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## INTRODUCTION

# Small, Stubborn Facts and Principled Practice

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This book is dedicated to Bob Barbieri—better known to those who played under him as “Coach B.”—whom I first met when I arrived at Wilkes University in the summer of 2002. I was an undersized lineman from a school not yet heralded in northeastern Pennsylvania for its football prowess. Coach B., in contrast, had been at Wilkes for about a decade and was something of a legend. A highly successful student-athlete in high school and college and later an even more successful head coach at Pittston Area High School, Coach B. had, in the early 1990s, jumped in as an assistant on a new coaching staff that was attempting to return Wilkes football to its former glory, which it did by claiming a conference crown in 1993.

In 2002, Coach B. was working the offensive line and focusing particularly on guards and centers, the positions I played. Aside from our overlap in positions, though, Coach B. and I couldn’t have been further apart. He was an established expert in the area, and I was an underweight freshman at the bottom of the depth chart who had been run over (twice) during “walk-through” drills in the first few practices. (For those not familiar with football: “walk through” implies that no one was running. I got run over anyway.)

The heat was brutal in August 2002, so our double-session practices were also brutal. It was two weeks of nonstop work: meeting, practice, meeting,

practice, meeting, bed. Somewhere in there, I assume that we also ate. It would have been easy for me—the guy on the bottom of the depth chart trying to memorize a playbook, stay awake in film sessions, eat enough to keep my weight up in the heat, and maybe get to know some of the other people on the team—to pack it in and head home, or at least to fall behind on any of the many things we had to do throughout those two weeks.

Thankfully, Coach B. was there. He paid particular attention to folks like me—those trying to find their way through this, trying to make sense of what was going on. He would call our attention to particular parts of plays when the starters were on the field, to help us get a sense of how to do our jobs. He would note, while we were reviewing film of practice, when one of us on scout team did a good job—“gave a good look”—mimicking the opponent for the starters during practice. Since “giving a good look” regularly meant “doing what the opponent would do and being hit for it,” it was nice to get the praise, even if we were too exhausted to process it that much.

It’s not difficult, looking back on how that season (and later seasons) unfolded, to see how Coach B.’s work in those moments helped all of us—newcomer and veteran alike—understand how we needed each other, how we all had to be responsible to one another, if we were going to be successful as a team. By pointing out and celebrating the necessary work of a scout team player, Coach B. was helping us recognize how each small part contributed to a complex whole. Coach B. was aware not only of who he was talking to but of who was *around* when he was talking to them: the pat on the back to a freshman that was done in sight of a veteran or the chewing out of veteran that was done in sight of a freshman shaped what we all would take for granted about what would and would not make us successful as a team.

Coach B.’s attention to the small details and their social consequences is at the heart of this book and at the core of what I see myself doing as a writing program administrator (WPA). The events, language, and objects people are creating and sharing in all corners of our programs—and the stories that emerge across institutions and regions as those things coalesce into broader narratives—are our ways into articulating and enacting more enduring, sustainable, and principle-driven writing programs over time. I’ve designed this book to guide WPAs through that work.

Of course, WPA work is wide and varied, and different institutions have different kinds of needs (as do the WPAs in them). Even writing programs that might be broadly similar categorically (say, first-year programs in regional-comprehensive universities) might be dissimilar in a range of other,

more specific aspects. Toward that end, I have aimed to articulate, in the next section, my own positionality and the assumptions I have made to create a more widely applicable approach to taking on WPA work and building principle-driven, sustainable writing programs with it. The core assumption I work from, however—that is, the one I think is most widely shared across WPA positions—is that WPA work varies in scale, from creating new course offerings to a single communicative act between a student and a teacher. The varieties of scale WPAs work with can be overwhelming and can easily lead us to lose the forest of our programmatic and career goals for the individual trees of the next problem that needs to be solved, the next email that needs to be answered, or the next phone call that needs to be returned. This text aims to enable WPAs to work through those varieties of scale and create the kinds of principle-driven programs that can be sustained over time.

### *My Positionality*

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I am a cisgender, white male WPA of a first-year composition program at a research university in northern New England. At the time of this publication, I am tenured, although the work of this book in the early stages occurred at the end of my pre-tenure period. As a WPA, I have some resources at my disposal: I work with a team of teachers in writing studies to run the program, and I enjoy the support of my department, chair, and dean for the work I and my program do.

I bring up my positionality here to anticipate, for both the reader and myself, the blank spots that emerge when I bring my own experience to bear in designing this text. The experience I have as a WPA at a research university is not the same as that of someone at a small, liberal arts college, a historically Black college or university (HBCU), a regional-comprehensive university, and so on; my awareness of these differences has helped me broaden the discussion throughout this text by linking to WPA work going on at a range of other institutions.

But articulating my own positionality is just part of a multi-pronged approach I use to make this text as accessible as possible for a wide range of WPAs. I also draw on an interactional framework, as articulated in chapter 1, to help WPAs look at issues at a range of levels, from the organization of a meeting or a class to the ongoing assessment of the program. This framework also allows me to further connect my work in this book to the many resources WPAs have developed over the past several decades in both particular program

sites (e.g., Jackson 2021) and particular positionalities (e.g., Phelps et al. 2019; Wenger 2014).

