

## EDITORS' COLUMN

With this issue, we ponder the future of basic writing. Although “remedial” writing has existed in the U.S. colleges and universities for more than a century, what most of us mean by basic writing is the field that developed as a result of the Open Admissions movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Always a contested space, subject to political and economic forces beyond its control, basic writing has nonetheless served thousands of students and produced a substantial and influential body of scholarship in the larger field of composition studies.

What is the state of basic writing today and what does the future hold for the field and the students it serves? These are questions that are not easily answered. In “The Future of Basic Writing,” George Otte and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk provide an overview of the forces that threatened BW in the 1990s and beyond. The sources of these attacks were wide ranging and included university administrators and boards of trustees seeking to increase their institutions’ status by eliminating “remedial” courses; state legislators reluctant to provide financial support for teaching “skills” they felt should have been mastered in high school; and BW scholars who argued that basic writing was just another way of stigmatizing students who, they maintained, would be better off going directly into the college mainstream. In this article, excerpted from their recent book *Basic Writing* (see the News and Announcements section at the end of this issue for information about how to access this book), Otte and Mlynarczyk review the effects, not all of them negative, that these attacks have had. Some of the more salutary results include the development of more effective models for teaching basic writing—and reading—within the regular college curriculum rather than as a “pre-requisite” to be completed before the “real work” of college can begin. In trying to anticipate future needs for BW instruction, Otte and Mlynarczyk note that in 2009 and 2010, partly because of the economic recession as well as the new G.I. bill passed in 2008, record numbers of nontraditional students have enrolled in the nation’s colleges, especially its community colleges. Will these students receive the type of support they need to achieve success as readers and writers—the type of support that recent research has shown to improve their chances for success in college and in careers? Only time will tell. In the meantime, in this issue, we take a look at some of the significant trends that are molding basic writing today.

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One obvious trend is the increasing use of technology in basic writing instruction. Some schools are being pressured to replace basic writing courses with computer labs where students work independently using commercially available materials. Obviously seen as a cost-cutting measure, this trend is reminiscent of the unsuccessful “programmed instruction” of the pre-computer 1960s. More promising is the use of the Internet to provide personalized BW instruction within an online community of basic writers under the leadership of a sensitive and well-trained teacher. In “Teaching Basic Writing in a Web-Enhanced Environment,” Linda J. Stine gives careful attention to this emerging field, providing a wealth of practical information to guide program administrators and teachers who are considering the adoption of fully online or hybrid basic writing instruction.

Another crucial area for discussion as writing program administrators and classroom teachers work to develop more effective BW programs and curricula is the question of the writing itself. What should students be writing *about*? If basic writers are to be motivated to invest the tremendous effort necessary to improve as writers, they need to be writing about topics that fully engage their interests and energies. In “Expanding Definitions of Academic Writing: Family History Writing in the Basic Writing Classroom and Beyond,” Sherry Rankins-Robertson, Lisa Cahill, Duane Roen, and Gregory R. Glau maintain that “[v]iewing academic writing and literacies as transparent and generalizable can negatively influence the teaching and learning of writing because such a view has the potential to under-prepare students to meet the dynamics of changing rhetorical situations, diverse disciplinary conventions, and varied purposes for writing.” They assert that first-year composition courses, and especially basic writing courses, are ideally suited to help students develop a richer understanding of academic discourse by researching and writing about family, often in multiple modalities. When the scope of school-sponsored writing is expanded to include family writing, students are encouraged “to see the relevance of writing to their lives outside of school” and, at the same time, “to reflect critically on their conceptions of family, often coming to see family as a more complex construct.”

A third question—and one that will be the focus of the 2011 Council on Basic Writing (CBW) workshop at the national CCCC Conference next spring (see the News and Announcements section for details)—is how BW can join forces with other student support services to maximize the effectiveness of basic writing programs. In “Realizing Distributed Gains: How Collaboration with Support Services Transformed a Basic Writing Program

for International Students,” Mutiara Mohamad and Janet Boyd describe the “fortuitous collaboration” that developed as they worked together to improve services for international students at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. Although the collaboration described in this article relates specifically to writing support for non-native speakers of English, it has obvious implications for basic writers as well. What is noteworthy about the approach that developed as Mohamad and Boyd worked together to serve their student population more effectively is their realization “that administrators need not wait for directives from the top down but can take the initiative to effect gradual institutional change.”

The final article in this issue addresses a question that has concerned the readers and editors of this journal for decades. What are the implications of “basic writing,” the term we use to describe the work we do? This term, coined in the 1970s by Mina Shaughnessy, the journal’s first editor, has periodically come under attack. In fact, in the Spring 1995 issue of *JBW*, editors Karen Greenberg and Trudy Smoke asked a number of prominent scholars in the field whether the journal should be re-named to avoid the negative connotations of “basic writing.” The results of this informal poll were inconclusive, and the journal retained its name. But Pamela VanHaitsma asks a similar question in “More Talk about ‘Basic Writers’: A Category of Rhetorical Value for Teachers.” In particular, she asks: What are the institutional, political, and other contexts in which the term “basic writer” bears positive influence, and does, or can, the *tactical* use of the term enable such influence? This question also embeds another: What does BW as a field still seek for students and teachers? In her case-study analysis of what she calls “teacher talk” around “basic writer,” VanHaitsma suggests that even as the term may work against the interests of students in the rhetoric of critics on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, it serves to argue for resources for students and pose important questions about students’ competencies and learning. It also empowers the effort to bring social justice to teaching and strengthens the activity of theorizing so foundational to both basic writing and composition as intersecting fields. After examining the ways in which the term “basic writer” is used by teachers on the campus where she conducted this case study, VanHaitsma asserts that “debates about basic writing’s existence would be better served if they shifted away from wholesale critique or defense and instead grappled with more rhetorical questions about value for particular institutions or programs at specific moments in time.”

As this issue of *JBW* goes to press, we are pleased to announce an addition to the journal's editorial team—Professor Cheryl C. Smith of CUNY's Baruch College. Cheryl is coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum at Baruch and offers workshops to graduate students and faculty on teaching with writing. Her research interests include the ethical dimensions of writing assessment, the use of pedagogical innovation to improve the self-efficacy of at-risk students, and the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on writing and the teaching of writing. Cheryl will be working directly with authors to develop and edit articles that have been accepted for publication. We extend a warm welcome to Cheryl.

**—Rebecca Mlynarczyk and Hope Parisi**