

Tom Fox

## STANDARDS AND ACCESS

**ABSTRACT:** *“Standards and Access” argues that easy claims about the relationship between language mastery and academic or economic access are false. Despite wide political differences between conservative commentators on education like Bennett, Bloom, and D’Souza and mainstream writing teachers, both groups share the belief that mastery of discourse provides access. Such a belief obscures real social and political boundaries, such as racism, sexism, elitism, homophobia, that really do prevent access. Our standards must be contingent on solutions to these cultural barriers.*

I will begin with three quotations concerning “standards” in higher education. These points of view represent the cultural ground, the territory on which I will be trespassing. The discourse is owned by Dinesh D’Souza, William Bennett, and Allan Bloom; time-share options extend to Diane Ravitch, Lynn Cheney, Roger Kimball, and others; it’s a long, long list. Many of these authors gained their property rights to this discourse by virtue of their association with the last two presidential administrations. We’ll start with the lay of the land, and three quotations:

The first is from William Bennett’s new book, *The Devaluing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children*:

Since the late 1960’s, there has been a collective loss of nerve and faith on the part of many faculty and academic administrators. The academy has hurt itself, even disgraced itself, in many ways. Course requirements were thrown out;

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intellectual authority was relinquished; standards were swept aside; scholarship increasingly became an extension of political activism; and many colleges and universities lost a clear sense of their educational mission and their conception of what a graduate of their institution ought to know or be. (156)

Next in line, Dinesh D'Souza, from *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*:

Standards of merit will always, and should be, debated to discover how well they measure the skills that are sought. This debate, however, has nothing to do with whether groups end up overrepresented or underrepresented, because the standards measure not group but individual performance. One can only raise the statistical average of a group by improving the achievement of the individuals within it. (189)

Finally, here's Allan Bloom, from *The Closing of the American Mind*, on standards:

Affirmative action now institutionalizes the worst aspect of separatism. The fact is that the average black student's achievements do not equal those of the average white student in the good universities, and everybody knows it. It is also a fact that the university degree of a black student is also tainted, and employers look on it with suspicion, or become guilty accomplices in the toleration of incompetence. (96)

Those of us schooled in poststructuralism and supportive of affirmative action and multiculturalism may be tempted to ignore such statements as hopelessly misinformed, naive, and wrong-headed. However true those sentiments may be, simply dismissing or mocking these authors misses the opportunity to examine the ways we may be unwittingly complicit in their arguments. I argue in this paper that unless we rigorously examine the assumptions about standards that we hold, our political commitment to economic and social access for all students is compromised.

I'll begin by shaking the ground—I work in California—upon which these claims about standards rest. Look at Bennett's list of the accomplishments of the late 1960s first: "Course requirements were thrown out; intellectual authority was relinquished; standards were swept aside...." Bennett is using the word "standards,"

a plural, as if it were singular. This use of “standards” is described by Raymond Williams in *Keywords*, as

essentially CONSENSUAL (q.v.) (‘we all know what real standards are’) or, with a certain deliberate vagueness, suasive (‘anyone who is concerned with standards will agree’). It is often impossible, in these uses, to disagree with some assertion of standards without appearing to disagree with the very idea of quality; this is where the singular plural most powerfully operates. (297)

So when Bennett says “standards were swept aside,” he does two things. First, he counts on a consensual agreement; standards are not named— “we all know” what they are. Second, he endorses a singular idea of standards, much like the way that “family values” was used by the Republican party in the 1992 presidential campaign, you either have them and that’s good or you don’t have them and that’s bad. And by doing so, he attempts to limit the response to either agreement or disagreement. This rhetorical strategy indicates a deep ideological difference between Bennett and those of us in the academy who have come to understand standards as more of an ordinary plural. For all the references to students’ lack of history in Bennett’s discourse, his view of standards is profoundly ahistorical. These are free-floating standards, not explicitly rooted in any historical need or condition. The most powerful rejoinder to Bennett’s claim that “standards were swept aside” is to get out of his either/or claim for the word and attempt to point out the ways in which Bennett’s standards (the ones swept aside in the sixties) far from being transcendent or objective are, like everyone else’s, *contingent*, that is, based on historical and social conditions. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, whose *Contingencies of Value* introduced the term “contingent” into our everyday academic vocabulary, explores the ways that unspecified or transcendent assertions of value, such as Bennett’s, work politically:

when someone . . . insists on the *objective* necessity or propriety of their own social, political, or moral judgments and actions, and deny the *contingency* of the conditions and perspectives from which those judgments and actions proceed, it must be—and always is—a move to assign dominant status to the *particular* conditions and perspectives...; it must be—and always is—simultaneously a move to deny the existence and relevance, and to suppress the claims, of *other* conditions and perspectives. (181)

The use of “standards” in this quotation by Bennett works to uphold the conditions of the pre-1960s university, without really stating what those conditions were. It also denies the “existence and relevance” of claims that these conditions were unjust.

