WIDENING THE MARGINS:
MAKING SPACE FOR *THIRD SPACE* PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

This article capitalizes on the experience of composition to examine where *Third Space* labor is currently positioned and uses frameworks from higher education and labor studies to look toward the possibility of a more equitable future. *Third Space* professionals both exemplify and challenge the class structure within the managed university, wherein academic freedom is exercised as a marker of class hierarchy. Affordances associated with the academic profession have become commodified, and physical and metaphorical constraints continue to grow in response to the erosion of academic freedom and financial support. The continued unbundling of traditional faculty roles means that the job of educating an increasingly diverse student population for a labor market that values interdisciplinarity, flexibility, and multiple literacies often falls to *Third Spaces*. In their attempts to maintain enrollment, universities exalt these support services even as they marginalize the professionals who staff them. Composition scholars and practitioners are no strangers to the margins; indeed, they've built homes and careers there, developing effective pedagogies and programs whose longevity and impact support both students and faculty. *Third Space* professionals' most effective moves are inclusive rather than exclusive and are attuned to core discursive and rhetorical principles from feminist studies. Such work, when it is effective, performs a gate-opening rather than gate-keeping function that is imperative to the Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives that have come to define the sustainability goals of the US university system.

Keywords: *: third space, social circulation, DEI, unbundling*

INTRODUCTION

In the field of composition, the struggling adjunct or part-timer has become a trope. *Doing time* like this has become part of the ethos of professional academic work in Writing Studies, as in other disciplines where "service" to a higher cause is expected to make up for untenable working conditions that include a lack of academic freedom, living wages, and access to benefits or professional development (Schell, 1998; Sledd 2001). From this position, the development of *Third Space* professional careers within higher education offers an alternative identity or career pathway in academia and challenges the "false labor binary" wherein one path is administrative and another academic (Whitchurch, 2015). As *Third Space* professionals who started our careers as contingent faculty before becoming Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing Center staff administrators, we aim to expand our understanding of the valuable intersections, roles, and reach of *Third Spaces* in higher education, particularly of the professionals who inhabit those spaces (Whitchurch, 2013 & 2015; Whithaus, 2013).

Here, we argue that the position of *Third Space* professionals both exemplifies and challenges the class structure within the managed university, wherein academic freedom is exercised as a marker of class hierarchy, specifically as

a concept that is associated with academic success, thus commodifying the concepts of freedom and constraint within the profession (Bousquet, 2008; Teichler & Cummings, 2015). The austerity politics that have defined US higher education in the twenty-first century have resulted in an institutional geography marked by this commodification; this is evidenced through deepening divides rather than the forging of strategic alliances. As physical and metaphorical barriers continue to grow in response to the erosion of academic freedom and financial support, the job of educating an increasingly diverse and differently prepared student population for a labor market that values interdisciplinarity, flexibility, and multiple literacies often falls to *Third Spaces*, which universities exalt as support services even as the institutionalized and systemic class structures within those universities marginalize the professionals who staff them.

Writing across the curriculum (WAC) scholars and practitioners (who often represent a form of *Third Space* professional) are no strangers to the margins; indeed, they've built homes and careers there, developing effective pedagogies and programs whose longevity and impact on both students and faculty is, at least partially, the result of their non-siloed, sometimes liminal nature (Cox, Galin, & Metzer, 2018; Luskey & Emery, 2021; McLeod, 1992; McLeod et al., 2011). However, because academic freedom is the capital by which intellectual work is quantified, material conditions favor and make visible certain types of labor within the university even as it is defined, built, and sustained by *Third Space* professionals who hold minimal capital or *freedom*.

Nevertheless, because *Third Space* professionals in higher education often work within and between established disciplines, their positionality requires the ability not only to code switch but also to translate language, practices, and modes of expression across multiple disciplinary contexts (Gonzalez, 2018). They establish their legitimacy (and those of the programs they represent) through complex discursive maneuvers that increase in value as they decrease in disciplinarity. In other words, *Third Space* professionals' most effective moves are inclusive rather than exclusive and carefully attuned to core discursive and rhetorical principles from feminist studies, usually without explicitly naming these practices. Such work, when it is effective, performs a gate-opening rather than gate-keeping function that is imperative to the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives that have come to define the sustainability goals of the US university system even as the conditions of their labor remain excluded from these same initiatives.

