

Disciplinary Reading in Basic Writing Graduate Education: The Politics of Remediation in JBW, 1995-2015

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ABSTRACT: Though practitioners in Basic Writing studies often refer to “the politics of remediation,” there are few pedagogical models that address how to teach this facet of professional life to graduate students and emerging professionals. Most often, this knowledge is transmitted through storytelling, namely narrative-based accounts of Basic Writing professionals engaging with other institutional stakeholders during moments of institutional change. This article provides some results from a qualitative study of such publications in JBW from 1995-2015 to highlight how a range of distant and close reading practices (Mueller) might serve to illuminate disciplinary patterns, thereby providing graduate students with new insights into the politics of the field.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; distant reading; politics; writing program administration

In a 1997 survey of students enrolled in graduate programs in composition and rhetoric, Scott L. Miller, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Bennis Blue, and Deneen M. Shepherd found that, despite an overall feeling of satisfaction with their programs, few respondents had carefully considered what the authors term the “future tense” of their professional lives: namely, the transition from graduate study to a full-time faculty role. Although graduate school is considered to be a crucial period in the disciplinary acculturation of emerging professionals, topics such as shifting societal expectations for higher education and the demands of faculty life beyond teaching have historically received limited attention in graduate curricula and programming (Austin). In their recommendations, Miller et al. emphasize the need to prepare graduate students for the job market, a topic that has remained

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at the forefront of work on graduate professionalization (Dadas). In composition studies, the teaching practicum has also featured prominently in scholarship about graduate professionalization, serving in many graduate programs as the only course directly related to the day-to-day working life of a future faculty member (Dobrin).

While the above are certainly crucial topics that might help facilitate the transition from graduate school to faculty work, I would argue that job market preparation and teaching practicums alone are inadequate preparation for the “future tense” of professional work that practitioners in Basic Writing might face. In her report of a discussion about graduate education and Basic Writing on the CBW-L, the field’s primary email listserv, Barbara Gleason raises some important questions about professional training that extend beyond job market preparation, teaching, research, or even traditional service obligations. Because her focus is on the pre-service training of Basic Writing professionals, Gleason is compelled to ask: “How well prepared are MA and PhD graduates for the political dimension of their work as teachers of basic writers? Are graduate programs educating students about the political nature of BW?” (56). In the current academic and political climate where Basic Writing programs and courses are increasingly at risk of reduction or outright elimination, these are perhaps the most important questions for future Basic Writing professionals to consider. Surprisingly, despite these pressing concerns, there is little in the way of concrete pedagogical models for *how* to address the politics of Basic Writing in graduate curricula.

Below, I draw on a common graduate school assignment—reading publications from a major scholarly journal—in order to develop a pedagogical approach that might shed light on the political nature of Basic Writing for pre-service instructors completing graduate programs in composition. After providing a brief history of the politics of Basic Writing instruction as it relates to the broader call for compositionists to serve as institutional change makers, I review the handful of extant approaches to engaging graduate students with this work that has been published in the past decade. Following this, I turn to the role that literacy practices play in graduate student socialization, with particular emphasis on scholarly journals. In the final section, I analyze data from a study of narratives about the politics of institutional change that have been published in *Journal of Basic Writing* from 1995 to 2015 to argue for a more critical approach to addressing reading in graduate curricula. Rather than focus primarily on the close reading of texts (as those of us who were English majors may be wont to do), I suggest that methods of what Derek Mueller (drawing on the work of Franco Moretti in literary

studies) describes as “distant reading” can also be employed in order to make disciplinary patterns more visible and therefore ripe for further theorization.

GRADUATE SOCIALIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF REMEDIATION

The phrase “the politics of remediation” is a familiar one in the professional discourse of Basic Writing studies, circulated in oft-cited publications by Barbara Gleason (“Evaluating Writing Programs”), Mike Rose, and, perhaps most famously, in Mary Soliday’s award-winning monograph, *The Politics of Remediation: Institutional and Student Needs in Higher Education*. Though she does not explicitly define this term, Soliday argues that “the politics of remediation” addresses the tensions between institutional needs and “social conflicts as they are played out through the educational tier most identified with access to the professional middle class” (1). Soliday goes on to explain that the roots of these “social conflicts” lie in the tensions between institutions providing access to higher education for students from marginalized communities on one hand and the rigidity of academic standards that, when enforced, often serve to limit that access on the other.

Rose and Gleason both echo a similar message, with emphasis on specific moments of institutional change and the various institutional stakeholders who might advocate in support of or against the interests of Basic Writing and remedial education. For Rose, such institutional pushback took the form of proposed funding cuts for Basic Writing, as his institution suggested that money be best spent on more collegiate resources than remediation. In Gleason’s case, institutional politics played a significant role in the implementation and evaluation of a Basic Writing pilot program that was ultimately not adopted by her college, despite compelling research suggesting its success. In these cases, the expertise of Basic Writing professionals and the interests of students enrolled in Basic Writing courses were both secondary to larger institutional goals of providing “rigorous” and “college-level” courses for first-year students.

This so-called “politics of remediation” has a much longer history, of course. Mina P. Shaughnessy’s editor’s introduction to the inaugural issue of *JBW* highlights the social justice imperative of Basic Writing at CUNY during Open Admissions and the subsequent resistance that some faculty demonstrated to what they perceived as the lowering of academic standards to meet the needs of this new student population (what Theodore Gross later referred to in his aptly-titled “How to Kill a College: The Private Papers of a

College Dean,” published in a 1978 issue of *Saturday Review*). More recently, legislative efforts to eliminate Basic Writing at four-year institutions and, in some cases, state-wide (see Sullivan for one example), reinforce the need for Basic Writing instructors to be savvy to their role as experts in a highly contested area of higher education. Despite this exigence, however, many new Basic Writing faculty are unprepared to navigate the institutional politics that have the potential to influence much of their professional lives.

