

# EDITORS' COLUMN

"Let's get specific." That seems to be the dictum driving the authors in this issue. Our field has seen more than its share of general discussions and polemics about basic writing's right to exist. Even in the popular press, we are regaled with accounts of how, where, and especially whether basic writing should be taught. Calls for an end to basic writing emanate from both the left and the right, creating a strange kind of squeeze play, with basic writing caught in the middle. Whether the call is for mainstreaming in the name of fairness or restricted access in the name of higher standards, the strong suggestion is that what basic writing instructors have been doing shouldn't be done at all.

When principle-based arguments from such different premises come to basically the same conclusions, it's time to look past principles to facts and specifics. If what basic writing instructors have been doing is something worthwhile, that ought to be demonstrable. It ought to rest on results and not just reasoning, on evidence and not just arguments.

That's an idea the authors gathered together in this issue have taken to heart, and they give us richly authoritative ways of saying what basic writing students are capable of (not least of all over time). They show us what they are doing, what they need, who they are, what becomes of them in the long run. Not all of the evidence is inspiring, but it is real evidence, impossible to ignore or dismiss.

The entire field of composition has come to acknowledge what a powerful body of evidence Marilyn Sternglass has amassed in her longitudinal study of basic writers *Time to Know Them*. Recipient of the most recent Modern Language Association's Mina Shaughnessy Prize for the best book in composition, *Time to Know Them* also won this year's Outstanding Book Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication. While these awards were still pending, Marilyn Sternglass returned to her former home, the City University of New York, to deliver the keynote address at the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors conference in October. The CUNY Board of Trustees had recently passed a resolution to phase out remediation at the CUNY senior colleges, one of which, City College, was the site of the study that produced *Time to Know Them*. From that work, Marilyn plucked the compelling story of Joan, who persisted against enormous odds, both at home and at school, but who also discovered key kinds of support, above all that offered to her by her own writing.

Because the CAWS keynote and the revised version of it that became Marilyn Sternglass's contribution to this issue of *JBW* focused on a single (if particularly compelling) case, we decided to break precedent and publish a review essay treating Marilyn's book. As regular readers of *JBW* know, we do not publish book reviews, but when one

came to us treating a *Time to Know Them*, we realized we had something we needed: an essay that helped to contextualize the importance of this extremely consequential work, not least of all by noting the state of the debate it contributes to. For this, we have Daniela Liese to thank.

The next two articles treat the hard facts of how basic writing is working at two universities. Tracey Baker and Peggy Jolly — who take Ira Shor’s demand to see “hard evidence that BW courses shelter more than they shunt” as their starting point — document a study they did to show their administration that their developmental reading and writing program was working. This meant exploding some myths subscribed to by administrators and policy-makers, but it was also not without surprises for the authors. Such a surprise gave Eleanor Agnew and Margaret McLaughlin the basis for their entire article: though they gathered evidence that basic writers were in fact successful in general statistical terms, a hard look beneath the evidence revealed that this was far less true for African-American students. Like Baker and Jolly, Agnew and McLaughlin are not content simply to present the information they have gathered; they wish to use it to recommend changes as well as raise awareness.

Then we have two articles that look beneath the generalizations and speculations about the use of computers in composition and basic writing classrooms. Sibylle Gruber uses the case-study method to show how complex and transitional matters of individual identity can be in the basic writing classroom, particularly when computer-mediated discussion helps to bring about a re-negotiation of multiple positions clustered around issues of insiderhood and outsiderhood. Laurie Grobman keys in on a different sense of outsiderhood, using web-based research to show how basic writers can use web texts outside “academic discourse” to negotiate authority, individuality, positioning — including their own.

We conclude with Beth Counihan’s “Freshgirls,” another essay based on case-study research that makes a fitting conclusion to an issue that begins with Marilyn Sternglass’s work at City College — and does so precisely because it has a far less happy ending. Situated at a sister college in CUNY, Lehman College, Beth Counihan tracks three “freshgirls” who do not outlast their first year. Ironically, it may be a kind of toughness they have been conditioned to — a determination not to care too much or invest too much — that makes them especially vulnerable. Heartening as it is to hear of Marilyn Sternglass’s Joan and her story of remarkable persistence, it is important to attend to Beth Counihan’s “freshgirls” as well. They are especially striking examples of what makes us feel our Spring issue is especially rich: replete with specific, research-based accounts of what is working, this issue, in every article, also uses “hard evidence” to fix our attention on how much we still have to do.

**George Otte and Trudy Smoke**