
Reviewed by Kristine Johnson, Xavier University

Tensions between humanist intellectual values and business logic are clearly visible in American higher education. Directed by economic interests and prevailing business practices, university administrators often aim to make institutions more cost effective by replacing the tenure system—now criticized for being antiquated and inefficient—with large numbers of contingent faculty. Directed by their own economic interests, students may understand their college education as simply a credential they will trade for success in the labor market, and universities have reinforced this understanding by defining students as consumers of their educational product. Composition Studies occupies a difficult position in this increasingly managed educational culture. While the discipline aims to be democratic and inclusive, it is regularly criticized for its complicity in the administrative structures and labor practices that have produced writing programs with tenured faculty administrators—the boss compositionist—and undercompensated, overworked adjunct instructors.

In The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies, Donna Strickland argues that administration and business logic have always been part of Composition Studies. Yet, teachers and scholars in the field have pushed the managerial into our disciplinary unconscious: they may refuse the managerial and instead produce research on writing theory and pedagogy, or they may frame administrative work as intellectual work that demands specialized knowledge. For Strickland, the growing body of scholarship written by writing program administrators for an audience of writing program administrators is further evidence that management (a term she uses instead of administration) does not occupy a consequential place in Composition Studies. Contending that management is an essential but overlooked factor in both the origin and the development of Composition Studies, she builds a compelling argument for understanding the history of the discipline “as the history of the increasing importance of managers of the teaching of writing” (17). Strickland offers a materialist history of writing programs as workplaces, composition studies as a profession, and teaching writing as an economic activity. The narrative she constructs covers familiar ground, beginning at Harvard in the nineteenth century and ending in the present, but its material focus challenges canonical disciplinary histories and represents a significant contribution to scholarship in composition studies.

Chapter 1 traces how corporate capitalism influenced the emergence of writing programs from writing courses. Strickland outlines the material conditions and cultural values—labor divisions, mechanization, and the femi-
nization of correctness—that shaped early writing programs. In this chapter, the controlling image is a 1907 Edison dictating machine advertisement: a businessman speaks and produces knowledge while a female secretary types and reproduces this knowledge. The early twentieth century introduced a division between conceptual and mechanical labor, and Strickland argues that an analogous division emerged between the mechanical work of English (writing) and the conceptual work of English (literature). Although the split between writing and literature has regularly been associated with an ideological stance that marginalizes writing, she contends that the split was rooted in the desire to make teaching more efficient in the face of more students and more written production. Writing programs were “made possible not by the devaluing of student writing in the university but by its central function in an institution that depended on writing as a tool for surveillance and assessment” (25). Ultimately, these programs became focused on mechanical correctness and staffed largely by white women, which Strickland clearly and persuasively links to the cultural assumption—embodied by the secretary and the schoolmarm—that women are guardians of correctness and virtue.

Strickland forwards a provocative historical narrative of composition studies when she traces how managerial impulses directed the founding of both the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1949 and the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 1977. Chapter 2 uses the work of George Wykoff to demonstrate that the CCCC was founded to meet the needs of administrators who wanted to control teacher behavior, an argument that challenges the commonplace belief that the CCCC was founded to serve teachers and improve their working conditions. The nascent field of Composition Studies defined its problem not as bad students or unfair working conditions, but as bad teachers who needed managing. Strickland illustrates how the CCCC aimed to solve this problem with a research agenda and professionalization—both of which would normalize composition teaching and enable writing program administrators to “extract the proper kind of labor” from teachers (73). The result of this “professionalism in composition studies has tended to enfranchise those involved in the administration of composition more than it has enfranchised the vast majority of teachers of composition” (54). It was the CCCC, she argues, that created the writing program administrator as a subject position and established among its members a strong affective attachment to the rightness of its disciplinary mission: teaching composition.

As the CCCC expanded beyond its original mission, pursuing a research agenda and turning away from administrative concerns, the Council of Writing Program Administrators was founded to reclaim this mission. Chapter 3 explores how the WPA attempted to suppress its managerial associations, while providing an intellectual community for administrators. Although Strickland found that the WPA founders were asking intellectual questions about management (particularly questions related to hiring teachers and assessing programs), she notes they attempted to avoid humanistic disap-
proval of managerial and/or mechanical work. They showed disdain for administrative tasks, reframed writing program administration as scholarly work, and identified themselves, first and foremost, as teachers. In this chapter, Strickland points to two important factors in the development of the WPA—and ultimately Composition Studies. First, she underscores how emotional attachments to teaching function to construct administration as positive work; writing program administrators feel bad and misunderstood, but “they have an essential task: creating a space to manage the affect that most everyone else attaches to writing” (90). Second, she describes how members of the WPA actually enjoyed material success in the growing, highly managed multiversity, continuing the normalizing project first initiated by the CCC (96).

Composition studies has enjoyed material success in part because English departments depend on revenue from writing programs, but Strickland observes that this success coincided with composition scholars promoting narratives of the field’s own marginalization and its commitment to radical democracy. Chapter 4 examines how the discourse of democratic pedagogy became normalizing, obscured the managerial, and functioned affectively. She begins the chapter by identifying a slippage in definitions of democracy: composition scholars define democracy as both an ideal (empowering students to create change) and a reality (helping students enter the middle class). In a critical reading of James Berlin, Strickland analyzes this slippage and identifies where Berlin obscures the managerial in his historical writing. She argues that social-epistemic rhetoric became a legitimizing, normalizing discourse in composition studies, which opened space in the discipline for a political agenda (108-110). Berlin perhaps envisioned democratic participation as an end in itself, but Strickland insists both that democracy must mean more than participation in public debate and that our disciplinary allegiance to democratic pedagogy is reinforced—and limited—by emotional, affective perceptions of its rightness (115-118).

Strickland historicizes the managerial in Composition Studies to support a call to action. Against intellectual misgivings about managerial activity, she urges composition studies to embrace management. In the introduction, she argues that members of the discipline should act as critical, managerial intellectuals, which would allow the field to “develop critical interpretations of [writing program management] … and to generate radical alternatives” (16). In the afterword, she returns to this call to action, offering two implications of embracing the managerial. Concretely, writing program administrators may be open to tweaking, combining “cultural-critical abilities” with administrative work because they are not affectively attached to particular normalizing commitments (120); and theoretically, they may adopt “operative reason,” which unlike instrumental reason does not anticipate outcomes but may be a catalyst for change (121). Although these implications are certainly generative, I found that they provided a weak conclusion to a strong book. The conclusions Strickland draws about operative reason and tweaking seem
indirectly related to her historical narrative, but I was further dissatisfied with her conclusions because they addressed the work of writing program administration—and primarily an audience of writing program administrators. For the book to fulfill its aim of reaching the discipline of composition studies, Strickland must also provide conclusions that include this broader audience in her call to action.

*The Managerial Unconscious* offers fresh, important historical perspectives on Composition Studies as a discipline and writing programs as workplaces. Its contribution to the discipline is primarily as historical scholarship, though it will also be useful for readers interested in affect and composition studies. Finally, it is well theorized, joining composition theory with contemporaneous management theories in a way that suggests new perspectives on both areas of inquiry. Throughout the historical narrative, Strickland illustrates how economic interests and business practices have always influenced composition studies and educational institutions—with varying pedagogical and disciplinary outcomes. As our discipline exists in increasingly managed institutions with increasingly complex economic pressures, this book is an essential resource for readers interested in the history or future of composition studies.

*Cincinnati, OH*