

# Jill Gladstein: A Data-Driven Researcher

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Readers of *The WAC Journal* may be familiar with the *National Census of Writing*, a 2013 database compiled from survey responses, web sites, and personal contacts at 680 four-year colleges and universities and 220 two-year schools. Funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the *Census* has been conducted, shepherded, presented, and interpreted by Jill Gladstein of Swarthmore College and Brandon Fralix of Bloomfield College. Recognizing the importance of the *Census*, the Council of Writing Program Administrators in Raleigh this past July presented Jill and Brandon with a special award for “extraordinary service” to the profession.

A significant section of the *Census* addresses WAC programs: graduation requirements, number and type of courses, capstones, administrative structures, and more. Some of the responding institutions have agreed to make their data public, allowing for direct comparisons among those institutions. Obviously, this resource is a gold mine for WAC folks in search of answers to questions about everything from curriculum to staffing. The following interview with Jill Gladstein addresses the *Census* as well as her other work on and views about WAC.

Jill is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing Associates Program at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, PA, just outside Philadelphia. Her background in education and TESOL, as she explains, led indirectly to work in WAC, an interest in writing programs at small liberal arts colleges, and eventually to the *Census* project. On a personal level, I have appreciated Jill and her work over the years, and as my own career draws to a close, I will point toward the *Census* and the book she co-authored with Dara Regaignon, *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges*, as resources for the search committee who will find my successor. Read on to learn more about a WAC person with a penchant for collecting and disseminating data.

Carol Rutz: Did your background in education influence your interest in WAC?

Jill Gladstein: This is a good question and at first I would have said no. I often tell students who experience uneasiness about not knowing their next steps that life will take you where you are meant to go. As I look back at my career trajectory, I agree with this simple perspective. I studied early childhood education in undergrad, and through experiences teaching at the Eagle Heights Nursery School at the University of Wisconsin I developed an interest in TESOL. The students were predominately the children of international graduate students, so they came to school knowing little to

no English. I was fascinated by how quickly they picked up the language and culture around them.

CR: Sounds truly inspiring. What then?

JG: That interest led me to graduate school for a master's in TESOL. At that point, I was planning to get my degree in two years and then return to the elementary classroom; however, that was before I took my first course in reading, writing, and literacy at the University of Pennsylvania with Mort Botel. My plan was to be certified as a reading specialist while completing my master's, but my experiences in those courses coupled with my teaching experiences in an intensive English program for adults led to my PhD work. Mort had shared the philosophy with me that if you have a question worth exploring, then you should pursue it. Up to this point I had never considered myself an academic or even a good student, but Mort helped me to see how I could pursue a question that had emerged from my teaching. He also had a great approach to the PhD process that spoke to my learning style. He would say, "You can make your PhD your life's work, or you can use the PhD to secure a position where you can do your life's work." I chose the latter path. For my PhD work I developed a curriculum that I implemented in several of my own intensive English classes on how students learning language engaged with the concepts of identity, culture, and difference. It's a long story, how I became interested in this topic, but you asked about WAC.

CR: I did indeed, but have we arrived at WAC yet?

JG: I finished my PhD and was looking for an academic position in TESOL when a friend from graduate school mentioned a part-time teaching job at Swarthmore. I had never taught students whose first language was English, but I figured it would be for a year, and I should be able to adapt what I knew from teaching writing to English language learners. During this year, a colleague had just taken over the writing associates (WA) program and wasn't sure it was something she wanted to stick with for any amount of time. My job search in TESOL wasn't going too well, and I wanted to stay in the area in a full-time position, so I offered to take over as director of the writing associates program.

The WA program was my introduction to WAC. The foundation of the program was made up of what some in the field call writing fellows, or course-based peer tutors. Swarthmore had adopted this approach when it added an explicit writing requirement that was WAC-focused. I came to discover that this new position was for both a WAC and writing center director. In order to be successful in this position, I had to learn not just how to teach writing to non-English language learners, but I also needed to learn the disciplinary genres that the writing associates (WAs) would be required to work with, because I now would be teaching the required course for all

new WAs. I had to learn how to build community within the WA program with the students, and I had to uncover the culture of writing across campus in order to figure out how to support it.

