The Idea of the Small School: Beginning a Discussion about Composition at Small Colleges and Universities

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I.

This special issue of Composition Studies originates in the belief that small colleges and universities constitute unique cultures in American higher education, presenting differences from larger universities that are often underestimated. It grows out of the sense that these differences have an impact on the very important work of teaching and administering composition at small schools, and that articulating these differences will benefit the study of composition as a whole, enriching and diversifying our sense of who we are as teachers of writing.

By way of illustrating the difference between large- and small-school cultures, we begin with three anecdotes.

One:

As part of an overall review of the first-year experience, a small college brings several consultants to campus to meet with students and analyze
the campus culture, looking for areas that could be strengthened. One analyst, from a regional land-grant university with a total enrollment of about 25,000, meets with a number of first-year students to discuss their experiences. At one point in the discussion, he brings up the idea of learning communities, a concept popular at many large universities because it can provide a means of developing intellectual community at the university by linking together—both explicitly and implicitly—a number of first-year courses. The hope is that—as students travel from course to course more or less as a group—they will develop a sense of community that offsets the institutional anonymity of a large school.

The consultant has barely begun his introduction of this concept to the small college students when they start shaking their heads. “Let me finish,” he says, convinced they’ll see the beauty of the idea if they hear him out. The students sit patiently, listening. Once he’s finished, they again reject the idea. “We already see each other too much,” they say. “The same people over and over again: in the dining hall, at parties, in the fitness center. The last thing we want is to have all the same people in all of our classes, day after day.”

Two:

A graduate student in a nationally recognized university composition program teaches a writing course largely formed around James Berlin’s construction of “social epistemic” rhetoric, a rhetoric that “offers an explicit critique of economic, political, and social arrangements” by asking students to “identify the ways in which control over their own lives has been denied them, and denied in such a way that they have blamed themselves for their powerlessness” (48). Late in the semester, the graduate student teaches an essay that contrasts this pedagogy with a more expressivistic approach to teaching writing, finally critiquing both. Hoping to get students to make connections between their reading and their lives, he asks them which of the two teaching methods they feel he employs. All the students, every single one of them, say “expressivistic.”

A year later, now a first-year faculty member at a small college, this same compositionist teaches the same syllabus, uses the same essay, and asks the same question. All of the students, every single one of them, say “social epistemic.”

Three:

Just as her first-year as the sole composition specialist on a small campus comes to a close, a faculty member receives an e-mail from the director of the general-education program asking if she’ll facilitate the annual summer workshop on the teaching of writing across campus. This workshop, well attended by faculty from every department, lasts for three days and is generally led, the Director of General Education informs the compositionist, by the
faculty member holding her position. A small honorarium is involved, as is usual for workshops of this kind.

The compositionist, wary of the preparation time involved in planning such a program, goes to a national academic listserv, explains the situation, and asks for advice. The responses she receives are quick and clear: what is being asked of her, write other WPAs, many of whom work at larger institutions, is above and beyond the call of duty, cutting into limited summer hours precious for research. The honorarium, too, seems low, failing to take into consideration the preparation hours necessary for such a project. The compositionist takes all of this into consideration and writes a thoughtful note to the general-education director, expressing her concerns. His response is guarded: true, the preparation would be extensive the first year but less so in the future, once a basic structure is established; the honorarium is the same any presenter receives for an event of this sort; she isn’t being asked to do anything her predecessor didn’t do. In the end, the compositionist leads the workshop, but not before her dialogue with the general-education director creates a great deal of tension, both interpersonally and inter-departmentally.

Those unaware of small-school culture may find these examples of small college “differentness” surprising. Usually, when asked to consider the differences between teaching writing at a large university and a small college, most observers would focus on the relative importance of teaching and research: at larger universities, the thinking goes, research receives greater emphasis, in terms of both tenure expectations and daily life—e.g. teaching loads and schedules. At smaller schools, an observer would rightly say, teaching loads are often heavier and research frequently less emphasized. And certainly such is often the case: most small schools act upon the assumption that students enroll there searching for a more intimate learning environment, and thus require faculty to carry heavier teaching loads—perhaps three to four courses a semester—while placing less emphasis on the importance of extensive publication.

