

In Our Own Words: Adult Learners on Writing in College

COLLIE FULFORD, STEFANIE FRIGO, YASEEN
ABDUL-MALIK, THOMAS KELLY, ADRIENNE LONG,
AND STUART PARRISH

In this article, we—two faculty and four alumni—reflect on the writing and learning experiences of adult undergraduates at North Carolina Central University (NCCU, or “Central”), a historically Black public university where 18 percent of students are over the age of twenty-four (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021a). That age marker for adulthood is somewhat arbitrary, as many NCCU students under the age of twenty-five have significant adult responsibilities, such as parenting and/or being financially self-supporting. These responsibilities are among the broader criteria that qualify students as independent, irrespective of age, per the Free Application for Federal Aid (Cruse et al., 2018). Nonnegotiable commitments to work and family can set independent students apart from their classmates because of limitations on the time available for writing, research, and other academic and social activity (Wladis et al., 2022). However, as the alumni authors of this article disclose, more than just time constraints can separate this group from their peers. Each adult learner brings a unique constellation of experiential assets and perspectives to their studies. The heterogeneity of the adult undergraduate population at NCCU makes generalizing about these students’ intersecting identities, educational histories, and experiences with writing a tall order. Nevertheless, their differences provide standpoints from which it is possible to rethink higher education—including the teaching and learning of writing across the curriculum.

When Collie, one of the faculty authors of this article, saw the call for this special section of *The WAC Journal*, she was already immersed in research about the writing lives of adult students. Her review of literature in writing studies had revealed a paucity of work representing this population of writers, despite their strength in numbers. Students over the age of twenty-four account for about a quarter of US undergraduates (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021b). Yet aside from research about veteran students and writing

(Blaauw-Hara, 2021; Doe & Langstraat, 2014; Hart and Thompson, 2020) and scholarship about community college writers that mentions adult students (see Hassel & Phillips, 2022; Sullivan, 2020; Tinberg and Nadeau, 2010), scholarship about postsecondary writers rarely includes adult students and even more rarely centers this marginalized population. As Michael J. Michaud (2013) pointed out more than a decade ago, this absence is especially pronounced in writing research about students seeking bachelor's degrees. Collie was therefore glad that *The WAC Journal's* call for articles invited scholars to focus on this population: it offered a critical opportunity to foreground adult students' vantage points on writing across the curriculum. Her frequent research collaborator, Stefanie Frigo, and four NCCU alumni with whom Steff and Collie have worked extensively as research partners all expressed interest in coauthoring for this issue.

The four authors who write the student perspectives in this article are Adrienne Long, Thomas Kelly, Yaseen Abdul-Malik, and Stuart Parrish. Here they represent their own distinctive standpoints that have been shaped by complex matrices of identity and experience. Their ages at the time of graduation span from late twenties to early sixties. Although two decades apart in age, Adrienne and Yaseen both prioritized degree completion when they returned to college: both attended continuously, full-time, while also working and parenting. They needed to realize the economic benefits of their degrees as soon as possible. In contrast, Stuart and Thomas integrated college into their lives intermittently across multiple decades; each adopted the practice of "dipping in and out" (Barton, 2009, p. 55) that is characteristic of a subset of adult learners who do so to accommodate shifting life priorities and changes to the conditions that make study possible. These four have completed bachelor's degrees in history (Yaseen '19), psychology (Adrienne '21), and interdisciplinary studies (Stuart '21 and Thomas '24). They have written for classes and extracurriculars, for their jobs, for their families, and for themselves. Remarkably, they all took up collegiate activities beyond coursework despite the extent of their other responsibilities. For instance, in recognition of the need for belonging and advocacy, the three oldest alumni authors of this article served as officers of NCCU's Adult Learners Student Organization; Adrienne was its founder and first president. Since advocacy and equitable representation of adult learners are also important in scholarship, the six of us (in different configurations) have conducted participatory research about the adult learner population at NCCU across multiple collaborative projects—including a study of adult students' writing lives—which we describe elsewhere (Frigo & Fulford, 2025; Fulford, 2022; Rosenberg et al., 2024). Because of their involvement in this research, Adrienne, Thomas, Yaseen, and Stuart are well positioned to provide insights about writing across the curriculum from adult learners' perspectives.