GRADUATE SOCIALIZATION TO THE POLITICS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Given the contentious energy often associated with Basic Writing, it becomes incumbent on professionals in this field to advocate for their work and the students who place into Basic Writing courses. Such efforts have been theorized by scholars in composition as change-making work, with the goal of bringing disciplinary best practices into their local institutional contexts in order to foster a more progressive attitude about writing across campus (McLeod). The message that compositionists should serve as institutional change makers is also prominent in Linda Adler-Kassner’s *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Adler-Kassner calls for WPAs to take on an activist role in an effort to bring disciplinary values to bear on their local writing programs, with the ultimate goal of fostering a more inclusive, and thus socially just, understanding of students’ writing.

With this impetus for compositionists to function as agents of institutional change, there have also been increased calls for graduate education to explicitly address these concerns. Graduate education is, as Parviz Ahmadi and Ashad Abd Samad note, “a very important part of any academic discourse community as it can initiate students into their professional discourse communities by introducing them to topics under discussion, disciplinary language, and discourse community culture” (97). In composition studies, graduate education tends to emphasize the disciplinary culture around teaching and research, but as Margaret Willard-Traub argues, professing composition is inherently political work and as such “an understanding of the ways in which intellectual work in our field is bound up with institutional politics” is “essential . . . to the professionalization of graduate students” (62). In an example more directly related to Basic Writing, Gleason describes Bruce Horner’s efforts to engage graduate students at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s campus in scholarly discussions about the politics of BW instruction by first “focusing on issues specific to their local context

and next by urging students to push back against institutional missives that serve to further marginalize students who place into basic writing courses” (“Reasoning the Need”). This graduate coursework serves to prepare future BW professionals by providing students with an opportunity to synthesize institution-specific primary source documents from their writing program within a broader context of BW research and scholarship, allowing graduate students to identify where patterns evident in the broader field are being replicated on their own campus. Embedded within that work is, of course, also an ethos that a Basic Writing instructor can and should serve as an agent of change in their local context.

In cases where a Basic Writing program is not immediately available as a site for graduate study, scenario-based instruction provides another useful pedagogical alternative to engage graduate students with the political nature of teaching composition. The board game *Praxis and Allies*, designed as a project for a graduate seminar on writing program administration offered at Purdue University, serves as one such example (Sura et al.) Under the direction of noted WPA-scholar Shirley K. Rose, Sura et al. crafted the game in order to emphasize the intersections between local and disciplinary forms of knowledge and the skill-sets required to negotiate the concerns of various people who may have a vested interest in writing instruction. In the game, players are assigned a scenario card (e.g., “start a new graduate program in rhetoric and composition,” or “coordinate with the writing center to develop and run workshops for English language-learners”); a role (e.g., WPA; Writing Across the Curriculum Coordinator); a status (tenured or untenured, assistant professor or full professor, etc.); and a list of required resources: funding, knowledge, and ethos. As a player works through *Praxis and Allies*, the impact that unplanned circumstances, missing knowledge points, or damage to ethos could have on the successful completion of a scenario are highlighted with chance cards. In order to successfully navigate the game, players must balance resources to complete each assigned scenario in the same way that a WPA might do on any given day.

For Basic Writing experts, Marcia Buell’s “The Place of Basic Writing at Wedonwan U: A Simulation Activity for Graduate Level Seminars” provides a similar opportunity for graduate students to role-play scenarios that they might face in their professional work. Whereas *Praxis and Allies* centers primarily on the experience of a WPA, Buell’s exercise requires graduate students to adopt the personas of different institutional stakeholders, including WPA, writing instructor, students, and literary scholars (presumably someone who is not well-versed in the interests of Basic Writing). Buell’s intention in devel-

oping this game was to “allow for exploration of the ecologies surrounding pedagogical approaches,” serving to situate curricular development within a broader institutional context with stakeholders who might have competing views about the role of Basic Writing. By emphasizing the crisis discourse that often accompanies discussions of Basic Writing, this role-playing game allows graduate students to transition from an idealized version of Basic Writing teaching that might be promoted by a graduate curriculum toward a more nuanced understanding of the competing institutional interests that Basic Writing might ultimately serve. Although it is necessarily limited in scope, Buell’s project offers valuable insight into the “future tense” that many Basic Writing professionals might ultimately encounter.

DISCIPLINARY READING

Another common method for educating future Basic Writing professionals about the complex institutional ecologies they will ultimately negotiate is, quite simply, reading about the real-life scenarios that composition teacher-scholars publish in academic journals. Studies of disciplinarity often emphasize the role of disciplinary literacies in the process of socialization to a disciplinary discourse community (Hyland). Specifically, Ken Hyland argues that scholarly writing does not simply mirror reality, but rather aids in the construction of that reality as a social system (196). He goes on to suggest that in order to be persuasive, scholars who publish in disciplinary journals must “display a competence as disciplinary insiders” by successfully engaging in a dialogue infused with disciplinary standards with their readers (197). Disciplinary reading, however, has not been widely studied in relation to native-English speaking graduate students. There are multitudes of studies that analyze disciplinary reading practices for adolescent and undergraduate students, many of which emphasize the role of reading as a form of disciplinary socialization. These studies tend to focus largely on comprehension and skills-based concerns (see Fang and Coatoam), while the function of reading as a form of disciplinary socialization for graduate students has received little scholarly attention, perhaps because of the tacit assumption that native-speaking graduate students already possess the reading skills necessary to fully engage with discipline-specific writing.

