

From the Guest Editors - Corequisite Writing Courses: Equity and Access

Dawn Shepherd, Samantha Sturman, and Heidi Estrem

First Year Writing Reforms

Corequisite first year writing courses are a critical component of institutional-level equity work. Most often, efforts to address inequities in higher education are focused at the individual level through rethinking instructor bias, pedagogical approaches, or curricular materials. That classroom level work is, of course, important to do and to deepen. At the same time, institutional policies and approaches such as a) placement based on racist standardized test scores and b) course structures that require non-credit-bearing classes based on those test scores are ripe for proactive, equity-minded reform. Because of the deep impact revised course structures and placement processes can have on the success of students whom our institutions have historically underserved, first year writing reforms are urgent. Corequisite writing courses are a powerful equity lever, and for that reason, we are especially grateful for the opportunity to edit this special issue on corequisite writing courses at this moment and in this journal.

This moment: when COVID-19 continues to cause harm to our students, families, and colleagues, when we all are continuing to learn from the protests that began and are continuing after George Floyd's death, when we are now, in this long, remote summer, beginning to tackle (collectively, imperfectly) the deep systemic racism in higher education, shamefully late.

This journal: *Composition Studies*' roots are in the first year writing classroom. From its earliest days, its focus has been on the exchange of ideas among two- and four-year writing faculty and on learning from mistakes and innovations in the classroom and across programs (Dietrich, "History"). This legacy of dissatisfaction with labor hierarchies and the instructional status quo permeates this issue as well, and we are grateful for Kara Taczak and Matt Davis' early and persistently positive support for this themed issue.

We imagine that some of you—maybe even most of you—reading this introduction now haven't taught first year writing since graduate school and are not the writing program administrator at your institution. Please keep reading. The scholarship in this special issue is relevant for all of us: those who teach in and administer first year writing programs but, perhaps in particular, those who don't. How, why, when, and for whom we offer first year writing courses affects nearly every college student at nearly every institution

in this country. First year writing programs are a high-volume, high-touch enterprise; changes there are likely to affect hundreds of students at any one institution and hundreds of thousands of students nationwide. Whether we teach first year writing or not, our scholarship informs it and our sustained support of first year writing is critically important. It is not hyperbolic to claim that this is where we can do our collective, deepest work to mitigate the damage from racist standardized tests, inequitable K-12 education, and state and/or institutional policies that disproportionately affect our most vulnerable students.

Terms of Engagement for First Year Writing Reforms

Those of us who are writing program administrators dwell in a constellation of overlapping issues and pressures that include state educational policies, institutional expectations, labor inequities, and race- and class-based literacy misconceptions. For those less steeped in the conversation or more removed from the day-to-day administration of first year writing, defining three concepts (writing placement, corequisite, basic writing) central to the host of issues informing corequisite writing pedagogy and research will be of use. While our gloss here is far too brief, the scholarship informing all of these areas is rich and complex, and we invite you to (re)visit it.

We start with writing **placement** because, in most cases, students do not opt into composition courses. Writing placement and first year writing course sequences are inextricably linked and changing course structures (as with the move to corequisite writing courses) means changing how students are placed into those courses. At all except the most selective institutions, students are placed into their initial writing courses based on standardized test scores, a standardized “writing placement test,” or, less commonly, through another locally developed approach like versions of guided self-placement (e.g., see Emily Isaacs and Sean Molloy; Christie Toth). Several very basic questions have long troubled the three of us (and others in our field) about placement and its unique role in higher education in the United States:

- Why do we accept students into college but then actually not-quite-accept them through sorting some instead into required, non-degree eligible courses, creating what Holly Hassell and Joanne Baird Giordano identify as the “blurry borders” between the “essentialist definitions” of remedial and “college-ready” coursework (58)?
- Why do we do this sorting based on literacy (and math), but not based on students’ knowledge of history, science, sociology, or psychology (see Richard Haswell)?

- Even worse: why do we sort students based on standardized tests, which have been exhaustively catalogued as racist and classist (e.g., Asao Inoue; Ibram X. Kendi; Jessica Nastal; Mya Poe and Asao Inoue; Mya Poe, Jessica Nastal, and Norbert Eliot; John Rosales)?

We use *we* deliberately in the preceding questions, because although these policies are often set by the state or the institution, writing scholars are implicated when we do not consistently advocate for other approaches. According to Hassell and Baird Giordano, “not only is placement students’ first contact with college English, but it is also the critical moment that has the potential to profoundly shape a student’s experience in college—including whether they will be retained or lost to higher education altogether” (56). Staci Perryman-Clark reminds us that “assessment creates or denies opportunity structures,” and that writing assessment can be an area to use “power to effect institutional change in ways that can foster equity and fairness in the classroom” (206, 211). Elsewhere, we have identified writing placement as a right-sized equity issue for writing scholars to address (see Estrem et al.). But for too many of us and for too many of the colleagues we work with at our institutions, placement based on standardized test scores is viewed at best as a neutral and efficient mechanism, or at worst a kind of necessary evil.

