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Educational Systems, Privilege, and the Ethical Costs of Standardization

The current AI cheating, grade inflation, and mental health crises in colleges across the US are a symptom of a larger problem in our educational system. They are an urgent opportunity, I believe, to address the underlying ethical priorities of university-wide structures that claim meritocracy, fairness, and objectivity to favor a preferred student-prototype over all others. Our nationwide educational practices advantage those who already understand prevailing norms of cognition, language, culture, and assessment, while systematically marginalizing students whose ways of knowing and performing success fall outside these learned norms of ideal-student behavior. Rather than empowering student learning and transformative teaching praxes through systems of accountability, transparency, and adapted-learning, colleges continue to reinforce standards of excellence that were originally designed to self-select for the privileged few. We are today at a crossroads where educational ethics and performative pedagogy are at odds. The rise of AI, the prevalence of grade inflation, and skyrocketing anxiety levels in our students all point to a critical need to rethink the ethical foundation of our classrooms, our pedagogies, and structures of higher learning. A central outcome of the fellowship will be a scholarly research article making recommendations for colleges across the US as well as the development of faculty training sessions at Emory grounded in new ethical pedagogic praxes. These sessions will translate ethical theory into concrete pedagogical action, supporting instructors in rethinking assessment, participation, feedback, and course design through a lens of care and justice. This work will be done in collaboration with Dr. Subha Xavier, who is partnering with me in this endeavor.



BRIEF BIO

Christine Ristaino is the Director of the Emory College Language Center and Professor of Practice at Emory University. She teaches courses on Italian diaspora, Baroque Italy, social justice in Italy utilizing memoir, comparative food studies, and language and culture. She has co-authored an academic publication entitled *Lucrezia Marinella and the “Querelle des Femmes” in Seventeenth-Century Italy*, as well as the first edition of a book series called *The Italian Virtual Class*, which teaches language through cultural acquisition.

Ristaino is also an Atlanta author whose memoir, *All the Silent Spaces*, confronts the topics of violence, identity, and discrimination. She writes and publishes articles, essays, OpEds, and non-fiction, and presents her work in various forums throughout the U.S. and abroad. In addition, Ristaino has published articles on education, child advocacy, changing the way we talk about violence, and topics around diversity. Ristaino participates in social justice work, education reform, and violence prevention. She is an award-winning advisor and teacher and has experience organizing powerful symposiums, seminars, conferences and events. She leads workshops on the topics of diversity, equity and inclusion, privilege, coming to terms with violence through memoir, writing and talking about difficult topics, and creating a public voice.



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MORE INFORMATION

Dr. Ristaino will be serving as an Areté Fellow during the Spring 2027 semester.

Visit her Emory [website here](#).