Looking back, I realize I partook in an ethnography of my own campus and program in which I functioned as a participant observer. My professional experiences dating back to my PhD days planted the seeds for my work in WAC. I have always had an interest in culture and how cultures communicate and understand each other. Reflecting on all of that, I have been fascinated by how discourse communities function and this interest transfers into WAC work as I learn more about different disciplinary discourse communities.

CR: Good for you! You have been both observant and flexible—and quite courageous. None of this is a huge surprise, given that you have shown in your publications and your current work on the *National Census of Writing* that you have solid research chops in both qualitative and quantitative methods. How do you use your research savvy in your teaching?

JG: Thank you for your kind words, because it has taken me a long time to assume an identity as a researcher. Actually, earlier in my career I considered myself a practitioner-researcher, but the focus of this work was my teaching. As I mentioned, my PhD work comes from my teaching at intensive English programs at two neighboring universities. I was fascinated with how students discussed the target culture, and I was interested in exploring questions around cultural acquisition. So, I think my teaching has influenced my research, and then over time the two in combination with my work as director have influenced each other; however, my current research, which evolves out of my experiences creating the SLAC-WPA consortium, takes place outside of the classroom. That consortium consists of writing professionals from small liberal arts colleges, also known as SLACs.

CR: Speaking of the SLAC-WPA consortium, you went to considerable trouble to gather a large group of SLAC writing people—first through a survey, and then through a conference that inaugurated a professional organization. What inspired you?

JG: Actually the idea of a meeting came before the survey. As I already mentioned, I came into the field without much book knowledge on what it meant to run a writing center/program or WAC program. In retrospect I realize I did know something from my studies in TESOL and reading, writing, and literacy, but early on in my career I felt there was more to learn in order to do what was needed and to do it well. The advice I received from several local folks was that the national organizations do not speak to the small liberal arts context; however, I don't always believe what people tell me, so I attended the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) and International

Writing Center Association (IWCA) summer workshops and conferences as well as the Ivy Plus Consortium annual meeting. Though I was able to make some connections with other institutions, I did feel a disconnect between what I was hearing in plenary addresses and break-out sessions and what I was experiencing on my own campus. I also heard some misperceptions of SLACs.

I vividly remember sitting at a meal at a CWPA conference, and the table was discussing a current problem in the field. Someone said, “We all have this problem, except those small elite schools,” the implication being that SLACs don’t have problems because of our perceived wealth. Don’t get me wrong, I am fortunate to work at an institution with a large endowment, but this wealth does not always lead to the ideal writing program.

CR: I have had similar experiences at conferences, even though my institution is not nearly as well-endowed as Swarthmore. All of us are trained at large, doctorate-granting institutions, and that institutional context can result in the tendency to apply the large university’s ethos to all of higher ed. I’d like to know more about how you decided to counter that narrative with the SLAC context.

JG: The idea of creating a space for writing folks at SLACs was rattling around in my head for some time when I met up with Lisa Leb duska and Dara Regaignon at the CWPA conference in Tempe. There we decided to pitch the idea of a meeting of SLAC writing directors to colleagues at peer institutions, and I offered to host at Swarthmore. The goal of the meeting was to find out our shared questions and to see if and how these questions differed from national conversations. Fifty-two schools were invited to that initial meeting and representatives from thirty-four attended. The response from that initial meeting was overwhelming as people began to see the overlap in what we each did on our own campuses. Bianca Falbo offered at the Swarthmore meeting to host the next meeting at Lafayette, and as they say, the rest is history.

CR: I remember that first meeting as narrative based. One after another, SLAC writing people told stories, many of them irritating or painful, about “the situation at *my* campus.” It was clear that people felt isolated, yet as the meeting continued, common themes were undeniable.