As is the case with many of the variations between small and large institutions, however, the teaching versus research divide is finally a matter of degree: both types of schools expect their faculties to teach well and to be involved in the scholarly dialogues of their areas of expertise. So perhaps more important than these broad-stroke distinctions are the minutiae of institutional culture, the day-to-day details that, taken each by themselves, might seem minor, but when piled one upon another, change the calculus of the composition classroom, not to mention a compositionist's career. The above anecdotes demonstrate just three such “small” differences. The first reveals how institutional size may impact students and their sense of community. At a large school where a first-year enrollment can top 4,000, it makes sense to develop mini-communities to counteract the seemingly (or assumed) impersonal culture.
of the institution. At a small school where first-year enrollments seldom crest 500, however, students often feel as though they know their classmates, if not by name, then by face, passing most of them—literally—on a daily basis as they walk to class. Community—a sense of belonging, of being recognized as an individual and recognizing others as such—already exists and does not need additional support.

The second incident, drawn from the experiences of one guest editor of this issue, reveals a similar consequence of institutional size: at many large institutions, most first-year classes, by necessity, are staged in impersonal lecture halls, at times seating from 100 to 1000 students. In contrast, most composition classes are small, perhaps the smallest classes students will take, with caps often as low as 20 and seldom topping 30. Steeped in the culture of institution as institution, of the university as a bloodless mechanism with necessarily standard procedures that ignore individual needs, it is easy for students to misread the one professor or TA who does know their names, to assume a personal warmth on the part of the instructor, and associate that warmth with their understanding of expressivistic pedagogy.¹

Students at smaller schools, however, often find themselves steeped in the culture of institution as friend. “We’re here to help you,” small colleges say in their admissions literature, at their convocations, in their every move and word; “if you begin to sink, we will dive in and pull you to safety.” And by and large, these places mean it. They have to: most small schools are dependent upon student retention for their survival. Even small state universities recognize that in the era of shrinking budgets, their very existence depends on convincing students that they take a personalized approach to education that the big schools don’t. Thus, class sizes—composition and otherwise—at most small schools are also generally smaller, and a greater percentage is taught by Ph.D.’s (Laurence 213). These smaller institutions also hold first-year teas at the president’s house, sponsor service-learning days where students and faculty construct low-income housing together, and encourage parents to contact professors, even at home. Against this backdrop, a pedagogy that critiques the academy comes off as cynical and pessimistic, difficult to reconcile with the “leisurely stargazing” of expressivism (Welch 389).² Thus, the small-college students—correctly—labeled their professor as aligned with social-epistemic pedagogy.

When viewed through the lens of the large university paradigm, it is easy to see the third anecdote as yet another example of administrative abuse of the WPA, a history well-documented in recent years at CCCC and in professional journals, wherein the WPA is viewed essentially as a “service” member of the faculty, called upon at whim to fulfill various and sundry needs of the university, then denied tenure after six years of hard work because of an
institutional unwillingness to recognize this work as legitimate and valuable. Certainly, such a reading applies to some small colleges or universities. At the same time, this anecdote reveals much about the small-school composition teacher’s relationship with his or her institution and the adjustments required of anyone moving from large university to small college. Most arriving at small colleges fresh from graduate school or from stints at larger universities are aware that their teaching effectiveness is the main criterion upon which tenure will be granted. What few of them realize is the extent to which institutional service is very likely the second criterion, ahead of research and publication. Indeed, at many small colleges and universities, it is entirely possible that a faculty member with average teaching evaluations and minimal publications and presentations may receive tenure simply because she has demonstrated a willingness to engage fully in the life of the institution beyond the classroom.³