Though there is not much in the way of graduate pedagogy that addresses disciplinary reading for native English speakers, there is no shortage of work that points to the importance of reading scholarly publications to the formation of our discipline. As Hyland notes, the scholarly discourse

and writing of a discipline “is not just another aspect of what goes on in the disciplines,” but rather contributes to “producing them” (5). Charles Bazerman adds that:

Writing is a complex activity, influencing the orientations and activities of minds located in historical, social, and physical worlds; through the creation, distribution, and reception of signs through various technologies and organizational systems; and as a consequence establishing an archive of thought, action, and events for further social use. (8)

Scholarly journals serve as exemplars of these “archive[s] of thought” that Bazerman describes and, as Robert Connors suggests, ultimately play an important role in the construction of disciplinary identity. In other words, journals in composition studies create a tacit understanding of how teacher-scholars working in this field and its related subdisciplines are expected to behave as professionals representing the discipline. Colin Charlton et al. further argue that “disciplinary memory influence[s] writing program identities and work” (19) and “because they help establish norms and values that shape individuals’ behavior and thinking within a community, narratives [in scholarly publications] develop a shared history that functions as a touchstone for future generations as they negotiate their present and imagine their future” (36). From a social constructionist perspective (Jorgensen and Phillips), the types of disciplinary discourses that are transmitted via scholarly journals have the potential to shape not simply one’s approach to research and the construction of knowledge in the field, but also their day-to-day experience as faculty members working in a specific local context.

Taking these arguments into account for graduate pedagogy and the issues that Basic Writing practitioners are most likely to face in their professional lives, it becomes necessary to consider what types of scholarly publications address institutional politics as a means of socializing readers to disciplinary best practices. Among the most common genres for such work are narrative-based accounts of something that happened in a particular local context, often characterized as “WPA narratives” that recount “how we struggle, argue, and bargain with colleagues and other administrators to protect our programs” (Stolley 22). These publications are a version of what Lynn Craigie Briggs and Meg Woolbright refer to as “academic narratives” that blend story and theory in order to highlight an institutional challenge that composition professionals faced, along with the strategies

they employed to further the interests of the writing program in their local context, and are commonly included on graduate syllabi as cautionary tales or models of successful efforts towards institutional change. As these sorts of narrative-based publications rise in popularity, however, it becomes challenging to consider how best to use these texts in graduate courses and, more importantly, how best to teach graduate students to engage with such work critically.

CLOSE READING, DISTANT READING: STUDIES OF *JBW*

If my own experience as a graduate student is any indication, narrative-based accounts about the politics of institutional change are often presented to graduate students as case studies that are meant to be read with great attention to detail. The goal, it seems, is for graduate students to read these works to get a sense of the nuances of institutional politics, the number of stakeholder perspectives that might be represented, and who seems to hold power in the interactions that are described. While this is certainly a valuable approach, it fails to capture patterns in these narratives that might develop over time and that might suggest something about how readers are “disciplined” to interpret such works. Instead, Derek Mueller notes that empirically-focused methods that foster “thin reading” (also referred to as “distant reading”) have the potential to reveal facets of disciplinarity that might not otherwise be visible through close reading alone. In *Network Sense: Methods for Visualizing a Discipline*, Mueller writes:

[Many] projects [on disciplinarity] have relied extensively on anecdotal evidence, intuition, and local experiences, on tacit knowledge lodged in what Stephen North (1987) counted as his “10 years of ‘living among’ the people of Composition” (p. 4). Noting this tendency is not to devalue these forms of evidence, nor to characterize them as lacking rigor or substance. Instead they purposefully tend to strain for a generalizing extensibility, surfacing a locally or regionally bounded perspective to account for larger-scale trends, patterns, or turns. (159)

Here, Mueller makes an important observation about the inherent difficulty in generalizing patterns across “local experiences” (which would include the “academic narratives” that are the focus of my own study). Because details about the politics of remediation are always locally specific, this

disciplinary knowledge is often transmitted through narratives which Mueller notes are difficult to study in any sort of systematic way. As Mueller notes:

Distant reading and thin description methods aid our corroborating claims about the field in these accounts, presenting augmentative forms of evidence to cases grounded in local experiences and, thus, these methods supply leverage for inquiring into the reach and plausibility of subjective claims about where the field at-large has been and where it is headed. (159)

Applying this approach of distant and thin readings can serve to address the methodological problem that Mueller notes above with anecdotal accounts that are so locally-specific that they may fail to provide any generalizable knowledge. Mueller theorizes the disciplinary publications of composition studies as a series of keywords that reflect the field's work and values. "Word-watching," as Mueller suggests, yields disciplinary glossaries, keyword collections, and critical examinations of disciplinary turns that reflect paradigm shifts and can serve as a robust source of data about, quite simply, what we call things in composition studies.

