

Introduction to ATD Special Issue on WAC and High-Impact Practices

Beth Boquet, Fairfield University, and Neal Lerner, Northeastern University

A common (and, frankly, tired) trope in higher education is that students are a problem: They're "academically adrift" (Arum & Roksa, 2011), their academic lives pale in comparison to—and have far fewer long-term consequences than—their social lives (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015), and when they write from sources, they largely engage in "failed paraphrase" (Jamieson, 2013). As writing center and writing program directors and scholars, we acknowledge the occasional truths behind these beliefs, but we also have experienced a counter-narrative, one in which students—via their writing—are connecting to critical content, to communities and social justice organizations, to faculty and other students; in short, students are having high-impact learning experiences that will shape the rest of their lives and the lives of others.

In this special issue of *Across the Disciplines*, we offer 10 articles that challenge the dominant narratives of student failure. These articles are grouped around what George Kuh and others have identified as "High-Impact Practices" or HIPs. These practices, which we next describe, have the potential to create the conditions for student success and the power to see writing across the curriculum and in the disciplines as much more than a value-added curricular requirement.

Indeed, findings from nationally-normed instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, from which the HIPs are derived, are very much a part of decision-making processes in the current landscape of higher education. State legislators, Boards of Trustees, national and regional accrediting agencies, senior college and university management teams—all are relying on measures of engagement to make significant decisions about institutional goals and programs. By connecting the work our writing programs do to engagement and to HIPs, as the authors of the articles in this issue do, we are taking part in conversations that have transformative potential.

What Are "High-Impact Practices" and What Do They Have to Do with Writing Across the Disciplines?

Kuh (2010) defines High-Impact Practices as "an investment of time and energy over an extended period that has unusually positive effects on student engagement in educationally purposeful behavior" (p. viii).

Specifically, the American Association of Colleges & Universities lists ten types of experiences that research suggests contribute to transformational educational opportunities when made widely available to undergraduate students¹⁴:

Across the Disciplines

A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2016.13.4.12>

wac.colostate.edu/atd

ISSN 554-8244

Across the Disciplines is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by [Colorado State University](#) and [Georgia Southern University](#). Articles are published under a [Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license](#) (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs) ISSN 1554-8244. Copyright © 1997-2017 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site's authors, developers, and contributors. Some material is used with permission.

- First-Year Seminars and Experiences
- Common Intellectual Experiences
- Learning Communities
- Writing-Intensive Courses
- Collaborative Assignments and Projects
- Undergraduate Research
- Diversity/Global Learning
- Service Learning, Community-Based Learning
- Internships
- Capstone Courses and Projects

Preliminary data emerging from studies of student engagement suggest that High-Impact Practices are not only positively correlated with improved performance for all students but that benefits accrue most significantly for historically under-served students, many of whom represent an institution's most at-risk populations.^[2]

In his book *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, George Kuh (2008) synthesizes educational research gathered primarily through the National Survey of Student Engagement in order to identify several distinguishing features common across these practices. Specifically, these engagements all typically include

- Frequent and significant contact with faculty, peers, material;
- Contact with material in active-learning, novel, and culturally diverse settings;
- Continuous feedback on performance;
- Integration, synthesis, and application of knowledge.

Kuh and others draw on this research not only, or even necessarily, to assess an individual student's progress but also to recommend programmatic improvement to the entire college experience. When implemented thoughtfully across the student experience, HIPs contribute to students' mastery of what are identified as Essential Learning Outcomes (Schneider 2008, p. 3):

- Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World
- Intellectual and Practical Skills
- Personal and Social Responsibility
- Integrative and Applied Learning

Institutions interested in improving Essential Learning Outcomes might look at the distribution of High-Impact Practices for students, for example: Are they clustered in the first year or the senior year? What happens for sophomores and juniors? On average, how many High-Impact Practices are students guaranteed at an institution? (Research suggests students need engagement with at least two to improve the likelihood that these experiences will increase retention and persistence.^[3])

To connect the availability of High-Impact Practices with retention and persistence goals, institutions need to know about student access and barriers to access. For example, it is not enough to tout an institution's international programs if large numbers of students can't afford them or can't work them into a four-year graduation plan. Similarly, promoting community and civic engagement without addressing transportation challenges for students or conflicts with off-campus work obligations is similarly ineffective.

