

The people behind the process: Reflections on the Institutional Quality Assurance Process at McMaster University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a brief history of the first 10 years of the Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) at McMaster University. Interviews with two senior administrators and six staff were conducted. These interviews highlight how the participants began their involvement with the Institutional Quality Assurance Process and what changes they have observed over time. The participants' reflections demonstrate the importance of a reflective and improvement-based approach to quality assurance that focuses on student learning experiences. The interviews also provide insight into the possibilities and challenges that have arisen as IQAP supports have become increasingly embedded within the MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching. Lastly, the value of rapport in multi-unit partnerships on campus and how quality assurance work centres on enhancing student learning at McMaster is also discussed.

KEYWORDS

quality assurance, curriculum review, student experiences, learning enhancement

This chapter documents the history and ongoing story of the Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) at McMaster University from 2011 to 2021 as told by the staff members and administrators who currently support it. In 2010, the newly established Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, known more commonly as Quality Council, launched the province-wide Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) (see Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, 2021). In 2011, every publicly funded Ontario university established a quality assurance policy and processes that aligned with the QAF. Most significantly, the QAF and related processes replaced previous curriculum undergraduate and graduate review procedures and brought them together under one joint process. Prior to the establishment of the QAF, the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) appraised graduate program reviews. Previously, undergraduate program reviews were conducted under the Undergraduate Program Review (UPR) process which was overseen by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU).¹ For a more detailed history of policies and strategic plans that have guided teaching and learning at

McMaster, refer to the chapter on the history of the MacPherson Institute in this anthology (de Bie et al., 2022).

McMaster University's (2022) quality assurance policy established in 2011, the "Policy on Academic Program Development and Review," is commonly referred to as the IQAP policy. The IQAP at McMaster primarily guides two curriculum processes: cyclical program review and new program development. Under McMaster's current policy, every academic program at McMaster must be reviewed regularly within 8 years of the previous review. For these cyclical program reviews, program representatives prepare a self-study document. The self-study is a reflective text that includes a critical analysis of the program and identifies areas for improvement and enhancement of the student learning experience. Proponents of a new program must prepare a proposal document that aligns with McMaster's IQAP policy. Both the cyclical review and new program development processes involve a site visit by external reviewers who are experts in the discipline being reviewed. Staff who support the IQAP provide consultations to faculty and administrative staff members on the preparation of these documents as well as guidance on the various internal and external approval processes. The IQAP is centred on educational enhancement and continuous improvement of students' learning experiences.

As an educational developer at the MacPherson Institute with six years of experience working in quality assurance at the university, I undertook a study of the history of McMaster's IQAP in the summer of 2021. I interviewed six staff members who support quality assurance processes and two senior administrators who currently oversee the IQAP at McMaster. Participants' narratives were transcribed and shared with them. They were invited to edit their narrative. As the primary investigator, I then brought these individual narratives together, weaving them into a brief written history of the IQAP at McMaster as told from multiple points of view from the people who support it. The chapter begins with an introduction of the people behind the process and outlines how they each became involved with the IQAP at McMaster. Next the evolution of the IQAP is described as well as the successes and challenges of establishing the IQAP Office. The chapter concludes by sharing participants' hopes for the future of the IQAP at McMaster.

As we celebrate 50 years of teaching and learning support at the MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching, known commonly as the MacPherson Institute or MI,² readers with stakes in quality assurance in higher education—including those in the McMaster community, staff and faculty at teaching and learning centres, and others supporting quality assurance processes in Ontario—will appreciate the reflections from staff and senior administrators in this chapter. Their experiences and insights demonstrate the importance of a reflective and improvement-based approach to quality assurance as well as the value of rapport in multi-unit partnerships on campus. The participants shared reflections on how the MacPherson Institute has become more involved in supporting the process as well as how quality assurance enhances student learning at McMaster. I hope readers will learn from the participants' reflections and that our experiences may help to illustrate how quality assurance processes can be used to create positive change for student learning.

