



## Teaching Matters and Assessment Center (TMAC)

Dr. William FitzGerald, Director | Catherine Buck, Graduate Assistant



### Director's Note

On the eve of Spring Break, we are far from enjoying spring weather! But we'll soon set our sights on summer and the academic year ahead.

At a recent meeting of the Faculty Senate, the topic of writing came up, as it frequently does. Our students are challenged by the expectations of academic writing; and we are likewise challenged teaching to those standards. In my dual roles as director of TMAC and of the First Year Writing Program in English, I strive to build bridges between what our students are learning in Composition and what we do as teachers of writing *across the curriculum*. Many interactions with colleagues fall into a general category of *Help! My students can't write*. What can we do? In April, I'd like to assemble a working group of faculty from at least six of our departments and schools to address expectations and standards to better address the articulation between First Year Writing and the curriculum beyond. Who's in? Please contact us and we'll get back to you. I'd like this group to meet three times this Spring and conclude our work with some concrete materials for supporting the work we do. For this or with any other ideas, TMAC can be reached at [teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu](mailto:teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu).

Speaking of writing, the first of our entries below focuses on the "crisis of citations" in teaching academic writing. I'm in favor of not expecting too much from our undergraduates in mastering the mechanics of citation and instead emphasizing the rhetorical uses of writing with sources. First *why*, then later *how*. Relatedly, another piece addresses the "bang for the buck" in commenting on student papers, recognizing that students benefit only so much from our red pens. Targeted responses, including in modes other than written comments, can have far more lasting impact.

Ah, learning outcomes. As the local czar of learning outcomes, I confess to a love-hate relationship with the industrialization of our teaching, as reflecting in the last of our pieces. In my time as director of TMAC, I have come to believe that the positive impact of learning outcomes on teaching is in the effort to construct meaningful learning experiences and pathways and to make

those efforts visible in dialogue with our colleagues. The formal metrics of assessment such as benchmarks and the surveillance of our teaching by outside bodies... well, I share the concerns of my colleagues. My motto is “Let’s do it for us (and our students), not for others.”

Finally, a plug for the workshop “Difficult Dialogues in the Classroom,” sponsored by our Office of Civic Engagement and the Committee on Institutional Equity and Diversity and scheduled for March 26. See details below to RSVP.

Wishing you a restful break!

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## In The News

### **Minding the Rules: A Crisis of Citations**

For many undergraduate students, especially first year freshmen, the question of how to use citations can be a particularly anxiety-inducing one. There are the questions about the right way to cite sources that hinge primarily on the seemingly nit-picking rules of the instructor, rather than on how to best give attribution to original sources. A recent [article](#) in the Chronicle tackles the difficulties that students have around citation by backing up from the rules altogether, favoring an approach that emphasizes the values behind using MLA, APA, and Chicago [citation styles](#).

Overall, it looks at the [strict rules](#) of writing and questions the emphasis on specific appearances before improving the arguments a piece of writing contains. Prescriptivists need not worry that the author here, David Gooblar of the University of Iowa, is advocating for getting rid of the ‘rules’ entirely, rather promoting the importance of knowing why they are asked to write a certain way, providing discipline and industry specific context for the project of writing towards their particular goal, be that the ‘research paper’ or otherwise.

### **Measuring College Cost Cutoffs**

As discussed in earlier TMAC newsletters and widely elsewhere, college costs are [growing quickly](#), making this once manageable investment prohibitive for many families and individual students. With skyrocketing debts, many applicants are demanding a clearer picture on the amount they will be expected to pay for their education, even while a growing number of students are [unaware](#) of the payment options and amounts that they owe in student loans.

While [some students](#) at Ivy League institutions have their full financial need met by the school, most others must take out large loans to cover tuition, housing, and books. Last month, the Washington Post [published](#) a number of financial benchmarks that students should use when calculating the amount of loans they should take. A government figure suggests 15% of future

income, but as the article points out, “few high school seniors know what they might earn in the decade after college when they will be paying off their loans.”