The reasons for this zealous approach to institutional service are many, but a main one is that small colleges mean smaller administrations and smaller support staffs. Thus, every faculty member, including compositionists serving as WPAs, must by necessity take on a greater role in the administration of the college—in everything from advising undergraduate clubs to speaking regularly to various groups, to serving more or less constantly on various college committees and in various administrative roles. A telling anecdote comes from a department in a midwestern college: when a junior faculty member received a Fulbright scholarship to work abroad, his department celebrated his success. When that same faculty member received an offer for a second year overseas, his chair asked him to come home, pointing out that his absence meant more responsibilities on his already strapped colleagues (Hanstedt 76). In the tightly-woven culture of the small college or university, the measures by which the composition profession as a whole defines success—publications, scholarships, national recognition—are less important than each individual carrying her weight at the institution, assuring its continued effectiveness.⁴

Rather than viewing this service responsibility as a burden, many small-school compositionists relish their ability to have a voice in the direction of the institution. Whereas the sheer size of a larger university generally prohibits intimate professional relationships between faculty and administration, these barriers are removed at smaller institutions, creating a culture of transparency where almost everyone is known by name and reputation. Thus, while institutional service at small schools offers many challenges, it also offers many rewards, in that it is often highly visible and generally well rewarded. Additionally, many small-school compositionists prefer this kind of work to the extended trajectories of scholarship, finding it less alienating and more rewarding, largely because smaller institutional size allows individual faculty to see easily the fruits of their labors, whether those fruits are the passage of a
new writing component within the general education program or the creation of a new writing course based on student service projects in the surrounding community. In short, these purely “service” activities can mean more at a small school—to the institution, to the students, and to the compositionist.

None of this is meant to imply that small schools offer, on the one hand, a paradisal existence impossible at larger institutions or, on the other, a sophisticated form of servitude calling for sacrifice of the small-school compositionist’s scholarly life. (Indeed, at some prestigious small colleges the teaching load and publication expectations may exceed those at larger institutions; in this essay, however, we are talking of a median kind of small school, one that admittedly is a composite that varies in many ways from any given institution.) Most of the essays in this special issue discuss very openly the difficulties of small-school life. Nor is any of the above meant to imply that somehow small college faculties engage in kinds of service that their large-school peers do not, nor that they do more total work than these peers: rather, as stated earlier, the point is that this work is different in its proportions and effect, both before and after tenure. Though both kinds of institutions speak the same language, they do so with very different accents.

II.

We haven’t thus far explicitly defined what is meant by a “small” college or university, so we should attempt to do so now. This is no easy task, for several compelling reasons.

First, attempting to define what we mean by a “small” school or university by cohort size is difficult because data specifically designed to calculate institutional size are lacking. In one relatively recent Modern Language Association survey of English departments, 243 of the 524 departments responding to the survey, or 46%, were departments in institutions with enrollments under 5,000—which, numerically speaking, at least, would seem to qualify these schools as “small” (Huber 37). That a number of these institutions might be two-year colleges, though, complicates matters; in this volume, we are interested exclusively in four-year, predominantly undergraduate schools. Since the 1999 MLA survey of staffing breaks down its data by degree granted, we know that 11% of the survey respondents (out of 42% of survey recipients) are two-year colleges, while 38% responded from BA-granting institutions (Laurence 215). This seems to indicate a roughly four-to-one BA to AA ratio, which, when applied to 243 schools enrolling fewer than 5,000 students, would yield a figure of more than 190 “small” four-year schools responding to the survey. Now, considering that only half of the schools surveyed responded, and assuming that those that did were representative, this may mean that there are in fact more than 380 “small” BA-granting colleges and universities in the
country. This figure does not, however, take into account the fact that many MA-granting institutions are in mission as well as size “small” as we intend the term, perhaps granting advanced degrees in only a few departments, and as a historical outgrowth from an original (and still predominant) undergraduate BA mission. Complicating this picture even further is the fact that the survey’s respondents are self-selecting, making statistical error likely.