JG: Yes, it was clear from these initial conversations that, as you say, people felt isolated and misunderstood both on and off of their own campuses. As we were preparing to meet for the first time, another director suggested we gather preliminary information on the different participants, so we created a registration survey. This suggestion lined up with our thinking that we could do more on our individual campuses if we began to share information across campuses. We shared the collected information in the

meeting materials. After the meeting, we developed the survey into a membership tool for the SLAC-WPA consortium. In order to be a member in the consortium, someone from the institution needed to complete an extended version of the registration survey. This membership survey was adapted and used as a research tool for the book that Dara Regaignon and I wrote on writing program administration at SLACs: *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges*. Later, with Brandon Fralix, we adapted the survey to collect data for the *National Census of Writing*.

CR: How would you characterize the SLAC group after 10 years? Can you mark particular milestones? Has a cohort emerged with an identifiable professional profile?

JG: This January (2017) Swarthmore will host the tenth SLAC-WPA meeting. It is now an organization of over one hundred schools in the process of applying for 501c3 status. It's been both fun and interesting to create an organization from scratch. An executive board oversees the operations of the organization, which mainly involve a listserv and annual meeting. Though in its infancy, the executive board members have worked to turn our initial idea about meeting into a sustainable organization.

CR: It's been fun to watch the organization grow. How would you describe the major changes over the last decade?

JG: When we first began to meet I am pretty sure all we needed was a room, food, and plenty of time for conversation. We still maintain these three important pieces, but over the years we have explored shared questions and created a couple of traditions. There are parallels between the consortium and the SLAC context as a whole. In both cases, size does play a factor and there seems to be a shared mission and collaborative nature among its participants. The consortium's size allows us to hold such annual activities as the *Speedshare*, where participants have the opportunity to rotate every fifteen minutes among a group of presenters to learn about new initiatives at different campuses, and the *Artifacts from our Practices*, where participants are invited to bring a syllabus or some other featured artifact to share with the group.

In the WA program at Swarthmore, we share with students the mantra, "You're not alone," to let them know they are not the only ones who have challenges with the writing process and that they can come to us for assistance. I never thought about this before, but I think SLAC-WPA has adopted the same mantra. Many writing directors at SLACs are the only writing professionals on their campuses, so they can feel isolated and misunderstood; however, the listserv and annual meeting provide perspective for these folks that they can bring back to their individual campuses.

CR: You articulate beautifully what I have observed.

JG: Related to that idea of perspective, one of my favorite graphs from the current *Census* that I recently presented at CCCC illustrates how SLACs are different from most other institutions in their approach to first-year writing. They rely on tenured or tenure-track faculty from across the college to teach and develop students as writers. During the first SLAC meeting we heard a lot of “I found my people.” We knew that our institutions were different from what we heard in national conversations but because of our separateness from each other, we weren’t able to articulate what was behind that difference. Between the consortium, book, and now *Census*, people at SLACs have perspective on their own local cultures of writing because they can now put them in conversation with peer institutions.

CR: I hope you know how your work and your willingness to collaborate have influenced the SLAC writing professionals all over the US. In that connection, the book you co-authored with Dara Regaignon presents data about writing at SLACs as well as theorizing the SLAC environment as a context for writing, especially WAC. What would you say to tempt readers who are not employed at a SLAC to seek out the book?

JG: Besides the obvious about learning about SLACs, what I am most proud of in that text is the methodology for our research and the lens we used to analyze the data. Early on in our research process we agreed that we had to look at both what were the explicit and embedded sites of writing if we were going to fully understand the history and culture of writing at SLACs. I knew from my own experiences at Swarthmore that if we just asked about the explicit writing requirement and the writing center that the full picture of our culture of writing would be misrepresented. Just focusing on the explicit sites of writing would have made it easy for participants to argue that the survey doesn’t speak to each of their particular contexts. In the book we make the argument that there are features of the SLAC culture that speak to WAC initiatives and what makes them sustainable, and it would be interesting to apply some of the questions we asked and analysis we did to other institutional contexts.

CR: Interesting indeed. Is that argument part of the foundational thinking for the *Census*?

