

## EDITORS' COLUMN

The fiftieth anniversary of *JBW*'s launch in 1975 is fast approaching. During the last half century, the landscape of Basic Writing has shifted, along with changing attitudes about educational equity, students' rights to their own language, anti-racist pedagogy, and the standards we use to access writing. Still, assumptions linger about Basic Writing programs, the students who are placed into or choose Basic Writing courses, and the faculty who teach them. Entrenched practices and expectations similarly linger. The authors in this issue probe these assumptions and practices as they explore the processes for assessing, ranking, and dividing student writers; the resilience of longstanding institutional structures and practices; what students want out of a college writing course and how they perceive Basic Writing; and the value of grammar to college writers. In the process, the scholarship centers the historical weight of the justice and equity frames at the foundation of Basic Writing as a field—frames that still define the scholarly and pedagogical work of many practitioners.

In "Basic Writing and Resisting White Innocence," Sean Molloy and Alexis Bennett bring us back to one of the field's starting points: the origins of Basic Writing at City College, CUNY in the late 1960s. Bennett, a recent college graduate, was Molloy's writing student and worked as a consultant in the writing center he directs. They combine their perspectives as student and teacher to reflect on the original Basic Writing system as it unfolded at CUNY in the 1960s and 70s—its impact on undergraduates, their educational prospects, and their largely contingent instructors. Molloy and Bennett demonstrate that a powerful narrative connected to white innocence pushed Black and Brown students at City College into newly designated Basic Writing courses during the same period that Mina Shaughnessy climbed the administrative ladder, first in City College's English department and later in CUNY's central office. According to Molloy and Bennett, "the reality of Basic Writing was a system of barriers, segregation, and exclusion, all grounded in a false and conveniently myopic white innocence." They argue that the original rationalization for Basic Writing was in fact so "conveniently myopic" that "none of Shaughnessy's arguments would have survived her death in 1978 if her Basic Writing narrative did not serve the larger institutional and cultural interests of white power structures within higher education that sought to resegregate PWIs and preserve white innocence." They add that the Basic Writing systems still prevailing at many institutions bare the traces of this foundational moment, and continue to rely on core assumptions about

“exceptional” versus “basic” students. As Molloy and Bennett assert, these systems demand the ongoing, uncomfortable work of self-reflection and anti-racist resistance to build new paradigms for understanding, teaching, and framing undergraduate writers and writing programs.

In “Gatekeeping by Design: The Use of an Exit Exam as a ‘Boss Text’ in a Basic Writing Course,” Stacy Wittstock looks at another way in which established paradigms linger and continue to shape practice. Her focus is the resilience of timed, high stakes writing exams to assess proficiency and advance students through the system. Though many scholars have identified the biases that drive this practice, and the field has intellectually “moved on from timed writing,” practices on the ground vary. High-stakes exams still shape curricula and impact student success in many settings. To urge institutions to move beyond this outdated, damaging practice, Wittstock develops a case study of interviews with ten faculty and two administrators, along with historical documents. Her study underscores the importance of faculty voice in setting and revising policy. Further, it “illuminates the relationship between harmful assessment ecologies and the institutional devaluing of faculty and students throughout higher education and demonstrates the danger of considering programmatic microstructures like curriculum and pedagogical practices in isolation from institutional macrostructures that shape them.” Wittstock acknowledges the difficulty of making change in a writing program when the institutional culture resists reform. Still, her study offers solutions that align with the recommendation of Molloy and Bennett to engage in the hard work of self-reflection that enables programs to identify the intuitional systems that shape practice, and explore how and where they might bend; align research with the practical needs and challenges the programs face; and elevate faculty voice and experience in the process. In particular, Wittstock underscores the importance of teacher agency to counter legislative and institutional control. She promotes efforts to “partner with and advocate for faculty, who are simultaneously the most vulnerable to upheaval caused by large-scale change and the individuals most often tasked with operationalizing those same changes toward equity for students in their classrooms.”

Margaret E. Weaver, Kailyn Shartel Hall, and Tracey A. Glaessgen extend this call for agency from faculty to students in their article, “Challenging Assumptions about Basic Writers and Corequisites at Four-Year Institutions.” They explore the increasing emphasis on corequisite models, driven by both fiduciary concerns around the cost of excess credits and the pedagogical emphasis on full-credit, more integrated models of instruction.

As their institution moved toward offering fewer prerequisite and more corequisite courses, Weaver, Hall, and Glaessgen studied the students who were selecting between the different options. They have found that “contrary to the assumptions being propagated in the literature and state legislatures, a significant number of our students prefer a prerequisite model of writing instruction that affords them more time to work on their writing in a low-risk environment prior to enrolling in the gateway course. By taking away this option, we are limiting students’ autonomy to choose.” Put another way: our assumptions about both Basic Writers and the value of higher education deny students’ agency in setting their own educational path. Similar to Wittstock, the authors argue that teachers and administrators working most closely with students must have a voice in charting the future, and in resisting a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to account for the students who belie our assumptions and expectations. Students and programs have to be agile as they respond to shifts both within and beyond their institutions, and institutions have to provide flexible pathways to accommodate diverse students’ roads to success. As Weaver, Hall, and Glaessgen put it: “we must continue to keep the needs of our students at the forefront and provide them with information and choices about the writing education they receive in our classrooms, and we must continue to demystify who these students are to the administrators and stakeholders making changes at our institutions.”

Finally, Amanda Sladek adds her voice to this call for students’ agency in shaping their own educational journeys in “Student-Centered Grammar Feedback in the Basic Writing Classroom: Toward a Translingual Grammar Pedagogy.” In particular, she locates student agency in an approach to grammar instruction that honors students’ right to determine the values that shape their own language, “including their agency in requesting help in conforming to standardized English.” In her developing practice, Sladek struggled to balance her students’ desire to master standardized English with her own resistance to mark their grammar missteps, believing it could undermine their confidence or stifle their creativity. Her exploration of the literature and experience in the classroom were telling her that, “language standards are artificially developed, no variety of English is linguistically superior or inherently correct, and the education system is designed to disenfranchise the very students who were most negatively impacted by my grammar marking.” Despite her own deepening intellectual convictions about the shortcomings of grammar instruction, however, her students kept asking for it, and repeatedly identified grammar as one of their main writing concerns. Sladek narrates her struggle to reconcile this tension, ul-

timately arriving at her decision to “engage students more directly in their own grammar feedback by working with them in determining the type and scope of grammar feedback they wanted.” She discusses the outcomes of this engagement, its intersections with research in translingual pedagogy, and the lessons from her students as her thinking has evolved.

Institutions of higher education are notoriously slow to change; practices get embedded, and along with them, outdated expectations and assumptions drive policy, curriculum, and attitudes. But foundations can be shaken by the stakeholders who experience the impacts of rigid structures most intimately: the students and faculty in the classrooms, and the directors at the helm of centers and programs. What would it mean for students to have a voice in defining “Basic Writing” as a course, as well as their values and identities as students? What would more equitably shared leadership that elevates faculty voice look like in our departments and programs? The articles in this issue provide insight into these questions. Further, they position us to keep the inquiry alive as we reflect on the purpose and effects of our institutional and programmatic structures, and as we resist those standards or curricula that restrict teacher agency, delimit student success, and quietly maintain the oversights, errors, and expectations of our past.

--**Cheryl C. Smith** and **Hope Parisi**