In addition to guiding my revisions of this text and shaping my theoretical commitments, articulating my positionality has encouraged me to detail, as much as possible, the assumptions I am making about WPA work and the needs, desires, and motives of the WPAs (and future WPAs) who are reading this book. I begin this work in the following paragraphs. Of course, just as we'll discuss when developing principles at the conclusion of this introduction, what we can *say* about what we are assuming (and valuing) is just the tip of the iceberg: readers will note a good deal many more assumptions than I list here. It is my hope that what I've articulated below will help readers identify, understand, and work with / push against those assumptions they see cropping up.

### *Assumptions I Am Making in This Text*

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As I wrote this text, I imagined an audience of people in particular WPA circumstances. Specifically, I have crafted this text for three separate audiences:

- Graduate students in a WPA course, who have “adopted” a writing program as part of that course
- New WPAs in tenure-track or non-tenure-track positions during their first few years at a new institution
- People returning to a WPA role after a considerable absence (perhaps to step into other, unrelated administrative roles).

These people have a range of different circumstances they are working in, but there are a few common elements about those circumstances that I used as building blocks to frame this text.

I'll begin with the obvious, which is that I am assuming a wide range of personnel that people have to work with. Some new WPAs might be the only writing studies person on their campus; others might work as part of a large (and rotating) committee. The graduate students in a WPA course might be adopting a writing program on their own or with fellow graduate students. And some people might have varying kinds of committees they work with and through as they pursue WPA work, in which case they would be doing fewer of these things individually and more of them as part of (or with) some kind of team. I make some assumptions about who people are working with—that there are chairs and deans to report to, for instance—but overall I aim for

a flexible document, something that can be used by a solo WPA or a large administrative team.

Second, these WPAs are in positions of considerable *responsibility* but not that much actual *authority*. They might be in charge of staffing, say, a first-year writing course each semester, but they are not able to hire particular faculty; they have to work with those approved (in part or in full) by others. To get things done, these people have to build alliances on campus, make persuasive arguments, and so on. This text imagines ways for people to make decisions about how to build arguments, alliances, and the like without necessarily having the power to demand certain kinds of changes to teaching or the program.

Third, the people I'm imagining for this text are strapped for resources, to a greater or lesser extent. The streets of the many institutions we work in are hardly paved with gold; we have to make do without some things, drive hard bargains to get others, and otherwise make a lot with a little, somehow. One of the most important, and most limited, resources for these people is *time*. They lack time to get things done, although the time they have (and lack) varies with the academic calendar. Readers will note, throughout this text but particularly in part I, a range of options for readers: people can (if they have the time reasigned to it) dive into the deep, nuanced details of particular aspects of campus life, or they can make do with easily accessed information that can give them a general picture of campus life to work with. And anything in between. This flexibility is designed to let people make use of this text as their time commitments allow.

Fourth, those reading this text will, because of their newness in the role or the institution or both, be navigating new and murky waters. I can imagine someone who has spent their professional life at a single institution needing less of this structure than someone who was in the position I was: fresh off of a cross-country move, trying to remember the names of the buildings, and frequently (though, I hope, not noticeably) getting the names of people confused.

Those are the assumptions I am making about the readers of this text in terms of their relationship with the institution they are part of and the circumstances of those institutions. But I am also making assumptions about the motivations of the readers of this text. These descriptions act like the descriptions above: the further away you are from them, the more work you might have to do to make this text useful for you.

I am assuming that you, the reader, want to improve your program *structurally* rather than individually. That is, you don't want your program to improve

just because you're there, day in and day out (although that's nice). Rather, you want your program to improve in ways it can continue to build on *after you're no longer part of it*. I want to imagine how we can *structurally transform our corner of higher education* so we might leave our programs and our institutions a little better than we found them, which later folks can build upon.

Toward that end, I assume also that you are a WPA (or future WPA) interested in *community*: in our field, in your institution, in your department, and in your local area. If we've learned nothing else during the Covid pandemic—and ample evidence suggests that we have not—we've learned the vital importance of community, of what we owe one another, of how we're responsible to those around us in our thoughts and deeds. Being a WPA is one way to participate in, shape, and build a range of communities; it is my assumption that this work is not only important but central to your understanding of the roles you inhabit.

Now, you might be looking through these assumptions and seeing yourself in some of those I mentioned and not others. Or you might be of two minds about a few things. I will freely admit that I came to UMaine expecting to be here for a few decades and running a writing program throughout that time. And yet, as I was working on this text, I frequently found myself wondering why I was several hundred miles from the friends and family who needed me in the midst of the greatest health crisis in living memory. Rather than marking that as an issue to ignore or push past, I suggest keeping such tensions in mind, letting them help you make sense of this text and the options it presents you with. I'm recalling a quote from Lou Holtz, who, when asked why his team played so well in the third quarter, mused, "I guess after the half our players forget the game plan and do what they think is best" (quoted in Liebman 1997, 97). Take this text in a similar way: let it give you a sense of what you can do, and then do what you think is best.