Calculating the number of faculty teaching composition at small schools also is not easy. MLA executive director David Laurence states that a 1990 survey of how well the association was serving its members’ needs found that 13.2% of the respondents identified themselves as belonging to a baccalaureate institution (17 December). Further, the 1999 “MLA Survey of Staffing in English and Foreign Language Departments” reveals that a large percentage of the tenured and tenure-track faculty at B.A.-granting institutions teach composition—42.2%, as opposed to 5.9% at Ph.D.-granting schools. As with the numbers on institutions above, however, caution is warranted: first, both of these surveys depend upon unscientific methods (in that respondents are self-selecting). Second, no organization, even MLA, enrolls 100% of the population it wishes to represent. Many compositionists, for instance, may not join MLA because they do not see it as their professional organization. Further, given the professional tensions described here between small-school faculty and the dominant research university paradigm, some small-school faculty members may feel disenfranchised enough that they simply don’t join any national organizations. Thus, the percentage of English-department members at small institutions is likely higher than the MLA figure. But again, knowing just how many faculty members there are teaching writing at small schools is virtually impossible, as things now stand.

Whatever the statistics say, attempting to define “small” by the numbers alone seems futile—at least at this time. One hope for this special issue is that it encourages professional organizations to take note of the uniqueness of small-school composition and begin gathering data about small-school composition professionals and their practices. We think it urgent that they do so because, until such time as these differences are noted and data are gathered, small-school composition will remain largely invisible, the professional world of the small-school compositionist under-reported in the literature of our field.

Instead of looking at cohort size, we prefer to determine what is and what isn’t a small school based on qualitative information. Our hope is that, by delineating the culture of most small schools, we can provide insights useful to doing composition work at such institutions and prepare future professionals for such work. Developing such useful information requires, first and foremost, discarding some stereotypes about the small school. Take, as one stereotype, the representation of the small school in the areas of tuition and
student demographics. Though the stereotype of the expensive private college is not entirely unfounded, it is also not entirely accurate. While some prestigious small colleges may have high tuition, many do not: Westfield State College, for instance, has a student population of about 3,500 and cites an overall first-year cost for the 2003-04 year of about $8,500 (www.wsc.mass.edu). Similarly, York College — a state school in Pennsylvania represented in this volume — was selected by *U.S. News and World Report* as a “best buy,” with tuition, room, and board totaling approximately $11,000 (www.ycp.edu/main).

For this reason, the student population at many small colleges and universities is also more diverse than one might at first expect. For instance, colleges such as Emory and Henry College or Ferrum College, both of which serve Appalachian populations, are certainly “small,” as is Berea College in Kentucky, where only students with limited economic resources are accepted and tuition is “free” (students are asked to work on campus). There are also small state schools like Shawnee State University, set on the border of Ohio and Kentucky in an area plagued by a depressed economy and dotted with abandoned mines and oil refineries. According to a former professor there, accepting a position at Shawnee State is tantamount to “shouldering a missionary responsibility.”

Even at campuses with less “missionary” zeal, the actual tuition costs, and therefore the affordability of these institutions by members of all groups, can appear deceptively high. At Randolph-Macon, the overall tuition and room and board may be $22,000, but 72% of students receive some form of financial aid averaging just under $14,000 a year. At Millsaps College, fully 85% of students receive aid averaging, for first-year students, $16,040. Since on-campus tuition totals $21,135, the overall cost for students is actually comparable to that of large, state-funded schools like Ohio State, where, for the 2003-04 academic year, typical annual costs are about $17,000 (www.osu.edu/osutoday/stuinfo/html), not accounting for financial aid. Thus, while the student body of some small institutions may be economically more privileged than those of many larger institutions, there are many small colleges and universities that are affordable to members of any income group. All told, then, students at small schools, like those at larger institutions, come from mixed economic and educational backgrounds. Any definition of the small school that assumes that its students enjoy socioeconomic privilege, then, is problematic.

Given these variations from the common stereotype of small schools, it is not surprising that no single Carnegie Foundation category captures entirely the academic ranking of the diverse small-college/university cohort; small schools range in ranking from “elite” to “noncompetitive” in student selection. While there are certainly many small institutions that are academically exclusive, this is not the case for most small schools, particularly those without state
funding on the one hand or large endowments on the other. In order to survive financially, these institutions are forced to maintain a delicate balance between more and less academically-successful students: those students whose grades and/or SAT scores are too low to get them into top-line institutions are accepted by many small schools in order that their full tuition payments can cover the costs of luring, through scholarships and grants, higher achievers. As a result, the admission standards at many smaller institutions are often surprisingly average. SAT averages around 1100 are not uncommon. Very few get too far above an average of 1200. While admittedly somewhat higher than many large state-funded universities—80% of Ohio State University’s 2004-05 first-year class scored 1090 or better on the SATs (www.afa.adm.ohio-state.edu)—scores like these may undermine the assumption that small schools are elite enclaves for the academically privileged.6