Basic writing (also known as developmental writing, or “dev ed,” as Peter Adams describes it later in this issue) is a series of one to four writing (and sometimes additional reading) classes that a student could be required to take, based on placement, that are ostensibly “pre-college” courses. These courses may “count” in some way during the semester (for financial aid or scholarship purposes), but they almost never count toward a baccalaureate degree. We’ve heard our colleagues and friends label a course “credit-bearing” if a student receives credit toward financial aid or a full semester load. We disagree. We believe that if an institution is willing to admit a student, it should be willing to educate them through courses that count within a general education program. While this is not always possible—most of the corequisite courses described in this special issue are not credit-bearing by our definition—we should all work toward this goal.

Basic writing, as an area of study, is a part of our discipline with a student-focused, progressive tradition of supporting all learners (see Council on Basic Writing “About Us”; Victor Villanueva and Zarah Moeggenberg). Instructors in these classes often labor under problematic conditions (large class sizes, poor compensation, unstable employment) while taking on, as their explicit mission, working directly with those who have been disenfranchised at the institution by being barred from college-level work. Recently, though, those of us deeply engaged with and supportive of the social justice principles that we bring to

teaching basic writing have had to come to terms with the deeply problematic structures surrounding that work. While individual classroom pedagogies may be progressive and designed to serve students, the larger institutional framework of developmental education creates an unequal, unfair gap between college admittance and college-level coursework.

We can and should continue to support and learn from the personalized, thoughtful pedagogical work and scholarly research from basic writing as an area of study, and we must also commit to dismantling basic writing as a course structure while continuing to better support and retain all students. Basic writing programs silo and underserve students who would better benefit from direct access to credit-bearing, college-level coursework with support. Developing careful approaches that enable students to circumvent non-credit bearing basic writing courses has immediate and profound positive effects on the persistence and retention of Black, Latinx, and working-class students (see, e.g., Leslie Hensen and Katie Hern; Katie Hern; the Multiple Measures Assessment Project).

As a replacement for basic writing courses that seek to integrate students directly into college-level coursework, **corequisite writing courses** provide an especially powerful form of writing instruction. These course structures have expanded fairly rapidly recently; hence the impetus for this special issue. In simplest terms, a corequisite course is a course a student is required to take alongside another course. As the Course Design pieces in this issue demonstrate, corequisite writing instruction takes many forms. Over the past several decades, writing studies scholars have experimented with and reported on a number of creative alternatives to non-credit-bearing basic writing courses, seeking to mainstream students through co-curricular courses, studio or writing lab options, or stretch models that provide students with additional support (see Peter Adams; Greg Glau; Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson; Rachel Rigonlino and Penny Freel; Judith Rodby and Tom Fox). In many cases, writing scholars have been able to successfully advocate for all writing coursework to be credit-bearing (by our definition). In others, the corequisite course does not count toward the degree, but it does still enable students to begin directly in the credit-bearing option. The goal is to move students into college composition while also providing meaningful, challenging support for them while they are in the course—and not prior to it.

Part of what has complicated reforms to writing placement and the development of corequisite writing courses is the support of these initiatives by stakeholders outside the university and far-removed from our classes. For example, states like California, Florida, and Connecticut have passed legislation to either reduce or eliminate writing remediation, thus having a similar effect of placing all or nearly all college-admitted students starting in credit-bearing

courses with corequisite support when needed. In many ways, this is good news that echoes statements from our field: the 2015 TYCA White Paper on Developmental Education Reforms draws attention to the potential long-term effects of reform efforts that deny access to postsecondary education for some populations, namely “class- and race-based ‘tracking’ that perpetuates occupational and professional segregation” (228). While such state mandates are rooted in research that demonstrates the improved retention rates for students who begin in credit-bearing courses, they are also often framed in terms of efficiency and speed (see Complete College America, “Corequisite Support”).

Writing scholars are right to be wary of these external bodies’ involvement; we, too, are leery of what Linda Adler-Kassner has identified as the insidious effects of the “educational industrial complex” (320). While we should challenge and critique the instrumentalist language of organizations that focus nearly exclusively on credit accumulation and “clear” educational pathways, we can and should also leverage the external support for educational reforms that clearly benefit students. As Hensen and Hern note, “[S]tudents of color are being disproportionately excluded from college-level courses based on criteria that do not accurately reflect their ability to succeed, and this exclusion has very real and measurable consequences for their educational progress.” As we all seek to engage in the lifelong work of exposing and addressing systemic racism—on our campuses, in our practices, in our nation—writing faculty can advocate for changing writing course placement and course access as well as the institutional structures that support them.

This Issue: Equity, Access, and Institutional Change

When we wrote our call for manuscripts focused on corequisite writing courses nine months ago, three terms resonated for us: equity, access, and change. This special issue provides teacher-scholars a platform for exploring the intersections among access and equity in first year writing, particularly with an eye toward the corequisite model, state and national higher education policy, and the institutional nuances of issues like course credits, instructor load, scheduling, and professional development.