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INTRODUCING THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE PROCESS

I began development of this chapter shortly after I became the lead educational developer for the curriculum development team in the IQAP Office in the MacPherson Institute. The IQAP Office supports the teaching and learning aspects of the quality assurance process, such as providing workshops and consultations regarding program learning outcomes³ and curriculum mapping.⁴ The IQAP Office also assists with the administration of all the undergraduate reviews and new program proposals. As I shifted into this new role, it was an opportune time to hear about my colleagues' experiences with the quality assurance process to better understand how it began at McMaster, how it had changed, and what they hoped the process would become in the future.

I began my involvement with the IQAP at McMaster in 2014 at the MacPherson Institute when I accompanied Lori Goff on a program self-study consultation. I had joined the unit a few months earlier, so this was an opportunity to learn more about the quality assurance process and how I might be able to assist Lori in supporting programs undergoing a cyclical program review. It was an exciting time in quality assurance at McMaster as the IQAP Office had just formed with Lori as its manager. In 2015, I joined the IQAP Office staff, and my role shifted to focus entirely on providing curriculum development support for programs going through reviews. Below I introduce my colleagues and provide a brief description of their roles.

My team members in the IQAP Office are Julianne Simpson and Greg Van Gastel. Julianne is the quality assurance specialist. A significant part of Julianne's role is site visit coordination and securing reviewers for undergraduate cyclical reviews. She also helped to create—and now maintains—all the guidebooks and templates used by departments and programs navigating the IQAP at McMaster. Greg is an educational developer. He assists faculty members and program staff with quantitative data collection and curriculum mapping surveys. He facilitates student feedback sessions and workshops on program learning outcomes. He also provides implementation support for programs that have recently completed a cyclical review and oversees the IQAP Student Curriculum Consultant program.⁵ The IQAP Student Curriculum Consultant program fosters opportunities for faculty members to mentor students and for the integration of unique student perspectives in a program's IQAP review.

Lori Goff is now director of the MacPherson Institute. Lori has a long-standing interest in quality assurance and played an important role in how the process evolved at McMaster. Her PhD thesis (Goff, 2015) examined the role of quality assurance policies within Canada's post-secondary education system. Lori works closely with the IQAP Office and Erin Aspenlieder, associate director of central programming at the MacPherson Institute. She is responsible for the delivery of the MacPherson Institute's mandate for the central programming areas, which include curriculum development and support for IQAP. She supports and advises on IQAP policy changes and institution-wide strategic planning related to teaching and learning.

MacPherson Institute staff members work closely with our colleagues in the School of Graduate Studies, Stephanie Baschiera and Christina Bryce. Stephanie is the associate registrar and graduate secretary. Stephanie supports new programs from their development to program launch and then observes how students progress through the program to graduation. Christina, the assistant graduate secretary, along with Stephanie, provides dedicated support to

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proponents of new graduate programs as they go through each step of the approval process. Christina is responsible for submitting the proposal to external governing bodies. She also supports graduate cyclical reviews by communicating with reviewers and assisting with site visit coordination.

The MacPherson Institute and School of Graduate Studies staff members support Kim Dej, vice provost, faculty, who oversees the process for all undergraduate new program proposals and cyclical undergraduate program reviews, and Doug Welch, vice provost and dean of graduate studies, who oversees all new graduate program proposals and cyclical graduate program reviews. Kim and Doug co-chair McMaster's Quality Assurance Committee⁶ and review all documents related to program reviews and new program proposals. Kim and Doug meet with the reviewers at the beginning and end of program site visits to ensure that the reviewers all share an understanding of the mission and boundaries of the IQAP. They also review reports and follow-up documentation related to the process for each program. For departments that are undergoing a simultaneous cyclical review of both undergraduate and graduate programs, Doug and Kim both oversee the review.

