

Introduction to Volume 17, Issue 3/4

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2020 has been a challenging year. Globally, COVID has killed nearly 2 million people, with the U.S. accounting for well over 300,000 of those deaths. Colleges and universities prepared over the summer to welcome students back to campus through a combination of social distancing protocols, wellness checks, and testing. A pandemic-induced economic downturn decreased enrollment at nearly all institutions. And much of the early college-amid-COVID reporting in the popular press focused on high-profile outbreaks on (or, more often, off) campuses as evidence that schools were compromising safety to ensure the room-and-board revenue stream central to their economic model. Less press, it seems, focused on the many ways that schools successfully limited community spread on campuses. At my own institution, for example, positivity rates among students, staff, and faculty were very low over Fall, and contact tracing revealed that transmission happened exclusively at off-campus venues. Rapid, rigorous quarantines of athletes, roommates, and even an entire residence hall at one point made it possible to limit on-campus COVID spread. While other institutions were less successful at limiting the spread of COVID, classrooms, dorms, and dining halls have not been the sites of transmission that many—myself included—feared they would be. As we look to Spring 2021, many schools are making or considering additional modifications to improve safety on campus. And all that might still change between now and the start of Spring term as we brace for the possibility of a post-holiday surge in cases.

Beyond the immediacy of pandemic preparations and execution of safety protocols, it is clear that COVID is a serious stress test for higher education. Preparations have required significant, unanticipated expenditures, and many schools—public and private—lack the resources to absorb the costs. Euphemisms like belt tightening and haircuts cannot capture the magnitude of the financial impact. Beyond the planning, testing, cleaning, and tracing costs associated with monitoring and managing the disease on campus, enrollments are down significantly at many institutions. Residential campuses forced to go remote—or to offer a remote option—have lost an important source of revenue. Both *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* document the ramifications. Universities across the US are announcing eliminating programs and restructuring, as well as furloughing, laying off, and outright eliminating faculty and staff positions. Some losses are temporary (we hope); others will undoubtedly be permanent. At my university, the trustees approved a plan last June that has consolidated the institution from six to five colleges. Within the College of Arts and Sciences, where I work, the plan disbanded the thirteen academic departments and reorganized them into six schools. The stated goals: cost savings and curricular efficiencies. In addition to working diligently to deliver meaningful, on-campus learning experiences while staying safe, we are working hard to make concrete progress on those goals. While we have not yet lost full-time lines, colleagues at many other colleges and universities have not been so fortunate. And evidence suggests that higher education is headed for even more austerity. Some schools will not survive this stress test.

Across the Disciplines

A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing
<https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2020.17.3.00>

wac.colostate.edu/atd

ISSN 554-8244

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And the vaccines are coming. It is worth pausing briefly to consider that fact. In under a year, the scientific community, private industry, and the public sector worked in concert to develop, test, and approve multiple vaccines. People are getting vaccinated. The best-case scenario, perhaps, is to begin returning to some semblance of normal by Fall 2021. Residential campuses may return to pre-pandemic dorm and classroom capacity, perhaps with enhanced hybrid and online instructional capabilities. A modest economic recovery may follow relatively quickly on the heels of vaccine distribution. Perhaps higher education will stabilize for 2021-22 and at least some institutions can meaningfully identify their new normal. One can hope.

In this challenging—but cautiously hopeful—context, this issue of *Across the Disciplines* offers three articles and two book reviews. Mike Palmquist, Pam Childers, Elaine Maimon, Joan Mullin, Rich Rice, Alisa Russell, and David R. Russell (2020) offer a broad perspective on Writing Across the Curriculum in a multimodal article that will quickly find its place in the syllabi of graduate courses on WAC. Adele Leon (2020) and Shakil Rabbi (2020), in their respective contributions, exemplify some of the very features of work in WAC that Palmquist et al. claim will keep the movement relevant in the coming decades. Both studies draw on foundational ideas in the field, with Leon examining low-stakes writing and Rabbi revisiting James Britton's transactional function of writing, which I first encountered in reading Britton et al.'s *The Development of Writing Abilities* (1975). Both studies engage meaningfully and empirically with our field's current interest in transfer and threshold concepts of writing, explore writing development among graduate students in the academic disciplines, and consider the implications of their research for pedagogy, faculty development, and student support. The two book reviews in this issue offer readers a window into recent—and important—books published by the University Press of Colorado: Matthew Sautman (2020) reviews 2018's *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity*, edited by Mya Poe, Asao Inoue, and Norbert Elliot, and Emma Lee Guthrie (2020) reviews Michelle LaFrance's 2019 *Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studies Researchers*.

