculty. FYC load for full-time faculty varies greatly from one to four courses and can be as many as five sections; most adjunct faculty teach two to three sections of FYC courses.

Support for Wellington's FYC faculty has been offered, but it has been as and met with varying success. On first joining Wellington's faculty, Campbell tried to organize an informal reading group for FYC faculty that had limited success. She once tried offering a workshop during a semester, but only three people showed up, perhaps owing to how busy faculty are or perceive themselves to be (in fairness, a 5/4 teaching load is a heavy one), and to Campbell and the other coordinators lack of any real authority. Wellington's English Department hosts an annual conference focused on pedagogy that historically has been well attended—Chris Anson has been a past speaker. While the conference is pedagogy-focused rather than writing-focused, it is nonetheless about writing broadly and therefore provides another means of support for faculty. Campbell reported that some faculty attend national conferences such as CCCC; the department and the institution offer some support, provided that faculty are presenting papers.

Mission, Objectives, and Outcomes

Campbell did not know whether Wellington's FYC program had a mission statement or objectives, which in essence means the program might as well not have them if one of the program's coordinators was unaware of them after three years on the job. The program has created syllabus templates for each course that include student learning outcomes and a suggested weekly schedule; Campbell could not indicate exactly who within the program had done this or when. According to Campbell, "Student learning outcomes are a required component of all syllabi; general education learning outcomes are also listed on FY writing courses, and were developed in collaboration with the assessment office." The program requirement that all faculty use "*They Say/I Say*" operates as a sort of mission statement and collection of objectives in that the mandated use of a single textbook does in a sense create a reasonably fixed single vision of writing and an accompanying set of expectations.

Challenges

Wellington's freshman composition program clearly faces serious challenges, the current tragic leadership vacuum and loss of faculty with longer institutional memories chief among them.⁴ Though those roles have now been filled, the program still has to contend with two of the three coordinators being new to their jobs and even Campbell herself, now the most senior coordinator, still being relatively new. Further, Campbell's telling suggests that the entire leadership model used to direct the program is problematic: the coordinators lack the authority to mandate any changes they see as necessary to the program and thus to complete the task they have been given. While the one person who can mandate them—the department chair—does

⁴ The assessment of the challenges to Wellington's FYC program as "serious" is mine in light of everything else presented in this study. Campbell does not characterize them as such.

oversee the FYC committee (the chair, the three coordinators, and three to four other department members), it is, no doubt, difficult for the chair to give the FYC program their full attention because of the heavy course load expected even of department chairs at SLACs.⁵ Wellington's FYC program would probably benefit from a single person with devoted focus on the FYC program, yet, for reasons not clear to Campbell, the university administration is opposed to creating a WPA position.

Additional challenges are insinuated by the way in which Wellington handles placement and ENG 101 Extended with its prescriptive grammar software. Both cases suggest that the first-year writing program may not be fully within the English Department's control, potentially a serious difficulty to programmatic assessment.

Yet it's important to note that these challenges are not uniquely HBCU challenges: Worthman and Armstrong both experienced varying degrees of tension in program leadership, and the General Survey indicated that many of the respondent schools have more pronounced problems in program direction than has Wellington (except, of course, to the extent that Wellington's situation is uniquely complicated by the deaths of two of its coordinators). Heavy involvement, even to the point of interference, from institutional administration has also emerged as a theme across institutions. In these two respects, then, Wellington is hardly unique.

Where it is unique is in the challenge presented by its student population. Campbell explained that most Wellington students are generally "low-income, Pell-Grant-eligible, ... African American students," a combination of demographic factors often interpreted by many institutions as markers of underpreparation. A student body largely perceived, rightly or wrongly

⁵ Campbell did not say what the chair's course load is, but my own chair only receives one course release from the standard 4/4 teaching load—the same release I get for only directing our writing center. My statements about Campbell's chair assume comparable treatment at Wellington.

by the FYC program, the English Dept., or university administration as “underprepared” would clearly present challenges to how to construct and assess a program to serve them. Such a perception of the student population certainly explains the placement procedure Wellington has developed, why the school doesn’t accept credit by examination, and the five-day-a-week approach of ENG 100 Extended.⁶ If Wellington is perceiving its students correctly, the school and the English Dept. are to be commended for the pains they’ve taken in their course construction to serve those students. Many colleges and universities might not go as far as Wellington has. The needs of the student population certainly do pose challenges to the FYC system, however. As a final important point, it’s impossible to know from the data I’ve gathered whether Wellington’s challenges with student “underpreparation” are unique to its context or are characteristic of HBCU SLACs, nor will I treat them as characteristic of HBCU SLACs—a sample of one is barely a sample at all.

Most Recent Assessment: Entire FYC Program, Spring 2016

Much like Armstrong, Wellington’s “most recent” assessment of their FYW program was a few years ago, took the form of an external review, and has since been followed by small adjustments, sometimes but not always based on that major assessment. Unlike Armstrong, however, Wellington’s implementation of changes, both those suggested by the major assessment and those triggered by other needs or shifts, has been somewhat more disjointed, most likely because of the difference in leadership configurations between the schools. While Wellington has better faculty investment in the FYW program than does Armstrong in that all Wellington English faculty teach in the program (compared to Armstrong’s single fulltime

⁶ I.e., given the cost of taking AP tests, maybe so few students can afford to that there is simply no need for a policy on accepting such.

faculty in Brown and a handful of adjuncts exclusively handling FYW courses), Wellington is more hampered than Armstrong in the implementation of changes by its lack of a single WPA to coordinate the program. It's also important to note that because of Campbell's arrival after the program review and the limitations of having only been at Wellington for three years, details in this section are often limited because there were questions that she either did not know the answers to or was unsure of.

The English Department hired an external reviewer—Campbell describes that person as “maybe not a WPA person, but a well-established, well-published comp./rhet. person”—to engage in a comprehensive review of the FYC program in the spring of 2016. Because Campbell did not work at Wellington then, she does not know exactly what motivated the review. Reading through the 10-15 pages of the reviewer's report as we spoke, the best Campbell could tell was that it “just seemed like the time” for the Department to reconsider what it was doing. Campbell has noticed in her time at Wellington that reviews seem to happen periodically for all areas, so it makes sense that the FYC program might simply have been due. Campbell also noticed language in the report suggesting that the review was partly the English Department's attempt at “engaging in best practices” in programmatic assessment, though she did not point to anything specific that gave her that impression, nor was it entirely clear to her what that phrase might have meant in that context. It's possible, too, that the review was partly related to university accreditation: “Accreditation is something that's celebrated here as various departments are accredited by their agencies,” Campbell observed. The review did seem to originate in the Department rather than University administration, however, at least as best Campbell could tell, nor was University administration involved in the process except as subjects of the reviewer's

interviews. The Department seems to have initiated the entire process and administrators simply complied.

Over their two days on campus, the reviewer—and it's clear that the reviewer was the primary, and perhaps only, actor in the assessment—met with most English Department faculty, the department chair, the provost, and the vice-provost, and reviewed common syllabi and sample papers from an existing departmental document repository; Campbell was fairly sure that this repository has restricted access, but she did not know who had access to it except that access was granted to the reviewer. The reviewer evaluated Wellington's overall approach to and philosophy of teaching freshman writing, though not from the perspective of any current theory that Campbell was aware of. The absence of any formal statement of theory notwithstanding, the report recommended several changes that suggest pretty strongly that Wellington's FYC program had some catching up to do with regards to current writing studies scholarship. Its primary recommendation was a change in focus from writing about literary texts and modes-based writing to academic writing, meaning, in Campbell's interpretation, getting rid of the assumption that teaching literature-focused, modes-based writing prepares students to write in their disciplines. Campbell observed when she first arrived at Wellington that "many assignments were current-traditional," meaning modes-focused, five-paragraph essays. The report's sections on teaching about plagiarism, on teaching grammar, and on the writing center together recommended an additional shift away from error-based teaching approaches. The report further recommended that the English Department conduct a retreat to develop a new teaching philosophy and learning outcomes for the courses in the FYC program. Lastly, it recommended the hiring of a formal WPA.

Campbell did not know what costs were associated with hiring the external reviewer or where the money came from. The report presumably did not find anything unexpected, at least in the sense that the English Department hired the external reviewer with the expectation that the reviewer would tell them to do things differently. Hiring the external reviewer to assess the program presumably also avoided in itself the pitfalls of expectation creep and bias in interpretation results: external reviewers have, by their nature as external, no stake in the findings or implementation of changes.

The English Department has at this point implemented all changes to the FYC program recommended by that review that it intends to make. Prior to the external review, both ENG 101 and 102 were heavily focused on modes-based writing about literature; these “current-traditional,” literature-focused, modes-based assignments have held on in some sections of 101, but have filtered out of 102 thanks largely to the adoption of “*They Say/I Say*”. Campbell did not comment on how the shift away from error-based teaching has proceeded, though she did note that such a move was complicated at Wellington because FYC faculty “provide [students] with a sense of what it means to be a writer in an academic setting in the first year, but then they [the students] go into other courses and get told they have bad grammar.”⁷ The recommendation for developing a new philosophy and learning outcomes for the courses wasn’t followed as described, i.e. with a retreat, but has been pursued in other ways through the University’s Office of Assessment.⁸ The English Department has not hired a WPA and Campbell doesn’t know why, but the creation of the course coordinators did follow from the external reviewer’s report, perhaps as a sort of compromise between the recommendation and whatever other constraints the

⁷ A common tension at most other colleges and universities of all types.

⁸ Campbell did not explain what she meant by this.

Department and Wellington face; the coordinators are scheduled to receive course releases for the first time ever in Fall 2019, apparently the only cost shift to the program the report has produced.

But the changes suggested by the external review report, whether followed or not, are not the end of the story for Wellington's FYC program. It has made and is making other shifts based either on what that report suggested or on changes the report caused, all chiefly at the instigation of Campbell and a former colleague with many years of service at Wellington.

Topping the list of additional shifts is an invited proposal to create a WAC program at Wellington. Campbell had pushed since her arrival for the creation of a WID program (one of her areas of expertise) but found "no institutional appetite" for it. But sometime in the last year, someone in administration requested that she and her colleague submit a proposal to create a WAC program.⁹ While Campbell did not know the reasons for the invitation—"Upper administration works in mysterious ways"—she was pleased by the invitation because she saw it as the administration recognizing the value of creating a campus-wide culture of writing. The proposal is far from guaranteed to go through, but to Campbell the invitation was still a step in the right direction.

The shifts in the FYC course coordinators also reflect the influence of the 2016 report. As discussed previously, Wellington opted not to follow the report's recommendation to hire a formal WPA, for whatever reason or reasons. But creating an FYC coordinator indicates that at least on some level the program recognized the wisdom of the recommendation. The move toward course releases over the years since the report shows the Department is wrestling with the recommendation and trying to find a way to make it work.

⁹ Campbell did not specify when or whom.