GETTING INVOLVED IN THE IQAP

While some of our roles have shifted, many of us currently involved in supporting the IQAP at McMaster have been involved with IQAP since it first began over 10 years ago. Julianne, Lori, Stephanie, and Doug all shared their memories of learning about what would become the IQAP. Doug "watched IQAP from the very start," and Lori recalled hearing about the Quality Assurance Framework around 2009 when she was working in the Faculty of Science as an instructional assistant. Lori was curious about how she might be able to use the Quality Assurance Framework in her work at the time. She remembers thinking "how can we use this framework as a tool [to assist with program development]?"

Julianne remembered hearing about the IQAP for the first time in a meeting wherein she learned "about this brand-new process." That meeting was in August 2010 when she had just started as the executive assistant to the associate vice provost (academic). Julianne recalled at that time, "McMaster was just starting to create the [IQAP] policy." That same year, Stephanie joined the School of Graduate Studies. She reflected, "the quality assurance process at the graduate level was shifting from the OCGS⁷ format to an institutional approach to quality assurance."

Christina, Kim, Greg, and Erin became involved more gradually as their roles at McMaster began to have more contact with the process. Christina became involved in 2014 when she started as the assistant graduate secretary and remembered that "in the beginning, [her role] was primarily to support the associate registrar and graduate secretary." For Kim, her first experience of the IQAP was as a faculty member in a department undergoing a review. Kim recalled her first impression of the IQAP as a faculty member: "it was actually great! As a teaching-stream faculty member to have every, or almost every faculty member, in one room talking about undergraduate curriculum was great!"

Erin and Greg both became involved as educational developers and as such were asked to support faculty members as they prepared components of the self-study. Greg was

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occasionally called on “to support some activities, getting some student feedback or facilitating program learning outcomes workshops.” Greg would eventually be asked to help with survey data and quantitative data collection. Like Greg, Erin’s first connection with quality assurance was through requests from faculty for “curriculum mapping, facilitated retreats related to program learning outcomes, . . . consultations about collecting student feedback, and . . . student feedback [collection].”

Some of us were immediately interested in the practical considerations of the new process, others were excited or curious about its potential use and implementation on campus, and some saw their roles gradually shift over time as the IQAP got more established at McMaster. How participants became involved in the IQAP demonstrates how the process involves many people and various types of supports that are not restricted to a singular unit or role.

THE EVOLUTION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AT MCMASTER

Given how long most of us have been involved in some capacity with the quality assurance process at McMaster, we have all seen how the process has evolved. The most significant change the participants identified with the process is the shift in perspective of quality assurance’s purpose.

Specifically, the process has shifted from an accountability approach to what Lori refers to as a “transformational” approach, which emphasizes development and enhancement of students’ learning. As staff members and senior administrators learned from the experiences of supporting the first few years of implementing the process, it evolved from an accountability exercise to one that is more developmental.

Stephanie observed this change. She outlined how the university “went from a prescriptive approach to one that was more facilitated.” To Stephanie, this in turn has made the institution “more agile than we were before. We can adapt and accommodate different components to programs and new approaches in a way that maybe would have not been possible previously.” Lori describes this shift happening because “there was a lot of senior leadership support.” The support of the Office of the Provost and from those in vice provost roles was crucial for initiating the shift in approach to quality assurance at McMaster.

Both Greg and Kim mentioned how the process has come to highlight student experience. Greg describes how he has seen programs going through the cyclical review process for a second time and notes “there is definitely a much more scaffolded process for thinking carefully about student experience.” Kim shared a similar observation, stating that “there has been a shift from it being about our review of the curriculum to a review of the student experience in response to the curriculum.” The focus on student learning is central in the transformational approach to quality assurance we take at McMaster. Those of us involved in quality assurance at the university understand our work as focused on the improvement and enhancement of student learning.

We aim to provide supports for faculty members and program staff that enable meaningful engagement with the quality assurance process. For example, Doug, Stephanie, and Lori reflected on how the process has become more refined and streamlined as more supports

were offered and more structure was provided to programs. Doug described the shift to a longer self-study preparation time. He explained,

once a 2-year self-study preparation cycle was adopted, the quality of reviews was much more uniform and on target. The interaction between the MacPherson Institute, the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, faculty chairs, and grad admins became much more natural.