One more note of assumptions that shaped this book before I move on. This is best highlighted by my work with Heather Buzbee. Heather was a graduate student at the University of South Carolina, taking an excellent WPA course with Kevin Brock. In one of our meetings during the semester, Heather noted that a lot of the literature on being a WPA (particularly a pre-tenure WPA) was a bit of a bummer. I found myself agreeing with her (and with Lynn Z. Bloom [2002], who explores the issues of fun and the WPA position). After all, the general advice I tended to get about being a pre-tenure WPA was, well, to *not* be a pre-tenure WPA.

Looking back over my years of work, however, I realized that I wanted to emphasize—as I hope I did for Heather, as well as others who "adopted" our

writing program in WPA courses—that WPA work is *fun*. It has its down sides, sure, but it’s also exciting and meaningful. It’s far more fun than we often see at a casual glance through research or what we might think when we hear a WPA vent about a tough day (or semester) at the office. It’s a chance to help people live the lives they want to live and on a large scale: what we do impacts some of the most vulnerable populations in the university, and it impacts a part of their lives (writing) where that vulnerability may be keenly felt. The final assumption of this book, then, is that it can be a lot of fun to run and build a program; to show that there’s a joy in this work and a chance to simultaneously develop a meaningful career, a productive program, and an exciting and engaging work life.

The remainder of this introduction provides a framework and a set of key terms for the rest of this book. I start by defining the *small, stubborn facts* that will serve as the bedrock on which this book is built. This gives way to *principled practices*, which will be the “way in” to this text for the reader—from the work done to identify values and valued practices, we’ll establish how to build a meaningful, sustainable writing program. And, of course, have fun while doing it.

### *Starting with Small, Stubborn Facts*

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Small, stubborn facts are at the heart of how I imagine my work as a WPA. I think that looking through records, constructing facts from those records, and using those facts to tell stories about writers and writing is the most important thing I do as a WPA. Higher education teachers and administrators are working in a neoliberal nightmare that is, as of 2024, quickly shifting to a dystopian hellscape: people are doing more work for less pay and working with fewer resources and without a sense of a brighter future for the industry and the world. In these circumstances, it’s no surprise that people work from small bits of information to make assumptions about students and their writing. The conclusion that “students can’t write” or “student writing is getting worse” is often dismissed as cruelty to students. And it is, but there’s a bigger picture to consider: that those saying it are trying to survive in unfavorable circumstances, and the conclusions they come to are the result not necessarily of intentional meanness but of theorizing with insufficient data.

My response to these negative stories about student writers and writing is to provide small, stubborn facts. I call these facts *small* because I search for

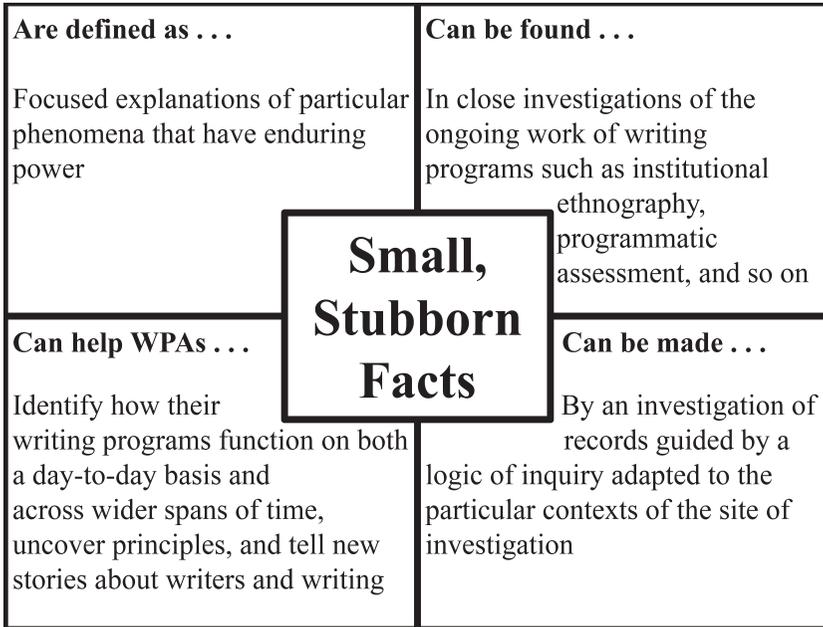


FIGURE 0.1. Small, stubborn facts

facts that require little by way of explanation: the number of students passing an end-of-term portfolio review in any given semester, for instance. This fact explains little but explains well.

In addition to being small, I also want the facts I look for to be *stubborn*. I want facts that are an aggravating and enduring presence to someone trying to claim that students can't write, that students are plagiarizers, that students "don't know how to write a sentence." If someone tells me that students are incapable of doing the work of English 101, for instance, I can provide a ten-year average of passing rates that indicate this isn't the case. Now, to be sure, someone dedicated to not liking the way the program operates will start doing the work to get around that fact. It isn't impossible, but it isn't easy because the fact is *stubborn*. It's hanging in there, daring the critic to find new ways to work against it.

Of course, stubborn facts can work against me as well as for me, particularly when they are part of a broader story about student writers and writing. So, in addition to trying to find small, stubborn facts to create new stories about writers and writing, we'll also be looking at how others around us—students, teachers, and administrators in the program, as well as those outside the program, and members of the community—go about establishing

facts (stubborn and otherwise) that shape how student writers and student writing are understood (figure 0.1).