WHO WE ARE AND HOW WE GOT HERE

Recent features in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* identify a number of issues that faculty are currently struggling with—everything from implementing high-impact practices (Halonen & Dunn, 2018) to striking the perfect balance between flexibility and structure following the pandemic (Supiano, 2023)—but what is most striking to us is how many of these uphold the perception of the higher ed participant tripartite: there are students, faculty, and administrators (by which people almost exclusively mean upper administrators like deans and provosts). In contrast to this public representation of higher education in one of our primary trade publications, we represent the invisible but growing minority: staff. As "assistant directors" and "consultants" (each of us is both of these), our work runs the spectrum from writing grants and managing other staff to teaching, leading professional development, and organizing community writing groups. One of us holds a master's degree and one a PhD; one of us has a 10-month contract, one a 12-month; neither of us followed a linear trajectory through our degrees and into our jobs, and neither of us grew up in higher ed households. We are both straight, cis-gendered white women in our 40s working for a 20k-student PWI in the southeastern United States. Both of us have made professional choices because of our families (the ones we were born into and the ones we made). In other words, like everyone else employed in higher education in the United States (and elsewhere), we are much more than the majority of mass media representation acknowledges, and so is our work. Moreover, because we changed majors, transferred, dropped out, returned, got secondary degrees for the hell of it, etc., we are committed to helping students who find themselves in the same less-than-"ideal" situations. All of which is to say, we are a (perhaps US-specific) version of the *Third Space* professional that Celia Whitchurch identified as higher education staff "who may be classified for employment purposes as non-academic," but who "are likely to have mix of academic and professional credentials, experience and roles" (2015, p. 49). According to Whitchurch, "in practice, a movement by both professional and academic staff in the direction of *Third Space* activity widens the parameters of both sets of identities" (p. 8). As *Third Space* professionals in an environment that sometimes identifies us as staff, other times faculty, and occasionally as administrators, we have experienced the benefits and frustrations of this widening, and we want to take this opportunity to document how we see it aligning with the widening of the margins in higher education more generally, particularly for new generations of students whose needs, expectations, and goals look different from those in the past.

Next, we introduce the *Third Space* concept and put its development and use in composition studies in conversation with Whitchurch's work in order to identify what our version of *Third Space* professionalism looks like. Then, we

explore the increasing requirements for interdisciplinary expertise (the "unbundling" of professional scholarly knowledge and roles) that occurred alongside (separately but, we argue, relatedly) the adjunctification and corporatization of higher education in the US (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). By positing a relationship between changing professional identities and changing rules regarding scholarly expertise, we are making an argument firmly based in writing across the curriculum theory: that, professionally speaking, we are what we write and vice versa. Responding to Michelle LaFrance's 2015 call to attend to labor in WAC programs explicitly, we find it important to identify how our professional foundations in WAC work inform the ways we situate ourselves (rhetorically and discursively) as *Third Space* professionals. Finally, we contend that theorizing the *Third Space* professional identity and exploring such roles' attendant rhetorical and discursive moves has particular salience in this historical moment because of the coming enrollment cliff (Campion, 2015), which experts currently predict will require a radical revision of the institution of higher education in the near future.[1]

Third Space

During the spatial turn that traversed the end of the 20th into the beginning of the 21st century, a variety of fields turned their attention to the material realities of the spaces and places they inhabit, study, critique, and/or seek to elevate or deconstruct. For composition studies, that space became the institution—sometimes in micro form, such as the classroom, but just as often in macro form, meaning the institution of higher education and the specific material realities that determine compositional practices there. Given composition's contested disciplinary status (Phelps & Ackerman, 2010), as well as its rhetorical indebtedness to feminist arguments about the power to be found in liminality (hooks, 1984), it's not surprising that the concept of *Third Space*, developed first in cultural studies (see, Bahba 1994), particularly cultural geography (see Soja 1996), appealed to compositionists. In one especially valuable application, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson (2007) question "the absence of attention to institutional geographies and material conditions" (p. 28) in writing studies more broadly and identify the studio approach to writing pedagogy as a form of "thirdspace" that is valuable because it "exists in the interstices…on the border" (p. 72). Moreover, building from Homi Bhabha's identification of *Third Spaces* as inherently political because of their impact on "conditions of use," Grego and Thompson (2007) argue that "[s]peaking from within a thirdspace changes the standards against which we verify a statement's meaning and changes our view of the 'problems to be solved'" (p. 75). According to them, the problem to be solved is as follows:

> If our writing programs enact pedagogies that reputedly value the highest levels of social consciousness but allow their own supporting institutional cultures, structures, and mechanisms for maintaining power to remain invisible, then we are not giving our students (or our teachers or ourselves) the tools to negotiate the deadening distances that institutional and organizational hierarchies and bureaucracies place between their workers and their own everyday practices (p. 35).

In our experience, *Third Space* professionals often exist at the intersection of this problem, and as long as we remain invisible, we work to uphold the established powers that we hope to dismantle or reconstitute in a more dispersed and equitable form. In positions like ours, support staff are a direct institutional and organizational response to changes in the conditions of use in higher education—and our existence then further changes the profession's conditions of use. In other words, the creation of *Third Space* roles in higher education in the US is a result of the failure to address a confluence of "institutional cultures, structures, and mechanisms for maintaining power" that led to the gutting of tenure and the casualization of the workforce. This occurred simultaneously with the ongoing democratization of higher education and opening of access that required additional student support even as faculty were stretched thinner and thinner.

The ongoing evolution of professional higher ed identities in the UK, US, and Australia, has resulted in an increase in what Celia Whitchurch calls "*Third Space* environments" (2008), which she defines as spaces that "do not sit easily in formal organisational structures and can be both ambiguous and uncertain" (abstract, 2015). According to Whitchurch, *Third Space* environments in higher education spaces are populated by "*Third Space* professionals," indicating those whose work and professional identity does not neatly fit into the "conventional binary descriptors such as those enshrined 'academic' or 'nonacademic' employment categories" (2015, p. 79).[2] Additionally, her

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[1] Other terms used to describe this phenomenon include "generational cliff" and "demographic cliff."

[2] In describing the contours of third space professional identities, Whitchurch notes that they exhibit the following characteristics (2015, pp. 96-97): "are likely to work in a multi-disciplinary or multi-professional

findings suggest that many *Third Space* professionals recognize the conflict between institutional and academic agendas and find ways to situate their own work productively, taking advantage of shifting politics and priorities. The *Third Space* professionals that Whitchurch studied "demonstrated agency in researching problems, making contacts, finding new ways of pursuing goals, and borrowing practice from elsewhere as appropriate" (2015, p. 93). Finally, a common thread in her findings addressed the level of visibility that such professionals experienced and its impact on their work and sense of belonging. While "[s]ome suggested that having low visibility and or ambiguous organisational positioning could be an advantage" (ibid) because it enabled them to move more fluidly between contexts, they also identified their use of "organisational structures…as a way of getting things done rather than as conferring a sense of belonging *per se*" (p. 94). Similarly, in their consideration of *Third Spaces*, Grego and Thompson (2007) suggest, "[t]he value placed on such work rests in good part on the invisibility of—or at least an appearance of sameness across—the specific institutional sites that actually house, clothe, feed, and otherwise sustain the academic bodies who populate any given discipline" (p. 37). When Grego and Thompson (2007) asked "how can we effect needed change in our institutional situations if our disciplinary tools and approaches for analysis do not help us speak in meaningful ways about the effects of the systems and relationships that affect our classrooms and pedagogies" (p. 28), they could not have had Whitchurch's theorizing of *Third Space* professionals (still several years away) in mind. Nevertheless, it is worth examining how distinct professional, academic, and academic adjacent fields developed in response to the needs of the modern university—primarily to identify and support an increasingly diverse (in every sense of the word) student population and to assist with the implementation and maintenance of pedagogical developments now termed high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2017).