In 2014, the IQAP Office was established within the MacPherson Institute and Julianne joined as the quality assurance specialist, a new role that was established in tandem with the IQAP Office. Prior to this, the Office of the Provost along with the School of Graduate Studies oversaw the administration of the process. Lori and occasionally Greg, from their roles in the MacPherson Institute, would assist program proponents with aspects of their cyclical reviews or program proposals.

Christina reflected on the establishment of the IQAP Office and shared that “the most significant change since the beginning of IQAP has been MI’s role.” Lori described how the IQAP Office was initially proposed. She explained that around 2012–13, she engaged in discussions with Arshad Ahmad, who was the associate vice-provost (teaching and learning), and Susan Giroux, who was associate vice-provost (faculty), regarding where best to administer quality assurance. Lori described developing a proposal that outlined how situating quality assurance in the MacPherson Institute “could be used as an opportunity to develop, refine, and elevate the student learning experience.”

THE IQAP OFFICE: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

The participants reflected on the successes and challenges of the IQAP Office. From the perspective of staff members involved in quality assurance at McMaster, locating many developmental and administrative supports for the IQAP within the MacPherson Institute has been largely viewed positively.

Examples of supports offered through the IQAP Office include running an annual series of lunchtime information sessions related to self-study development and site visit preparation, faculty consultations regarding self-study or new program proposal development, guidance on internal and external approval processes for new program development and curriculum revision, and administration support to the Quality Assurance Committee. Greg described how having IQAP supports offered through the MacPherson Institute focuses conversations about quality assurance on “student experience and enhancement of that experience.” Similarly, Julianne described how “we are just able to offer more of those supports through an educational developer lens which has that caring, collaborative nature.”

Stephanie considers the establishment of the IQAP Office as one of the biggest successes of the quality assurance process at McMaster. From Stephanie’s perspective, “MI was able to offer support that was new and necessary. The centralized approach to this support is more efficient and provides significant pedagogical support.”

For Doug, a key support offered by the IQAP Office “is the tight coupling of what a given program does with its program learning outcomes and the degree level expectations⁸ and curriculum mapping.” He went on to point out that “the fact that there is this oversight and consistency and willingness to work together to produce the program learning outcomes and degree level expectations has been a benefit. I think that has been tremendous.” For Kim, having the supports offered through the MacPherson Institute emphasizes the role of reflection in the quality assurance process. She explains that the IQAP Office enables program representatives to take feedback and put it into action and that this “happens seamlessly when IQAP is in the MacPherson Institute.”

While many benefits of locating IQAP supports in the MacPherson Institute were identified in the interviews, many of us also reflected on the challenges that can arise. From Julianne’s perspective, a challenge for her role is navigating between enforcing deadlines and allowing time for programs to engage in meaningful reflection. She explained how, at times, it can be difficult when the more administrative aspects of quality assurance need to be upheld, such as timelines outlined in McMaster’s IQAP policy or submission dates for program approvals that are established externally by Quality Council. Julianne stated, “part of my role is ‘please adhere to the deadline!’”

Typically, teaching and learning centres at Ontario universities are not directly involved in the quality assurance process. Erin, who joined McMaster from another university that did not have quality assurance supports located in their teaching and learning centre, was initially concerned that both teaching and learning supports and quality assurance were being largely administered through one department. Erin’s perception prior to joining McMaster was that the supports offered in a teaching and learning centre would be at odds with a process like quality assurance. She was concerned because she “thought it would make programs anxious about seeking development support because they might feel like they were being checked or watched.” However, having now observed how the developmental approach is not at odds with quality assurance processes at McMaster, she revealed that she was “so pleasantly surprised to find how fruitful that joint offering is” in practice.

Similarly, Lori described how despite the emphasis on reflection and development, there can be a perception of the quality assurance processes as punitive: “when you start talking about quality assurance, there is this evaluative component to it. Almost like policing. That we really didn’t want the MacPherson Institute to become known for and that is not really our role. Really trying to think through and navigate that tension has been a challenge.”