Though there are certainly examples of such studies of scholarly journals in composition (see Phillips, Greenberg, and Gibson; Lerner), this approach represents something of a departure from existing studies of *JBW*, which have employed purely close reading strategies to analyze specific themes and patterns. In "The Representation of Basic Writers in Basic Writing Scholarship, or Who is Quentin Pierce?" Susanmarie Harrington offers an analysis of the first 17 volumes of the journal. She is intentional in her choices, clarifying that, "It's not my purpose here to do a history of *JBW* or even a complete content analysis of work presented there" (95), and instead examines the way that student voice has been constructed in the journal. Harrington identifies a disconnect between what she perceives as a student-centered discourse shared among practitioners and teacher-scholars in the field of Basic Writing and the ways that students are depicted in the pages of *JBW*. Laura Gray-Rosendale offers a similar study that examines how student identity is constructed in *JBW* from its inaugural issue in 1975 through the time of her publication in 1999. Gray-Rosendale borrows an outside framework in order to categorize and analyze articles in the journal under study. In this case, the author relies on Joseph Harris' three metaphors which he suggests are dominant in Basic Writing scholarship—growth, initiation, and conflict—to provide a framework for analyzing thematic trends in *JBW*,

with specific focus on the construction of Basic Writing students' identities through the pages of the journal over more than two decades ("Investigating Our Discursive History"). More recently, Gray-Rosendale examines a smaller corpus of articles from 2013 to 2016 to re-examine the construction of student identity in *JBW* that her earlier work explored ("Basic Writer's Identity"). Each of these studies of *JBW* identifies patterns that become categories for analysis, all of which provide important insight into the trajectory of Basic Writing studies. Yet, because these studies were interested in examining very specific phenomena in *JBW*, other significant patterns that might be present might not be uncovered.

STUDY METHODS

My own study of *JBW* takes a different route by working between close and distant reading strategies in order to develop an analysis of disciplinary patterns in narratives about the politics of institutional change in *Journal of Basic Writing*. Though a distant reading of the different topics and institutional stakeholders that are named in the narratives I analyzed reveals patterns that might not otherwise be visible, without the initial close reading of these articles in order to develop a coding scheme, it would not have been possible to identify these patterns at all.

Sample Selection and Narrowing the Corpus: In order to locate patterns in both topics that are associated with the politics of remediation and the descriptions of various institutional stakeholders, I examined all issues of *Journal of Basic Writing* from 1995 to 2015. My goal was to focus on feature-length articles that included narrative accounts of the politics of remediation playing out in a specific local context. To locate "information-rich cases" (Patton) that would fit the scope of this study, I first read the descriptions of published essays that were included in Editor's Introductions for each issue of *JBW* with two guiding questions in mind:

- Is this an account of an experience in a local context?
- Does this selection address the politics of literacy instruction through issues such as placement, curricular change, program redesign, assessment, or access?

And finally, so that this study would be focused on program or department-level concerns rather than classroom pedagogies, I considered a third question:

- Does this selection address the role of multiple institutional stakeholders beyond simply students and their instructors?

Although students are arguably the most important stakeholders in basic writing instruction, an emphasis on the politics of individual classroom situations would have resulted in a much larger corpus of articles that did not include the perspectives of stakeholders other than students and their instructors. Therefore, I excluded students when I considered the different stakeholders named in a given selection.

If the answer to the three questions above about politics, local context, and stakeholders was yes, I included that selection in the second round of coding. During the second round of coding, I used the same three guiding questions to read through article abstracts and further reduce the corpus. What remained was a collection of twenty-four feature articles that included narrative accounts that addressed the politics of remediation and included the interests of multiple institutional stakeholders beyond students and their instructors (see Appendix).

Coding Data for Analysis: At this point, I coded each of the twenty-four articles to identify the different institutional stakeholders who were referenced (distant reading) and then followed this with an analysis of the ways that these stakeholders were described (close reading). I created an Excel spreadsheet to track different stakeholders who were named and, as needed, refined categories to capture all of the different stakeholder perspectives that were mentioned in the corpus of articles. Once all stakeholders were identified and the frequency of their mention within the corpus was noted, I completed an additional round of coding which examined how each stakeholder was described by looking at descriptive references of their actions, attitudes, and interests.

A DISTANT READING OF *JBW*

Mueller's work on distant reading focuses largely on frequency counts and various methods for data-visualization that such frequency counts over a large corpus make possible. In the absence of data-visualization, Mueller acknowledges that even a table of frequency counts alone can elucidate patterns in the data that might not otherwise be visible. This was certainly true of my study of stakeholders in *JBW* as I was surprised to identify 46 different categories of stakeholders across the 24 articles I analyzed. The chart below reflects the percentage of total articles (n=24) that include references

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to each of the categories of stakeholders that I identified, proving a “distant reading” of stakeholders in narrative-based accounts about the politics of institutional change published in *Journal of Basic Writing* from 1995 to 2015. I believe that the numerical data here offers a decontextualized representation of some disciplinary patterns that are ripe for further discussion, including the sheer number of stakeholders represented in this corpus, as well as the ways in which groups of people (i.e. committees, departments, etc.) were also frequently characterized as stakeholders.

Table 1. Stakeholders in *Journal of Basic Writing*.

Stakeholder	Frequency of Mention
Academic Advisors	7 (29.16%)
Adjunct Instructors	3 (12.5%)
Administrator	7 (29.16%)
Admissions/Recruiting Staff	14 (58.33%)
Basic Writing Expert	1 (4.16%)
Basic Writing Instructor	24 (100%)
Basic Writing Program	16 (66.66%)
Basic Writing Program Administrator	12 (50%)
Board of Trustees	5 (20.83%)
College-Wide Committee	5 (20.83%)
Community-Based Organizations	3 (12.5%)
Community College	1 (4.16%)
Community Outreach Program	4 (16.66%)
Consultants Hired by the State	1 (4.16%)
Department	1 (4.16%)
Department Chair	8 (33.33%)
Department Colleagues	3 (12.5%)
Department Committee	7 (29.16%)
Director of Support Service Program	4 (16.66%)
Director of Writing Center	4 (16.66%)
Faculty (Branch Campuses)	4 (16.66%)
Faculty (General)	2 (8.33%)
Faculty (Other Departments)	6 (25%)
Faculty Governance	6 (25%)
Graduate Program	4 (16.66%)
Graduate Teaching Assistants	4 (16.66%)