JG: Absolutely. We hypothesized that SLACs were different from other institutional types, but comparable data were difficult to find at the time to fully support this conclusion. The book project had gathered data on SLACs, but now we thought it just as important to gather data on other institutional types in order to have a better understanding of the differences that might exist across types. We had seen the power of having a shared data set that people could utilize on their own campuses and thought it would be useful for the field to gather these data from all two- and four-year public and not-for-profit institutions and make them available on an open-access database.

At this same time, Brandon Fralix, who is at a minority-serving institution, and I were co-chairing the diversity task force of CWPA charged with the question of how to diversify the organization's membership. We saw the *Census* project as an opportunity to begin to define what diversity exists among and within different institutions.

CR: That data-gathering on diversity is certainly timely. Back to the book: what else about it would benefit the non-SLAC reader working in WAC?

JG: The other argument from our book I'd like people in other institutional contexts to consider refers to the tradeoffs that an institution makes in developing its approach to writing. For example, as mentioned, many SLACs have WAC faculty teach the first-year writing seminar. Some would argue these sections should be taught by composition/rhetoric specialists; however, because these sections are taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty, class sizes average around twelve to fifteen. The researcher in me wants to know the pros and cons of the different tradeoffs. People argue that the ideal first-year writing course should be taught by a rhetoric/composition specialist, in a small class setting, around the content of threshold concepts, writing about writing, and teaching for transfer. However, the reality remains that schools need to make tradeoffs based on their local contexts. When we completed the book, I was left wondering what it would look like to research the different combinations to document what changes. For example, I wonder if a first-year writing seminar taught by WAC faculty is more conducive to the concept of teaching for transfer than a first-year comp course taught by TAs in an English PhD program.

CR: I like that question a lot, and I can hear the chorus of research university WPAs screaming about the costs of such a program, even if the outcomes were measurably better.

JG: The work on the book and then the *Census* has helped me to better articulate the questions and decisions institutions make around how best to teach and support student writers. From looking at the administrative structures of hundreds of writing programs, I have learned what questions to ask faculty across the college to help inform their own teaching of writing.

Now when I am invited to another campus to lead a WAC workshop or for an external review, I often look for or ask about both the different explicit and embedded sites of writing in order to try to find out why some are explicit while others are embedded or diffused. In helping faculty look through this lens from an institutional perspective, it has also at times helped individuals use this same lens to think about what is explicit and embedded about the teaching of writing within their departments or courses.

CR: I'm sure *The WAC Journal* readers would be interested in one or two examples of questions that you have found to be productive.

JG: Sure, though I imagine they already know them. When I visit a campus or look at their structures around writing, I want to find out, "How are the different stakeholders defining writing and the rationale for having writing as part of the curriculum?" It's the collective responses at an institution or within a department that determine the culture of writing. I imagine this collective may be easier to gauge at a smaller institution, but I also imagine that when we unpack the different structures around writing on a given campus or in an individual department, we can see how definition(s) of writing informed decisions to create or change those structures. For example, does a department have a place in the curriculum where particular disciplinary genres are assigned or taught? How explicit is this teaching? This connects to the next question, "What does it mean to 'teach' writing?" This question trips up some WAC faculty. They don't see themselves as teachers of writing, and yet they value developing students as writers. This belief often leads me then to ask, "How do we (WAC faculty) both institutionally and individually foster and support the culture and goals of writing?" This third question circles back to the first. If as a faculty we believe that students need to learn how to effectively communicate their learned knowledge in order to be successful academic citizens or disciplinary members, then as WAC professionals we can help faculty think through what is needed to achieve this goal at an institutional or departmental level and within their own classroom. Sometimes what is needed is a shared vocabulary for how to discuss writing pedagogy across the disciplines. These questions were informed by what I've learned about the SLAC context, where, for the most part, there is shared responsibility for supporting all students as writers, but isn't this belief in a shared responsibility a necessary ingredient for most WAC programs or initiatives to be sustainable?