Julianne, Erin, and Lori described the tension between the developmental approach to quality assurance and the perception of the process as a form of surveillance, policing, and punitive accountability measures. This tension reveals that while there has been a shift to approaching the process as reflective and iterative since the creation of the IQAP Office in the MacPherson Institute, this change will continue to take time to resonate across the McMaster community.

Kim and Greg identified another tension related to the boundaries of IQAP support within a teaching and learning centre. When working with faculty members and other central support units, clarity related to the role and limits of the supports offered by the staff at the

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MacPherson Institute is crucial. Kim explained: “setting boundaries is important. . . . It is a challenge in terms of communication and understanding the partnered roles.” Similarly, Greg pointed out the limits of the supports that we can offer through the MacPherson Institute. He explained that when recommendations from cyclical program reviews “are not teaching and learning related there is not a lot we can do” to support programs in addressing them. The tension related to expectations of the supports offered by the IQAP Office underscores the importance of clear communication of the limits of our support.

Christina, Julianne, Lori, and Erin all spoke about the challenge that comes when two central departments are responsible for supporting the IQAP. Administrative supports for graduate reviews and new program proposals are provided through the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) while administrative supports for undergraduate reviews and new program proposals are provided by the MacPherson Institute. The MacPherson Institute also provides support and consultations on teaching and learning components, such as program learning outcomes, curriculum mapping, and student feedback sessions to both graduate and undergraduate programs. Because there are two units supporting quality assurance, sometimes challenges can arise. As Christina pointed out, “the two offices have slightly different processes at times.” The differences between the undergraduate and graduate processes were likely put in place when the processes were governed separately. While the IQAP policy brought both processes together under one common one, these differences identify the challenge of putting policy into practice.

Julianne described this challenge in the following way: “There is always that bit of friction between the two processes. I think that is common.” Lori also spoke about the challenge of implementing the IQAP, explaining that “there were some tensions early on between undergraduate and graduate sides because the application and leadership of the quality assurance process had historically been different.”

Both Lori and Erin credited relationship building between the two units as crucial to addressing this challenge. As Erin put it, “intentional relationship building on both sides” is the way in which we can navigate this challenge. The formalized way this relationship building takes place is through the IQAP Working Group.

This group is comprised of the teams from both the MacPherson Institute and SGS and meets regularly to discuss any issues or concerns that have emerged related to the administration of the quality assurance process or supports that are offered. For example, recently, the IQAP Working Group has been involved in the revisions to the IQAP policy. Christina described when “we developed the IQAP Working Group, I think we found a lot of places where we could streamline the processes at the two levels where it made sense to do so.” Similarly, Stephanie also highlighted the role of the IQAP Working Group, saying “the collaboration between the MacPherson Institute and the School of Graduate Studies and the work done in the Working Group has been incredibly successful.”

As Doug observed, there is “lots of good news but it is mainly good news because we have so many good people working on doing it right.” There has been considerable stability and continuity with the staff involved in supporting the IQAP. This stability over the first decade of the IQAP at McMaster has helped to maintain trust and rapport between colleagues. While the

rapport and positive collaborations between the IQAP Office and SGS is positive, Lori warns of the potential risks as “the personal and professional rapport with people . . . might not transfer to the next people that come into those roles.” This potential risk is something we must keep in mind as we consider what the future might hold for the quality assurance process at McMaster. As changes to staffing and administrators arise, those of us involved in supporting the quality assurance process must make time for building and maintaining relationships with colleagues.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS

To conclude the interviews, I asked what hopes and plans each of us had for the future of IQAP at McMaster. Stephanie believes that

a good quality assurance program will always be in a state of continuous improvement. As an institution and specifically, as [an IQAP] working group, we must figure out how to support the bold visions of programs within the Quality Assurance Framework.

For us to accomplish this goal Stephanie suggested that we need to “acknowledge that programs are changing. They are more interdisciplinary; they are more dynamic. . . . That is where I would like to see us go. Imagining what’s possible and greeting it.” Lori echoed the hope of continuous improvement, saying she hopes at McMaster we “continue to develop ourselves and refine what we are doing and our processes.”