Cover Art

The cover for this issue was created by Brittany O’Meara, a printmaker, writer, and adjunct instructor in the First-Year Writing Program at Boise State University. Brittany says of this digital painting,

Traditional painting requires the use of various brushes in size and shape to apply paint to a canvas, which creates a tangible object that hangs in physical spaces. Because of the pandemic, we are all asked

to learn new ways of experiencing the world and connecting with others, and this new way of existing opens up a conversation about art and access. [...] Creating art that is both painterly in form but digital in medium works to remove the barriers that are commonly associated with viewing art in both place and practice.

This piece, in its representation of the unique intersection of art and access, fits perfectly with the themes of equity and access we see in this special issue.

At a Glance: Connections and Collaboration

In this visual piece, Shelley Rodrigo and Samantha Sturman illustrate a course structure that is not otherwise represented in this issue: online corequisite instruction. Offering a corequisite course online in turn offers college access to a wider range of students. While the current situation requires many courses to be moved online, designing an online corequisite course comes with its own set of unique challenges and opportunities. Their visual collaboration examines two online corequisite courses (one synchronous and one asynchronous) taught by faculty trained both in corequisite instruction and best practices for online course design. It shows how these different course designs make use of tools within Learning Management Software (LMS) in purposeful and intentional ways to create corequisite courses that are fully integrated with the first year writing courses they support.

The Articles

This collection of articles offers a variety of perspectives that build nicely on each other, from national (Peter Adams), state (Diane Kelly-Riley), classroom and campus (Mark Blaauw-Hara, Carrie Strand Tebeau, Dominic Borowiak, and Jamie Blaauw-Hara), and finally historical (Eric Armstrong, Megan Baptista Geist, and Joshua Geist) levels. Adams, professor emeritus at The Community College of Baltimore County in Baltimore, Maryland, brings his national perspective as well as extensive pedagogical, administrative, and scholarly experience to bear in his piece. In it, he offers clear descriptions of the many variations of corequisite writing courses, necessary aspects of vital faculty support, and key issues to consider when transitioning to corequisite education. Second, Kelly-Riley's piece provides a data-driven snapshot of corequisite implementation across different institution types (including community colleges, a small college, and universities with various research expectations) within one state educational context. Third, Blaauw-Hara et al., of North Central Michigan College, share the results of their study of the efficacy of a "writing about writing" approach within a corequisite course. Their findings speak to the power of challenging curricular materials for all

first year writing students. Finally, Armstrong et al. of The College of the Sequoias reveal how often meaningful educational reform is met by backlash, and often from educators themselves. They end with strategies to help us all remain vigilant to likely threats to corequisite writing education.

The Course Designs

The four Course Design pieces offer insights into how corequisite is conceptualized and corequisite writing instruction is shaped by its local context. They vary in credit hours, number of students, and instructor models. As importantly to us, while all offer examples of excellent courses, these scholars also write candidly and with vulnerability about the imperfect and nonlinear nature of curricular change. Angela Christie and Lynee Lewis Gaillet describe the development of a corequisite experience that pairs a “freshman learning experience” course with the initial first year writing course. Sara Heaser and Darci L. Thoun detail their efforts to design a careful corequisite course that is taught by a different instructor than the first year writing course. The robust corequisite course has had the unintended consequence of raising new questions about the first year writing course that it supports. Kim Jaxon, Laura Sparks, and Chris Fosen describe a dramatically different course configuration than most of us are used to: ninety students in a “jumbo” course who also attend small ten-person workshops as part of the overall course experience. Stacey Stanfield Anderson, Kathleen Klompien, and Kim Vose share their two-credit intensive corequisite course, the popularity of which has led them to add upper-division versions of it. Collectively, these windows into four very different institutional contexts illuminate the bright spots and dusty corners of our corequisite classrooms.

The Where We Are Section

This issue concludes with pieces by two special scholars in our field, both of whom have now retired. Tom Fox (often with his colleague Judith Rodby) unabashedly countered the damaging basic writing narrative of “bonehead English” at his institution, California State University Chico, for many years, and developed alternatives to non-credit-bearing coursework even in the face of direct hostility from colleagues. He has been a champion of all student writers throughout his career, and his book *Standards and Access* is still relevant today. We are delighted that he contributed this piece, which is rooted in the classroom and also addresses institutional change. And finally, our colleague Karen Uehling has been a tireless advocate for students in basic writing classes for nearly forty years. She helped found the Conference on Basic Writing, remaining an active participant in that organization for many decades. During that same time, she taught thousands of students in a variety of basic,

first year, undergraduate, and graduate writing courses. Her piece helpfully illuminates the changes she has been a part of as our field's efforts to best support all students have continued to evolve. It is an honor to have both of their perspectives included here.

Taken together, these pieces raise dynamic, compelling, and unsettling questions about corequisite writing education. We are energized by these scholars' work and look forward to the research projects that will be inspired by them.

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