What, then, do we mean when we speak of a “small” school or university? For the purposes of this special issue, we are defining a small school as one where the enrollment is relatively low, generally within the range of two- to three-thousand students, and certainly no higher than five-thousand students. Further, the type of college whose composition practices we begin to investigate here is one where its small size matters, where, more particularly, the small number of students is seen as one of the school’s strengths rather than as a weakness. Consider, again, Westfield State, a public university in western Massachusetts. On a recent version of their website, Westfield had this to say about its mission as an institution: “Emphasizing teaching, student advising, and a supportive atmosphere that encourages student involvement in the life of the College and the community, Westfield State College is a teaching institution whose primary mission is undergraduate education which focuses on the intellectual and moral development of its students” (www.wsc.mass.edu). This passage is rife with the language of the small college, emphasizing close community: the atmosphere is “supportive,” and students are not just passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in the day-to-day mechanisms of the institution. Teaching is mentioned twice explicitly and once implicitly (“intellectual and moral development”). All of this, combined with the mention of advising and the repeated references to pedagogy, implies close student-faculty interaction on all levels: academic, social, administrative. Without once mentioning its size, Westfield makes it clear that students will know the faculty, and the faculty will know the students. Many of the institutions we examine in this issue similarly regard their size as a feature tied centrally to their identity. Smallness is something they celebrate, even trumpet, in their literature and their community.

Another important part of this qualitative definition is the small school’s estimation of community. Generally speaking, a small college is a place where,
for better or worse, size allows for a strong sense of community; where the language used to refer to the institution inscribes community as an ethos of the institution; and where this ethos—again, for better or for worse—shapes relationships between and among students, faculty, and administration. Important to note here is the term “generally”: qualifiers of this sort pepper necessarily any discussion of “small” schools. Any meeting of the Small School Special Interest Group at CCCC and any of the occasional panels at MLA or WPA or CCCC addressing matters relevant to those at smaller schools likely will contain participants from a variety of institutions with a variety of missions relative to the teaching of writing—shaped by differences in their student demographics, funding sources (e.g., state vs. private), and campus politics. Some schools require a 4-4 teaching load and little or no scholarship for tenure; others, the emerging and nationally ranked “research colleges,” have a lighter teaching load and expect at least the publication of a book for a faculty member to gain tenure. Some small schools are state-run; others are church-affiliated. We recognize, in other words, that even among those schools we consider “small,” there are many differences that must not be ignored. Indeed, we relish the opportunity this special issue provides to recognize some of the variety of institutions and missions that fall under the heading of “small.”

In so defining these institutions, we must again stop to qualify this admittedly imperfect definition. Few if any large universities eschew the language of community and personal attention, assuring parents that their children will be ignored and abused, especially by the oft-demonized, lowly TAs. And, as mentioned above, many small “research colleges”—the Macalisters and the Lafayettes of the world—feel extensive scholarship is a crucial part of their identity. The difference is that small institutions, research-oriented or not, can back up their rhetoric about community and personal attention with small enrollment numbers that allow students, faculty, and administration to develop a sense of community nearly impossible at larger institutions. Thus, as imperfect as it may be, our definition of a “small” school stands: an institution is small if it considers itself so and sees its size as one of its greatest strengths.