My interest in small, stubborn facts emerges from my work in graduate school. In one of my first meetings with my adviser, he encouraged a passion for what he called “really cool facts.” “One good fact,” he said, “can take care of a lot of theories.” Paying close attention to little, seemingly insignificant aspects of the act of writing, or classroom interaction, or a response to feedback on writing came to shape the trajectory of my research through graduate school and into my appointment at the University of Maine.

It was this interest in small, stubborn facts that shaped my views of administrative work and what a WPA might do and could do to build alliances, expand and innovate in the program, and shape instructional choices. This interest, by extension, shaped the questions I asked, such as “how do new TAs adapt to a writing about writing curriculum,” “how do accommodations from Student Accessibility Services align with the needs of those students as they enter English 101,” and “how are we communicating with students about their grades throughout the term.” These kinds of questions were tightly focused and gave me information I could use to build some small, stubborn facts on.

Note that I consistently discuss facts as “constructed” or “built” throughout this section. My use of the word *facts* might suggest to readers something of a positivist orientation. But my notion of “facts” is contingent on a phenomenological and ethnomethodological notion of rationality and sees a “fact” not as something entirely indisputable, existing outside of human language in any way. Instead, I see facts as socially agreed-upon understandings that while not *indisputable*, are *difficult* to dispute in particular circumstances and, if situated in the appropriate story, *become* frequently undisputed. Facts are, in my framing here, a social accomplishment, a way to influence how people in particular institutions talk about student writers and writing.

I will develop my notion of facts as part of the intersubjective accomplishment of rationality further in chapters 1 and 2. For now, I can provide an example of how a fact, as part of a broader story, can be used to shift the way particular interested parties talk about student writers and writing. Consider, as a hypothetical example, a department on a university campus that is unhappy with the term papers being shared in the core courses of the major. The chair of that department contacts the director of first-year writing to demand to know why students are arriving at the core courses unprepared to do the work assigned.

The director might respond by introducing a small, stubborn fact: student success rates on the end-of-semester portfolio review. Students are, on average, learning to do difficult kinds of writing in their semester of English 101 that they did not know prior to entering the course. This writing has some of the characteristics the department is looking for. So it would seem, then, that the students are not *unprepared* to do this kind of writing—they have demonstrated that they can, in fact, do it. There seems instead to be some kind of problem translating what they know to the new circumstances of their core courses. What, the director might ask the department chair, could be some of the reasons for this disconnect? Further, what data might we gather to find out?

Note the shift in attention. The department chair's initial outreach was about *student knowledge and ability deficits*. The director's response is about a *structural problem* that has caused students to be unable to demonstrate their best work. The story is no longer about what students can't do and has become instead about how two different programs might work together better.

Of course, the beauty of hypothetical examples is that they can easily have simple resolutions and happy endings. This is not always the case, though, and I'm sure the reader can easily imagine a department chair not replying kindly to the director's attempted reframing of the problem. But the example does demonstrate what a small, stubborn fact can do: it can serve as a starting point for developing and advancing new stories about writers and writing. Furthermore, the stubbornness of those facts can make these stories durable, longer lasting in the face of changing circumstances on campus.

This general idea of constructing and accumulating small, stubborn facts as the basis of telling new stories about writers and writing will inform the chapters that follow. We'll also be looking at how other people—in the program, in the university, in the community—go about creating facts that shape the stories about writers and writing that are being told. But as I've identified them above (and will develop further in chapter 1), you might get the sense that facts are everywhere. We are always talking and acting (and interacting) them into being, always making them real again with each passing moment. So, if that's the case, how can we possibly decide what facts to study, to follow, to try to understand, to try to put into the world? I answer this question with the concept of *principled practices*, which I describe in the following two sections. Just as searching for small, stubborn facts helps me see how a program is operating and how I might further develop the work of that program, principled practices direct my attention to facts that need attending to.

### *What Is Principled Practice?*

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My notion of *principled practice* draws on its use by Arthur N. Applebee (1986) and Peter Smagorinsky (2002, 2009) but is informed heavily by Linda Adler-Kassner's (2008, 2016) use of *principle*. Principles, according to Alder-Kassner (2016, 461), are “the beliefs and values that lie at the core of what we do.” Principles help us make decisions about what we value and how we value it, help us prioritize some things over others in the limited time we have to do the complex work of running a writing program. As Ruth Benander and Brenda Refaei (2021) demonstrate in their study of equity at Blue Ash College, what we value shapes our programs in concrete and tangible ways.

I blend this notion of *principle* with the Applebee (1986) and Smagorinsky (2009) notion of *principled practice*. The concepts were developed to address different issues but have considerable overlap. Adler-Kassner is discussing the principles that shape our WPA decisions. Applebee and Smagorinsky, in contrast, are discussing teaching decisions for and in the classroom. Applebee (1986, 5), writing nearly four decades ago, was responding to the tensions between research and practice and considering why so many efforts to develop widely applicable model approaches to teaching “fail to achieve widespread reform of educational practice.” Applebee identifies the root of these failures as researchers and teachers having focused on the wrong things: “We have allowed our understanding of teaching and learning to focus on *what* we do when we teach—the activities and curriculum—rather than on *why* we do it—the principles underlying instruction in general and our subject in particular” (5–6, original emphases). By focusing on *what* people do in successful programs and providing detail about these programs, practitioners attempting to implement these programs are unable to adapt the detail to the needs and circumstances of their students; thus, they unintentionally diminish the chances of the program succeeding.