A third effect of the 2016 external review is in Campbell's recent effort to revise the ENG 102 master syllabus. She has several things in mind to improve delivery of the course. As already discussed, all faculty are required to use the second half of "*They Say/I Say*" as the textbook. In the current construction, faculty are encouraged to use readings from one of the text's five themes.¹⁰ Campbell's proposed revision requires professors to include a peer-reviewed academic article of their choosing related to their chosen theme collection in the textbook as an additional course reading. She wants faculty to have more flexibility in reading choices based on her preference and on faculty feedback requesting opportunities for more cohesion within their courses while giving them freedom to choose their own reading assignments.

A final distant effect of the 2016 external review has originated outside the English Dept. and the FYC program, even as it has significant implications for both. Historically, ENG 102 students have been required to submit a portfolio at the end of the course, and the English Department has generally used this as an assessment tool of some sort.¹¹ But in the last couple of years, Campbell's former colleague once experimented, in partnership with the University Assessment Office, with adding a second Accuplacer timed writing test and a multiple-choice test to the portfolio for program assessment. The experiment was motivated at least in part by her colleague's interest in attempting to chart statistical measures across a semester in the form of a pre- and post-test; after one attempt the program reverted to the portfolio approach "as the ideal form of summative assessment, in keeping with NCTE/CCCC principles and practices."¹² In addition, Campbell reports that another member of the English Dept., who has a background in

¹⁰ Chapters in the second half of the book each collecting readings on a related idea such as "The Environment."

¹¹ Campbell did not explain how the portfolios are used.

¹² Campbell did not specify whether it was one semester or one year.

Education, has been working with Wellington's Assessment Coordinator to produce more assessment data on outcomes. These education-inspired ideas on programmatic assessment are, in Campbell's words, "beginning to infiltrate the Department" with "varying degrees of participation and commitment to principles and practice of assessment data gathering." What is happening to Wellington's English Department on the point of assessment, then, echoes Gladstein and Regaignon's point about programmatic assessment often being handed down from administration in the language of accreditation (194), a move that seems to be creating as much resistance at Wellington as I have observed in my own experience.

There are no plans for another programmatic review in the foreseeable future. Campbell speculated that Wellington's institutional reaccreditation in a couple of years might lead to another round of programmatic review. But there is no way of knowing.

Implications and Connections

The HBCU SLAC may be a special case of SLAC. But the most striking thing about Wellington's story in the most recent round of program review is how similar it is to other SLACs in the issues its FYC program faces in trying to re-view itself for the sake of its students. It still speaks to the broad themes in program assessment identified by the General Survey.

Shifting Programs & Perspectives

The hiring of an external reviewer to evaluate Wellington's FYC program is a clear indication that the program wants to evolve, to become something more than it has been. Likewise, the program's movement from "current traditional" modes-based, literature-focused writing toward something more disciplinary and using a contemporary textbook in "*They Say/I*

Say” is commendable, revealing faculty’s desire to bring their program up to date and better serve their students; Campbell’s proposed revision plan for ENG 102 pushes the program even further. These are big leaps. Though Campbell did not discuss it with me aside from a single mention, the practice of collecting ENG 102 student portfolios for some variety of program assessment also bodes well for the program’s continued improvement. The creation of coordinators for FYC courses indicates some recognition that the program’s leadership needs to evolve because it is no longer manageable by the chair alone. Whatever its future, the WAC proposal invited of Campbell and her colleague shows Wellington to be growing in its awareness of the need for and value of a campus-wide writing culture; it’s certainly a move Gladstein and Regaignon approve of (146).

Yet the past still has a strong hold on the FYC program. For all the good the external review did, the program still has not developed a mission statement or objectives (or at least it was not communicated to me that these had been developed) beyond the de facto ones provided by the common textbook. Outdated approaches to teaching writing still persist in some sections of ENG 101, over the external review’s recommendations and the Department’s decision to move in a different direction. The program still lacks a formal WPA, again, despite the external review’s recommendation, and the program shows the effects of that lack of leadership in the outmoded teaching approaches that persist and in the lack of control over its placement procedure and some of the more recent moves toward assessment.

Wellington’s FYC program shows the tensions of a changing program, one that is trying to modernize itself while still heavily anchored in its past.

Administrative Pressures

Wellington shows many of the same administrative pressures the General Survey, Worthman, and Armstrong experience. Yet it does so in an odd way. University administration did not interfere in the English Department's efforts with the external reviewer and even seems to have played along by allowing the reviewer to interview the provost, vice-provost, and perhaps others. Administration has not demonstrated any interest in affecting the direction of the FYC program's curriculum, at least per Campbell's telling. It does, by and large, seem content to let the English Dept. and the FYC program manage their own affairs.

Yet the University Assessment Office retains control of student placement. University administration likes the current form of ENG 101 Extended despite faculty objections to the commercial, traditional grammar instruction software used in the class. Administrators may have been involved in getting the external reviewer to come. Someone in administration had to invite the WAC proposal. Campbell indicated that the reason the program has not hired a formal WPA is that Wellington's administration opposes doing so, though she did not give any evidence for her claim. Through the Assessment Coordinator, assessment language is beginning, in Campbell's words, "to infiltrate the department," a loaded word choice. From what Campbell describes, the English Department gained control of its FYC program assessment narrative with the 2016 external review. Whatever kinks there were in implementing the report's recommendations aside, the Department showed that it was assessing the FYC program and that it was acting responsively to that assessment. Yet now it seems that there is no plan for the next round of programmatic review, and I inferred from Campbell's total narrative that the English Dept. is waiting on something, perhaps some signal from administration to even consider scheduling the next program assessment. For University administration to wrest back control of

that narrative seems a bit strange, particularly with the inferior assessment measures that have been implemented in the form of the Accuplacer timed writing test used for placement and in the combination of portfolio with Accuplacer post-ENG-102 timed writing test and multiple-choice test Campbell's former colleague tried.

The tension is a bit perplexing. Wellington's FYC program shows more influence than it should from outside forces, yet the only outside force that could create that kind of gravitational influence is administration, even as, to hear Campbell tell it, administration does not actively intervene in the program's or the department's operations.

Mixed Results

The external assessment of Wellington's FYC program has certainly produced mixed results in the ways it addressed or didn't the priorities of published scholarship on writing program assessment reviewed in chapter 1, and it is perhaps in this that it is most like other SLACs.

The school has a clear definition for its first-year writing program, one that the catalog states accurately and that all faculty seem to know—except that not all faculty follow that definition, at least in ENG 101, and the definition does not seem to fully consider the abilities of Wellington's students in either the placement procedure or their needs in satisfying writing expectations elsewhere in the University. The Spring 2016 external program assessment, while clearly defined within itself by the reviewer, does not seem to have been defined in any way by Wellington's context or the English Department, which requested the assessment, in the sense that while the reviewer seems to have known what was to be evaluated, for what purpose, and how, the English Department does not seem to have had any understanding of any of those

issues, or at least none that Campbell articulated. To the Department's credit, they had the good sense to ask for help when they needed it, and to be sure, a loosely defined assessment is better than none at all and may in some circumstances be better than a tightly defined assessment. But the external reviewer was limited in what they could say to the program by virtue of not having the time to truly get to know the FYC program, the students it serves, or the university that supports it. Also absent from the definition of assessment Wellington most recently operated under are the requirements that assessment be "*regular, systematic, and coherent*" (Yancey and Huot 11): the absence of information on when the next assessment will be, what it will review, or how that review will square with the most recent one further weakens what little definition Wellington had. As already noted, the FYC program does not have a mission statement or objectives except in whatever sense a single common textbook serves as a stand-in. Program outcomes, in contrast, are clearly defined and well-communicated to faculty and students. The assessment tools also require a mixed definition: Per Campbell, the reviewer used interviews, sample syllabi, and sample student papers. But Campbell was unable to say how those tools were used. It's also odd that the reviewer did not examine student writing to determine what learning it reflects; it's possible the reviewer did engage in that kind of study, but it's hard to imagine what depth they might have been able to pursue with just two days, several other tasks, and no mention of a rubric or evaluation standard for the student writing in the report.¹³ The information produced by the review and its management may be the simplest question to answer: the reviewer released a report, apparently kept in the same limited-access repository where other Department documents are kept, including master syllabi and student samples; apart from that, Campbell did not know who had access or how that access was granted. Completely absent from

¹³ At least, none I was told about. But the snippets of text and on-the-fly summaries of narrative of the review Campbell provided during our interviews makes such in-depth examination of student artifacts seem unlikely.

my conversation with Campbell were the financial concerns of the Spring 2016 review. This is, again, clearly due to Campbell's not working at Wellington at the time of the assessment and the death of her long-serving colleagues, since the external reviewer obviously got paid by someone within Wellington. The only financial concern touched on in our conversation was the release time the FYC coordinators have received for the first time in fall 2019.

Localism is accounted for in that Campbell and her former colleague have considered their students' needs in Campbell's proposed revisions to ENG 102 and in their joint WAC proposal; Campbell also demonstrated clear awareness of her local context in noting that a shift away from error-based teaching methods has created some hardship for her students in their other classes. But it's hard to imagine how any reviewer from outside an institution could grasp all the nuances of a program, department, and school in just two days, regardless of how much access that reviewer was granted.

The question of who was involved in Wellington's program review is tricky. The way Campbell described the external review process, Wellington's FYC faculty seem absent from the review save as passive interview subjects or access-granters to program information. This characterization may, however, be unfair, as Campbell narrated events she did not witness from a document she did not help create. Had I interviewed her late colleague, the story of those involved might have been different. Much clearer, however, is the current involvement of faculty in their ongoing processes. Campbell is certainly as active in ongoing review processes as a 5/4 load allows, as are her department chair and her colleague with an Education background, and as her late co-coordinator colleagues were. But the faculty who continue to resist change to ENG 101 and who did not make any effort to participate in Campbell's informal reading group or attend the workshop she offered, both meant to help them become more effective at their jobs,

show that at least some faculty members are not contributing at all to the FYC program's efforts to improve. Another dimension of the people question is students, specifically how the report accounted for students with special needs, ESL writers, and minorities. Campbell saw no direct reference to those types of students in the report, so in that sense the report does not account for them. But in the sense that Wellington is a minority-majority institution whose students share demographic factors that often mark them as underprepared, and the report called for a move away from error-based teaching approaches because such approaches lead to unfair evaluation of student work, the report did account for them.

With regard to speed of implementation of program revisions, Campbell's sense is that the changes that have trickled in over the last three years probably couldn't have happened any faster. Local circumstances, including considerations for faculty and students and her own role in the changes, precluded faster adoption.¹⁴ Campbell arrived at the beginning of the change-implementation process and had to build trust so that the necessary changes could happen. She doesn't have the authority to force changes, and in some ways she doesn't want that kind of authority. She believes changes are more effective when they happen because of a common purpose rather than a mandate: "Building a strong writing culture and a sense of community with your colleagues," she observed, "it happens not through institutional authority but through a common culture, consensus rather than coercion." It's through building a stronger writing culture that Campbell thinks the 2016 external review will eventually have the most impact on students. In the immediate term, she observed, "first-year students have nothing to compare to"; yet, as noted previously, a shift away from error-based teaching approaches has potentially hurt students because of how faculty in other departments respond to students' "bad grammar," a response

¹⁴ By "local circumstances," Campbell seemed to mean some of the local context issues discussed previously and maybe an institution-wide hesitance to embrace change.