Let’s move now to the second quotation. In this statement, D’Souza gives us half a loaf: “Standards of merit will always, and should be, debated to discuss how well they measure the skills that are sought.” He seems here to be granting us the point that standards may change, that they are, in some sense, “contingent.” However, still grasping half a loaf, let’s say it’s a stale baguette, he hits us over the head by saying that the contingencies are not social or historical, but only individual. It only takes a moment of reflection to realize that his point is seriously incoherent. Standards are by definition a social agreement (i.e., Williams’ point that standards are “consensual”); that’s why they can be debated. Yet in an amazing *non sequitur*, D’Souza suddenly denies this social contract by saying that standards are only *set* socially but measure only *individual* achievement. While it is true that individuals take tests, this is hardly a startling observation. The next step is startling, however: *because* we take tests individually, then group measurement is irrelevant. We ought to reflect a moment on the bizarre nature of this claim; it would mean for instance that the disparity on standardized tests between African Americans and White students is solely the result of an amazing coincidence.

Yet D’Souza has no trouble making the claim, nor would most readers pause for more than a second reading it. It is based on a fundamental value of the dominant class, as old as the American Dream and as mythic as the Marlboro Man. Behind D’Souza’s claim is a web of values that inhibits collectivity, that seeks to deflate the strength of social identification, that prevents oppressed groups from seeing their situations as the result of systemic injustice, not individual failure. We have moved in Bennett from the Scylla of objectivism to the D’Souza’s Charybdis of individualism. The two discourses have in common the ability to obscure “contingencies” or render competing contingencies irrelevant and non-existent (*Contingencies*, 41).

Neither Bennett nor D’Souza says exactly what contingencies their lament about standards are based on, and that’s part of their argument. Allan Bloom doesn’t either, but his statements on race, which are echoed by Bennett and D’Souza, give us a glimpse into what’s going on here. Let’s start with the most offensive passage: “The fact is that the average black student’s achievements do not equal those of the average white student in the good universities,

and everybody knows it.” What’s important about this quotation is the move from objective and irrefutable standards (note “and everybody knows it”) to the rejection of institutional and curricular changes that invite participation and success to students of color. All of the authors I have cited make this same move; their critique of falling or abandoned standards is always accompanied by a critique of affirmative action and multiculturalism.

The arguments that connect standards with multiculturalism reveal the contingencies under which these authors make claims about standards. Each author claims to be reasserting a standard that supposedly existed in the past and is now threatened or abandoned, without having to deal with the fact that we now face students whose diverse histories and cultures challenge an easy sense of comparison. This wish for the mythic equal past leads to some wild claims about the present. Bloom asserts, erroneously, that “[t]here is now a large black presence in major universities, frequently equivalent to their proportion in the general population” (91); Bennett asserts, unbelievably, that “[w]e have basically overcome the legacy of slavery” (189). These assertions, nevertheless, finally explain what all the fuss is about. Bennett, Bloom, D’Souza say outright that they wish to return to a university ideology that predates both poststructuralism and the attempted, but still largely unsuccessful, integration of the university. That is what their reconstructed standards are meant to do. Disingenuously, they claim that their version of “standards” will provide students of color with academic and economic access, even though history has proved them wrong. And all these authors go the next perverse step and claim that multicultural education and affirmative action actually deny access.

It should not surprise us that argument about “access” should emerge in these discussions of standards. It’s familiar; students’ access to academic and economic privilege is contingent upon meeting “standards.” Many of us ascribe to this same contingency when we seek to “empower” our students by giving them either the language of the academy or the language of the dominant culture. This is inviting; it gives our classrooms and our profession a sense of action and power, a sense that we are making a difference in our students’ lives.

This is the contingency that influences Shaughnessy’s pedagogy, the early initiation theories of Bizzell, Bartholomae, Rose, and Bruffee. When you learn a specified discourse, when you meet the standards of the academy or the business world, then you will be equal, access will occur. English teachers like to think

of language as power, and we are so disgusted with the gatekeeper roles we have been forced into, that we have embraced the idea that language is central to economic and academic access. This is where we share contingencies with Bloom, Bennett, and D'Souza. We also believe that access is contingent on "standards." So our standards have been based, however unconsciously, on the standards that we believe employers and other university professors hold. Basic writing programs are, in most universities, defined exactly this way: as service courses designed to prepare students for the academic writing in the rest of their careers. We feel extra pressure because we know that some of our students will not stay in college so at the very least we want to teach them enough about writing to help them economically if they drop out.