Applebee's solution to this problem was to draw on *principled practices*. With principled practice, researchers rely on the skills of practicing teachers, not to implement step-by-step curricula but to identify the principles underpinning curricular initiatives and use those principles to guide the implementation of said initiatives in new locations. Applebee (1986, 6–7) develops this concept further by arguing that this researcher-practitioner relationship would be the launching point for developing new principles and activities: “Rather than the ‘teacher proof’ models of good instruction that have dominated previous reforms, models of principled practice would rely on the expertise of

the practicing teacher to transform those principles into realistic approaches for particular contexts of schooling. Rather than new activities, such reforms would lead to new principles for orchestrating activities, for choosing what should happen next and why.” Applebee’s notion of thinking through teaching choices based on principles rather than particular classroom activities demands the *articulation* of such principles: that we be able to say what we value, just as Adler-Kassner (2008, 2016) suggests.

Smagorinsky takes up Applebee’s call for principled practice, but he does so to critique the emerging notion of *best practice* in teaching English language arts (ELA). Like Applebee, Smagorinsky argues that context matters in teaching and that what seems to be a “best practice” in one setting might be problematic in another. Smagorinsky (2009, 20) instead urges a return to principles: “Teaching through principled practice challenges teachers to think about what is appropriate given the unique intersection that their classroom provides for their many and varied students; their beliefs about teaching and learning; the materials available for them to use; and the public, professional, and policy contexts in which they teach.” For Smagorinsky, as for Applebee, the context has an influence on how research is used in a particular classroom; it is up to a trained and dedicated teacher to draw on principle, engage in disciplined reflection, and make teaching choices that are responsive to what research shows and what students need.

Applebee and Smagorinsky are useful in outlining the role principle plays: how it builds connections between research and practice, how it positions the teacher as expert, and how it empowers teachers to use their expertise to make informed choices. When we align this with Adler-Kassner’s (2008, 2016) notion of principle, we can see the ways principle might shape anything from programmatic direction—such as aligning with a particular interested party on campus to launch a new initiative—to the relationship between teachers and a WPA in a writing program.

Adler-Kassner (2008, 2016) offers the language of *strategies* (long-term plans informed by and supporting principles) and *tactics* (day-to-day work that moves long-term plans along) to explain how a WPA might enact a principle across a range of time spans. We will be addressing strategies and tactics further throughout this text, but I want to highlight for the moment the connections between strategies and tactics and the informed choice making of teachers that Applebee and Smagorinsky imagine. Just as they imagined teachers as skilled experts capable of making informed decisions about their classrooms, this text positions the WPA as an expert in the work of running a

writing program, as someone capable of wielding disciplinary knowledge and the particulars of a given writing program to map out a path forward, address problems, and communicate with interested parties. Defining principles and the ways they are enacted is a useful way to take on that work.

So, what is principled practice for a WPA? It is decision making that is informed by values, by expertise in the field, and by the particular needs of the contexts in which the WPA is working (see Buyserie et al. 2021 as an example of a similar approach). Throughout this book, I will be drawing on *principled practice* as a tool to focus on, analyze, and develop *small, stubborn facts* that can help us tell new stories about student writers and writing, as well as understand the facts already in operation in a particular program. In the next section, I lead the reader through a set of questions that can help identify some principles and possible ways they can be enacted. This work will be an important starting point for taking on the challenges of part I of this text.

Before moving on, however, I want to underscore how difficult it is to identify our values. While we can always think of a few things we stand by, a few hills we might be ready to die on, there is a range of values that we often hold so closely, act on so instinctively, that we do not realize they are there. For each principle we articulate, there are many more that we have not (and perhaps *cannot*) articulated. Furthermore, when we think about the principled practices of an entire writing program, we can imagine them happening in a range of ways: you might have principled *administrative* practices, principled *teaching* practices, and perhaps more.

The principles readers establish below will change. The list will be added to. The list will be subtracted from. And that is as it should be. As we live our lives, we find new ways to articulate what we value. We also come to new understandings about those values. And, finally, we develop new values. The articulation of a value as a principle isn't the end of the journey. It's the beginning of realizing the kinds of WPAs we want to be and the kinds of programs we want to build.

### *Tracing Principled Practice*

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Principles and practices do not always intertwine. Sometimes we have practices that are informed by our principles only at a distance or perhaps not at all. We carry some administrative, research, and teaching practices with us from one program, study, and class to the next—not because they support what we value but because (1) we are comfortable with them and (2) we have

not reflected on a practice to realize that it is disconnected from (and maybe contrary to) what we value. What we need to think about are practices that bring, front and center, our values into focus in ways that are not distanced or contradicted. It's here that we can begin to learn the most about what we value, so that we can later trace out the distance between our values and our actions in other choices we make.