Campbell characterized as rooted in “well-intentioned, but oversimplified and misguided assumptions about the relationship between grammatical correctness and making meaning in one’s discipline”; further, the response is a kind of criticism of the new approaches in Wellington’s FYC program. If, however, the changes initiated by the 2016 external review report could be the catalyst for creating a stronger culture of writing campus-wide, for example by creating an appetite for a WAC program, Campbell believes the review could come to benefit students eventually. Other than these post-report realizations, Wellington’s English Department does not appear to have given any consideration to the speed of implementation or to the possible effects of the external assessment they commissioned.

Even after this reprocessing of Wellington’s story, it’s still impossible to say for certain what the FYC program’s motivation for engaging in the Spring 2016 assessment was. The changes were to the program and to classes, suggesting that learning about student learning was at least part of the motivation. Yet the way in which the review was carried out bears the gravitational signature of an administration at work behind the scenes, specifically in the short amount of time given to the review and in the lack of in-depth consideration of student artifacts. It appears, then, that Wellington falls in with those schools in the General Survey that list both desire to learn and administrative mandate as assessment motivators.

In sum, Wellington’s Spring 2016 review is very much in line with its peer participants in the General Survey.

Additional Considerations: Program Leadership

Campbell had two key observations about the operation of SLACs beyond the discussion of FYW program assessment that merit some exploration. The first is on program leadership.

Campbell's assertion that it's better to lead by consensus and a common purpose rather than by authority is important. It is, in point of fact, what Dell does at Worthman and what Brown is attempting to do at Armstrong. There are significant differences between the three, however. Campbell is still working to build that consensus and shared purpose because she is still fairly new to Wellington, and Wellington in general and the English Dept. in particular have not yet embraced an institution-wide culture of writing. Dell, in contrast, already has that buy-in: his department has accepted his vision and his institution's administration largely has, too, in both cases somewhat by natural interest in a culture of writing and somewhat by the persuasive work Dell has done. Brown seems to have buy-in from her staff of adjuncts, more limited commitment from her chair, and virtually none from her institution, so her level of effectiveness as leader is fairly high with her immediate staff but drops off exponentially the higher she needs to reach into the administrative structure.

What these differences suggest is that consensus is important—vital, even—but some formal authority is still necessary. As Campbell said and Gladstein and Regaignon affirm (21-22, 137-138), directing a writing program, particularly when it comes to an assessment project, by top-down mandate isn't the best way to go at a SLAC because it's likely to create resistance and resentment from faculty. But as these three programs illustrate, having an official title (and maybe a budget) does lower the threshold for the amount of consensus-building that has to be done. Dell has an official title, a small measure of authority, and a budget, and the only thing he noted not getting compliance on was an increase to his budget. Brown has a semi-official title, but no authority, no control over her budget, and barely a course release, all of which severely limit her range—she can't even schedule her own courses or shuffle her faculty. The only thing she has going for her is the confidence of her chair, which is no small thing, but not a large

enough thing to empower Brown for effective program or program assessment leadership.

Campbell seems to lack even what little Brown has: even in her role as coordinator of ENG 102, she cannot decide on changes to the course master syllabus without slowly building agreement over time from her departmental colleagues, something Brown's limited authority still allows her quickly and easily. Where Brown and Dell have control over assessment efforts in the FYW programs, Campbell does not and never has. Some official authority does seem necessary to program function and assessment execution.

In both of these points, however, we must acknowledge that certain demographic factors may play into each of the schools' contexts and how they respond or don't to their WPAs. Dell is a white man at a dominantly white school, and even though both our conversation and the ways he discussed his colleague Clementine Sanchez suggest he does not consciously leverage his privilege, it may be that his race and gender do smooth the road for him, at least a bit. Brown is a white woman at a university that clings tightly to its affiliation with a highly sectarian evangelical denomination that is among the strictest in its limitation of women. Even though Brown's chair is a woman, her status as a woman (possibly even their status as women) may play into some of the difficulties she has had assessing and adjusting her program. Campbell's case is perhaps the most interesting one. Nothing in our conversation suggested her context limits her because she is a woman. She does diverge significantly on matters of faith from her institution's religious affiliation, though that difference is not widely known, and she believes it might not be a problem even if it were. What does concern her is her race: she is white. She is not from the U.S., which maybe makes a little difference, but is not a difference others would know until they heard her speak or found out her story, both of which might take time. Campbell is acutely aware that the color of her skin means that she must be careful in how she presents her ideas and plans

to her colleagues for fear that they will either perceive her as doing so on a privilege-based authority she does not feel or intend, or perhaps wave her ideas through without careful, critical consideration for fear of offending “the white woman,” either way perhaps attributing to Campbell a white fragility that, as a foreigner, she may not have.

The issue of consensus-building versus immanent authority complicates things a bit for SLAC program assessment leadership. Campbell makes a really good point about the value of leading through consensus, one that the published scholarship reviewed in chapter 1 largely agrees with. At the same time, there are complicating factors that may make that consensus harder to build at a small program: Consensus may be difficult to build at a PCU because of the large number of people involved, it’s true, but the small number of faculty and reduced distances between faculty members and between faculty and administration enhance the effect that identity politics may have when the time comes to make decisions about programmatic assessment.

Additional Considerations: Race and the HBCU SLAC Sense of Separateness

The issue of identity politics leads to the second additional insight Campbell shared. Dell mentioned the SLAC sense of separateness, echoing Gladstein and Regaignon’s discussions of the small college structure of feeling (22). Campbell affirmed feeling that sense of separateness from Wellington as a SLAC, and further as an HBCU, a point that merits serious consideration.

As I said at the beginning of the chapter, my aim in engaging with an HBCU SLAC was to bring HBCU SLACs into a conversation that, as best I could tell, in all but one case did not seem to acknowledge that these schools existed. Yet I had great difficulty in finding a school willing to participate. I directly contacted sixteen HBCU SLACs, four of them multiple times and two of them through friendly intermediaries. Only four gave me any sort of initial response,

one of them being Wellington's department chair writing to say that she was too busy (Campbell's response came six months later); another WPA, after at least three attempts at contact (one direct, one through an intermediary, and one through the department chair) sent a reply so terse that it seemed rudely dismissive.¹⁵

These responses—both rude dismissal and silence—baffled me. My assumption was that HBCU SLACs had been excluded from scholarship on writing program assessment for the same reason HBCUs had been created in the first place: White institutions, or in this case white scholars at white institutions, had kept blacks out. That was what I have sought to rectify. But my lack of success made me wonder if something else was at play. I approached an African American colleague, herself a graduate of a prestigious HBCU PCU, and, after clarifying that I was not asking her to “speak for her people” or even for all HBCUs, asked if my problem in recruiting a participant school might have been my identity. I grew up in Argentina, and though the people who surrounded me would have been considered Caucasian, my very white skin looked even paler when surrounded by their deep olive tones; add to this a name that was unpronounceable except to those who had any training in English, and my sense has long been that someone with my name will never be confused with anything other than a white man. Deeply flawed and unchallenged though that assumption was, it was the idea I had in mind when I approached my colleague to find out if my identity might have been the reason for the lack of responses to my inquiries. She said that, yes, it was possible, though she challenged me to reconsider what part of my name I considered essentially white and why I made the assumption that my racial identity might have been an issue. She went on to explain that my assumption

¹⁵ The actual message was “Sorry, but I’m not interested in participating. Best [no signature line] Sent from my iPhone.” The terseness of the response combined with the number of times and avenues it took me to get it made me think that what was actually meant was “Go to Hell.” It’s possible, however, that this was only my impression, and my impression could easily be wrong.

about the exclusion of HBCUs was somewhat flawed: While racism and exclusion may have created HBCUs, many now operate under a type of cloistering mentality (my term, not hers) in which they seek separation from the rest of the (white) world, zealously guarding themselves and their students. The United States's difficult 400-year history on race says the HBCU SLAC has good reason for its fears. Just as one example, I recently heard about some of the history between a large PCU and a small HBCU SLAC in the same city involving the way the PCU's English Department treated the HBCU SLAC's students during desegregation to make those students not want to attend the PCU. The story made clear why the HBCU SLAC still has trouble trusting the PCU 50 years later. It also validates my colleague's point.

Campbell effectively confirmed the HBCU SLAC sense of separateness in our conversation, mostly without realizing it. I sensed in Campbell from the first moments of our interview a tension between recognizing what I was trying to do and wanting to be honest about her experience to contribute to that effort, while also wanting to present her institution in the best possible light and making sure that I not include any details that might make her school look bad. She finally admitted as much in the closing moments of our final interview, telling me that she had done some reading on white faculty at HBCUs and found that it's hard for white faculty to discuss their HBCUs because they don't want to seem critical of their schools. She was a little surprised when I pointed out to her that the hedging behaviours she described reading about were the same ones she had engaged in with me from the start. She had not realized she was doing so. There's clearly a sensitivity there—a sensitivity that perhaps I should have shared.

It's impossible to know why I encountered such difficulty in recruiting a participant HBCU for this portion of the survey. Maybe my identity was an issue—a quick internet search would have revealed it. Maybe the faculty at the schools I contacted are just as overworked as

SLAC faculty everywhere and simply couldn't work one more thing into their schedules. Maybe those schools that felt the inclination to respond had already done so for the General Survey and did not want to participate for a second time. Or maybe the statistical odds were simply not in my favor: considering that only 42 of 246 SLACs, or seventeen percent, responded to my requests to participate in the General Survey, getting any sort of response from four of sixteen HBCU SLACs is a significantly better response rate, statistically speaking. But whatever the reason, I would have done well to pursue these schools with greater critical self-examination than I did.

Conclusion

With that, the in-depth interviews are concluded. The final chapter reconsiders the explorations of this chapter and the three previous chapters to provide a final analysis of how SLACs and program assessment scholars can learn from each other to improve the field's understanding of best practices.

Chapter 6: Study Implications

Summary Review

This study fundamentally set out to answer three questions: (1) How are FYW programs engaging in program assessment at SLACs? (2) What do SLACs need to learn from best practices agreed upon by published research and scholarship in writing program assessment? (3) What, if anything, can writing program assessment scholars and researchers working at PCUs learn from SLACs about programmatic review practices?