Nedra Reynolds (2004) argues that having and maintaining a space to "dwell" intellectually is central to building and maintaining a disciplinary ethos. It is significant that the *Third Space* concept gained traction as a way to identify and critique both physical and structural spaces in higher education institutions at the same time that high-impact practices were being identified and celebrated. For instance, in their study, Grego and Thompson found that the least helpful solutions for helping students adjust to college writing demands were classroom-based (p. 30). In contrast, they claim that their studio method is successful because it recognizes both the *Third Spaces* that students bring with them into the institution and the value of writing support and instruction as a *Third Space*. In other words, writing intensive courses (a high-impact practice) are most successful when implemented with scaffolding and support from *Third Spaces*. That this holds true for the majority (if not all) of high-impact practices is evidenced by the number of university offices and personnel—all *Third Spaces*—devoted to this type of support. We are not suggesting that *Third Spaces* have or should become unique as a discipline. Instead, we believe that they deserve their own designation in a formalized unbundling that values rather than eschews interdisciplinarity for the benefit of all higher education stakeholders. By taking the present opportunity to intentionally revise the structure of the university, we have the chance to facilitate the restructuring of society by inviting more diverse voices to participate in scholarly conversations.

UNBUNDLING

The concept of unbundling roles in higher education is not new; however, the study of it and its effects on labor practices in higher education are under-researched. Gehrke and Kezar (2015) developed a framework for understanding unbundling as a phenomenon in higher education. Development of such a framework was intended to formalize the general unraveling of what was once a single faculty role into multiple roles, thereby contributing to future research on labor in higher education. For instance, the service work of advising traditionally done by faculty is increasingly taken on by teams of advising professionals, sometimes completely divorced from the college or

environment or team; build up new forms of expertise…that represent new space and require a blend of academic and professional inputs; handle shifting bundles of activity; work to both long and short deadlines, with multiple partners and collaborators, in a mutable environment; cope with ambiguity and accommodate, and even use productively, the tensions that they encounter; make connections (for instance, across the curriculum); represent Friedson's 'elite' group of professionals, who apply their expertise to more complex, individuated tasks, as opposed to 'standard' professionals whose activity is geared to 'standardised production'; extend classic accounts of professionalism by developing new knowledge particularly in relation to their institution or their own practice; use professional bodies for networking purposes rather than as gateways to career; acquire qualifications on the basis of need for expertise rather than accreditation; and, reflect a blurring of boundaries between different types of knowledge."

department in which the student's degree is housed. While some scholarship focuses on the unbundling of instruction, others refer to the "unbundling of the trilogy of teaching, research, and service" (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015, p. 96). For our purposes here, we concentrate on the latter and consider Arvaja's (2018) insight that unbundling represents an opportunity to reject the emphasis that the "new managerialism" places on accountability, control, productivity, and efficiency, suggesting a shift in formalized labor practices in American higher education that is worthy of study. Inquiry into formalized unbundling could and should expand into the *Third Space*, where career paths diverge to meet the way the university has changed to respond to the expectations and needs of current college students (Whitchurch, 2015). The professionalization of such roles challenges those who hold power at work but renounce it in their personal politics to reexamine their place in power structures that serve them—a challenge that feminism has long struggled with. In other words, this is an important part of equity and inclusion work in higher education.

The "new managerialism" that has increasingly characterized US higher education since the turn of the century replicates the public and private dichotomy of work and home critiqued in the work of feminist theorists such as Royster and Kirsch (2012). The caste system within the modern university elevates faculty and upper administration, long seen as the public face of the university. Members of this group perform the act of teaching courses, doing research, and publishing, as well as the work of managing operations, according to the paternalistic political structures of the managed university. In turn, they are granted the affordances of that role—i.e., funding, opportunities for promotion and tenure, travel, and time and space for scholarly creativity. Below that group, staff, or *Third Space* professionals, perform work that is seen as support and are granted the constraints of that position, including set work hours, unclear or non-existent paths to promotion or career advancement, and limited access to funding for creative scholarly work or travel to professional conferences. Flexible schedules, clear paths to promotion, and job security structures are the material manifestation of the highest caste in the American university. The burgeoning *Third Space* is positioned as middle-class labor, a classification that supports the wealth of the upper class. We accept that this reality may be a challenge for some allies to accept.

