

A WPA Reflects on Assessing Black Women's Writing during Intersectional Pandemics

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Spelman College boasts a proud herstory of a comprehensive and interdisciplinary writing program. Designed and cultivated by the unmatched Jacqueline Jones Royster, the program continues to thrive on that foundation. As an integral part of that design, the Spelman College Comprehensive Writing Program (CWP) assesses portfolios for both first year and final year students. First year students are also enrolled in a year-long course, African Diaspora in the World (ADW), that requires critical essays as culminating experiences at the end of both semesters. One of the signature initiatives for the CWP is portfolio assessment of selected writing from first-year students, which consists of a detailed reflection letter, a critical or argumentative essay, and a critical or argumentative essay that includes at least 2 sources. Portfolios are typically collected during the month of April and assessed during the first week of June. The CWP recruits between 14–18 readers from Spelman faculty across all disciplines, at least 1 reader from outside the college, hires a consultant to norm readers and facilitate the event, and hosts a week-long assessment reading. Receiving a passing score on the FYW portfolio is a graduation requirement, and each student has 3 opportunities to fulfill the requirement: 2 opportunities for assessment of the portfolio and if students are in need of additional support and resources, a 3rd opportunity of enrolling in a course that provides additional composition instruction.¹ At every stage of this process, supportive language is employed, emphasizing that Spelman College does not want to penalize students but instead wants them to have access to all the necessary resources to be effective writers for the balance of their time on campus and in their professional lives beyond.

In March 2020, when COVID-19 was identified as a serious threat worldwide, students and faculty were notified that Spelman would complete the semester remotely, and we have yet to return to campus. Meaningful traditions and ceremonies were cancelled, and student morale sank. By April 2020, the assault on Black bodies from COVID-19 and nationwide incidents of racial injustice and brutality was palpable and consuming, and as WPA, I knew I needed a curricular response to this historic and cultural moment. I still felt fairly new to the WPA position and was still cultivating and shaping my administrative identity. My position had been open for two years prior to my arriving at Spelman in the fall 2017. Many of the poli-

cies and practices I was supporting were adopted by my predecessor. I was on research leave at the onset of the pandemic, and my Assistant Director alerted me to the escalating anxiety of our faculty and students. My leave essentially ended with the onset of COVID, as I wanted to respond to this moment with my own ideological and pedagogical sensibilities, sensibilities that were centered on an acknowledgement of the stressors and crises that our students, our Black women students, were navigating. I wanted to invoke a pedagogy and a practice of compassion in this moment. Our instructors and students were catapulted into remote learning in March of 2020 with little warning and preparation. Faculty were stressed and concerned about how to prepare students for such a high stakes academic exercise from afar, and students were stressed over performing this task amid the myriad of physical, mental, and emotional threats on their lives.

Spelman is a place where a compassionate response to extraordinary circumstances should be the norm, where students should be able to scream “I am not okay!” and be heard. President Mary Schmidt Campbell often refers to “The Spelman Difference” in her speeches, a phrase that articulates the nature of our students’ experiences within our unique cultural context. I needed an accommodation demonstrative of this difference. After consulting with senior administration, I adjusted the portfolio submission schedule. I sent email notifications to first year students, giving them the summer to prepare their portfolios, announcing a series of workshops in the early fall to help with preparation, and scheduling the reading in early October. I offered virtual workshops in September to almost 300 students and met with more than 100 students in one-on-one video conferencing to offer support and guidance on portfolio submission. In those moments, I fielded questions about what to submit, listened to them share the ways COVID had impacted their lives, and offered support and suggestions for how those emotions and experiences could become content for their reflections. It was absolutely the most exhausting work of my professional life, but I knew the postponed schedule meant these students were no longer enrolled in the classes for which they had completed the writing, and they needed a sounding board and guidance. The CWP sent out reminders for how to make virtual writing center appointments and reminders of other virtual resources. Finally, I invited 13 of our strongest readers from previous assessments, hired Dr. Sheila Carter-Tod of Virginia Tech to norm and facilitate, and hosted our first virtual assessment reading. For our norming session, I asked Dr. Carter-Tod to make space to discuss the nature of trauma and duress as part of the cultural context for work in which we were engaged. Though this discussion did not in any way alter the standards or

adjust the rubric, it gave readers a deeper understanding of the content of the portfolios.