The preceding four chapters have attempted to answer the first question, and the answer is, in sum, that it varies. Most schools that responded to my requests to participate have attempted or are attempting to engage in some form of measuring the effectiveness of their first-year writing programs, in a constellation of configurations and with varying degrees of success. Thirty-four of 42 respondent institutions have evaluated their programs at least as often as every ten years, and 26 of those do so yearly or every two to three years. Twenty-nine of 31 schools evaluated their entire first-year writing programs (plus Armstrong and Wellington), an entire first-year writing course (plus Worthman), or one or more student learning outcomes.¹ Half of 32 respondents and Worthman did so through completely formal, replicable assessment processes, while an additional twelve respondents plus Armstrong and Wellington engaged in partially formal processes. Seventeen of 31 institutions, along with Worthman, Armstrong, and Wellington, report that current theory shaped their assessment efforts. Twenty-four of 31 respondents and Worthman plan to assess their programs again within the next five years,

¹ The difference in number is due to the eight schools who have never assessed their FYW programs being excluded, two additional schools who opted not to complete the General Survey, and one respondent who did not answer any of the open-response questions.

eighteen of them within the next year. Most responding schools, it seems, are attempting to engage in regular, systematic program assessments.

But many schools are not engaging in these practices, or not engaging with them frequently, or not systematically, or only when forced to by some outside agency. The reason for that variety of engagements with program assessments resides in the variety of the programs themselves: The General Survey found schools engaging in two-semester composition, one-semester composition, one-semester first-year writing seminar, and one-semester first-year seminar programs, plus a few others that defy neat classification—about the only thing the Survey didn't find was a predominance of WAC programs, a striking counter to Gladstein and Regaignon's assertion that at 92% of their sample, WAC is nearly twice as common at SLACs as it is at PCUs (7). This variety is reflected in the programs operating at the universities interviewed in depth, each of which is different from the others: Worthman operates a single first-year writing seminar course in two options and no remedial course; Armstrong offers a one-class composition course with a quasi-remedial course; Wellington requires two semesters of traditional composition with a single remedial course for those that qualify. The programs responding to the General Survey are led by a mix of formal WPAs, department chairs, and committees, plus a stray dean or other leadership configuration. This mix is reflected in Worthman's Dell, who has limited authority over his program and assessment efforts even as a formal WPA; in Armstrong's Brown, who is a semi-formal WPA with some authority only over her staff of adjuncts and little else; and in Wellington's Campbell, who has no authority in her role as a program coordinator save what she can create through consensus-building. Some FYW programs are housed within a single department and taught only by faculty in that department (Worthman, Armstrong, and Wellington all conform to this model), while others are owned by

multiple divisions and taught by faculty from across campus. The responding institutions in this study in total represent a broad spectrum of FYW program constructions, and thus have a broad spectrum of practices for assessing those programs. There is a lot of noise in the signal.

Mutual Learning: SLAC Program Assessment Practices & PCU Scholars/Researchers

But for all that noise, there is still much that can be said in answer to the second and third questions, what SLACs can learn from program review scholarship, and what program review scholarship can learn from SLACs. Because this study began by identifying several themes in the published scholarship on best practices on writing program assessment, it makes sense to examine what these scholars and SLAC FYW program directors and assessment leaders can learn from each other by working back through each of these themes in the same order they were presented in chapter 1. Some of these themes are, as chapter 1 revealed, interconnected, and examining each in turn has an element of playing the game pick-up sticks, or, in Meg Morgan's metaphor, trying to assemble a "crazy quilt." The elements will be kept disentangled as much as possible for a clearer examination. Included in this section are possible directions for future research in writing program assessment, whether for SLACs or for all institutions.

Definition of Writing Program

The single definition of *writing program* offered by White, Elliot, and Peckham in chapter 1 as a collection of managed, directed actions intended to produce formally demonstrable results is broad enough that it should be easily answerable by any type of institution anywhere. Yet the General Survey and the specific interviews suggest that many SLACs lack a clearly-articulated definition of their programs, at least in that many do not seem to have well-defined

visions of what their first-year writing courses are about. While that challenge may not be unique to SLACs, it is striking that it is as difficult as it is for as few of them as there are, to say nothing of the difficulty it poses to a comprehensive study of these institutions. No set of responses to a single question in the General Survey demonstrates this assertion directly. But the tangle of answers to the questions about program type and home, program faculty status, program leadership, mission statement, objectives, outcomes, and assessment intervals (all issues addressed separately to follow) suggests that many of the responding programs lack a clear vision of themselves. Consider, for example, the General Survey's findings of seven different approaches to FYW among 41 respondents, indiscernible answer patterns among the responses about program faculty status, five approaches to program leadership plus thirteen schools whose approaches didn't fit any classification, or the discovery that more than half of respondents don't have mission statements for their programs. The most that many of these schools seem to be able to do is point to some class or two that they offer that is writing-focused and that students generally take (or are encouraged to take) in their first two semesters. In the in-depth interviews, Armstrong's Brown and Wellington's Campbell both had a complete understanding of their programs, but they seemed to be the only ones at their respective institutions who did, effectively meaning that their programs were not clearly defined at the institutional level. Both struggled with articulating that definition in institutional terms. Only Worthman's Dell offered a clear and complete definition of his program, and even he expressed frustration at the challenge of making his institution understand that definition. It seems SLACs could benefit significantly from learning to define their FYW programs in ways that are understandable and articulable by more than just the WPA.

But writing program assessment scholars and researchers could learn something from the apparent chaos of SLAC FYW programs. Much of the literature on writing programs and on program assessment seems to proceed from an implicit notion that somehow we're all talking about the same thing when a scholar says "writing program." While it would be great to offer unproblematic examples of *writing program*, meaning those in which the term is used with a clear, contextually specific definition in program assessment literature, such a use doesn't seem to exist—which is the point. The Yanceys, Huots, O'Neills, and White-Elliot-Peckhams of published scholarship all use "writing program" in general, undefined ways, and given that their intention is to write broad guidelines for fellow practitioners at peer institutions to their own, this makes sense. Yet this very literature also argues repeatedly that local context must always be the dominant consideration; further, Carter's experience with writing program assessment at North Carolina State is different from Inoue's account of his experience at Cal. State, Fresno, which is different from Leydens and Olds' experience at Colorado School of Mines, which is different from what happened to Moran and Herrington at the University of Massachusetts, which is different from Peckham's narrative of his work at LSU, and so on and so on. The edited collection *Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context* assumes in its very existence that even public comprehensive institutions define *writing program* in a variety of ways, many of them distinctly different from those at other institutions. Yet, again, general publications on writing program review treat the idea of a writing program like a single, clearly defined, monolithic thing. The spectrum of FYW program constructions at SLACs made visible in the General Survey likewise insists that many approaches equally qualify for the designation "first-year writing." It challenges the imagination to believe that SLACs, which account for only two percent of higher education students in United States, would somehow be *less* diverse in

their approaches to first-year writing than PCUs, which account for more than 30% of collegiate students. More logically, PCU FYW programs contain at least as much variety in their approaches as SLACs do, probably more. In considering the definition of *writing program*, then, writing program assessment scholars might do well to specify what program type(s) they have in mind in their writings, even when writing generally. The variety of programs among responding SLACs suggests that acknowledging such nuances is important to effective implementation of program review efforts.

Definition of Writing Program Assessment

Six different authors or groups of authors agreeing on definitions of *writing program assessment* in chapter 1 has much to say to SLAC WPAs and program directors, particularly on the frequency and regularity with which to reconsider a program, and on the importance of reconsiderations being, in White et al.'s word, "longitudinal" (4), meaning not just reconsidering the current program but doing so in view of past reconsiderations and with an eye toward future work. The General Survey shows that FYW program assessment is occurring at least every three years in 55% of responding schools. That's not a bad frequency—even if not an ongoing model, such as that employed by Dell, or yearly approach, followed by more than one-third of General Survey respondents, a time span of two to three years between assessments is still small enough to suggest intentionality in the program review effort and to keep institutional memories fresh, or at least to allow smoother handoff of institutional memories to new faculty as older faculty move on or step out of the review effort. Fresh institutional memories are important for maintaining the longitudinal part of the review process. Similarly, the 50% of responding institutions that conducted completely formal program review processes show their understanding of a clearly

defined program assessment effort in that formal processes are easier to understand in retrospect and easier to duplicate in the future. But it is the 45% of responding institutions that reviewed their programs less often than every three years, such as Armstrong and Wellington, and the 50% of institutions that did so with only partial formality that have the most need of learning from best-practices publications. While a program that reviews itself regularly every five years, for example, shows a kind of understanding of the importance of regularity and longitudinality of programmatic review, such an interval makes it harder to engage in a process that is, as Yancey and Huot put it, “coherent” (11). The same can be said for all the programs that engaged in review projects of limited formality or complete informality: lack of formality limits coherence, intentionality, and a longitudinal view.² SLAC FYW programs need to reexamine themselves with a frequency narrow enough to remember where they’ve been and to plan for future assessment work. Neither Armstrong nor Wellington know when they will next review their programs. They and the many responding institutions in the General Survey like them could benefit from following published research more closely.

Yet the variety of *program assessment* definitions that seems wide enough to contain the multitudes of approaches to program evaluation also seems to miss something. As with the definition of *writing program*, there again seem to be two unspoken assumptions lurking in the background of statements about definitions. The twin drumbeats of regular assessment (White, Elliot, and Peckham and Yancey and Huot chief among them) and documented assessment processes (Hesse, Moran and Herrington, *NCTE-WPA White Paper*, O’Neill, and Walker and Myers) ring loud. While none of them say it outright, much of the literature seems to imply—perhaps by repetition alone—that “regular” writing program assessment means “ongoing” or at

² Neither Armstrong, Wellington, nor Worthman had issues with complete informality in their assessment projects.

least yearly. The scholars who emphasize the need for documentation similarly seem to imply that documentation means recording and preserving everything an assessment effort produces. I concede that these inferences may be mine alone. It's also true that the processes followed by about half the SLACs in this sample need to be formalized and pursued more frequently. But there might be value for all collegiate institutions if "regular program assessment" did not have to mean ongoing or yearly. Engaging in an assessment project once a year instead of every semester, or every two years instead of once a year, for example, might allow programs to breathe a little, decreasing faculty burnout, giving the programs a little more time to test any hypotheses that arose in a previous round of review, and lessen the chance that the reevaluation process becomes a box to check rather than an opportunity to learn. Documentation practices that did not require records of every single move might have a similar benefit—some things are better left undocumented. The important content should always be documented in formal channels, of course. But if not *everything* must be documented, a small bit of space is created for micro-adjustments and problem-solving that could contribute to a smoother, more engaging process for faculty.