Instead, knowing the [average salaries](#) of recent graduates can provide students with a better understanding of their future financial prospects. [One expert](#) suggests having a total debt of less than the student’s annual income following graduation, while [others](#) place a higher emphasis on the whole picture of contributions from family members, as well as emphasizing that different amounts of debt can place different burdens depending on the student and the industry to which they will enter.

### **No-Comment Paper Responses**

Many instructors in the writing program have discussed the merits of eliminating or sharply reducing comments on student papers, but the practice has broader value across departments as well. While commenting less will certainly improve instructor response time and lessen the time involved in responding to student papers, it’s far more than just the easy way out. [Michael Millner](#), an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, writes in a recent posting on [ChronicleVitae](#) that moving away from the practice of providing extensive written feedback on submitted drafts has also been widely beneficial for the students themselves.

He recounts his own change in approach to paper commenting, sharing that he had previously given students so many comments that one undergraduate said he had “made his paper bleed.” Milner links the difficulty students have in fully benefiting from lengthy paper responses with economic difficulties, noting that many of his students worked full time jobs and, at a [large university](#), had never had the experience of meeting with a professor one on one to discuss their work. For Milner, the choice to spend his time building relationships with his students reviewing their work in person rather than heavily marking up final drafts was a particularly successful one.

### **The Big Business of Learning Outcomes**

A recent [article](#) in the New York Times education section discusses the unintentional impacts of overly assessing learning outcomes in undergraduate education, particularly the ways in which it can be detrimental to the students. It explores the ways that an industry has cropped up around the measuring of student learning, often in forms that is not inherently natural to the subject they are learning. Citing [broader criticism](#) about the current state of assessment, the article references courses where additional questions were added to exams for the purposes of checking a necessary box of assessment, rather than the pedagogical goals of the instructor or the needs of the students.

[Conferences](#) on assessment and [concentrated efforts](#) to improve the ways that universities assess their students and programs are one approach to tackling the need for quantification in the business of higher education. The NYT piece laments the hyper-focus on the ‘product’ of learning

and the wider disinterest in the space of the academy for personal growth an exploration into a field of interest. Acknowledging that there is no one market-ready procedure to produce college students with the ‘critical thinking skills’ so desired by their employers, it advocates for less focus on the efficiency of education, and more on it’s depth, far harder to quantify.

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## TMAC Calendar

Upcoming events by TMAC and Campus Partners

### **Difficult Dialogue in the Classroom | March 26<sup>th</sup> | 10:20-12:30 | West AB Conference Rooms**

Sponsored by the Office of Civic Engagement and the Committee on Institutional Equity and Diversity, this workshop on identity, race, and power in the classroom will be facilitated by Dr. Ali Michael of the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education. The workshop will strengthen awareness among faculty by helping us look more deeply at how inequalities among race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability affect (and sometimes cause us to perpetuate) injustice in our classrooms. We will discuss strategies for injustice in our classrooms. Lunch provided. Please RSVP to Associate Chancellor for Civic Engagement, Nyeema Watson, at [ncwatson@camden.rutgers.edu](mailto:ncwatson@camden.rutgers.edu) by Wednesday, March 21<sup>st</sup>.

### **Making Sense of Your Course Evaluations | April 5<sup>th</sup> | 12:45-1:45 | Armitage Faculty Lounge**

As the semester winds down, we will be holding a reboot of our popular program on Making Sense of Your Course Evaluations. Come for a fruitful discussion of ways that you can use student responses to adjust future teaching or how to best present the results to represent your strengths in the classroom. Lunch provided. Please [RSVP online](#).

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If your department would be interested in holding a particular pedagogically focused event, please reach out to [teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu](mailto:teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu).

For additional resources, visit [tmac.camden.rutgers.edu](http://tmac.camden.rutgers.edu), or write us at [teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu](mailto:teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu)