These accommodations resulted in our highest pass rates ever, approximately 90%, up from 85% in the previous year, which reflects a marginal gain from the year before after instituting revisions in the portfolio guidelines. In the debriefing and exit surveys, our readers expressed how thoughtful and critical these portfolios had been. Of the 12 readers who completed the survey, 5 had served for more than 10 years, 1 had been a reader for between 6 and 9 years, and 6 had read for between 2 and 5 years. All exit surveys reflected on the quality and intentionality of these portfolios in comparison to years past. The readers commented that the reflection letters were more “authentic,” “moving,” and “developed” than in the past, and others acknowledged an increase in the level of “creativity in expression.” Several readers reflected on the ways the students reflected on this moment, facing a multiplicity of pandemics, COVID and the public, televised, and desensitized killings of Black bodies by the police, and many students expressed an appreciation for the support of faculty and the writing program for offering the additional resources to accomplish this academic milestone.

Experiences like this one led to collective conversations about how the English Department might be more intentional about supporting our students. These conversations revealed effective strategies and accommodations from so many of our colleagues that we formed an *ad hoc* committee to develop informal policies and practices and pedagogical frameworks that might best support our students. We adopted the framework of “compassionate pedagogy,” defined as “ensuring that our teaching and interactions with students and colleagues are based on kindness, and followed through by actions and practices that alleviate suffering and promote wellbeing . . . it allows students, teachers and all involved in universities to become a humanising voice which listens to and hears the realities of the marginalised and excluded.”² We crafted a shared digital space to collect all the ways that our colleagues were engaging in compassionate pedagogical practices. We looked for intersections and began exploring scholarship and shaping language for a theoretical model and shared practices. Our preliminary draft of compassionate pedagogical practices are as follows:

1. Include a statement in our syllabi explaining that we are committing to a compassionate pedagogical approach and that by taking the class, students are expected to abide by the articulated principles of compassion when they are engaged in class-related work.

2. Bring to our classes a specific project, assignment, lesson, or discussion that bring awareness to this project.
3. Offer compassionate practice as a way to help students live in the world more peacefully and more conscientiously. Articulate that compassion does not preclude a commitment to rigor, standards, or deadlines but that compassion does require expectations to be rooted on non-arbitrary or strictly punitive grounds.³

The department hosted a virtual town hall at the beginning of the spring semester which gave our students the opportunity to talk with us about their needs during this perilous time, but it also gave faculty an opportunity to share their own vulnerabilities. The town hall was a pivotal moment, where students and faculty acknowledged the reciprocity involved in invoking compassion. Our *ad hoc* group is now discussing next steps for implementation, considering more complete policy development with greater visibility to the larger campus community and possibly academia writ large. What we have preliminarily concluded is that this small accommodation in the Comprehensive Writing Program mattered; the deployment of a pedagogy of compassion worked, especially with Black women whose lives are under constant assault in our current socio-political climate. When students are heard and supported, even in the most adverse of circumstances, they show up, and consequently show out!

NOTES

1. For a more complete profile of comprehensive writing initiatives at Spelman College, see Lockett, Alexandria. "Critical Reflections on Spelman College." *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration*. CCCC of NCTE, 2019. pp. 116–119.

2. The University of Westminster, Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation. Dr. Kathryn Waddington, Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. <http://cti.westminster.ac.uk/compassionate-pedagogy-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-important/>

3. The Spelman College English Department's draft of pedagogical practices. This initiative is still in the development stage. The committee is currently drafting language to adopt.

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