CR: Of course it is. Your challenge to faculty and administrators elsewhere inevitably produces useful local knowledge. We are all prisoners of our experience, and you are unlocking the cell, as it were, to help people recognize their own contexts more fully as well as think about positive changes. Do you have an example that speaks to that kind of insight at a place you have visited as a workshop leader or program reviewer?

JG: Wow, I never thought of it that way before. Recently I was invited to a peer institution to give a talk based on the book and *Census* and to lead a WAC workshop around assignment design. A faculty committee had spent the year reviewing the writing requirement and right before my visit had proposed changes to be discussed and voted on next fall. I was invited to campus to put their discussions into a broader context and to help address "a lack of coherence and consistency in terms of faculty



understanding of writing pedagogy and the implementation of writing instruction practices.” My goal for the visit was to pose questions and provide opportunities for the participants to better understand the culture of writing at their institution and how they each connected with this culture in their own courses. One concept that seemed to resonate with several of the participants was intentionality, which circles back to the idea of embedded and explicit practices.

During one exercise where I ask faculty to deconstruct an assignment into its tasks and challenge the faculty to think about where they expect students to learn how to do these tasks, a faculty member shared an insight that I have heard before from other WAC faculty: “In my department we discuss when the different content knowledge will be taught in the major, but we never talk about when the different aspects of writing should be introduced and taught.” You know from your own experiences facilitating these workshops and witnessing these light bulb moments that you might never know what happens after you leave campus, but in that moment it feels like the individual participants will take these insights and use them to inform their own courses and perhaps their departments’ approaches to writing.

CR: I agree that one hopes that the insight during the workshop or discussion will inspire additional discussion and action after the event is over and the invited facilitator has left, and one rarely finds out what, if anything, actually happened.

Finally, what do you particularly want *The WAC Journal* readers to know about you, your work, and your approach to WAC?

JG: I’m not sure how to answer this question. My work and approach to WAC has evolved and been informed by numerous experiences in and out of the classroom. I didn’t realize how much until you asked me these questions. So as I mentioned before, my current research agenda evolved out of my work with the SLAC-WPA consortium. During my PhD work I had received training on different research methods and had learned about grounded theory. This background came in handy as my research interests stretched out of the classroom. Through both the work on the book and the *Census*, I have learned that I am a person who believes in a data-informed practice, and this connection with data has helped me with my work in WAC.

I hope people see that I didn’t set out to create these national projects: questions that emerged from my practice led me to these projects. The same can be true about my approach to WAC. I don’t go meet with a colleague or go into a particular institution with a plan; rather, I listen and observe and then together work out the best process moving forward. I also could not have done any of these projects or my work at Swarthmore without the help of others. I may be insane enough to take some risks and start out on one of these projects, but there have always been others there willing to take the risk with me or to support me along the way.

CR: You have no reason to apologize for the SLAC-WPA consortium or the *Census*! Are there other projects on the horizon that those of us reading *The WAC Journal* can look forward to?

JG: Brandon and I have begun to work on the next iteration of the *Census*. We're taking the year to revise the survey and update contact information before launching the *2017 Census* next June. Until then, we are launching a blog as a companion to the *Census* where folks can submit a five-hundred- to one-thousand-word post in response to a question or two from the *Census*. We will be writing the first few posts, but then we hope others will see this as a worthwhile publication opportunity.

My own research based on the *Census* data extends the work I began with the book, in which I'm interested in mapping the different administrative configurations across institutional types. In the book we defined six different configurations and the rationale and outcomes for a particular configuration. I imagine this mapping will uncover a whole host of questions around positioning of resources within and around writing programs and centers. Another idea rattling around in my head involves creating a data cooperative where people can share raw data from assessment and research projects in order to build large data sets. There are many obstacles to this idea, but who knows?

CR: Who knows, indeed? As you have demonstrated, curiosity and methodological imagination can lead a person into unexpected territory. Thank you for your work to date and for your willingness to discuss it with me.

## Works Cited

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- Gladstein, Jill, and Dara Rossman Regaignon. *Writing Program Administration at Small Liberal Arts Colleges*. Parlor Press, 2012.