But look how terrifyingly close to Bloom, Bennett, and D'Souza we are. We hold "standards" that function as a singular plural when we know—and our students know better—that standards in both university classrooms and the workplace are radically plural. We hold that once standards are met in our courses that access is a given, an individual effort. Thus we endorse both the deliberate generalization of Bennett and the naive individualism of D'Souza.

What we need to do is disentangle "standards" from these terms of access. The contingency between access and standards associated with vague notions of academic discourse or an economically valued standard English is a lie. While received opinion is on the side of this contingency, which is why Bloom, Bennett, and D'Souza can leave so much out of their arguments, the facts are not. For instance, the dominant pedagogy for African American students in the last three decades has been versions of the access through language pedagogy. This pedagogy is an unqualifiable failure. If you trace participation in higher education by African Americans in the last two decades, you see an ugly picture of slow, actual *decline* until 1988, a small increase in the last few years, and an overall picture that *no* significant change is occurring.

You can't blame writing teachers for this decline, but that's just the point. The easy connection between language pedagogy and access is false, and dangerous, too, as Elspeth Stuckey points out in *The Violence of Literacy*. Believing in this contingent relationship between language and access is dangerous because, as all contingencies do, it foregrounds one issue while it obscures another. If we tell ourselves and our students that they will achieve access if they master writing standards, we are obscuring and underestimating the powerful forces of racism, sexism, elitism,

heterosexism that continue to operate *despite* the students' mastery of standards. We are denying the terror that comes from economic insecurity; we are obscuring the effect that brutal physical violence has on women students; we are minimizing the debilitating effects of racial violence. We say, "master these standards of writing and you will access the institution."

This belief in the power of language to provide access is a difficult one to give up. It reasserts itself suddenly—in a one-to-one meeting with a student, in answer to an unexpected question in class, in a memo defending the basic writing program to administrators. When we give it up, what do we have left? I am not one who believes it is possible to operate without standards. I believe we ought to have standards and we ought to interrogate the contingencies of these standards rigorously. Given the *discontinuity* between access and language standards, these standards instead need to focus on fostering collective powers to resist the social and political forces that deny access, deny participation.

These standards are relentlessly plural, contingent upon the local needs, conditions, and qualities of specific student bodies, specific programs. This plurality is easily managed by good teachers and good programs, and their standards can work to challenge all their students to write better, more important, and more critical work. Writing program administrators and researchers need to support teachers in these efforts by articulating standards that are *not* based on the false relationships of access loud enough for our colleagues, our administrators, and the public to hear them. Instead of measuring successful writing in terms of a predetermined (and most likely misunderstood) language of the workplace or the academy, we need to measure writing according to the standards listed below. No one reading this paper should mistake my argument for an argument against standards. I am arguing *against* the persuasive power of the contingency between access and the asserted standards of the academy and the workplace. I am arguing *for* contingencies that see standards in a relationship with social and political change. So here they are; this list is by definition incomplete. We should expect:

- writing that interrogates cultural/political commonplaces, that refuses to repeat cliched explanations for poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other diseases of our society;
- writing that willingly explores and embodies conflicts, that isn't afraid to enter into the messy contradictions of our world;

- writing that critiques institutional inequities, especially in the immediate context of the classroom, the writing program, the department, the university, but also in the institutions that have played an important role in our students' lives;
- writing that demonstrates successful practices of resistance, that seeks historical evidence for possibilities and promise;
- writing that complexly addresses complex issues, that doesn't seek safety in simplicity;
- writing that seeks a wide audience by respecting the dignity of others, yet with courage to stand against those who are unjust;
- writing that self-consciously explores the workings of its own rhetoric;
- in short, writing that seeks to reduce the deafening violence of inequality—the social forces that really do prevent access.

These standards must be regularly plural, and they must reflect local and context-specific interests and problems. They are highly ambitious, and reflective of the best work the academy can do and, in some cases, has done. These are not standards that are specific to basic writing. They should remind us of the blurred and perhaps ultimately unhelpful boundaries between “basic” and “regular” writers.

The fear of falling standards, so quickly tied to strident and uninformed criticisms of affirmative action by Bennett, Bloom, and D'Souza, reveals a more nefarious nostalgia for the days when universities didn't bother trying to attract students of color, when curricula went unchallenged. We need to remind them and ourselves that the good old days weren't so good for a majority of Americans. The long revolution to make higher education serve the needs of people of color in this country, to challenge the curriculum with new literatures, new cultures, new scholars, new students; this struggle begins at our doors. Our standards should reflect our solidarity with those who seek to reduce the violence of inequity.

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