Grant-Funding Agencies	6 (25%)
High School Teachers	2 (8.33%)
Institution	1 (4.16%)
Larger Academic Unit (Beyond Dept.)	15 (62.5%)
Larger College/University System	2 (8.33%)
Legislators	9 (37.5%)
Library	8 (33.33%)
Media	1 (4.16%)
Non-Matriculation Programs	5 (20.83%)
Parties to Statewide Agreements	1 (4.16%)
Placement Staff	4 (16.66%)
Public	1 (4.16%)
Student Organizations	6 (25%)
Staff Support Services	2 (8.33%)
Support Services	2 (8.33%)
Testing Companies	8 (33.33%)
Writing Center	4 (16.66%)
Writing Faculty	7 (29.16%)
Writing Program	24 (100%)
Writing Program Administrator	4 (16.66%)

I developed the list above through a grounded-theory approach to reading through each of the twenty-four articles which required coding for each category of stakeholder. I repeated this process several times, until subsequent readings did not illuminate a new distinction to be made between different categories of stakeholders. Not surprisingly, there were higher frequency counts for stakeholders directly related to the writing program, but the sheer range of stakeholders who might have an interest in a basic writing course or program is telling. Academic advisors, admissions/recruiting staff, placement staff, and testing companies, for example, tended to be referenced when placement into courses was a topic of concern. When the topic of reducing or eliminating remediation was addressed, it was generally several steps removed from those whose day-to-day work directly addressed Basic Writing and included administrators, legislators, and boards of trustees. In some instances, it was necessary to name collections of individuals such

as committees, departments, or even the institution at-large, as often these groups were represented as speaking with one voice.

An analysis of these stakeholders must also consider the constructed nature of the narratives in which their descriptions appear. Generally, authors who publish in *Journal of Basic Writing* are writing from a subject position that is invested in the maintenance of Basic Writing courses or other curricular structures and student services that would support the students who would traditionally place into such courses. The almost natural result of such subjectivity is the development of an “us vs. them” description wherein stakeholders who might appear to be threatening the work of Basic Writing are more easily portrayed in a negative light. The flip side to this is the promotion of an inherently positive image of Basic Writing instructors.

After a more detailed reading to analyze descriptions of Basic Writing instructors, I was able to develop three distinct subcategories: Basic Writing instructors as marginalized by their institutions (20.83%), Basic Writing instructors as institutional change agents (29.16%), and Basic Writing instructors as advocates for social justice (62.5%). These categories were not necessarily mutually exclusive. I defined marginalization at the institution by looking for explicit references to Basic Writing courses, programs, or faculty as somehow “othered” in a particular local context. The code for institutional change agents was reserved for any references of Basic Writing instructors who were actively seeking to change an aspect of the institutional culture about writing. In some cases, this was also associated with advocating for social justice, as arguments about access, diversity, and equitable educational opportunities were mobilized as reasons for change.

Across these statistics are identity constructions of Basic Writing instructors that speak to the sense of mission and agency that professionals in these fields ascribe to their work through descriptions of themselves and their colleagues. Beginning with these data points invites further questioning, particularly in the context of a graduate seminar: In what ways do BW instructors advocate for social justice? What are the tensions between serving as an institutional change agent and being marginalized at your institution? By whom are BW instructors marginalized? Such questions can serve to identify disciplinary assumptions about what it means to engage in the professional work of Basic Writing (assumptions that may have tacitly formed as a result of other scholarly reading in the field).

CLOSE READING DESCRIPTIONS OF OTHER STAKEHOLDERS: ANALYZING THREATS TO BASIC WRITING

A close reading of this largely-positive characterization of Basic Writing faculty alongside other less-than-positive descriptions of other stakeholders—namely administrators, the general public, and the institution—reveals clear opportunities to frame distinctions between insider/outsider groups in Basic Writing scholarship. Given the extent to which graduate studies are rooted in disciplinary socialization, recognition of these patterns could provide graduate students an opportunity to approach their understanding of such relationships between Basic Writing instructors and other stakeholders with a more critical eye, which might enable proactive relationship-building rather than emphasizing reactions to institutionally-mandated changes.

The section below offers a brief overview of data from three of the outsider groups described in *JBW*: administrators, the public, and legislators. Based on my reading of articles from across the history of *JBW*, these three stakeholder groups appeared to have the potential to significantly impact the status of Basic Writing courses or programs. At the same time, I was hard-pressed to find examples in the field's scholarship in *JBW* or beyond that speak to how Basic Writing experts might proactively address the concerns of these different stakeholders. By highlighting these particular categories of stakeholders, I hope to call attention to opportunities for graduate education for future Basic Writing professionals to more deeply engage in efforts to demonstrate to these and other stakeholders the needs that courses labeled "Basic Writing" often address.

Administrators

Under this category, I include references to deans, provosts, chancellors, and the like to acknowledge that "administration" might look drastically different from one institution to the next. In the selections I analyzed from *JBW*, administrators are often portrayed as motivated by financial concerns (Warnick, Cooney, and Lackey) rather than student success. In "Remedial, Basic, Advanced: Evolving Frameworks for First-Year Composition at the California State University," Dan Melzer attributes California State University efforts to eliminate remediation to the work of the university Chancellor, citing a "top-down" approach, and even pits them in direct opposition to Basic Writing by noting that "despite the victory of many Basic Writing teachers in protecting access for underserved students, the Chancellor's Office and Board of Trustees have continued their attempts to eliminate remediation"

(85), a rhetorical move that situates the higher administration as not valuing access for underserved students, which indicates a lack of commitment to social justice and an emphasis on “the language of exclusion” (89). Likewise, in “Re-modeling Basic Writing,” Rachel Rigolino and Penny Freel point to the talks among administrators to potentially “dismantle remedial programs” at SUNY in the mid-1990s (53). These descriptors consistently construct administrators as anonymous villains who threaten the work of Basic Writing programs.