In the first article for this issue, Palmquist et al. (2020) take stock of WAC and its many permutations. "50 Years of WAC: Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going?" brings together interviews with many of the leading figures in the history and development of what has become one of the AAC&U's eleven high-impact educational practices. Through both video and alphabetic text, readers are invited to see—and hear—for themselves pioneers' reflections on the first half century of WAC. The authors offer a brief history of attention to writing in higher education, the complicated relationships between English and writing, and a set of important educational trends to offer context for and frame the emergence of an identifiable WAC movement by the early 1970s. "50 Years" traces sets of relationships and networks that helped to establish WAC as a scholarly field within writing studies, with key founding figures of the WAC Clearinghouse and academic journals such as *The WAC Journal* and *ATD*. This work established publication venues for scholars in the field, a requirement for disciplinary recognition. Told through the lenses of Susan McLeod's and Joan Mullin's academic trajectories, the article documents enduring challenges for those whose work in WAC does not neatly conform to the three-legged stool of teaching, scholarship, and service, or who discover that writing studies is not recognized by campus colleagues as an academic discipline. Helpfully, Palmquist et al. also detail the broader moves that have helped to establish WAC as a recognizable discipline: the creation of the International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference; the International Network of WAC, where I first encountered a community of WAC scholars and administrators nearly twenty years ago; the Statement of WAC Principles and Practices; the formation of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum; and more. Looking ahead, the authors see WAC as a "force for change" and point to several identifiable places where WAC has a role.

Adele Leon's (2020) contribution, "Low-Stakes Writing as High-Impact Educational Practice in MBA Classes," reports on just the sort of work that will help to ensure that WAC remains a force for change

across academic disciplines. Leon's empirical case study helps to address a surprisingly under-examined cornerstone of WAC practice: low-stakes writing assignments. Her work is motivated in part by a concern that the attention on writing as a high-impact practice (HIP) has thus far privileged high-stakes, formal writing and risked treating informal writing—a centerpiece of WAC practice—as “supplements used to buttress major writing projects, thereby perpetuating a hierarchical model of assignment types” (Leon, 2020, p. 47). In addition to contributing to our thinking about low-stakes writing as a HIP, Leon's study offers insights into the use of such writing in graduate programs and seeks to establish a bridge between the literature on WAC and that on curriculum, pedagogy, and learning within business journals. The low-stakes prompts used in the study were written to speak to Anderson et al.'s (2016) “meaning-making writing tasks” and “higher-order learning activities,” as well as to theory on both transfer and threshold concepts. The survey questions Leon administered to students in the MBA classes were constructed from the National Survey of Student Engagement questions on deep approaches to learning. And her approach to interview coding enables her to explore the matter of transfer and threshold concept acquisition by the MBA professor in her study. While Leon's contribution reports results from a relatively small number of students in two courses taught by a single professor, she finds promising associations between low-stakes writing and the HIPs she examines. Additionally, she explores in depth the ways that assigning low-stakes writing shifted the business professor's thinking about both writing assignments and class engagement.

In “Mapping Rhetorical Knowledge in Advanced Academic Writers: The Affordances of a Transactional Framework to Disciplinary Communication” Shakil Rabbi (2020) reports on an extended ethnographic study of two Ph.D. candidates, one in entomology and one in political science and women's studies. Rabbi worked with the ABD doctoral students in the graduate writing center, and the data for his contribution to this issue come from interviews anchored in part by a discussion of drafts written and selected by the research subjects. Rabbi, while acknowledging the limits of the case study method, aims to shed light on the value of a transactional framework for understanding how emerging expert academic writers approach a rhetorical situation. Additionally, he argues that the transactional framework offers insights into both the metagenre (Carter, 2007) and threshold concept (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) frameworks. Rabbi finds support for the value of more general rhetorical knowledge for developing academic writers, even as his subjects apply that knowledge in specialized, discipline-specific ways when generating texts for particular audiences and purposes. And he proposes a refresh of the transactional framework to shift it from a category or function of writing to “a way of thinking about disciplinary communication” (Rabbi, 2020, p. 83). Both Rabbi's and Leon's contributions invite further research into graduate students' writing development and have the potential to inform instruction in graduate programs.

As we head into 2021, let us hope that the new year brings much that is good, a robust vaccine rollout, a return to wider social interactions, in-person academic conferences, and a solid recovery for the economy—and for higher education. As we look ahead for *ATD*, we see the promise of a good year. We will soon publish a substantial special issue on archival research across the disciplines, guest edited by Gesa Kirsch, Caitlin Burns, Dakoda P. Smith, and Romeo Garcia. In addition, after receiving an unprecedented number of submissions for a special issue on STEM and WAC, Erin Beaver, Brian Hendrickson, and Justin Nicholes are moving forward with what promises to be another substantial thematic issue. Beyond the special issue, the guest editors are already in conversation with Michael Pemberton at *ATD Books* about a possible companion edited collection on WAC and STEM. We are currently in possession of more than a dozen manuscripts making their way through the review process, keeping our consulting readers busy, and of course, we welcome more: ***please submit relevant work for consideration!*** Paul Cook is engaged with several authors preparing reviews of recent books in the field. And Chris Basgier, Staci Perryman-Clark, Amy Cicchino, and Ashleah Wimberly are close to issuing a call for proposals for a special issue of *ATD* focused on diversity,

equity, and social justice in WAC faculty development. Stay in touch as this new year unfolds, and take care.

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Complete APA Citation

Cripps, Michael J. (2020, December 31). Introduction to Volume 17, Issue 3/4. *Across the Disciplines*, 17(3/4), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-I.2020.17.3.00>