A principled administrative practice that highlights this is my decision to underscore the importance of learning management systems (LMS) use in my writing program. This might seem like a rather straightforward issue—or perhaps no issue at all, if your institution requires a particular LMS—but upon my arrival at UMaine, there was no widespread use of LMS in English 101. Teachers occasionally *did* use them, of course, but people also did things simply on paper, with materially submitted assignments and printed assignments. And some people found a middle ground with email and Google Drive.

Emphasizing the use of an LMS came with my growing awareness of the importance of creating accessible classrooms for students. Students cannot always be in class, and for good reason: they might have to pick up an extra shift at work, or they might have a medical condition that prevents them from attending. Having a single place for them to go so they can see copies of board notes, summaries of class meetings, assignment prompts, and assignment prompt submission portals allows students to more easily and effectively access materials from classes they could not attend.

Now, there are other reasons to support an LMS, but this highlights a value (creating accessible classes) and a practice (using an LMS) coming together to demonstrate the program operating with its priorities in order. Furthermore, the principle can guide the particular ways we go about using an LMS. After all, an LMS *on its own* does not make a course more accessible: we need to use the space deliberately to make it so. There is a productive back-and-forth between a principle and its enacted practice that allows, over time, for a deeper understanding of each.

The exercise below is a way to build on the ideas I highlighted above to guide readers to some principled practices—and, from those principled practices, to a tentative articulation of (some of) their principles. This is important work to do before starting to look at the nuts and bolts of a writing program. Understanding how a program is working is certainly important, but a new WPA's entry into a program means that what *they* value will come to shape the program too, and articulating (some of) those values at the start is a useful

way to notice the distinctions between those values and what the program values in its claims and actions.

I keep saying that readers will articulate “(some of)” their values: WPAs and teachers aren’t ever finished realizing what they value and how they value it. Often, some of the most important, closely held values people have are not articulated until there’s a clash of some kind. So, readers will be learning more and more about what they value throughout this text. What the guide below provides is merely a starting point.

### *Articulating (Some of) What You Value: A Starting Point*

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The list of questions below will help you get started by pinning down some principles, some practices, and some principled practices. Like all aspects of this book, this can be done individually (if you are, say, the lone compositionist in a department) or collaboratively (if you are working with a team of WPAs). See the questions as a point of departure; you may find yourself running with some and not others, using them to lead you down new avenues of thought, and so on. The goal is to end the activity with a sense of some principled practices, which you’ll build on in part I. As long as you did that when you finish the activity, congratulations. You did it right.

1. Start with some values about administration and teaching that are obvious to you: principles you’ve noted before, that perhaps even close friends or colleagues might be aware of.
2. Identify some administrative or teaching practices you’ve valued in the past or that seem important to you in some way. At this step, the distance between the principle and practice isn’t important; we’ll address that in a bit. Just write them down in as much detail as is useful to you.
3. Write down some moments you’ve experienced, read about, or heard about (from professors, colleagues, listservs, and others) that have sparked an emotional reaction from you. Include some detail about *why* you think these moments caused the emotion you experienced. What was it that gave each moment that memorable spark?
4. Look across what you did in steps 1–3 and try to see the overlap. Where the overlap among what you value, what you practice, and what you react to emotionally? What relationships do you see? It’s at these intersections of acknowledged principle, valued practice, and emotional response that we can see values and actions feeding off of one another. It’s here that we can identify that which we hold most dear. Most likely,

these intersections will give you more than one value. That's fine—write them all out for this step. You may find yourself blending them together later.

5. Write out the principles that emerged for you. Try to provide two parts: a word, phrase, or sentence that encapsulates what you value (the principle), and a short text that elaborates that value with description, examples, and perhaps connections to other values (the practice).
6. Finally, write down any questions you have about what you've valued. Identify anything you might be unsure about, some notes toward principles you can't quite articulate, and any lingering experiences from steps 3 and 4 that you'd be interested in circling back to.

Once you've finished with these steps, you'll have a set of principled practices to set you up for taking on the work of part I. Again, these principled practices are just a starting point for you; you'll likely uncover more things you value as you move along in this book. But having an idea of what you value before you dive into the site of a writing program will become more and more useful as you progress through the book and start to make plans for a future program that intertwines your values and the program you are part of.

### *Where We're Heading: An Outline of This Book, and Its Role on Your Bookshelf*

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This book is divided into three parts, each of which is designed to build on those that came before it. A fair amount of recursivity is built in, so readers can return to this text again and again in future years and work toward useful programmatic insights from various starting points. Figure 0.2 provides a representation of how the entire text fits together.