We structure this article as a roundtable to suggest a teaching approach that can work equally well in groups of adult learners and in age-integrated spaces. Roundtables, focus groups, and small-group work all prioritize the contributions of the discussants. Small-group discussion and project-based collaborative learning are established teaching approaches that honor the social nature of learning and knowledge production. These methods are familiar to democratically oriented faculty who decenter themselves in favor of what can emerge from and among students. These practices shift the locus of authority from the teacher to the students, thereby flattening classroom hierarchies. We argue that it is important to intentionally employ these kinds of collaborative approaches in age-integrated learning settings to achieve two benefits—one for adult learners, and the other for the overall community of learners. First, decentralized strategies demonstrate to adult learners that faculty respect their existing social, rhetorical, and process knowledge. By using these approaches, we show that we trust them to contribute experiential wisdom. Second, many adult learners are accustomed to taking the lead in collective decision-making about significant matters in their jobs and family lives; thus, in mixed-age groups, they can model efficient problem-solving and generous ways of interacting.

We coauthors know each other well through our work on multiple joint projects. Our roundtable approach used to be a deliberate, constructed practice, but at this point we fall into it without consciously thinking about process. Working literally around Steff's kitchen table (and via many video meetings, emails, and texts), our group collaboratively reviewed the call for articles and decided how to write our response. In an iterative, digressive, messy, and enjoyably social process, we jointly developed a set of questions to try to unpack the experiences of adult undergraduate writers that would speak to *The WAC Journal* readership. Adrienne, Yaseen, Thomas, and Stuart then engaged with these co-constructed guiding questions:

1. What did you bring to academic writing as an adult learner?
2. What happened in your classes, in your interactions with other students and with professors?
3. What challenges and support have you experienced as an adult learner and writer?
4. What relationships do you perceive between your academic writing and where you are now?

Their forthright responses reveal what may not otherwise be evident to faculty who teach writing across the curriculum in mixed-age institutions.

Roundtable

Question 1: Who are you, and what did you bring to academic writing as an adult learner?

Yaseen Abdul-Malik

I'm a thirty-three-year-old, African American Muslim elementary school teacher who hated education for a long time. My family moved overseas in the early 2000s, and I was raised in a world where nationality, gender, and race governed what you could and could not do in the workplace. My ability to speak both English and Arabic pushed me into education to make ends meet. I received my teaching certification from Cambridge University and got my TESOL certification in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. With each new certification, I discovered the advantages of an education—and the systemic barriers that prevented others from having access to that education. Writing was how these systems of power identified and measured what I knew. I knew how to communicate through speech. I could illustrate my competencies in conversation, but these systems that gate-kept power, money, and freedom were built on narrow and rigid understandings. To fulfill my passion, I had to write my way out. Taking technical writing classes in college helped me create narratives of competency that transferred into the business sphere, making me marketable in new ways.

Thomas Kelly

I am a mid-fifties white man. I made several attempts at getting a college degree over the last three decades, but it wasn't until my early fifties that I finally accumulated the right credits to receive my AA degree at Durham Technical Community College and was able to attend North Carolina Central University as a junior and graduating senior. Over the last thirty years, I have made several runs and false starts at getting into a four-year college, and I had an impressive amount of unusable credit hours going into NCCU. Earning a living, having a life, and honestly, being a lazy man all kept me from committing to a four-year school. I was so impressed when I began to understand the lives that Yaseen and Adrienne led. They had far more adult responsibilities than I—a childless spinster—and they were going to school full-time as well! Once I started taking junior- and senior-level classes, I could only manage two courses a semester. I am a dilettante. And a hippy, so by my fifties I could make enough money part-time as a self-employed carpenter to afford college. I received my AA at the age of fifty-two from Durham Technical Community College, and now at fifty-six I am graduating from North Carolina Central University with a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies—the choose-your-own-adventure degree.

I used the opportunity to choose my classes to further my writing interests. I chose primarily psychology and writing courses, and my academic writing became a

vehicle for my creative pursuits. Everything I wrote became an chance to shoehorn my personality into my writing, and the professors had to read it! Being read was the realization of a lifelong dream.

My experience at NCCU was profound. My age and experience added empathy and depth to my writing, and the professors teaching my junior and senior classes mentored me in the creation of a written voice that is unique to who I am after all these years. I did my best writing (so far) at NCCU.