Kim values the reflective practice that underpins the IQAP at McMaster and wondered how that aspect of the IQAP might be mirrored in other institutional processes. For example, Kim wondered how teaching evaluations might become more of an “ongoing process of iteration and reflection.” Doug would like for McMaster to partner more with universities internationally to offer programing. To do so, he identified that this is a place within the quality assurance process where there could be “more variety of ways that you can do things.”

Erin, Greg, and Lori would all like to see quality assurance processes connect more directly with goals related to equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA) at the institution. Lori hopes that we can “use the process as a vehicle to start important conversations [about EDIA] in departments.” Similarly, Greg hopes that we can be “more thoughtful with EDIA questions and concerns and issues” during program reviews and new program development.

I hope readers will learn from the participants’ reflections and that our experiences may help to illustrate how quality assurance processes can be used to create positive change for student learning.

While we interact with each other frequently in our roles supporting quality assurance processes at McMaster, I have not had a chance to learn about how each of us became involved with the IQAP at McMaster or to hear what my colleagues have observed during their involvement with the process. I appreciated that the interviews I conducted gave us the time to have these conversations and the opportunity to record and share some of what we have learned about quality assurance over the last 10 years.

The ideas and suggestions for the future of the IQAP from the people who support the process demonstrate that they are always finding ways of improving and advancing quality assurance processes to enhance student learning experiences and that they see both the current limitations and future possibilities for the IQAP. The people in this chapter helped shape IQAP at McMaster, and their insights and experience will contribute to its continuing evolution.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (Protocol 5263).

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The Institutional Quality Assurance Process relies on many different roles across the university to support it. Unfortunately, it was not possible to include all the various people who play or played a role in supporting the quality assurance process at McMaster in these interviews. Susan Giroux, Allison Sekular, Peter Smith, and David Wilkinson played important roles in establishing and/or expanding the quality assurance process and its supports. I would also like to acknowledge the work of Melec Zeadin and Danielle Gabay. While no longer directly involved in quality assurance at McMaster, both were valued members of the IQAP team. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this chapter for their thoughtful and constructive feedback. Lastly, thank you to Christina, Erin, Lori, Stephanie, Doug, Kim, Greg, and Julianne for their willingness to share their experiences and memories of quality assurance with me and for their enthusiasm for this project.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed summary of the history of quality assurance in Ontario refer to Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (2022).
2. The MacPherson Institute was also previously known as the McMaster Institute for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning (MIETL) and the Centre for Leadership and Learning (CLL). For consistency, I refer to this unit as the MacPherson Institute throughout the chapter even when a reference was made to a time when it went by another name.
3. Program learning outcomes (PLOs) are statements that indicate what knowledge, skills, and/or attributes students who successfully complete the program will possess.
4. Curriculum mapping is the process of identifying gaps, redundancies, and misalignments of course offerings and learning experiences for purposes of improving and enhancing the overall coherence of an academic program.
5. To learn more about student involvement in quality assurance at McMaster, refer to McKenny and Anderson (2019).
6. The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) is a joint committee of members from the Undergraduate and Graduate Councils at McMaster. The Quality Assurance Committee assesses cyclical review documents and recommends appropriate actions for the program in relation to their review.

7. OCGS is the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, which was responsible for graduate curriculum reviews until the development of university-specific quality assurance processes in 2011 in alignment with the province-wide Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) (see Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, 2021).

8. Degree level expectations (DLEs), established by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), are the threshold-level skills and knowledge that graduates of an Ontario university program must demonstrate. DLEs are also referred to as undergraduate degree level expectations (UDLEs) or graduate degree level expectations (GDLEs).

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Amy Gullage has been an educational developer at the MacPherson Institute since 2014. Her role is primarily focused on supporting the Institutional Quality Assurance Process. Amy has a PhD in curriculum studies and teacher development from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation as well as published journal articles and book chapters examine embodiment and fatness both in the classroom and in popular culture.

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