Localism

Localism is one of the themes of scholarship the General Survey could not address, at least not directly. That said, the entire collection of survey responses suggests that the responding SLACs are doing what they are doing for program assessment in response to their local contexts, at least to the extent that none of them mentioned any outside influences or factors on their assessment projects. Armstrong and Wellington, however, illustrate lack of localism fairly well. There was wisdom for both schools in hiring outside consultants when they determined they

needed help—points of programmatic humility and self-awareness that are worthy of respect. At the same time, these consultations are problematic for a local construction of assessment because of the brief amount of time the consultants spent at the institutions. As noted in the chapter on Wellington, the idea that a consultant, whatever their level of expertise or experience, could make effective determinations for the university that fully address the local context after only two days on campus seems farfetched. While Brown did not say how long her consultant team was on site, it seems unlikely that they would have stayed much longer than Wellington’s did, and even less so that they would have stayed long enough to truly get to know the institution. Add to this thematic conflict the further notion of the “small college structure of feeling,” as Gladstein and Regaignon call the sense of separateness or otherness that most small colleges seem to feel, and the idea of hiring outside programmatic assessors seems even more counter to the idea of localism.

It may be on this point, however, that SLACs have the most to say to scholars at PCUs. Localism says that all assessment projects must respond to the local context. What that position assumes is that local conditions are conducive to an assessment effort. But what if they aren’t? What if the local conditions are such that a review process is materially unworkable? If the in-depth interviews reveal anything, it’s that the local context must be at least somewhat favorable for a “decent” program assessment to take place—that is, there must at least be some material considerations present, like a small budget to pay for staff or materials, a little release time for the WPA, and a modicum of interest from department and university administration to say (as they did to Dell) “Give us some assessment stuff.” Without these basic conditions in the local context, even the “flexible” SLAC WPA will have difficulty producing any sort of investigation into the FYW program’s practices and results. Armstrong and Wellington both demonstrate this

limitation conclusively, and even Dell had to do quite a bit of work to get his program where it is. Again, the General Survey didn't touch on this issue, but given the mix of program types, leadership configurations, and teaching faculty load and status described in chapter 2, it would strain belief to say that the respondent schools only included well-provided institutions with eager, compliant administrations who care deeply about assessing their FYW programs for the sake of learning about teaching and student learning and who trust their WPAs to do the job they were trained to do. More likely, Armstrong, Wellington, and Worthman represent the norm at least among the responding schools if not SLACs at large.

The implication for future scholarship on program assessment written by researchers at PCUs is that they might want to name their assumptions about local conditions. Better yet, work on what constitutes acceptable minimum conditions for a program review would be major help to WPAs generally and to those working at SLACs in particular.

Program Mission Statement, Objectives, and Outcomes

These three elements are again combined for discussion just as they were in chapters 2-5 because of their interactional nature. Though treated separately here, it's worth pointing out that these elements can be understood as part of the local context that assessment efforts must consider. As concerns SLACs, these institutions, in short, have quite a bit to learn from best practices scholarship on these points, particularly on mission statements. As noted in chapter 2's presentation of General Survey results, more than half of responding institutions lack a mission statement. While around 75% of respondent schools had both objectives and outcomes, the likelihood that this is the result of administrative interference in the program rather than an informed decision by the program (as discussed in chapter 2's analysis of administrative

pressures) makes this bad news all around: if administrators created the outcomes and objectives, then the FYW program is not fully within the home department's control, significantly complicating program review efforts. Armstrong and Wellington affirm the finding in that Armstrong only had objectives until recently, adding outcomes just in the last year, and Wellington has only outcomes; both schools similarly show the marks of administrative interference, or at least interference in the form of complete apathy and lack of support, in Armstrong's case.

But one other point that bears noting for program assessment literature is that somehow these schools are still accomplishing the fundamental work of FYW program evaluation insofar as every institution participating in this study save the ten participants of the General Survey is at least attempting to evaluate their programs. Maybe they aren't doing it as well or as completely as they might, but they're still getting it done. Scholars and researchers might do well to consider and investigate how these evaluation efforts can proceed in light of imperfect circumstances. Such consideration/investigation might look at how programs such as these SLAC FYW constructions accomplish what they do, or, as with local context, suggest minimum standards that are necessary for an effective program assessment effort construction.

Personnel

The issue of whom to include in program review efforts and when to include them is a difficult one. Chapter 1 acknowledged that it would be, and chapter 2 confirmed the difficulty in that the General Survey's questions on program leadership, teaching faculty, and staff involved in the assessment effort received the most muddled responses of all. The General Survey and the three subjects of the in-depth interviews had plenty to say on the topic, particularly on program

leadership and faculty labor, both of which are central considerations to the execution of a program assessment effort.

The chapter on Wellington closed with a reflection on program leadership, chiefly focusing on the contrast between Campbell's assertion about the value of leading by consensus-building and leading through explicit authority. There is much wisdom in leading by consensus, particularly when the leader, such as Campbell and Brown, has no real authority to leverage; even Dell acknowledged that much of what he did was accomplished by persuasion despite his formal, albeit limited, authority at Worthman. Yet consensus-building depends on trust. The General Survey's question on who was involved in an assessment effort revealed several arrangements in which assessment team members were pulled from departments across campuses. It's difficult to create the trust needed for consensus-building among team members who don't know each other well and/or when led by someone who has no official expertise in the task at hand. Formal authority made many things easier for Dell, just as the lack of it significantly complicated program leadership and assessment matters for Brown and Campbell. But the recognition of their training and formal expertise also helped create trust among the people they worked with. These elements suggest that some formal authority is necessary for WPAs to be effective at their jobs, but that that formal authority is best exercised through consensus building.

Considerations about SLAC faculty labor are also important. Faculty teaching 4/4 or more loads, plus advising, plus committee work, plus a dozen other things, on 9- or 10-month contracts, perhaps for less pay than their PCU counterparts, can't really be expected to willingly take on the extensive work of FYW program assessment, too, and do it well. An institution can, of course, demand faculty do so if it wishes, but where in their schedules can faculty burdened

with the time-intensive task of teaching first-year writing reasonably be expected to fit such a load and deliver program assessment with any kind of quality? The answers, of course, are (1) nowhere, so that the assessment simply doesn't get done, resulting in either an outside consultant being brought in or an institutional administrator intervening who may or may not understand what they're doing or why and who may do the job badly; or (2) faculty tackle the project tiny bit by tiny bit and only produce an assessment eventually and maybe in such a way that none of those involved ever fully grasps the entire picture (such being the case in my own department in 2018-2019).

In sum, the mutual teaching takeaway is that SLACs need to give more attention to writing program leadership configurations, especially at program assessment time, and to faculty labor conditions before implementing an assessment project.³ For their part, program assessment researchers and scholars would do well to give more thought to how varying program leadership configurations other than the "standard" WPA and to how faculty workload, particularly for graduate students and contingent faculty, might affect programmatic reviews.

Assessment Tool

Responding SLACs are not using student grades or timed writings as their tool for evaluating their FYW programs. That much is clear in the cacophony of responses to the General Survey's questions on evaluation tool and current theories that informed their latest assessment efforts. In this respect, SLACs are conforming to best practices. Only five institutions used a portfolio. Though it's impossible to know exactly why all others did not use a portfolio, Worthman's Dell opted not to because of the amount of time portfolios take to process and a

³ Even Gladstein and Regaignon's book doesn't do this, merely classifying leadership configurations without evaluating the effectiveness of each type.

small pool of faculty to review them, good reasons for modification to best practices and likely the same reasons some of the General Survey's responding institutions also avoided portfolios. But if the responding schools really do have as many formally trained composition faculty as they claim, it seems many of these institutions are not listening to those faculty: the "current theories" many programs said they followed—namely "rubrics," AP grading practices, "equity and inclusion"—aren't really current theories at all, at least as far as writing program assessment is concerned. Combined with the many institutions that did not cite current theory at all and the previously noted evidence of administrative influence, these factors suggest that SLAC FYW programs are either ignoring the guidance offered by their composition-trained faculty or are drastically over-reporting the numbers of these faculty.

Of interest to PCU program assessment investigators is the variety of other tools SLAC WPAs used to evaluate their programs: single essays, student surveys, focus groups, and oral interviews were all named in the General Survey, plus the outside consultations used at Armstrong and Wellington. It seems unlikely that the writers reviewed in chapter 1 are not aware of these other assessment tools. Yet these tools are hardly mentioned at all save in a passing reference here or there. The corpus of scholarship and research seems, however, to be locked onto the portfolio as the only adequate means of evaluating a writing program. Portfolios can do a lot, but a survey or a focus group, or even a single essay, may reveal things that a portfolio cannot, or cannot reveal as well. The idea of program assessment as informed by current theory is also worth considering since the choice of assessment tool is the one most likely informed by some sort of theory. O'Neill brings up this point directly (451), though it also seems echoed in Yancey's assertion that decisions of how to go about writing assessment should consider "methodology" (486) and in the entirety of White, Elliot, and Peckham's *Very Like A Whale*. Yet

as with the idea of *writing program*, the idea of “current theory” seems largely undefined, and WPAs or their equivalents cannot be expected to account for ideas that are not clearly defined. SLACs, then, can contribute two things to the enrichment of the main line of assessment scholarship: considering more seriously other means of evaluating program effectiveness, and clearer definitions of “current theory.”

Finances

The General Survey did not inquire about assessment project finances, but Dell, Brown, and Campbell did reveal that their programs are mindful of their finances, at least to the extent that two of the three are aware that they don't have direct access to any money to work with, something the reduced budgets of small colleges compared to PCUs anticipated. There is no deficiency in knowledge of financial considerations for these three WPAs. They know they can't engage in proper assessments without money, they know they have to make decisions for assessment based on what money they have access to (just as they have done), and they agree with O'Neill, Moore, and Huot that “If good assessment is important to a university, they should be willing to pay for it” (114). It could be argued that Dell, Brown, and Campbell could just ask for more money. But they have already done so many times and are continuing to do so. There simply isn't any money for assessment projects or to improve programs according to assessment findings—which does indicate that there *is* a deficiency in their institutions' thinking about assessment funding. On the point of finances, then, it is the SLACs themselves rather than the members of the FYW program who would do well to pay more attention to the available publications on effective assessment projects.

SLACs may have the smallest first-year writing programs in the higher education landscape, but they are not the only small programs, nor is lack of funding strictly a SLAC concern. While much of the available literature on program assessment does acknowledge the realities of scarce financial resources and that WPAs sometimes have to go outside their programs to get the necessary resources, I encountered little discussion of either point beyond the mere acknowledgement of those realities. More guidance from prominent scholars on exactly how to gain that funding would benefit more than just liberal arts universities.

Diverse Populations

The General Survey did not attempt to investigate this theme. For their part, Dell and Brown both admitted not properly considering diverse populations, and Campbell had trouble thinking of what a diverse or a special-needs population would look like on her campus. Dell's reaction on hearing his response to my question on diverse populations on his campus was particularly illuminating because he heard himself give an answer that bothered him. Both he and Brown recognized the need to do a better job at their respective institutions of acknowledging these populations and incorporating them into the FYW program and the assessment. While they might reasonably castigate themselves a bit for failing to act according to their training on this point, the failure is not entirely theirs. As both noted, they work at overwhelmingly white institutions that have limited resources for any students who are outside of the "norm." Factor in the previously-discussed issues of lack of financial resources, staff, and institutional authority in these programs, and it's not surprising at all that Dell and Brown struggle as they do in accounting for students who have special needs, English-learning students, and minorities, even as they have growing numbers of all three types on their campuses.