Adrienne Long

I am a divorced, fifty-one-year-old African American female whose passion for advocating for adult learners developed while completing my bachelor's degree at NCCU in psychology. Much like Tom, I feel that age paired with empathetic depth as an adult learner afforded me the opportunity to infuse generational wisdom into my writing. A large portion of the writing I did as an undergraduate student had a mature tone and was informed by my "real-life" experiences. Having lived longer than most traditional students in my courses proved an advantage with regard to knowing and understanding the larger context of the subjects I wrote about. I grew to appreciate this about myself over time, and I was more grateful for the experience of being back in school overall despite the challenges. I was happy to be back in school, but jumping into new technology – like learning management systems and discussion boards – was the scariest part for me. I had to learn new tools just to submit a term paper. It was mostly assumed by professors that all the students in their class had recent exposure to something similar.

I quickly realized that if I really had the desire to complete school, now would be the time. Otherwise, I was prepared to quit. Every day that passed, I remember thinking to myself, "Why are you doing this?" Having started the Adult Learner Student Organization, I knew there were others like me that felt the same way. From there, I decided that I needed to do something while in school that could make "the difference" for someone else. I, too, wanted and needed the normalcy that I felt my younger counterparts were enjoying.

I remember meeting Tom Kelly for the first time at an interest reception for the Adult Learner Student Organization that I started at NCCU. Because of the conversation we were having on the challenges we shared as students, I realized that I really wanted to make a difference that would bring more visibility to the challenges and the emotional hurdles we face. The organization became a passion as I used writing as a way to give it a voice of its own. Yes, I was a student, but I was an adult first. Because of that, my writings displayed a serious and persuasive tone to get things established or considered for the students that were members.

Stuart Parrish

I'm a sixty-five-year-old white male, married. I took classes part-time at Duke, UNC, Louisville, Wake Tech, and Durham Tech over many years. I had some professional certificates, but it wasn't until I took technical writing at NCCU that I really settled down with firm goals and commitment. Now I see myself as hopelessly creative, and maybe not too well suited for academics, but I definitely benefited from doing a lot of the hardest intellectual work of my life under tough circumstances— with an aging mother, selling the family home, and becoming the family's main support member for her. Naturally, younger students will have a different sense of voice and identity than I do. When I'm off base, I have muscle memory. I know to ask myself how to simplify what I'm trying to do into discrete steps or ask for help.

At NCCU, I really enjoyed learning where research and writing could lead me, like presenting at my first conference with Jamal Whitted and Collie.¹ Jamal told me about Steff's interdisciplinary studies intro class. Students write a portfolio for it, and he was so enthusiastic about how all the assignments blew his mind, expanding his self-awareness, making him really think through liminal areas of his plans and dreams. That writing really bore fruit for me, too, inspiring growth and clarity. That class was also where I met Tom, and it was a revelation for us to be two guys over (harumph) years of age in the same class, finding things in common. I think that was the first time that happened to me at NCCU. It was a very welcome initiation into what it could be, what I maybe hoped college would be.

Question 2: What happened in your classes between adult learners and more traditional learners? Between you and your professors? Between you and other adult learners? Why do these interactions matter?

Adrienne

Most prerequisite undergraduate classes have a large mixture of every kind of student. But by the time you reach classes in your major, the dynamic begins to shift. Adult students desiring to do well will oftentimes sit closer to the front of the class so they will not be distracted. Over time, everyone in the class with similar goals will gravitate to one another, commiserating over the coursework needing to be completed. A mutual bond eventually forms from common threads when, over time, everyone realizes they have the same goal—completion!

1. Stuart, Jamal, and Collie presented their research about adult students at a diversity, equity, and inclusion conference. As insider researchers, Jamal and Stuart framed the talk by discussing their own higher education histories as adults in relation to findings from surveys and interviews (see Parrish et al., 2019).

Providing input based on prior knowledge of subjects was often well received by my professors and at times heavily relied upon for deeper explanations of the subject matter. Too often, though, it felt like because I looked “old” enough, I was automatically considered a subject-matter expert. I once had a psychology professor ask me my opinion about a point in time that I am not old enough to have lived through. At that moment, I felt singled out from the rest of my classmates.

Adults can tend to feel less inferior as older students, and more assimilated into student life, when professors foster cross-generational learning relationships. Doing this helps students on both sides of the age spectrum share with their classmates their backgrounds, personal influences, ideologies, and opinions, which may not be shared when there is a lack of collaborative activities. In my general psychology course, the professor once hosted a panel to discuss gender roles and relationships with audience participation during a Q&A. It was well received because it allowed students to gain wisdom while providing real-world views that matter or relate to all ages.