From the perspective of workplace identity, it is important to approach this restructuring or unbundling of roles by critically examining the real capital of the university. If *Third Spaces* and the individuals that inhabit them are kept to the margins through the replication of the public versus private binary, the unbundling can still happen, but the caste system of the old university structure remains. Royster and Kirsch (2012) introduced the term *social circulation* to identify a process that is both *evolutionary* and *revolutionary* and critique the way that the past informs the present and the future as society changes to meet shifting expectations and roles (p. 23). According to them, "the concept of social circulation might well begin with a disruption of the dichotomies associated with rhetoric being defined within what has been considered historically to be the public domain of men, rather than the private domain of women" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 98). Applied to the unbundling of roles in higher education and the fight for equity, the concept is useful for interrogating the tiered binaries that have traditionally governed the dissemination of capital across our institutions.

Umbach (2007) pointed toward the intersection of human capital theory, labor market theory, and structural theory to define and describe how individuals invest in their education as a way to increase their own human capital and create pathways to obtaining the affordances associated with a career in higher education. According to Umbach, staff roles are seen as care work and end up with the material conditions connected with that class of worker, while faculty roles are viewed as performing the *real work* of the university and, therefore, are seen as public facing and in need of visibility and power. However, the average student has changed, as has the expectations of the workplace and the expectation of the worker in that space. Although Umbach's 2007 study is primarily about the role of gender in the academic workplace, this trope is well substantiated in composition scholarship. The past few decades of composition scholarship has produced scholarship documenting the disparity in workplace affordances that mirror patterns of gendered labor in other segments of the labor force (Rhoades, Gunter, & Carroll; Schell, 1998; Schell & Stock, 2001; Sicari, 2022, to name a few). Those in upper administration and influential faculty roles are identified with male roles, while junior and adjunct faculty and those in support roles associated with care work are associated with feminine roles (Umbach, 2007). Moreover, while even 5-10 years ago affordances looked like earnings, prime office space, and occupational status, in our post-Covid present, they look more like flexibility to work from home, access to professional development and conference funds, and institutional status that match the increase in workload.

Left unchecked, this structure contributes to a continued caste system that reaches beyond the material and contributes to workplace identities. However, this may be the moment to shift course. Teichler and Cummings (2015) associate academic success with a sense of freedom and autonomy that is linked to class and position within the institution, this success is traditionally associated with being more siloed, while the generalist is less powerful, experiences little in

the way of freedom, and lesser degrees of institutional power. Bickle et al. (2021) point to professional group identity as a class marker in academic work, much like the ability to do research (p. 145). Their research on teaching groups "clearly showed that this desire to change the group identity was linked to the unbundling of different functions in the academic professions described in literature. We perceive the absence of research in our current roles as a shortcoming in our desired professional identity….Therefore, it could be argued that we have striven to retain elements of academic identity whilst working within the constraints of institutional requirements" (Bickle, et al., 2019 pp. 143-44). Although still somewhat scarce in the U.S. context, this reaffirms that we may have a unique opportunity to create new sets of identities, practices, and pathways that do not rely on the siloed and classed structure of the past university stuck in a teaching paradigm but instead capitalize upon the teaching paradigm that shares expertise and values the equity built through collaboration.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

Shifts in the academic landscape happen gradually. Major changes are most impactful and sustainable when in response to fluctuations in student needs. The last major shift in US higher education happened on the tail end of the Vietnam Era, as veterans from groups for whom college was formerly not an option returned to take advantage of the GI Bill. Increased enrollments and differing levels of college preparedness gave rise to the open access institution and increased the need for formalized student support services. The professionalization of the academic *Third Space* began in the wake of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 and 1972, the Middle Income Student Assistance Act of 1978, and the development of the Pell Grant. Because these reforms opened access to a large generation of underrepresented students, they coincide with increased levels of professionalization of academic staff, beginning with college admissions, financial aid, advising, and recruitment (Hughes, Kimball, & Koricich, 2019). Similarly, there was an increased need for the type of academic support provided by writing centers, tutoring centers, and faculty development programs such as Writing Across the Curriculum programs to provide the critical literacy work needed to ensure students were retained and graduated. In their framework, Gehrke and Kezar (2015) break down these shifts into eras that represent distinct phases in the unbundling of faculty roles. According to them, Era IV began in the 1980s and lasts up until the present. In this most recent era, they argue that the once monolithic faculty role, which traditionally included teaching, research, and service, has been unbundled into distinct roles.