In part I, I provide a road map for examining a writing program “from the ground up”—that is, to see how the program works, what problems it solves, and what issues it creates. In chapter 1, I create a framework and general approach for taking on this work. I also provide guidance on collecting artifacts for analysis. In chapter 2, I lead the reader through the ways these artifacts can be examined to assemble facts—explanations of how the program operates, both on a day-to-day basis and across longer stretches of time (the quarter/semester, the year). Chapter 3 leads the reader through identifying how these facts coalesce into particular principles, principled practices, and broader narratives that are being told by the program about student writers and student writing. Through careful reflective work, WPAs can be sure that

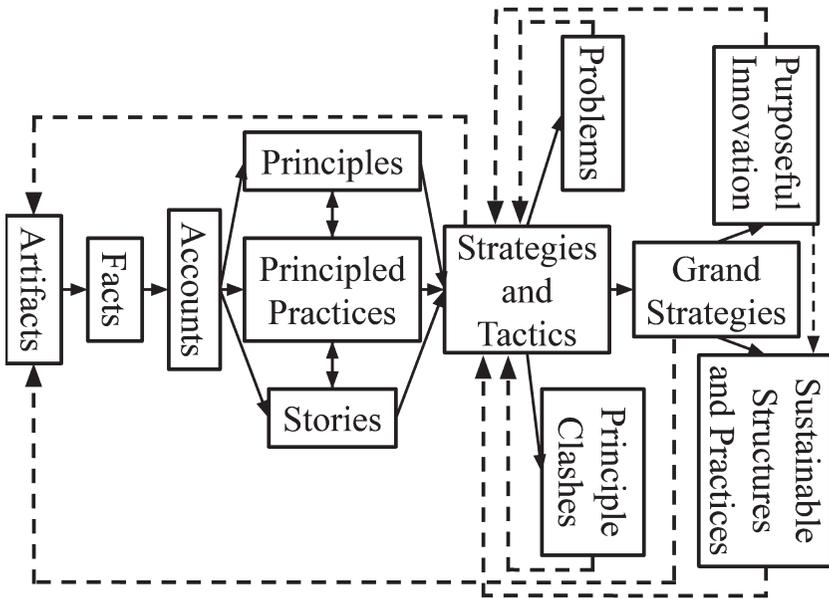


FIGURE 0.2. Map of this text

the facts they have assembled and mobilized are and remain grounded and that innovations that emerge remain tightly aligned with the problems the WPA notices “on the ground.”

In part II, I turn attention to the “little picture” of the next one to three years of the program, drawing on the facts WPAs have identified as being constructed, the principles underpinning those facts, and the principled practices and stories those facts coalesce into. In chapter 4, I lead the reader through an identification of, in Adler-Kassner’s (2008) language, the *strategies* and *tactics* they can plan for the next few years. In chapter 5, I home in on strategies and tactics to solve agreed-upon issues: long-standing concerns the program’s constituents agree need to be addressed but that have not been successfully addressed. In chapter 6, I lead the reader through the strategies and tactics that are aimed at clashes of principle between the WPA and the program constituents. At the conclusion of part II, readers will have a good sense of how to use part I’s results to plan programmatic change for the next few years.

In part III, I take the “long view” of decades and help readers develop “grand strategies” for their writing programs. In chapter 7, I lead WPAs through the development of “grand strategies,” or extremely long-term,

always unfinished goals. In chapter 8, readers will mobilize their grand strategies by planning out purposeful, targeted programmatic innovation. Through purposeful innovation, WPAs can continue the growth of the program without undermining successful aspects of it. The ongoing tinkering offered by purposeful innovation also provides a chance for WPAs to see what they and their program value in new ways, in new circumstances. In chapter 9, I lead readers from targeted (and successful) innovations to the creation of *sustainable structures and practices*, or transformations of the program that come to be seen as unquestioned, constitutive elements of the program by those in it. It is through the development of such sustainable structures and practices that program growth and change can perpetuate across years and decades.

I close the book by attempting to frame the work of WPAs in a broader context, with a bigger mission than simply operating a writing program successfully (not that that isn't, in and of itself, a significant accomplishment). WPAs are not simply cogs in a higher education machine: they are in a position to make the bureaucracy of higher education more human, more geared toward the needs of students attempting to find growth, meaning, and success in their lives in and beyond school. After all, what is the point of leading, being in, or even having a writing program if you can't use it to help someone live the life they want to live?

The above outline provides a sense of what is going to happen in this book. But I also wrote this book with an idea of what it might do on a WPA's bookshelf. When I am in the library hunting for a book, I always end up walking out with a few more than I intended to. It's the experience of most academics in a library, I think: we see the book we want and right next to it is another book on a similar topic that might be helpful. And another one next to that. And they're all free. So, I succumb to temptation and end up dragging a few more to the kiosk than I originally intended. Perhaps even more than a few.

When I was writing this book, I tried to imagine what that bookshelf might look like around it. Not in a university library but in a WPA's library. What does this book need to work in concert with? What set of texts would be helpful for WPAs as they take on the work of building a sustainable writing program? My imagined bookshelf of texts around this book is as follows, in no particular order:

- *The Activist WPA*, by Linda Adler-Kassner (2008): This book can help readers figure out how to promote positive change from the WPA position.