III

Anyone who has been at a small college or university for any period can undoubtedly add to this definition, focusing on other factors that distinguish small-schools from the dominant research university paradigm. These small-school faculty might discuss the challenges of being a generalist, one who teaches everything from first-semester writing to Victorian literature to creative writing to multiethnic literature and beyond. Or perhaps they would mention the difficulties of being the only “pure” compositionist in their department, or of being in a department that doesn’t have a compositionist, or at a
college with no writing center, no writing across the curriculum program, and no composition requirement. Perhaps they’d talk about how their students seem to resist collaboration, not because of some abstract belief in individual rights, but because the campus is small enough that students actually know who does and who doesn’t do their work and fear being placed with a well-known slacker. Small-school faculty members might raise questions about how critical pedagogy is problematized in an all-white, all upper-middle-class classroom (sometimes, but not always, the case at a small school, as we have shown), or how scholarship on service learning might need to be altered at a school with a religious affiliation—a characteristic typically only small schools possess. And on and on.

Granted, none of these issues is earth-shattering. Indeed, even those academics unversed in the culture of the small college probably will not find them particularly surprising, taken one by one. Piled each upon the other, however, and stretching out over days and weeks and semesters and decades, the degrees to which small schools differ from the hegemonic research university paradigm add up. Unfortunately, thus far very little scholarship has addressed these differences. While there are, of course, volumes of research on learning communities, critical pedagogy, and the work of the WPA, a careful scan of the book exhibits at composition and other conferences will reveal no texts that explicitly address how these pedagogical practices and administrative roles so familiar to compositionists get altered, or even canceled, when they are enacted at the small college or university. Efforts to publish works that deal with matters of small-school composition culture are often dismissed with the paradoxical argument that “There’s never been anything done like this before; there’s no audience for a book like this”—as though the lack of any prior text on a subject matter is proof that the subject need not be addressed.

A perusal of recent conference offerings demonstrates a similar lack of explicit conversation about the effects of institutional size: of the roughly 450 panels, discussions, and roundtables at the 1998 CCCC convention (entitled “Breaking with Precedent”), less than a half-dozen explicitly addressed the small-school experience. Even fewer appeared in the program for the 1999 convention, and the 2000 convention, entitled “Educating the Imagination, Reimagining Education,” contained only one panel explicitly addressing the needs of those teaching composition at the small college or university. More recent history in this area is even less encouraging: one or possibly two (depending on how they’re construed) panels on the small school in 2002; two in 2003; one or two in 2004; and, at least from anecdotal reports as of this writing, only four at the 2005 meeting. While it’s simple to assume that the lack of representation necessarily signifies a lack of theoretical sophistication on the part of those proposing papers on small-school experience, the reality is a bit more
complicated. One member of the CCCC Small School Special Interest Group tells the story of his attempt to persuade the national organization’s nominating committee to assure a small school representative on the executive committee by running two small school faculty against each other. The member’s basic argument was that committee representation would increase organizational awareness of the effects of institutional difference. Such an awareness, he asserted, might improve the chances of small-college specific proposals being accepted for the national conference. “If you guys want to get more proposals accepted,” one nominating committee member graciously suggested, “perhaps you should send your proposals to the mentoring committee for feedback.” At which point, another of the nominating committee leaned over and informed the first, “He’s on the mentoring committee.”

None of which is to say, of course, that all conference presentations, all books and journal articles in composition are pragmatic, application-oriented work, and therefore potentially un-pragmatic and inapplicable to the small-school “sector” of composition teaching and administration. Much of the theoretical work in the field, for example, addresses the needs of faculty members at all institutions, small and large. Small-school composition professionals can always read and focus their own scholarship broadly, not necessarily connecting it to the everyday composition work they do at a small school, but such an approach can certainly be energy-depleting and may, finally, lead to a sense of professional fragmentation. Similarly, after a time, some small-school faculty may resort to self-diminishing strategies in negotiating their long-term relationship (or absence of relationship) with the profession as a whole. These scholars may simply disappear from the national scene, dropping subscriptions to journals engaged in debates not exactly their own, and giving up on conferences that fail to resonate with their experiences or provide information helpful to their work.