Stu

I didn’t play unofficial TA, but I tried in little ways to let classmates know when I could be helpful. Then I let them make the move if they wanted some assistance. I benefited from that, too. In service to others, I felt more included. I’m older, more mature. This self-awareness might make the teachers’ jobs easier. Knowing more about myself, my limitations and strengths, as well as what I mention above—all of this comes with intrinsic motivation. I know learning is a never-ending process of refinement, so that understanding was built into my expectations; I could talk about that with my professors, and we could plan together how I could improve.

Peer review is great, too—exchanging papers, reading each other’s work, and offering a critique. Also, working in groups outside of class, like video group assignments. The dynamic changes when we share a common goal and when we don’t feel as graded or scrutinized. You can hear people’s register or tone change when the prof leaves and they are speaking in a room (or Zoom) full of peers only. I noticed that when we abruptly transitioned to online classes due to COVID safety concerns. We were given group assignments and we had to meet up online, and this was an environment where the professor wouldn’t be present. Traditional students expressed feeling homesick, lonely, and isolated. I don’t know how, but it seems that allowing us to interact like that created a broader bandwidth of communication and connection.

Yaseen

There are two types of people who go to college: people who want to, and people who need to. I needed to go to college. I circumnavigated this truth for many years but eventually realized that to get to the next level, college was a necessity. Unlike

traditional students, I did not go to college to find myself. I had neither the luxury nor the time to be undecided. I needed a stamp on a paper. I went in with no illusions. While sitting in dorm rooms and talking to my peers, though, something changed. I listened to traditional students talk in class about new discoveries. Some of them spoke with a romance that made me feel like there was more to this place than just grades. They talked of home as a faraway place, a place that they could retreat to, not a place that they were responsible for. I wanted what they had. I felt that without it, I wasn't getting what I was paying for.

To create the illusion that I was one of them, I took the bus to campus early in the morning. I texted a friend to let me into his dorm so I could walk with my friends to the café for breakfast. I would call out of work to go to kickbacks and parties. I didn't correct people who thought I was younger than I really was. There was a hope I had—I wanted to travel backwards. To no longer be the kind of person who needed to go to college, but to be a person who wanted to go. A person who had time to volunteer for free, who formed lasting relationships with roommates and line brothers. I had missed that, but maybe I could get it back.

I couldn't. A nontraditional student must balance the world outside campus with the world on campus. The more energy I put into the world on campus, the more the real world left me behind. Rent was due, electricity was due, my family needed me. Taking the bus home, I realized that college was an island, and I was not an islander. It was then that I realized that being a nontraditional student was not an academic designation. It was an illustration of a class system.

Thomas

Though I was in the class of students who wanted to be at Central, and I did not have the outside pressure of family and finances that both Yaseen and Adrienne had, my age felt isolating. Also, I was a white dude in a primarily nonwhite space. I was, however, prepared for that; it is the reason I chose Central. What I wasn't prepared for, however, was how much younger most of the students were at a four-year university than they had been in community college. It was lonely and strange. Being at Central, I deeply desired some human connection. Someone who could understand what I was going through. The professors presented an odd dilemma. The social construct of professor and student and the relative power dynamic was vexing. I am not sure what they felt, but I felt (and probably misread) that social structure strongly—perhaps a leftover from when I had been a young man in the harsher power dynamics of the 1980s. With my professors, I had this needy desire to have some social connection, adult to adult. But I was stymied by my reading of what was socially acceptable, given my perception of the power differential. It wasn't until I found Adrienne and her Adult Learners group (and, later, Stu—it was so nice to not be the only old guy

in class) that I felt some of the collegiate solidarity and camaraderie that younger students seem to enjoy.

Question 3: What challenges and support have you experienced as an adult learner, especially regarding writing?

Yaseen

Can you write a paper if you have work in the morning? Can you write a paper if you have to get to a parent-teacher conference right after class? If your car breaks down and you have to take the bus to and from campus, can you write a paper then? Can you write a paper if you're taking care of your sick relative? What time will you make for research? What time do you have left for drafting? These are the questions that nontraditional writers in higher education deal with all the time. I went to college when I was twenty-two years old, and I brought my responsibilities with me. In my first year, my wife had our first son. With no money for sitters and no housing provided for us by the school, I had to work and keep my grades up. We brought our son to class. I wrote papers on the bus, during breaks, and in other classes. I did this because I understood what I was working towards and what a college education meant for me and my family. Even traditional students arrive at college in different circumstances, so the word *nontraditional* infers a normality that does not exist. I wonder what ideas I would have discovered if I had been in a system that was able to consider my outside life.