Nor can they turn to best practices literature for much help on this, at least where program assessment is concerned. Composition-rhetoric, writing studies, or whatever else it might be called, is a white-dominated discipline. Of the scholars reviewed in chapter 1, only Inoue, Matsuda, and maybe a couple of others are not white. That may be my fault for not intentionally seeking out and including a more diverse group of scholars. But it's also telling that the voices most often elevated in writing program assessment scholarship, whom I went to precisely because I am a junior scholar seeking knowledge from the elevated and prominent, are almost all white. Rather than diverse populations being an issue on which SLAC WPA and program assessment scholars can learn from each other, the entire field of writing studies needs to do a better job of properly considering people who do not look like most of us in the discipline.

Speed of Implementation, Data Management, and Consideration of Consequences

While the General Survey did not explore these three themes, the in-depth interviews did ask respondents about each of them. Dell was the only one who could answer all of them clearly, and he did have thorough answers for each. Brown was able to speak some to the speed of implementing the assessment in the sense that it was an external review done over a couple of days. She could also address the speed of implementation of changes in her narrative of what happened after the external review, but in a way that suggested her timeline was driven more by limitations on her time and the amount of cooperation (or not) she got from Armstrong's administration rather than by a careful consideration of her context and of the possible consequences. Brown did not address data management at all, never mentioning where the external review report is kept or who can access it, nor what she does with all the placement

essays she collects each summer. She did speak a little to consequences of the changes the external review caused the program, but she framed these largely more in terms of the challenges of “bringing her program up to code” than in implications for student learning conditions, though students were clearly in her mind in her pursuit of the placement essays, as were faculty in her design of the limited faculty support she can do and in lowering course caps. Campbell was able to address all three themes, but only at a remove since she didn’t work at Wellington when the assessment was carried out.

Making any statements about what SLACs can add to conversations about program assessment best practices or vice-versa on these themes is challenging. All three WPAs are clearly thinking about issues of implementation, data management, and consequences. Whether they have any agency or resources to act to influence those issues is another matter, one deeply intertwined in issues of local context and human and fiscal resources already addressed. SLAC WPAs won’t be able to tackle the issues of implementation speed, data, and consequences until other issues are addressed. The best way to consider these themes, then, may be in light of the need for better scholarship on minimal standards for effective program assessment execution.

Assessment Motivation

The General Survey found that a mix of formative impulses and administrative mandates dominated the motivation for engaging in FYW assessment projects among responding schools. That mix plus other evidence points to significant influence by administrators. Assessing writing programs strictly to please or appease administrators will only yield data that can satisfy that constituency. But assessing to improve student learning will provide data to improve teaching *and* to satisfy administrators. SLAC FYW programs would greatly benefit from giving more

attention to the scholars in program assessment who emphasize the formative, student-focused approach to program review such as Morgan, Yancey and Huot, and O'Neill, Moore, and Huot.

There is, of course, a strain of program assessment literature that I generally characterize as more cynical, chiefly Haswell and elements of White, Elliot, and Peckham. I don't mean that to be an ungracious characterization. Their works are strategic and pragmatic, I have benefited from those works, and I admire these authors as scholars. But their approaches, at least at times, seem to surrender the idea of formative program evaluation as pointless because administrators are unlikely to care about or be impressed by the results of formative evaluations. Rather, there should be room for program assessments that are formative while also satisfying all stakeholders. Brown, Campbell, and Dell, in contrast, expressed outright exuberance about the work they had done or might do if given the chance that would allow them to engage with their students' needs and improve the work their programs do. This was no wide-eyed, naïve exuberance, either. These were professionals who acknowledged the limitations and difficulty of their work and the need to satisfy stakeholders who don't understand or care what writing teachers do. They were realistic about their circumstances. Yet they kept their sights on the possibility for good of the work they did. Retaining that optimism—dare I say hope?—was vital to these three WPAs because their institutional circumstances are such that without it, they likely would sink into professional despair, making them ineffective in their jobs or even sending them away from the programs that so benefit from their expertise. Assessment practices that lean more toward Campbell, Dell, and Brown's optimistic realism seem a better way to go.

Additional Lessons

SLAC FYW program assessments have two final ideas to share, one for their own programs and WPAs, the other for program assessment researchers.

For SLACs: Writing Your Way Out

The administrative interference in SLAC FYW programs assessments is clearly a challenge for Dell, Brown, and Campbell for many reasons, not least because administrators tend to reduce an assessment from an opportunity to learn about teaching and student learning to a box to be checked and numbers to be created to throw at an accrediting agency so that they'll go away and leave the school alone.⁴ But what if that administrative mandate could be turned? What if these small college programs could take advantage of those mandates and whatever resources they might provide and turn them to programmatic reviews that actually do what these efforts are meant to do?

Assessment is a writing program's chance to tell its story and define itself. My friend Jack Shock is a long-time professor of Communication who also has many years of professional experience. One point he insists on with his public relations students is to always tell their client's story before someone else does. Dell and Brown's approaches to writing program assessment suggest something similar and a way forward for SLAC WPAs: Do the right work, even when administration is hostile or indifferent. Then, do as Dell did and issue a report administration isn't expecting that shows what the program can do.

The many murky answers in the General Survey may be, as I have argued, an indication of someone else telling a writing program's story. Haswell's point in "Fighting Number with

⁴ Ironically, in this way college administrators are to accreditors much like departmental faculty are to college administrators.

Number” that whoever counts first, wins, speaks to exactly this idea. Whoever tells a program’s story gets to decide what gets counted, how, and what the numbers mean. In the case of small colleges, if administrators get to make that determination, the writing program loses, as do all who are part of it, including the students, at least in the sense that someone other than the formally trained experts on writing are deciding what the writing program is and what it can become. But if SLAC WPAs can get ahead of their administrators and tell the FYW program’s story first or in a radically new way, they get to create the proper narrative for writing program assessment, or even to wrest it from administration’s control.

For Program Assessment Researchers: Complications of Specialness

The administrative impulse to make all programs assess themselves because of accreditors is strong, and clearly driving the FYW program assessment efforts at many small schools. Might the differing prioritizing of writing program assessment have something to do with some measure of cross-purposing seen at some SLACs compared to PCUs? PCUs, it can generally be argued, are not confused about their identities. They are educational institutions. There are certainly tensions within those identities: a few that come to mind are the tension between research and instruction, the budget for athletics compared to the budget for academics, or even the school’s overall vision of itself as, say, an agricultural and mechanical (A & M) school in tension with non-A & M general education requirements. But in the end, they are educational institutions, end of story. No one debates this. No one is confused by it.

The same cannot always be said of SLACs, or at least cannot be said as consistently. Their size and sense of other mission may so pull at the educational portion of institutional identity as to supersede it. Small student bodies mean that a shift in enrollment of as few as

twenty students per year in either direction can set several institutional divisions scrambling, particularly when it is twenty *fewer* students. A decline in enrollment can trigger bursts of fundraising and recruiting, particularly for programs that show less decline or even increases in enrollment. The institution may then invest more capital and attention in those divisions to the point that these academic divisions subsume, at least to some degree, the institution's liberal arts mission. This is not to say that declining enrollments do not affect PCUs. Of course they do. It's just that a very small decline can send massive shockwaves through a small school in ways that simply don't occur at large universities. The numbers of students required to produce a rapid seismic shift on a large campus that is home to as few as 15,000 students are so proportionally high compared to those at a SLAC that they seldom occur, whereas such a decline may be a yearly concern for some SLACs. Proportionally, it takes large schools much more time, maybe a decade, to feel student declines that affect SLACs annually.

Then there are those SLACs that have a strong sense of their religious identities. These schools may, for example, arrange themselves in such ways that religious function—as manifest by, say, daily chapel attendance or required Bible classes—significantly affect educational functions, including course availability, students' flexibility in scheduling classes each semester, time to degree completion, and expectations of faculty.

How an institution sees itself and what dictates that identity have fairly clear implications for assessment. In the case of a college or university with reasonably stable enrollment and that sees itself primarily as an educational institution, the notion of program assessment is more likely to be part of the institutional fabric. That is not to say that it is an easily and commonly accepted idea: virtually every scholar discussed in chapter 1 makes clear that faculty and administrators often have to be dragged into such projects, even at PCUs. It is to say, rather, that

program assessment is not an alien concept, even if it is unwelcome. These institutions have people who understand program assessment, think about it as part of their jobs, pursue it periodically simply because it is part of an educational process, part of what educational institutions must do to themselves for their students from time to time. An institution fighting to maintain enrollments, however, is much less likely to think about program assessment unless forced to by some external factor or unless it discovers program assessment's utility to recruitment or budgets. So is an institution trying to rebrand itself into a new kind of university or fighting to maintain a historical identity in the face of a changing academic environment. Similarly, a school that sees facets of itself as equally important or even more important than its educational mission likely isn't thinking about writing program assessment unless forced to because being something else is more important, and that something else may even exist in a state of tension with the educational part of institutional identity. We could illustrate the tension in these ways: (1) The SLAC fighting to keep its enrollment up is too busy rebranding itself and rearranging its budget to care much about any variety of assessment except those that will aid in that mission. (2) The SLAC morphing into a business school or an engineering school or a graduate and professional school doesn't care about first-year writing program assessment because it either is too busy fighting to maintain its identity as a liberal arts institution or sees the new identity as the path of the future, and the department home of the writing program as a mere service department, therefore irrelevant to the new scheme. (3) The SLAC that sees itself as a religious body first may not care about writing program assessment because it states explicitly that daily chapel is the most important thing that happens on campus. (4) The HBCU SLAC may similarly be concerned first with its identity as an HBCU and protecting its operations and

students from outsiders, and thus may be hesitant to embrace writing program assessment because doing so may expose its operations or its students or both to scrutiny from outsiders.

Taken together, all of these pressures of identity may help explain why the General Survey suggests that most schools that are engaging in first-year writing program assessment are doing so chiefly because of mandates from the administration. It seems likely that in a fair few of those cases, everyone, even administrators, is too busy thinking about other issues to consider an assessment project except when pushed to do so.

The implications for future research in writing program assessment at liberal arts colleges and universities start with the recognition that these schools are much more complex than their size suggests and more varied than their number might lead us to expect. These institutions need to be studied more closely before their FYW assessment practices can be fully grasped. Second, the “small college structure of feeling,” the SLAC sense of separateness and specialness, is real and will be an obstacle to such study just as it is an obstacle to SLACs advancing their FYW programs and assessment practices.

Application

So what does all of this mean for SLACs and those who run their FYW programs or at least their assessments? How do they use this information? The first question points toward some of the answers in that it names one of the changes and also names the two entities that can make application from this study. If assessing first year writing programs matters, changes will have to be made.

