

Lifting as We Climb: The Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition 25 Years and Beyond

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Abstract: *This 20-minute documentary showcases interviews with founding members and past presidents of the Coalition in order to tell the story of the organization's first quarter of a century. The film details the Coalition's origins, successes, challenges, and goals for the next quarter of a century. By allowing viewers to watch and listen to the women who have made the Coalition's journey possible, "Lifting as We Climb" provides a personal and lively version of the organization's history and its hopes and aims for the future.*

Keywords: *documentary, film, history, origins, future, mentoring tables, social media, digital spaces*



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This 25-minute documentary seeks to both capture the history of the Coalition and provide viewers with an experiential sense of what being a member of the Coalition today looks, sounds, and feels like. We may never be able to gaze into Sappho's eyes or lose ourselves in the cadence of Sojourner Truth's speech, but history today is brimming with recorded images and voices. As with most historical developments, this is a mixed blessing. Along with the extraordinary power of seeing and hearing women who have lived through

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the Coalition's history share their stories comes a number of limitations. Chief among them, perhaps, is the inability of a short documentary to go into the depth that a book or even an article invites. There is also a limitation in the number of voices a short film like this one can represent.

When planning this project, the Coalition's Advisory Board provided me with a list of 40 potential women to interview, all amazing and, no doubt, able to contribute fascinating stories about their involvement in the organization. From this list, I chose six. With this number of interviewees, a short film can display a variety of perspectives while also inviting us to know the women speaking. We can experience their personalities and views in a way that will hopefully linger, as if we had them over to our homes, our living room reverberating with not just their stories but also their essence.

When selecting participants for this project, I wanted to feature a mix of generations, races, and types of involvement with the organization. As a result, I interviewed four Coalition presidents—Kathleen Welch, Andrea A. Lunsford, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Elizabeth Tasker-Davis. This group stretches all the way from our founding president to the current one (at the time of filming). I also interviewed two women, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Suzanne Bordelon, who, while not having served on the board, have been faithful attendees of Coalition meetings and have supported the organization in a multitude of ways throughout their careers.

Besides sharing these six women's experiences, the documentary also provides viewers with a first row seat at the 25th Anniversary Gala. While viewers will not be able to taste the delicious cake that was served to attendees, they will hear the sound of dozens of forks on plates, laughter, and applause as Coalition members and their guests enjoy the event and their celebratory dessert. More importantly, viewers will see parts of the Gala interspersed with the interviews, so that the Gala presentations of past Coalition presidents Barb L'Eplattenier, Shirley Wilson Logan, and Nancy Myers also add their thoughtful and witty voices to the film.

While the camera spends much time focused on the podium and the speakers, it also explores the audience. Throughout the documentary, there are images of the group discussion that followed the session's main speakers, the mentoring tables, and informal conversations scattered across the room: all aspects of what makes the Coalition valuable to its members. The documentary closes with a discussion of the future, both from the interviewees and Gala presenters. The dreams and challenges captured here include working to increase the Coalition's diversity in various ways—from race to gender to place of birth. How do we continue to reach academics while also stepping outside the ivory tower? How do we cross national boundaries to find international publics?

In addition, as the film shows, great hope is placed on rethinking our scholarship to include digital media such as moving images, podcasts, and web texts. Of course digital texts by themselves do not ensure wide audiences. Figuring out how to disseminate such texts through new types of scholarly publication, social media channels, and whatever digital worlds are dreamt up by the technological witches of the future—and, yes, we need more women developing digital platforms!—may be just as crucial as creating the texts themselves if we are to reach beyond our traditional ranks and lift ever higher as we climb in the next quarter of a century.

About the Author

Alexandra Hidalgo is an assistant professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University. Her documentary work has screened at national and international festivals and her video essays are forthcoming in Enculturation and Computers and Composition Digital Press. She is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of agnès films, an online community of women filmmakers that fosters and helps promote feminist and woman-centered films and videos.