Moving beyond individual costs, what are the consequences for the field as a whole when institutional differences are not voiced or recognized? One obvious answer is to refer again to the anecdotes which began this introduction. Consider, for instance the story of the new writing program administrator who found herself locking horns with her general education director. A few years after the WPA gave a paper on this experience, a follow-up discussion revealed a more nuanced understanding of the situation, wherein the WPA acknowledged the struggles she had translating a large-school discourse of antagonism to a small school context (Anonymous). Every year, graduate faculty work hard to prepare their Ph.D.’s for a successful transition into full-time work. And every year, literally hundreds of new professors begin jobs at institutions where the language and values with which they were inculcated in graduate school do not fit the colleges and universities they’ve joined. The result is not just a sense of

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individual failure, but a black eye for graduate institutions in general. Certainly, the field as a whole must be concerned when even its most “successful” students—those who land a job in this challenging market—discover themselves in a world which they’d never even heard mentioned.

Or consider a recent CCCC panel on theorizing the writing center. After a particularly engaging paper about writing center directors and narratives of martyrdom (Karl), one audience member raised her hand, referred to institutional hostility, budget battles, and departmental bickering between literature and composition, and concluded: “I know I need to find another metaphor than martyr, but given the circumstances, I just can’t find one.” Everyone laughed, but most nodded in agreement. In “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” James Berlin makes the point that discourse unchallenged becomes normalized:

In falling victim to reification, students begin to see the economic and social system that renders them powerless as an innate and unchangeable feature of the natural order. They become convinced that change is impossible, and they support the very practices that victimize them—complying in their alienation from their work, their peers, and their very selves. (490)

Similarly, a field which fails to listen to those voices that question the status quo risks limiting its options and losing sight of alternative possibilities. While the audience member’s comment about being locked in a narrative of writing center martyrdom may just as easily apply to the work of a small-school writing center director, we need to ask ourselves if small-school culture might not provide alternative metaphors, alternative ways of envisioning a writing center director’s relationship with his or her institutions, metaphors which might also be useful at large schools. What, for instance, can we learn from an institution where constructions of administrators are based less on abstraction than on daily interaction? Or where literature/composition schisms are less likely to exist because most English department faculty teach both? Writing Centers aside, what else might small schools add to our field’s internal debates—in everything from tenure expectations to budget discussions to innovative ways to recruit and retain writing center tutors?

Stately simply, we hope that this special issue of Composition Studies will serve as an antidote of sorts, addressing both individual needs of small college compositionists and field-wide concerns. To some extent, this issue is the culmination (though not the stopping point) of efforts that have been afoot for some time to organize teachers and administrators of composition at small colleges and universities, and these efforts bear noting quickly here. In response to the spontaneous appearance on the 1997 CCCC program of
four panels devoted to small-school composition, presenters at those sessions (including the two authors of this introduction) gathered to propose a special-interest group (SIG) related to this “sector” of composition work. That SIG has been meeting annually at the conference ever since. A listserv has also emerged (smallcomp@spu.edu) with now over one-hundred subscribers. And a workshop in preparing for a career at a small school was offered at CCCC in 2003. These developments notwithstanding, we hope the essays collected here go on to speak in print to two very broad audiences, with two very specific goals in mind.

First, we hope this issue will connect with those professionals already at or just beginning at small colleges and universities. In particular, some of the essays included here are intended to initiate discussions among small-school faculty about the issues that affect their professional lives. Some of the essays are theoretical, raising questions (and sometimes answering them) about the work to which these faculty have dedicated their careers. Other essays are practical, offering tips gleaned from experience. Not a few of the pieces included here provide small-school professionals with access to contemporary composition theories that can be applied in the small-school setting.

Second, we hope this volume will speak to large-school graduate faculties and graduate students invested in the study of composition. More specifically, we hope to alert these faculties to the particulars of our worlds, the ways in which our students and our institutions and our values pose unique challenges to the practice of contemporary composition. In doing so, we are hoping that these faculties and their students will recognize the richness our work adds to the field of composition studies and will take the opportunity to investigate further, in personal reflection, in case studies, and in comparative analyses.9 We hope that this issue may alert graduate students and the faculty members who mentor them to the benefits and challenges of academic life at a smaller school.