The Public

A consistent theme in narratives about the politics of remediation that have been published in *JBW* is that the general public is most frequently described as ill-informed about sound composition pedagogy and driven by a vested interest education that is publicly funded. To put it another way, references to the public in narratives about the politics of remediation in *JBW* often depict the public as part of the problem that constitutes opposition to the democratic work of Basic Writing programs. Sugie Goen-Salter notes the “institutional need to convince . . . the tax-paying public that democratic ideals are being met, while reassuring them that their dollars are not being wasted teaching students what they should have learned in high school” (97). The public, in this characterization, leads the charge to maintain academic rigor for fear of “wasting” resources on students who have seemingly not earned the right to be in college at all.

The Institution

Because institutions often express a set of values via mission statements and policy directives, and because references to “the university” or “the college” are common in *JBW*, I considered “the institution” as a separate category. While I recognize that in practice, institutions are made up of a collective of individuals, I noted in *JBW* that “the institution” often was imbued with a distinct identity. References to “the institution” in the selections I examined most often cast “the institution” as a stakeholder whose work was in opposition to the democratic goals and ideals of the Basic Writing enterprise. In Pavesich’s 2011 article, for example, although there is a great deal of emphasis on the social justice mission of Roosevelt University, the institution that is the focus of Pavesich’s analysis, the university’s policy regarding the placement of transfer students is described as “strain[ing] its commitment to social justice” (94). Similarly in articles written about Cali-

ifornia State University (CSU), “the institution” is often blamed for policy decisions that negatively impact Basic Writing (Fox; Melzer; Goen-Salter). Here again, the institution itself becomes a stakeholder responsible for the issuance of mission statements and policy documents that marginalize Basic Writing expertise.

The above examples paint a clear picture of stakeholders whose influence threatens Basic Writing courses and programs. Each of these analyses is evidence-based, as there are interpretations from close readings to interpret each of these identity constructions. At the same time, however, close readings are necessarily limited in scope in order to develop a particular line of thinking in the service of a larger argument. The analysis of administration, the public, and the institution is useful in constructing a narrative about Basic Writing that emphasizes victimization (a trope that is arguably all too common in our field’s professional discourse, published and otherwise), and one that positions Basic Writing professionals as consistently on the offensive. While there is, of course, quite a bit of truth to this conception of a Basic Writing professional’s life, it is only *part* of the picture that is laid out in *JBW*. Comparing this interpretation to the analysis of Basic Writing instructors above suggests a potential disconnect between this victim identity and the primary ways that Basic Writing professionals describe themselves and their work, as only about 20% of the articles in this corpus described Basic Writing instructors as marginalized. In contrast, about 90% of the articles describe Basic Writing instructors as either agents of change or advocates for social justice. A more detailed distant reading of descriptions of other institutional stakeholders could do more to reveal opportunities for Basic Writing professionals to potentially locate allies, while also considering the complexity of institutional structures that Basic Writing is embedded within.

FREQUENCY TRENDS OVER TIME

Returning to Mueller’s argument that distant reading practices make visible data that might not otherwise be uncovered, I turn here to my analysis of legislators depicted as stakeholders in *JBW*. Although legislators are represented in just over one-third of the total articles in this corpus, it is worth noting that more than half of those articles were published in the seven-year period between 2008 and 2015. The sudden spike in frequency of mentions is a clear indication that legislators are playing an increasingly prominent role in the working lives of Basic Writing professionals.

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I applied the code for legislator to examples where legislators or lawmakers were specifically named as stakeholders, or where such stakeholders were implied because a particular law or formal government policy was named. For example, a reference to “Title V, part of the legal code of the state” (Fitzgerald 5) was coded under this category, as were references to official government entities such as “The Idaho State Board of Education” (Uehling 23) and “the Tennessee Higher Education Commission” (Huse, Wright, Clark, and Hacker 37). Combining references to legislators, laws, government policies, and government agencies highlights the extent to which various levels of government oversight might impact the work of a Basic Writing program. These legislators and government policy-makers wield tremendous power over the direction of Basic Writing programs, simply by passing legislation and enacting policy that mandate particular approaches to remedial education that can influence placement, course offerings, curriculum, and program structure.

Table 2. Descriptions of Legislators/Policy Makers in *Journal of Basic Writing*.

Descriptive category	Frequency in Total Corpus
Defending Standards, Not Students	3 (12.5%)
Opposing Social Justice	3 (12.5%)
Defenders of Access	3 (12.5%)

Legislators as threats to Basic Writing. The descriptions of legislators and government policy makers seem to fall along two axes. The first one stands in stark opposition to the inherent mission and values of Basic Writing as a field of study. In this characterization, legislators/lawmakers/government policy makers are portrayed as threats to student and faculty interests.

