

Empowering the Community College First-Year Composition Teacher: Pedagogies and Policies, edited by Meryl Siegal and Betsy Gilliland. University of Michigan Press, 2021. 328 pp.

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Community colleges have seen their fair share of precarity—an issue that has been brought into even sharper focus recently through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic. A *New York Times* article from April 2021 notes that while all types of colleges and universities have been negatively affected by COVID-19, it is community colleges that have been disproportionately impacted: a 9.5% decrease in enrollment is cited, a drop that is “more than double the loss experienced by four-year schools” (Saul). A November 2020 article from *Inside Higher Ed* notes that enrollment for community college freshmen is down by 19%, with the hardest-hit population of “underrepresented minorities” decreasing by nearly 30% (St. Amour). And even before pandemic times, vast educational reforms in curriculum and placement, widespread budget cuts, and the financial incentivization for colleges “to get more students through a course of study (transfer, certificate, or degree) more quickly” has meant that community college teachers face substantial challenges that inform the ways they approach pedagogy and interact with programmatic and institutional policy (Siegal and Gilliland 5).

But despite emergency transitions to (and then sustained engagement with) online platforms, despite waning enrollments, and despite decreased funding, first year composition (FYC) teachers at community colleges continue to do good and meaningful work. The new edited collection *Empowering the Community College First-Year Composition Teacher: Pedagogies and Practices* sheds a necessary light on the teachers who are at once resilient and nimble, despite the challenges of a changing landscape. Editors Meryl Siegal and Betsy Gilliland provide readers with a collection that “provides a broad look at contemporary community college FYC that inspires teaching and learning and, at the same time, endeavors to present the complexity of community college FYC in higher education” (11).

Precarity sometimes proves to be the catalyst for meaningful work to get done in response to—and often in spite of—challenges. Teachers of community college FYC rise to these challenges by asking: How does the changing landscape affect our pedagogical decision-making? Are our current programmatic structures, course designs, and writing curricula as effective and equitable as they can be for an undeniably diverse student population? How can we best contribute to all students’ success considering local material conditions? What skills (writing or otherwise) are the most practical and transferable for the students in our FYC classes? How can we listen to one another and learn from our

individual but collective experience? Siegal and Gilliland's collection showcases the innovation, collaboration, and wily resilience of this teaching population in four thematic parts, comprising sixteen engaging chapters.

The "Introduction: Why FYC Teachers' Perspectives Are Important," offers necessary context and exigence, and Siegal and Gilliland note the shifting trends in offering first year composition courses (e.g., moving away from past models of remediation/developmental writing in an effort to accelerate students through programs expediently) and the widespread conviction that "The [community college] student is a customer focused on getting in, getting through, and getting out" (7). They assert that teachers are an integral and inextricable asset to creating institutional change and seek to amplify these expert voices in the parts that follow.

In "Part 1: Refining Our Pedagogy," four chapters contribute to the ongoing discussion of refining one's pedagogy and offering sound practice in community college FYC. In this section, readers explore studies that investigate student agency in constructing the writer's identity through reflective writing; improving reading comprehension and retention in online formats; empowering multilingual students through socio-cognitive classroom practices; and the metalinguistic knowledge students possess through writing-about-writing frameworks. Common threads in part one include meeting diverse student populations where they are at, and maximizing their diverse experiences and knowledge to make the composition classroom "work" for them.

"Part 2: Teaching Toward Acceleration" includes three chapters that share how meaningful classroom practices occur even in accelerated formats. These chapters explore the transformative value of contract grading as anti-racist praxis, focusing on student responsibility and time management; relationship- and community-building not only to inspire mutual trust among students but also to improve academic literacy; and scaffolding writing-intensive projects for students with disabilities, demonstrating ways to make college writing curricula truly accessible. Part 2 shares multiple stories of community college FYC offering innovative and dynamic approaches to assessment, classroom engagement, and student advocacy and support.

Each of the three chapters in "Part 3: Considering Programmatic Change" does just that: When faced with changes at the program level (ostensibly to meet students' evolving personal and/or career exigencies), community college FYC teachers adapt to these challenges with students' best interests at the heart of their decision-making. In this section, readers engage with discussions of how to provide meaningful, humanities-informed instruction to STEM students; how to facilitate student success in synchronous online instruction to students in rural areas (and how to assess within these constraints); and how CTE (Career and Technical Education) professional writing approaches can motivate students to rise to the challenge and rigor of college-level writing expectations.

This section makes visible the adaptability and agility of community college FYC teachers, who innovate even in the face of changes to material conditions. Part 3 demonstrates the transfer of skills, knowledge, and expertise among disciplines, as well as between academia and the real world.

“Part 4: Considering Curriculum: Research and Policy” is the longest thematic section, boasting six chapters that each present a different approach to “researching issues in FYC instruction, student success, and educational policy” (Siegal and Gilliland 14). Readers can engage with topics that include advocating for the diversity of multilingual learners; an ethnographic approach to understanding how community and two-year colleges support international students; and how departments respond to educational reform and policy change. This section concludes with chapters that discuss co-requisite teaching models; how faculty perceive changes to FYC programs, including curriculum reform and placement protocols; and a look into what the processes of a community college institutional research (IR) offices do for students and faculty alike. Researching and connecting what happens in the classroom with overarching policy allows community college FYC teachers to understand diverse student needs and work toward institutional practice that is equitable for all students.

In their “Conclusion: Listening to Teachers,” Siegal and Gilliland discuss practical applications of the previous chapters, encouraging readers to take a cue from the collected authors and pursue research, classroom practices, and programmatic initiatives that further the common community college goals of access and equity. The striking and effective balance of focus on what happens at the classroom level, combined with the big-picture view of community college FYC’s positionality in the larger institution, is a highlight of the edited collection. The conclusion also offers a robust selection of questions for reflection and review for every chapter, as well as a glossary of key terms, encouraging readers to engage with the studies even more meaningfully and inviting more teachers to join the conversation.

Siegal and Gilliland believe in teachers. Despite all challenges, teachers are resilient, they are collaborative, they are visionary. This book situates teachers at the center of every discussion and amplifies their dexterity and adaptability. *Empowering the Community College First-Year Composition Teacher* “is an effort to bring grassroots faculty perspectives back to the curriculum, showcasing faculty knowledge, expertise, and creativity in designing and implementing excellent instruction in FYC” (10). The book champions community college FYC teachers and the tenacious work they have been doing all along, and *all* educators will be empowered by the work shared in this collection.

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Works Cited

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