- *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*, edited by Rita Malenczyk (2013): This book is a helpful compendium of terms, ideas, and resources for WPAs.
- *Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studies Researchers*, by Michelle LaFrance: This book complements the close-to-the-ground study of writing programs the first part of this book guides readers through.
- *Making Administrative Work Visible: Data-Driven Advocacy for Understanding the Labor of Writing Program Administration*, edited by Leigh Graziano, Kay Halasek, Remi Hudgins, Susan Miller-Cochran, Frank Napolitano, and Natalie Szymanski (2023b): This book provides a range of approaches that will help readers not only make their WPA work visible but also gain a better sense of what that work is and how to do it.
- *Toward More Sustainable Metaphors of Writing Program Administration*, edited by Lydia Wilkes, Lilian Mina, and Patti Poblete (2023): This volume will help readers get a sense of how they can make their work and that of their program more sustainable over time.
- *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration*, edited by Courtney Adams Wooten, Jacob Babb, Kristi Murray Costello, Kate Navickas, and Laura Micciche (2020): This book will guide readers through the affective complexity that comes with being a WPA.
- *A Working Model for Contingent Faculty*, by Robert Samuels (2023): If WPAs are working with contingent faculty (and most are), this book will be a useful guide to making things as equitable as possible, given available resources, responsibility, and authority.

These books are certainly not the only available texts on WPA work (I have more in each chapter, which I explain in the next section), and they are not required for readers to take up the work of the book. But for those familiar with WPA research, this text and its purposes can best be understood in the context of this “bookshelf.” And for those new to WPA work who might like a small selection of widely varied but resonant resources, this list would be a good place to start.

### *A Note on Resources in Each Chapter*

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At the end of each chapter, I identify a handful of resources that might help readers address the concerns of the chapter. I am not aiming for a comprehensive list of resources but rather for a collection that is suggestive of the

wide span of resources available to WPAs as they take on the work of building sustainable writing programs. It was a difficult balance to strike: I wanted to give readers enough resources to help them take up the work of each chapter in greater detail but not so much that they are engulfed in citations.

My decisions about what to and not to include in each set of resources were guided by several sets of criteria. First, I wanted each chapter to have a mix of *germinal* and *recent* research. “Germinal” in this case means that the research is long-standing in our field and continues to be pertinent to the work we as WPAs have to do today. Susan H. McLeod’s *Writing Program Administration* (2007) stands out as a good example; it provides useful insights into WPA life, even almost twenty years after publication. By “recent” research, I mean research in the last five or so years of my writing this book that resonates with the topics of the chapters in some way. Five years is not a hard deadline, as readers will see when reading the resource lists.

I also wanted texts that could help people do different kinds of things with the topics in each chapter. Toward that end, I identified texts that acted in three different ways in relation to the topics of each chapter. In my notes, I referred to these texts as *sensitizers*, *contextualizers*, and *methodologizers*. (I never intended to share these names with others—I thought the references might be helpful only much later, and I regret that I did not think of better names.) *Sensitizing* texts help the reader develop sensitivity toward particular aspects of a writing program: the impact of race on assessment, for instance, or the role of gender in student evaluations of teaching. *Contextualizers* are texts that provide a wider context of the WPA experience, such as the Program Profiles in *Composition Forum*. Finally, *methodologizers* are texts that can help WPAs take up the work of the chapter in particular aspects of the program, in the way Michelle LaFrance’s *Institutional Ethnography* (or any of the texts in the recent explosion of IE work—see Odasso [2022]) can help WPAs trace out the facts at work in their programs.

These two sets of criteria gave me plenty to work with. But, as I put the resources together for each chapter, I noticed that they were clumping together on certain topics, like assessment. To resolve this concern, I identified five common topics in WPA work to address in resources throughout the book: assessment, curriculum, labor, placement, and professional development. I wasn’t able to cover each of these topics in every chapter, but working with that intention provides the entirety of the book with a range of topics WPAs can engage with. I also aimed to have these resources work across a range of sites—community colleges, small liberal arts colleges,

regional-comprehensive universities, and so on. This should help WPAs working in different settings adapt their use of this text to the demands of their context.

My final set of criteria was a mix of material that was and was not open access. Not everyone has the kind of library access they need to get behind certain paywalls, and not everyone can afford to go on a shopping spree at Utah State University Press. But the inclusion of some texts in this book might help some of you make the case that you need to purchase them, either for the university library or through departmental budgets.

There is a lot of exciting and groundbreaking work in WPA research today, and it was not easy to make decisions about what to include and what to exclude. Even some older texts that the field has developed beyond (e.g., Potts and Schwalm 1983) seem as though they may be useful to illustrate the histories informing the writing programs we work in today. To alleviate some of my anxiety over these choices (in addition to writing this perhaps overly long explanation), I separated, whenever it seemed appropriate, the in-text citations from the resource list. So, if I mention something in a chapter, I usually do not add it as a resource at the end of that chapter—not because it isn't important but because you already read it, and you can find the citation at the end of the book. I encourage you to think of each set of resources as a starting point for diving further into the research on writing program administration as you take up the work of each chapter, using not only the readings but the places those readings can be found (books, journals, edited collections) as a wider space to explore.

### *A Closer Look at Principles and Principled Practices*

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Readers interested in learning more about principles and principled practices might benefit from the texts below. The discussion of principles I draw on is firmly rooted in WPA work and emerges primarily from the work of Linda Adler-Kassner. The discussion of principled practices has its roots in ELA instruction and is a conversation that stretches back to Arthur Applebee's time as editor of *Research in the Teaching of English* in the 1980s. "Context and Positionality" resources can help WPAs think through the complex specificities of their programs and interactions with them. Finally, "WPA Histories" offers broader, historical contexts that can help WPAs make sense of their programs within the context of a wider history.

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