Legislators defending standards, not students. An example of lawmakers characterized as a threat to Basic Writing is present in this excerpt from Huse, Wright, Clark, and Hacker’s selection, which narrates one program’s response to legislative mandates that impacted their ability to offer Basic Writing courses:

According to a May 2002 *Tennessean* article, “THEC [Tennessee Higher Education Commission] officials said they aren’t opposed to remedial and developmental courses, but as they prepare for a state budget that might provide no additional funding for several years and could even cut higher education funding by more than

\$90 million . . . THEC administrators are focusing on maintaining the quality of the courses higher education was meant to offer.” (Cass 26)

The choice of words here is significant: presenting the concerns of the THEC administrators as centered around “the courses higher education was meant to offer” (in Cass, qtd. by Huse et al.) implies that Basic Writing courses (referred to here as “remedial and developmental courses”) are *not* the types of courses that belong at the college level. This discursive construction of Basic Writing as below-standard is commonly cited in the field’s scholarship beyond *Journal of Basic Writing* as a threat to the field (Otte and Mlynarczyk; Reid). While such perspectives have traditionally been common from a range of local, on-campus stakeholders (such as faculty, as Hull and Rose demonstrate, or the media, as Adler-Kassner and Harrington prove), other more famously documented examples, such as the efforts to eliminate remediation at CUNY’s senior colleges in the late 1990s, are more directly tied to lawmakers and politicians (Gleason, “Evaluating Writing Programs”). In this description, legislators carry agency and power over Basic Writing instructors and programs, as they are able to mandate curricular and programmatic change.

Patrick Sullivan’s article about a legislative shift in Connecticut that profoundly impacted Basic Writing includes a similar characterization of the state legislature that Huse, Wright, Clark, and Hacker present. Public Act 12-40, according to Sullivan, effectively rewrote the statewide approach to remedial education, forcing institutions to adopt an accelerated model of Basic Writing:

Impatient with very modest graduation rates among students who require remedial assistance in English and math, this legislation took the bold step of mandating an accelerated approach to developmental education, requiring all colleges in the system—twelve community colleges and four state universities—to offer a maximum of one semester of remedial work for any student requiring additional preparation for college. Furthermore, colleges were required to offer developmental students who were deemed ‘likely to succeed in college level work with supplemental support’ the opportunity to enroll in a first-year composition class that provided embedded support. (45)

Sullivan's choice of words here contributes to an unfavorable image of the legislature in this case. For example, his use of the word "impatient" suggests his perception that the legislature is attempting to rush student progress. This, coupled with his observation that the legislature emphasized students "Deemed 'likely to succeed,'" indicates that the legislature is invested in maintaining rigor, rather than advocating for students. Here again, legislators are described as enjoying agency in *Journal of Basic Writing* as they are able to effectively limit access to higher education to only those students whose academic profiles suggest the potential for success and thus threaten the existence of Basic Writing courses.

Legislators opposing social justice. Other legislative initiatives do not target Basic Writing or remediation explicitly but nonetheless have an influence on the work of a Basic Writing program. This is notable in Gail Stygall's discussion of a Washington State ballot initiative that was designed to eliminate preferential treatment for individuals based on race, ethnicity, or gender, a move that Stygall notes effectively eliminated affirmative action policies. The effect of such policy changes on a Basic Writing program intended to serve populations that typically benefit from affirmative action programs can be detrimental. Stygall notes, "By December of 1998, the three-decades old Educational Opportunity Program at the University of Washington, whose two-course, for-credit composition-requirement fulfilling writing sequence is housed in the Expository Writing Program which I direct, was as much at risk as its students" (6). Here, Stygall subtly positions the legislators behind this ballot initiative as anti-affirmative action, by first noting the date of the program's inception (which is aligned with the latter portion of the Civil Rights Movement) and also by using the term "at-risk," which is often employed to describe students from minority or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Later, she adds to this by noting that "legislators and educational policy makers in state governments treat educational policy documents as just that—policy contracts" (7) and points out that "when these documents contradict and undo other policy initiatives, such as diversity commitments, we must point to the contradictions and counter arguments" (7). In her efforts to paint legislators and policy makers as anti-diversity, Stygall successfully paints them as enemies of Basic Writing.

A similar depiction of legislators as exercising their agency to work against social justice is notable in Sullivan's essay on the passage of Public Act 12-40 in Connecticut, a legislative move that forced a re-design of Basic Writing programs throughout the state. Similar to Stygall's description of educational policy as divorced from the actual needs of students, Sullivan

indicates that the Connecticut legislature approaches remediation through the lens of “an economic theory that frames investment in developmental education on a business model that privileges return on investment and statistical probabilities” (65), as opposed to the much more student-centered approaches that most developmental educators adopt. With that, Sullivan also notes that

As I listened to and participated in statewide discussion about implementation of PA 12-40 in the tumultuous months following passage of this legislation, I was alarmed by some of the language I heard being used about underprepared students and the seemingly punitive measures being discussed to deal with them. I spoke with one consultant who was assisting the state with implementation during this process, and he had a similar read on the situation. He said that it appeared to him that some of the framers of this legislation, and some of those who were providing leadership in the initial public discussions of this bill, ‘simply wanted underprepared students to go away.’ (73)

This characterization of the legislators responsible for the passage of PA 12-40 notes their interest in cost-saving and investing in students who are “likely to succeed.” While this is certainly an unfavorable depiction of the state legislators, alone it does not present them as interfering with a social justice initiative. Elsewhere in this article, however, Sullivan highlights the influence that this legislation has had on student placement. By requiring multiple measures and creating “bottoms” for certain courses, Sullivan argues that this legislation (and, by proxy, the lawmakers who enacted it) have “in effect, clos[ed] the open door at Connecticut community colleges” (45-46). The social justice implications of this are clearer, as limiting access to community college education is likely to have a disproportionate impact on students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Legislators as defenders of access. This positive view of legislative influence and agency is most often discussed in *Journal of Basic Writing* in relation to mission statements. One such example can be found in Fitzgerald’s discussion:

The legal guidelines governing the mission and much of what happens in the 108 California Community Colleges are delineated in Title V, part of the legal code of the state. That code explicitly mentions instruction in basic skills as one aspect of the mission of

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community colleges. Since their mission is set by the legal mandate in Title V, the mission statements adopted by the colleges vary little from campus to campus. Moreover, because Title V requires California community colleges to provide basic skills for students and the Chancellor's Office mentions remedial education, English teachers at Chabot College, like those at the other California community colleges, accept the validity of offering Basic Writing. (5-6)

In this excerpt, Fitzgerald highlights the way that legislative efforts can exercise their agency to *support* rather than threaten a Basic Writing program. In particular, she points to the way that the legal mandate for community colleges to include remedial instruction as part of their mission has the effect of persuading faculty as well as upper administrators to "accept the validity of offering Basic Writing," as opposed to suggesting that it might threaten an invisible academic standard, as the selection from Huse, Wright, and Clark demonstrates above.

By combining both distant and close reading methods, a fuller picture of the disciplinary discourse about legislators is made visible. The close reading provides characterizations of legislators who have influenced Basic Writing described in the twenty-four articles in this corpus. At the same time, the quantitative data points demonstrate the extent to which each of these characterizations is present in the selections from *JBW* that were included in this study, serving to complicate the overall analysis by revealing the frequency with which legislators are characterized as working in direct opposition to Basic Writing professionals' social justice imperative. Such findings provide an opportunity to further interrogate the written discourse of our field, to examine the extent to which the polarity between Basic Writing instructors and legislators is reinforced with direct evidence or with authors' analysis of a given scenario. It is clear to anyone working in Basic Writing today that legislators and policy makers often exercise great authority in changing remedial programs that they do not fully understand, which of course makes them a natural enemy to Basic Writing. At the same time, however, because these bodies do wield so much potential power, one might wonder if these negative characterizations might limit the possibilities that future BW teacher-scholars might envision in working with state government. Whether we want it to be true or not, closer engagement with the legislative processes that result in dramatic changes to Basic Writing is likely necessary to the future of this profession, which suggests that the ways

that we construct our relationships to legislators and policy makers should be further theorized.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GRADUATE STUDY

The above examples offer only a glimpse into a much larger data set, but they serve to highlight some patterns in identity construction that could be further theorized. Within *JBW*, there are clear patterns in the way that authors recount stories about facing the politics of remediation: state legislators and administrators are evil and greedy; institutions enact disembodied policies; the general public fails to understand the work of Basic Writing; and Basic Writing experts are stalwarts of social justice working against these difficult odds. For the purposes of publishing in this field, it is instructive to recognize where one's own work fits alongside these established tropes.

At the same time, the relationships between various stakeholders that are described can provide an invaluable resource for Basic Writing teacher-scholars who are new to the field and the institutional politics that influence Basic Writing instruction. Recognizing the wide range of stakeholders who have an influence on that work can better prepare graduate students to foster positive relationships with those who will have a vested interest in Basic Writing down the road. In the absence of a game like *Praxis and Allies* for Basic Writing, the narrative accounts published in *JBW* can provide something of a road-map for encountering similar situations in other local contexts.

With that, however, one might wonder the extent to which the construal of these situations as published in *JBW* may be sending the most effective messages to graduate students about how to foster meaningful growth and change in Basic Writing. Are administrators and legislators inherently disinterested in equitable education across the board? Are all instructors who are labeled "Basic Writing experts" necessarily aligning their work with a social justice mission? Will the general public always misunderstand the work of Basic Writing? It would be dangerously reductive to suggest that these are the *only* identity constructs of these stakeholders that are present in *JBW*, but the power of these images is prominent in the pages of the journal.

Analyzing this facet of our field's scholarly discourse has the potential to call into question these identity constructs and complicate conceptions of agency for those who might adopt the professional identity of a Basic Writing expert. Rather than billing ourselves as marginalized social justice warriors, perhaps there are more agentive identities to develop and adopt. With that, presenting a more nuanced image of the stakeholders who are

traditionally assumed to be “against” Basic Writing could open up opportunities to develop more productive relationships with those parties. While the strategic work of negotiating institutional politics is well-established in the field of Writing Program Administration, explicit attention to this strategic discourse is less common in Basic Writing. Given the popularity of the term “the politics of remediation” in Basic Writing scholarship, it seems wise to expand our conversations about this term to help graduate students to better understand the larger institutional structures within which they will likely work.

Often, readers are directed to what’s important in a story through an author’s subtle (and at times even unconscious) effort to call attention to some elements of the narrative while allowing others to fade into the background. This process is particularly complex when narratives appear in scholarly journals, as the very goal of such work is, in part, to reproduce a disciplinary culture. When it comes to the politics of remediation, Basic Writing scholars often reproduce stories where other stakeholders exercise agency that negatively impacts our courses and programs. This is not to say that such stories are not true; on the contrary, the extent to which the forces that push against Basic Writing succeed in their efforts to reduce or eliminate it is alarming. At the same time, the reproduction of such stories, true or not, reinforces an image of Basic Writing professionals as increasingly without agency beyond our classrooms, leaving little room to theorize what might be done with what agency we *do* have in the future. Rather than focusing graduate study on the politics of remediation on a cautionary tale, an exemplar victory, or a locally-focused scenario, graduate education in this area must move beyond close reading of a few scenarios and instead read across texts to locate patterns that might help us to strategically position our work for stakeholders we may have forgotten or opportunities we may not have considered. Uncovering the patterns across the stories that comprise our disciplinary history is a small step toward authoring stories that more consciously shape the “future tense” of Basic Writing studies that we might hope to realize.

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APPENDIX

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