For SLACs

The changes SLACs will have to make can be summed up in one term: material conditions. If program assessment matters, institutions need to change their local FYW landscape by creating the conditions that will allow assessment to occur. The essential conditions to be created are three.

The first move a SLAC needs to make is to designate someone as the WPA. Ideally, that someone should be a faculty member trained in composition. If the institution already has such a someone, great. If it doesn't, it should either consider hiring one or identifying a current faculty or staff member willing to educate themselves on at least the current theories of writing program assessment, for which the Works Cited pages at the end of this document are a good start.

Second, the newly-made WPA must be given some measure of authority and the release time to do the job. The authority does not have to be absolute: Will Dell's scope of control over his program is a good model to work from, in that he has the freedom to make decisions for his program but still has a department chair, dean, accreditation liaison, and others to answer to. A release of even a single course is vital to allow the WPA time to plan and design the assessment, though a two-course release might be better, especially if the institution is launching its first ever assessment.

Third, the institution must provide the funds for the assessment. It's been repeated often throughout this work because it is essential: if assessment matters to an institution, the institution should be willing to pay for it. Funds should be available for whatever materials are needed for the assessment such as paper, extra printer ink/toner, new computers, or data storage infrastructure (whether another filing cabinet or server space). Funding should also be available to pay for any staff needs, mainly as stipends and any meals for faculty who participate in an

assessment, as it is unreasonable (and also maybe unethical or inhumane) to ask faculty already carrying heavy teaching and service loads to participate in One More Thing. A stipend and a meal or two would incentivize participation in assessment projects and likely improve performance. Similarly, while it isn't necessary to increase the salary of the WPA, doing so or at least providing a small stipend would also incentivize the position and state to the broader university community that both writing and the work of assessment are important; such a move would be a worthwhile investment. Nor does the funding need to be massive. The prospect of raising the WPA's salary aside, Dell was able to remake Worthman's writing assessment landscape with a total budget (writing program plus extra summer spending) of around \$2,000, an amount that should be easy to come by even at small institutions.

An institution states its values through what it staffs and what it funds. If writing is valuable and assessment matters, institutions should be willing to take the necessary steps to show that it takes those things seriously.

For SLAC WPAs

For WPAs already in the thick of the work at a SLAC, the changes are less material than they are philosophical and actionable.

SLAC WPAs should start by identifying what the institution values and where the FYW program fits in those values. That may seem like an overly obvious first move, perhaps even one that most WPAs already know, but it is the move that Brown and Campbell are still trying to make and that I will have to make at my own institution, so it's likely they and I are not alone. For the many schools that already have objectives and outcomes, these are a great place to start because inherent in these items are statements of what is valued. Another source of information

are any available master syllabi and/or accessing colleagues' course syllabi. Adding to these the institution's mission statement and (if there is one) the program's home department's mission statement, the WPA should then be able to create a functional mission statement or perhaps even reconsider an existing one. What we value dictates what we assess and, to some degree, how we assess it.

Second, the WPA should determine what people can be included in the assessment effort. The swiftest approach is for WPAs to consider who among their colleagues are already believers in evaluating what writing teachers do so that they can do it better because this approach reduces the amount of initial buy-in that the WPA will inevitably have to create. The less work that has to be done at the beginning of an assessment effort, the better, because there is plenty to do. These colleagues, who don't have to be more than shoulder-tapped initially, should include some who are in the classroom because they know what is being done and how, but also an administrator or two, ideally either the home department's chair or the most proximate dean (or both) because such inclusion adds teeth to the effort and signals to the rest of the institutional community that the assessment effort matters.

Third, WPAs should identify what to use for the assessment and instrument to evaluate that something by. If, for example, the program has fairly consistent content across course sections and even a generally agreed-upon departmental essay rubric (my department has such), these might be enough for the first run of an assessment effort. If course content varies widely, however, the first assessment project for the WPA might be to gather course syllabi and compare them to each other and/or the master syllabi (if one is available) and let the assessment be an evaluation of course content across sections with an accompanying argument on what should be done differently. The choice of tool and instrument will to some degree determine the assessment

effort's level of formality, something the WPA should make note of for the next program evaluation project. In identifying the assessment tool and instrument, the WPA should also consider what special populations are present on campus (which might require a phone call or email to the admissions office), think about how those choices might negatively affect students who are members of those groups, and then act in whatever way possible to limit adverse effects to those students. Attendant to the tool and instrument, the WPA would do well to consider what, if any, materials storage will be needed (whether cardboard box on an office floor or hard drive space), and also when to actually do the work of the assessment project for the sake of participating colleagues, even if it's nothing more than making a note on the calendar that "Today, I [we] will review syllabi."

With these points established, the WPA should then determine how much the effort will cost and pass along that figure to whoever apportions funds. While the institution should provide the funds, it will be helpful to administrators to know what it will take to adequately assess the FYW program. Even an educated guess, perhaps arrived at in collaboration with the assessment team or a member of the administration unit that disburses funds, can be a starting place for negotiation. In the event institutional funding is not available, the WPA should look to outside sources, perhaps in teaching themselves grant application writing. Identifying and accessing outside funding will, of course, add time to the creation and implementation of an assessment project, but since no assessment can occur without funding, it is time that must be spent.

Once the assessment proper takes place, the one remaining action for the WPA to take is to write a report of what was done and what was found. This report should be addressed to all stakeholders, but with those who funded the assessment project and those who participated in it most in mind. This report is the WPA's opportunity to tell the program's story in such a way that

the story can continue. This means that the WPA should write it and not someone else. It also means that while the report should be told honestly and directly, it should be written in such a way that administrators, as Dell cautioned, can accept the good news as truly good and the bad news as not bad news but as an opportunity to improve the FYW program in such a way that it can serve the institution better and attract more students.

Conclusion

This study reveals that it's possible to engage in FYW program assessment without a large budget, a bunch of graduate students, or portfolios. It's possible to engage in programmatic reevaluation regularly without meaning every semester or every year. As several schools demonstrate, one large evaluation followed by five to six years of smaller adjustments can produce necessary programmatic change, albeit more slowly and less dramatically than large annual evaluations. This study also shows that engaging in the process of programmatic review "badly" or out of step with the scholarship reviewed in chapter 1 is still better than not engaging in program assessment at all. Most of the schools in this investigation, whether in the General Survey or the in-depth interviews presented in the last three chapters, are getting the job done—they are assessing their first-year writing programs, even as much of what they do does not match the formula of "gather student portfolios, decide on a rubric to evaluate those portfolios, sit in a room with a bunch of graduate students and maybe a few faculty at the end of each semester over a day or two to evaluate those portfolios, be sure to pay them and feed them lunch, gather the results, evaluate those results, and decide on a plan to address what was found." SLACs certainly have gaps and limitations in their program review efforts, but these seem largely due to local contexts and less due to ignorance. All programs at all types of schools could

do better in their reviews. But this does not mean that SLACs are doing FYW program review wrong; rather, they are engaging in that practice as best they can, responding to their local contexts in ways that published scholarship may not have imagined but that nonetheless does what it needs to do. Lastly, to all the best practices, this study adds one more, a positive variant to White's Law: a writing program needs to tell its own story before someone else does.

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Appendix A:

Scholarship on Writing Program Assessment at SLACs

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Appendix B:

Consent Form for General Survey on FYC Program Assessment at SLACs

This research project is designed to inform dissertation data about writing program assessment practices at small liberal arts colleges and universities (SLACs). To qualify for participation, you must be a chair of an English or Writing department or a writing program administrator at a SLAC, or their designee; you must also be at least 18 years old. Participants in this survey will remain completely anonymous: no identifiable information about you or your institution will be requested or collected, and all data collected via Qualtrics will be anonymized. You must remember, however, that there is always the risk of compromising privacy, confidentiality, and/or anonymity whenever one works with email or the internet. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology being used. No guarantees are made regarding the interception of data sent via the internet by third parties.

You will be asked a series of multiple choice and fill-in questions about your first-year writing program and its efforts at program assessment. The survey will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete. If at any point you wish to abandon the study, you are completely free to do so.

By clicking the button below to access the first question of the survey, you are consenting to participate in this research study. If you have any questions, you may contact principal investigator Nathan Henton at nwhenton@memphis.edu or his advisor Dr. Joseph Jones at jgjones@memphis.edu.

Appendix C:

General Survey Questions for FYC Program Assessment at SLACs

My name is Nathan Henton, and I am a doctoral candidate in composition studies at the University of Memphis. The following questionnaire is a key part of my dissertation project, which seeks to understand how writing program assessment is carried out at small liberal arts colleges and universities (SLACs). Scholarship in writing program assessment is abundant, but almost all of it assumes large, comprehensive, public universities, not small liberal arts colleges and universities. There are significant features that differentiate the two types of schools that may affect how writing program assessment is carried out at SLACs, and scholarship on writing program assessment at SLACs is virtually non-existent; thus, the process is not well understood in that context. Your responses to this questionnaire will contribute to understanding how writing program assessment is carried out at SLACs and how writing program assessment scholarship might need to be modified for use at these schools.

1. How does your department define its first-year composition (FYC) program? What courses are included? (White et al. 18)
2. How many students does the FYC program serve in a typical year? <100, 101-400, 401-700, 701-1000, >1001
3. How many FYC course sections does your department teach on average each semester? ≤ 5 , 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, ≥ 31
4. How many faculty members are part of your department? 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, ≥ 21
5. How many faculty members teach FYC courses? 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, ≥ 21 , all of them

6. What is the status of your FYC teachers? Adjunct? Full-time? Tenure-track? Non-tenure track? Select all that apply.
7. Do any of your faculty members have formal training in teaching composition, either by degree or other formal, certifiable means (graduate course work, participation in a National Writing Project summer workshop, etc.)? 0, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, ≥ 7 , all of them
8. What is each teacher's average FYC course load per semester? 1, 2, 3, 4, ≥ 5
9. What are course enrollment caps? ≤ 15 , 16-20, 21-25, 25-30, ≥ 31
10. Who directs your FYC program? (Gladstein and Regaignon 42-91) Department/division chair; formal WPA; informal WPA; formal writing center director; informal writing center director; department/division committee; college dean; other:
11. Does your FYC program have mission statement? (ADE 130; Hesse 155; Inoue 252, 257-258; Morgan 148; White et al. 38, 156) Yes; No
12. Does your FYC program have explicitly stated objectives? (ADE 130; White et al. 18, 38, 156, 173) Yes; No
13. Does your FYC program have explicitly stated outcomes? (ADE 130; Carter 268-273; White et al. 173) Yes; No
14. How often in the past has your FYC program been formally assessed? (NCTE-WPA; White et al. 3; Yancey and Huot 11) Never; every year; every 2-3 years; every 4-6 years; every 7-10 years; less often than every 10 years
15. Considering your most recent FYC program assessment effort:
 - a. Was the assessment effort initiated by...? Curiosity about some facet of student learning; a mandate from college/university administration; a combination of the two; other:

- b. How formal was the assessment effort? Completely formal: the entire process took place according to established, written protocols and procedures known and understood by all faculty and staff participants; Mostly informal: while the products of our assessment effort provided reliable data that satisfied our stakeholders, the procedures and/or protocols and/or participants were largely determined on an ad-hoc basis through departmental meetings and “water cooler” conversations—we probably could not reproduce this exactly for our next assessment effort; Mix of formal and informal: some of our procedures and/or protocols and/or participants were determined by established, written, known, reproducible means, but others were determined on an ad-hoc basis.
 - c. What aspect of your program did you evaluate? (Inoue; Moran and Herrington; Morgan 145; NCTE-WPA; Walker and Myers; White et al. 3-4; Yancey 486; Yancey and Huot 8, 11)
 - d. Who was involved in the assessment effort? (Carter 271-272; Gladstein and Regaignon 42-91; Jones 81; Morgan 143, 148; Walker and Myers 285; White et al. 3)
 - e. Did any current theories and best practices inform your assessment effort? If yes, which one(s)? (ADE 131; O’Neill 451; O’Neill et al. 35-58)
 - f. What evaluation tool did you use? (ADE; Elbow and Belanoff; Inoue; Leydens and Olds; Moran and Herrington; Morgan; NCTE-WPA; Peckham; Walker and Myers; White et al. 70-71; Yancey; Yancey and Huot 9)
 - g. At what time of the academic year is/was the assessment performed?
 - h. Approximately how long does/did your assessment take?
16. When is your next round of FYC program assessment scheduled to occur?

Appendix D:

Specific SLAC Survey for FYC Program Assessment Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Writing Program Assessment at Small Liberal Arts Colleges

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the writing program assessment practices at small liberal arts colleges and universities (SLACs). You are being invited to take part in this research study because of your position as chair of an English or Writing department or as writing program administrator at a small liberal arts college/university. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of three people to do so.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The person in charge of this study is Nathan Henton, Ph.D. candidate in Composition Studies at the University of Memphis Department of English. He is being guided in this research by Dr. Joseph Jones. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

By doing this study, we hope to learn how small colleges and universities carry out their writing program assessment efforts. While scholarship on writing program assessment is abundant, most of this work assumes large, public comprehensive universities as its model and audience. Further, almost none of it addresses the needs and constraints of SLACs. Yet there are significant

differences between SLACs and large public universities that likely lead to differences in writing program assessment practices that are not well understood.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

This study is designed for chairs of English or Writing departments or writing program administrators at SLACs, or their designees. If none of these is your role, you should not participate in this study.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

If you agree to participate, the researcher will arrange a place and time convenient to you for a meeting. The total expected time to completion is about four hours, though it may take more or less time than that. You and the researcher will decide whether to meet for a single long session or multiple short sessions.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

You will be interviewed using a questionnaire developed by the researcher and his committee and approved by this Institutional Review Board. The questionnaire asks about your writing program and your program assessment efforts. You will be provided with a copy of the questionnaire in advance of the interview. The interview will be audio-recorded.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is, to the extent allowed by law. Any paper records will be kept in a secure location. Any digital files, such as the recording of your interview, will be kept on a password-protected computer. In the report of this research, all

personally identifiable information will be obscured or removed; all names will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms. All records will be destroyed when the study ends.

CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, or if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Nathan Henton at nwhenton@memphis.edu or his advisor Dr. Joseph Jones at jgjones@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent

Date

Appendix E:

Specific SLAC Survey Questions for FYC Program Assessment

My name is Nathan Henton, and I am a doctoral candidate in composition studies at the University of Memphis. The following questionnaire is a key part of my dissertation project, which seeks to understand how writing program assessment is carried out at small liberal arts colleges and universities (SLACs). Scholarship in writing program assessment is abundant, but almost all of it assumes large, comprehensive, public universities, not small liberal arts colleges and universities. There are significant features that differentiate the two types of schools that may affect how writing program assessment is carried out at SLACs, and scholarship on writing program assessment at SLACs is virtually non-existent; thus, the process is not well understood in that context. You are receiving this questionnaire because you have agreed to provide in-depth responses to these questions, which we will answer in an audio-recorded interview, either face-to-face or by phone or video chat. Your responses will contribute to understanding how writing program assessment is carried out at SLACs and how writing program assessment scholarship might need to be modified for use at these schools.

1. How does your department define its first-year composition (FYC) program? What courses are included? Why? (White et al. 18)
2. What year did your program begin? (ADE; Carter 269-270; Moran and Herrington 125; O'Neill et al. 4, Walker and Myers 289; White et al. 7 & 10)
3. How many students does the FYC program serve in a typical year?
4. How many courses does your department teach on average each semester? On average, how many of these are FYC courses?

5. What determined the configuration (i.e. number of courses, course sequence, requirements on when the courses should be taken), requirements, strategies, and content of the current iteration of your FYC courses?
6. How are students placed into FYC courses?
7. How many faculty members are part of your department? What is the department's race and gender distribution?
8. How many faculty members teach FYC courses?
9. What is the status of your FYC teachers? Adjunct? Full-time? Tenure-track or non-tenure track?
10. What is each teacher's FYC course load and what are course enrollment caps?
11. Do any of your faculty members have formal training in teaching composition, either by degree or other formal, certifiable means (graduate course work, participation in a National Writing Project summer workshop, etc.)?
12. Does the department ever provide any training or continuing education opportunities in writing or composition for its faculty members?
13. Who directs your FYC program? Is that person formally recognized as the writing program administrator (WPA)? If yes, does that person have a formal title and/or receive any special considerations (e.g. course releases, credit toward tenure)? Is this a 9-month, 10-month, 12-month position? (Gladstein and Regaignon 42-91)
14. Has your program produced any guiding documents, such as syllabus templates, for your FYC courses? If yes, how and when was the content of these determined, and how are the documents distributed to faculty? May I have copies? If the program has not produced such

documents, why not, and how does the program guide content and ensure instructional consistency across course sections?

15. What evidence does the program use to determine the effectiveness of its courses? What evidence has it relied on, historically?
16. How often in the past has your FYC program been assessed? What determined the time gap between assessments? (NCTE-WPA; White et al. 3; Yancey and Huot 11)
17. What is your department's mission statement? The program's? How were these determined? How are these mission statements communicated to faculty, students, and other stakeholders? If either or both do not have a mission statement, why not, and what guides the focus of the department and the program? (ADE 130; Hesse 155; Inoue 252, 257-258; Morgan 148; White et al. 38, 156)
18. What are the FYC program's stated objectives? How were these determined, when, and by whom? How are these objectives communicated to faculty, students, and other stakeholders? If your program does not have stated objectives, why not, and what do you use instead? (ADE 130; White et al. 18, 38, 156, 173)
19. What are the FYC program's stated outcomes? How were these determined, when, and by whom? How are these outcomes communicated to faculty, students, and other stakeholders? If your program does not have stated outcomes, why not, and what do you use instead? (ADE 130; Carter 268-273; White et al. 173)
20. Considering your most recent FYC program assessment effort:
 - a. What motivated the assessment effort? Why did you engage in assessment?
 - b. How formal was the assessment effort? What determined the degree of formality?

- c. Who was involved in the assessment effort? To what extent were members of the program responsible for initiating, leading, and executing the assessment? (Carter 271-272; Gladstein and Regaignon 42-91; Jones 81; Morgan 143, 148; Walker and Myers 285; White et al. 3)
- d. What aspect of your program did you evaluate? (Inoue; Moran and Herrington; Morgan 145; NCTE-WPA; Walker and Myers; White et al. 3-4; Yancey 486; Yancey and Huot 8, 11)
- e. How did you decide what to evaluate? Why? Please be as specific as possible about the decision-making process. (ADE; Inoue; Moran and Herrington; Morgan; NCTE-WPA; Walker and Myers; White et al.; Yancey; Yancey and Huot)
- f. What current theories and best practices informed your assessment effort? Why? If none were referenced, why not? (ADE 131; O'Neill 451; O'Neill et al. 35-58)
- g. What evaluation tool did you use? How did you choose it? Why? Please be as specific as possible. (ADE; Elbow and Belanoff; Inoue; Leydens and Olds; Moran and Herrington; Morgan; NCTE-WPA; Peckham; Walker and Myers; White et al. 70-71; Yancey; Yancey and Huot 9)
- h. What role, if any, did your institution's administration play in the assessment effort? (Carter; Gladstein and Regaignon; Jones; Moran and Herrington; Morgan 143, 148; O'Neill; Walker and Myers; White et al. 3)
- i. Did the assessment effort require any sort of negotiation between members of the program and administration regarding who was involved, which facet of the program was evaluated, and how it was evaluated? How were these negotiations

resolved? (Carter 271-272; Gladstein and Regaignon; Jones 81; Morgan 143-148; Walker and Myers 285; White et al. 3)

- j. Did the assessment effort account for students with special needs, ESL writers, and minorities? If yes, how? If not, why? (Gladstein and Regaignon 73-74; Inoue and Poe 345-346, 352-353; Matsuda and Silva 16-17; Matsuda and Skinnell 231, 235-236; NCTE-WPA)
- k. What costs were associated with the assessment effort? How did the program pay for those costs? (Peckham 172, 176-177; Soliday; and Walker and Myers 286)
- l. At what time of the academic year is/was assessment performed?
- m. Approximately how much long does/did your assessment take?
- n. What were the products of the assessment effort? Were there any unexpected results? Did the program encounter any difficulties in managing expectation-creep biases in result interpretation? How did you guard against these biases? (Hesse 155-156; NCTE-WPA; O'Neill 453; Walker and Myers 284)
- o. Where, how, and by whom were the information produced by the assessment effort and the materials used in the assessment (student portfolios, rubrics, etc.) stored? How were they secured? (Hesse 155-156; NCTE-WPA; O'Neill 453; Walker and Myers 284)
- p. Did the assessment effort cause significant cost changes to the FYC program? If so, in what way(s), and how did the program pay for those costs or redirect the savings? If not, why not? (Peckham 172, 176-177; Soliday; and Walker and Myers 286)
- q. Were any programmatic changes suggested by assessment implemented?

- r. If not, are changes planned but just not executed, yet?
- s. If so, how quickly were programmatic changes suggested by the assessment project implemented? Was that pace too fast, too slow, or just right for the program? For the institution? (Boone et al. 188-189; Harrison 35)
- t. How have programmatic changes affected faculty? (Harrison 35)
- u. How have programmatic changes affected students? (Matsuda and Skinnell; Soliday)
- v. When is your next round of FYC program assessment scheduled to occur? Has the most recent assessment effort informed your plans for your next round of assessment? If yes, how? If not, why not? (Hesse; NCTE-WPA; O'Neill; Walker and Myers)