I did not take a writing class in high school. My high school was a collection of books I received once a month through an online program. MLA style was a foreign concept, and I had to reteach myself. Relearning these formats for writing in addition to the writing itself was difficult for me during my collegiate studies. The formulaic archetypes that college papers share create a foundation of uniformity, but this also has the unintentional effect of making part of the writing process tedious.

Stu

I really identify with the feelings and scenarios Yaseen describes because I had my share of similar experiences—but different. I have this self-knowledge, which was a big plus, but looking back, I also felt that I had to really lean in and trust and depend on all the help I could get. I tried to use office hours, Zoom, phone calls, email, anything I could because I felt strongly that I needed a lot of feedback to stay on track. Maybe Yaseen, Tom, and Adrienne had more self-assurance than I did . . . perhaps a more robust internal writing infrastructure? You can't paint all adult learners with the same brush. I needed structure and help with formatting and time management. I look back and feel like I was just beginning to make inroads towards good habits and writing practices. For instance, during my internship, a graduate-student mentor

came up with a method that I still use today when I can. She used a big conference-room screen during our editing sessions. Getting the text off of laptops and onto a big scale somehow afforded me more distance from my own words and made editing feel more objective. As she effortlessly demonstrated how technology could help with a difficult task, I overcame my lack of confidence and adopted this new skill.

Adrienne

The challenges that I faced were related to the rules of writing versus me writing how I speak normally. I hadn't been in school for a long time, and my writing style had been shaped by what I knew from working in corporate and not having someone critique my writing. My class assignments were more structured and often had rules I had to follow.

It was during the summer between my junior and senior years that I wasn't sure if I would be able to graduate. I decided to write a letter to the chancellor of my school to advocate for myself, but also to advocate for the rights of all the other adult students in my position. I was eager to illustrate in my email the severe disappointment his pending decision would cause if he were to not let me continue school. This style of writing works well in corporate, but could I convey my thoughts and feelings effectively to persuade the chancellor? I wanted the email to express how I emotionally felt but also be inclusive of how my peers felt as well. I knew this was my one shot. The email was designed to capture his attention and to express the overall distress that I carried in my heart about students being mandated to come back to campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. I submitted the email to him at 10:59 p.m., sure that I was right in my position to ask for something more than the constant "no" that I'd been given up to this point. But I was told that I couldn't be a part of the distance learning program, that it was full! I only had five classes standing between me and graduation and moving on with the rest of my life. I sent a second email, sure that I would hear nothing back. But by 2:00 p.m. of the following day, I received a call from my school's student advocate informing me that I was registered for the next semester and would graduate. That email, along with my style of writing from an adult's perspective regarding the sacrifices I made and the challenges I faced to get to that point, is what I want to believe captured the heart of my reader and inspired him to make the one phone call that would change everything!

Thomas

While the classes and especially the newer technologies were challenging, I had expected the final two years of college at a real four-year university to be difficult. Other than my experience being a highly visible outlier in my classes, my time at Central was smooth, and the students and professors were lovely. I had great writing

and English instructors throughout my early mishmash of college years, and I hope that community college gets the respect it deserves in academia. By the time I came to Central, I understood that I should seek out and destroy all passive sentences. Every writer needs to edit, edit, edit, then come back two weeks later and edit some more. What can be said in three sentences can also be said in two; slash every useless word without mercy. The professors at Central were enthusiastic because I was not just trying to meet the requirements of the assignment but was also working to write something someone might actually want to read.

Question 4: What relationships do you perceive between your academic writing experiences and where you are now?

Stu

I am working on local history and genealogy, music, songwriting, and integrating new technology into my music. Writing and editing has changed how I think about musical possibilities. I think of practice as research and experimentation, and that leads to composition, which I then collate, edit, and practice in new arrangements. I love the quote, “The map is not the territory it represents”; but if the map is correct, then the territory will have similar structures, and therein lies its usefulness. I am used to blurred boundaries, but I often get lost in thought or in the chaos of creation. The structures of writing practices, flipping a set of questions into an outline/rubric, asking myself holistically to dive deep and then surface, simplify, clarify—all of that is invaluable and transferrable to my music practice. By *practice* I mean time spent doing, being free to explore without self-editing, as well as the more crafty work. I learned from my undergraduate studies that there aren’t any shortcuts, and even professors have to carve out time and make writing a priority because nothing writes itself. I met an editor of a journal recently and described where I was at, and he reminded me, “Write two hours every day, and that stuff will begin to sort itself out.”