How the authors in this issue connect to HIPs

The authors of the 10 articles in this Special Issue of *ATD* connect to a variety of HIPs in a range of curricular and extra-curricular projects: from first-year seminar (Thaiss, Moloney, & Chaozon-Bauer) to capstone courses (Hendrickson; Parrish, Hesse, & Bateman), from specific WI courses in a range of disciplines (Kester, Block, Karda, & Orndorff III; Elder & Champine) to the impact of WI and core curricula more generally (Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, & Paine; Herrington & Stassen), from residential learning communities (Voss) to undergraduate research and presentation opportunities (Barron, Gruber, & Pfannenstiel; Burdette, Galeucia, Liggett, & Thompson). Students take on substantial writing, speaking, and collaborative projects; faculty explore what it means to write in their disciplines and in general education more broadly; and researchers conduct empirical studies of the effectiveness of WI courses in a range of contexts and curricular moments. Overall, this research connects writing to student learning in powerful ways—ways that can be defined through the framework of HIPs.

We do need to acknowledge that not every HIP is addressed in this issue. In particular, the intersection of composing practices with internships was not among the topics we saw covered effectively in the many proposals we received, nor was the intersection of composing practices with diversity/global learning. We see these as critical gaps and encourage readers to pursue research especially in these areas. Doing so will strengthen the relationship between our WAC and writing programs and broad institutional goals, both as they are currently enacted and as they should be imagined.

What's next for HIPs?

All of us who staff academic programs should have a sense of our institutions' priorities, and we should report our activities frequently and in as many ways possible to showcase the writing program, WAC program, and/or writing center's connections to strategic goals. Few colleges and universities can prioritize all HIPs; many are especially committed to a subset. Knowing which HIPs are highlighted in institutional reports (to accrediting agencies, for example) can help direct resources to and through our WAC and writing programs. Gathering this information might require new partnerships, new frameworks, more research on writing in curricular and co-curricular programs. Understanding writing programs' roles in promoting High-Impact Practices places the student experience where it belongs: at the center of a vision for the future of higher education.

References

- Armstrong, Elizabeth A., & Hamilton, Laura T. (2015). *Paying for the party: How college maintains inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Arum, Richard, & Roksa, Josipa. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Jamieson, Sandra. (2013). What students' use of sources reveals about advanced writing skills. *Across the Disciplines*, 10(4). Retrieved from <https://wac.colostate.edu/atd/reading/jamieson.cfm>
- Kuh, George D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: AAC&U. Retrieved from http://www.neasc.org/downloads/aacu_high_impact_2008_final.pdf
- Kuh, George D. (2010). Foreword. In Jayne E. Brownell & Lynn E. Swaner (Eds.), *Five high-impact practices: Research on learning outcomes, completion, and quality*. Washington, DC: AAC&U. vii-ix.

Schneider, Carol Geary. (2008). "Introduction: Liberal education and high-impact practices: Making excellence—once and for all—inclusive." In George D. Kuh. *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. 1-8.

Notes

[1] Rather than elaborate on each HIP in detail, we encourage you to explore the AAC&U's excellent website (www.aacu.org) and specifically this brief synopsis: <http://www.aacu.org/leap/hip.cfm>

[2] Some under-served students appear to be less likely to participate in high-impact activities, especially 1st generation and African American students. Engagement and persistence positively correlate for all students; more significant effects are observed for under-served student populations, especially African American students.

[3] Improved performance equals grades as well as retention, integration and transfer of information.

Contact Information

Elizabeth H. Boquet, Ph. D.
Professor, Department of English
Director, The Writing Center
Donnarumma 130
Fairfield University
Fairfield, CT 06824
Email: Eboquet@fairfield.edu
Phone: 203-254-4000, ext. 2248

Neal Lerner
Associate Professor, Writing Program Director
Northeastern University English Department
405 LA, 360 Huntington Ave.
Boston MA 02115
Email: n.lerner@northeastern.edu
Phone: 617-373-2451

Complete APA Citation

Boquet, Elizabeth, & Lerner, Neal. (2016, December 26). Introduction to ATD special issue on WAC and high-impact practices. *Across the Disciplines*, 13(4). Retrieved from <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/hip/intro.pdf>