We hasten to add that this collection is not intended as a mechanism of divisiveness; we do not wish to claim for small-school composition any kind of superiority to, or victimhood under, larger schools’ practices. Indeed, the guest editors of this issue wish to acknowledge the debt we owe personally to the large research university, in particular one of the largest single-campus institutions in the country, the Ohio State University, cited earlier. One of us attended OSU as an undergraduate, the other as a graduate student, and neither of us regrets our time there or the communities that supported us in our studies. We are active in large-university composition culture and see this collection of essays as augmenting rather than diminishing the reigning paradigm of composition that has emerged over the last few decades. In short, we hope that this special
issue contributes to greater celebration of the rich indeterminacy—beyond monolithic paradigm—of contemporary composition studies.

Roanoke, VA

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NOTES

1. We recognize the danger here of reinforcing the oft-repeated stereotype of expressivist pedagogues as warm and fuzzy, and the social-epistemic teacher as cold and overly theorized. The language here reflects the language of the students described in that second anecdote.

2. Again, our apologies for the stereotyping of both pedagogies. Welch’s excellent essay has often been misread in overly simplified terms. Again, the language here reflects the oversimplifications of undergraduate students struggling with complex concepts.

3. For a more extensive discussion of service at small schools, see Hanstedt, “Service and the Life of the Small-School Academic.”

4. To avoid being accused of hyperbole, we list below the service components in one of the editors’ tenure file. Worth noting are the number of events—talks, papers, readings, etc.—which take place on campus, but nonetheless are valued as benefiting the institution and thus given credit toward tenure and promotion. In no particular order, this editor’s c.v. listed the following examples of institutional service: participation on two ad hoc committees examining the first-year experience; membership on the honors committee and on the curriculum committee, spending the second of three years on the latter chairing it through a series of college-wide curricular revisions; serving as faculty advisor for the college Best Buddies program, an organization pairing students with developmentally disabled teens in the surrounding communities; writing a play which was performed on campus; advising the student literary magazine; serving as editor for a national literary magazine; running a visiting writers program that brought twenty nationally-recognized authors to campus in six years; teaching fifteen independent studies; taking two weekend-long trips to conferences with creative writing students; serving on the board of commissioners for a new African-American Theater company in town; tutoring inner-city children; organizing annual student readings for family weekend; participating in a year-long on-campus seminar discussing faith and learning; starting a summer creative writing program for teenagers; serving on the departmental hiring committee; taking two Habit for Humanity trips; helping to rewrite the department’s curriculum; advising forty students—about half of whom were non-English majors; giving eleven talks on campus, ranging from fiction readings to seminars on James Berlin to leadership talks for student organizations to a dinner speech for a graduating class.
Our decision to focus solely on four-year programs, or institutions where the bulk of the academy has a four-year, BA-granting mission, should not be misconstrued as a bias against the very important work of two-year colleges. Rather, this decision is based upon the recognition that two-year and four-year colleges have different cultures and different issues, and that while the former have done an excellent job of bringing the discourse of their world into the broader dialogue, the latter have not.

This doesn’t even take into consideration institutions like the University of Virginia, where admissions standards are significantly more competitive than at many small schools.

One notable book that does address composition at the small college is Robin Varnum’s *Fencing with Words: A History of Writing Instruction at Amherst College during the Era of Theodore Baird, 1938-99*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996. Though useful, the scope of this book is necessarily limited to a single institution with a unique standing in the academy; consequently, its applications are also limited.


Indeed, a lot needs to be done in deconstructing the dominance of the research university model in our professional discourse. In addition to examining small colleges and how they occupy an uncomfortable middle ground between large universities and community colleges (which have done an excellent job of foregrounding their “difference” in recent years), scholars might look at mid-sized M.A.-granting institutions, and the unique challenges they face and the benefits they afford. Specific steps graduate institutions might take to broaden their familiarity with the varieties of institutional culture is perhaps subject for another essay. A few quick suggestions, though, might include: encouraging graduate students in composition and rhetoric to consider dissertation topics investigating specific pedagogical or administrative issues at small schools; inviting to campus for information purposes graduate alums who’ve pursued careers at non-research university schools; and making contact with local colleges, possibly with the goal of providing advanced graduate students with teaching experience, on a part-time or adjunct basis.

**Works Cited**

Anonymous. E-mail. 11 March 2003.


---. E-mail. 17 December 2002.