Adrienne

Before participating in research about adult student writers, I never thought much about my writing. I was right in the middle of completing my degree. When asked several questions during the research project about how I developed my writing style, I was forced to reflect on my experiences and growing up as a whole. This research experience then led me to an internship opportunity, which allowed me to explore how different words and styles of writing can bring to life other people’s voices. I am more passionate than I was before simply because I know how to use the power of my experience to express what I wanna say.

Yaseen

Speaking is in the moment, writing is forever. It took years for me to understand this truth, and it is one of the things that make me such an avid reader and writer now. I have always had ideas; storytelling is my passion. But it wasn't until I took writing classes in college that I discovered that my voice could resonate through sound and space. It could be kept in a thing—a thing that could be discovered and rediscovered forever. That made learning how to write important. Through these classes, I learned that certain types of writing must be organized in certain ways to create clarity and uniformity. Learning why these things were important, meeting educators that could explain how these pieces came together, was important for a nontraditional student with obligations outside of school.

Thomas

NCCU taught me to write at an advanced level; and while the academic side of writing is a bit dry for my taste, I was still able to insert a bit of who I am into everything I wrote. Every sentence I created helped me learn how to craft a creative voice unique to myself. Whatever writing I do in the future I owe to my experience at Central. It was a significant emotional challenge to be an adult learner in such a youth-centric environment, but that trial became a part of who I am and what I bring to the page.

Conclusion

As Steff listened to these voices come together around her kitchen table, the message was clear. In their diverse reflections on their writing experiences at NCCU, Adrienne, Thomas, Yaseen, and Stuart illustrate the profound impact of age, life responsibilities, and their own unique life trajectories on their writing. Their reflections demonstrate that adulthood brings a richness of perspective and a depth of commitment that have significantly influenced both their approach to learning and their feelings about the value of writing. For Adrienne and Yaseen, returning to formal education was a deliberate choice amidst familial and professional obligations, where writing became a tool to advance, advocate for, and reflect on generational wisdom. Conversely, Thomas and Stuart navigated a longer academic path, integrating their studies with careers and personal growth, and have used writing to explore their passions and evolve creatively.

The classroom interactions between this group of adult learners and their more traditional classmates, as well as their professors, highlight a dynamic exchange of both knowledge and empathy. Adrienne's and Stuart's perspectives underscore the value inherent in cross-generational dialogue in the classroom, enriching the writing and learning experiences of all students. Challenges such as balancing work, family, and academic demands reveal the resilience and determination of these adult

learners, who carve out time for writing amid busy lives. They often seek to expand their writing space, to write big and to write expansively, rather than stick to the constraints and requirements of a particular assignment. Although challenging, these outside demands seemed to foster profound personal growth and a deep appreciation for the transformative power of writing.

Looking ahead, it's clear that these academic writing experiences in the classroom have equipped Yaseen, Adrienne, Thomas, and Stuart with perspectives extending far beyond the walls of the university. For Stuart, writing has intertwined with his explorations in local history and music, while Adrienne has found empowerment in advocacy through writing. Yaseen's realization about the permanence of written words speaks to the enduring impact of his educational journey, while Thomas is planning to pursue his MFA. These experiences collectively challenge traditional notions of studenthood and illustrate how age diversity enriches educational communities. This understanding should prompt a reevaluation of the pedagogical practices of writing faculty. These writing narratives uncover the resilience, diversity, and transformative potential of adult undergraduate writers at NCCU. Their stories call for continued recognition of and support for adult learners in higher education, advocating for inclusive writing practices and assignments that honor the varied paths and contributions of all students. As these voices contribute to broader scholarly discourse, they should remind us of the importance of representation and the power of writing to bridge generational divides, inspiring meaningful change in the classroom and beyond.

We hope that the ideas and experiences told here prompt other scholars, teachers, and program leaders to be actively curious about the adult learners in their own institutions and to ask them similar questions—or, better yet, to afford them opportunities to explain what they wish we would ask them. Their stories invite us to enact inclusive writing pedagogies—such as teacher-facilitated, student-led discussion—that honor who they are, why they are in school, and what they have to offer.

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