We posit that the *Third Space* professionals under examination here have taken up the tasks pushed to the margins by this unbundling, tasks such as one-on-one tutoring, counseling, writing and language support, and many other tasks that fall under the banner of *student support.* It could be argued that the modern American university was built on the back of those visionary *Third Space* professionals who began the work of formalizing the formerly informal work of student support, thus creating inclusive spaces that increased equity for the increasingly pluralized student body brought through the ivory tower gates as a result of those mid-century reforms. Throughout the late 20th and early 21st century, these services grew and expanded into their own structures and professional communities supported by the goals to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion on college campuses. Furthermore, as suggested by Hughes et al. (2019), such services may be playing an increasing but understudied role in bringing students to institutions, retaining them while they are there, and ensuring their success post-graduation.

Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, Generation Z was already heading to college with differing expectations and educational experiences as a result of policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Common Core, practices such as over-reliance on standardized testing, and new educational ecosystems bolstered by reliance on the internet as a teaching and learning medium (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). However, we would like to reject the cynicism that often undergirds well-deserved criticisms of current education policies in the U.S. Instead, we propose a shift in focus toward how thoughtful, contextualized unbundling of the faculty role can lead to the professionalization of *Third Spaces.* and the High-Impact Practices and DEI initiatives they support. This has the potential to revolutionize modern higher education by honoring the collaboration and inclusivity that are valued by this generation of college-bound students (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). As Gehrke and Kezar's (2015) theoretical framework emphasizes, defining the faculty role and pinpointing localities within what was once the "professoriate" has become increasingly difficult due to economic, technological, and social forces that are far beyond the control of any governing body or institution; furthermore they suggest that stakeholders pay more attention to "roles and functions" when defining groups. Part of professionalizing the *Third Space* lies in defining it as something distinct from the traditional roles of faculty and staff as they are understood in the American university model. This definition will aid in the development of those professional spaces and group identities as higher education rebuilds post-Covid and with greater concern for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Investment in *Third Spaces* demonstrates a practice of DEI, not lip service to it. Staff in these

positions can be specialized and deeply invested in the academic conversation surrounding anti-racist principles, employing the feminist practices that Royster and Kirsch (2012) associate with an evolution of institutional and pedagogical rhetoric and engaging in practices that ensure we do not make the future in the shape of the past.

Due to factors such as the declining birth rate and the financial concerns brought on by the 2007 recession, colleges and universities have been braced for the coming enrollment cliff forecasted by demographers since the early 2000s. This will result in decreased college enrollments beginning in 2026 and will subsequently result in a diminished hiring pool beginning in 2030 (Campion, 2015). Institutions of higher learning intent on surviving this upcoming shift would be wise to find means to open enrollments without sacrificing their academic standards. In other words, investment in the *Third Spaces* that support less prepared and otherwise differently prepared college applicants could offer long-term solutions to the looming enrollment woes. In the second installment of a column on leading through the coming changes, Campion (2021) suggests that regional institutions have more at stake than elite institutions as we approach the enrollment cliff predicted for 2025-26. This has implications for universities but presents opportunities for *Third Space* staff to capitalize on their expertise and professionalize their missions in local contexts and across institutions, disciplines, and specializations. The anxieties in regard to this shift in demographics among higher education professionals has only been amplified by the trends emerging from the students coming to college post-Covid. Only by growing, supporting, and professionalizing the spaces that work to retain students can smaller and non-elite institutions expect to maintain their momentum. In the past, resources have floated to the top in support of faculty, administration, and research. As universities look to tighten belts and implement practices that ensure students' success beyond college, an approach to unbundling informed by Umbach's (2007) and Gehrke and Kezar's (2015) frameworks and Whitchurch's (2015) conceptualization of *Third Space* professionals can be used to reexamine and assess institutional goals and outcomes in order to design a more sustainable future for faculty, staff, and students.

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