

# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

**SPRING 1993**

**VOLUME 12, NUMBER 1**

**\* SPECIAL ISSUE \***

**4th National Basic Writing Conference Plenaries**

The Tidy House: Basic Writing  
in the American Curriculum  
**David Bartholomae**

Basic Writing Reconsidered  
**Peter Dow Adams**

Standards and Access  
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Literacies and Deficits Revisited  
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The Status of Basic Writing  
Teachers: Do We Need a  
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The Politics of Basic Writing  
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Basic Writing:  
Pushing Against Racism  
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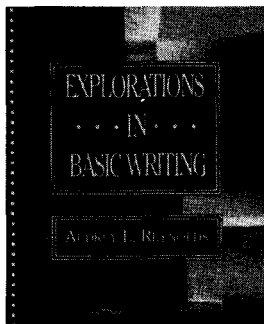


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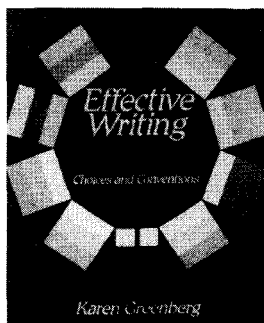
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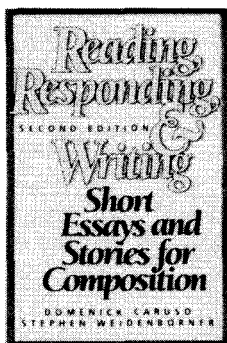


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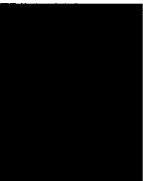
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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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The *Journal of Basic Writing* publishes articles of theory, research, and teaching practices related to basic writing. Articles are refereed by members of the Editorial Board (see overleaf) and the Editors.

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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

VOLUME 12

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SPECIAL ISSUE • 4th National Basic Writing Conference Plenaries

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## CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 10-20 pages on topics related to basic writing, broadly interpreted.

Manuscripts will be refereed anonymously. We require four copies of a manuscript and an abstract of about 100 words. To assure impartial review, give author information and a short biographical note for publication on the cover page *only*. Papers which are accepted will eventually have to supply camera-ready copy for all ancillary material (tables, charts, etc.). One copy of each manuscript not accepted for publication will be returned to the author, if we receive sufficient stamps (no meter strips) clipped to a self-addressed envelope. We require the MLA style (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 3rd ed., 1988*). For further guidance, send a stamped letter-size, self-addressed envelope for our style sheet and for camera-ready specifications.

*All manuscripts must focus clearly on basic writing and must add substantively to the existing literature.* We seek manuscripts that are original, stimulating, well-grounded in theory, and clearly related to practice. Work that reiterates what is known or work previously published will not be considered.

We invite authors to write about such matters as classroom practices in relation to basic writing theory; cognitive and rhetorical theories and their relation to basic writing; social, psychological, and cultural implications of literacy; discourse theory; grammar, spelling, and error analysis; linguistics; computers and new technologies in basic writing; English as a second language; assessment and evaluation; writing center practices; teaching logs and the development of new methodologies; and cross-disciplinary studies combining basic writing with psychology, anthropology, journalism, and art. We publish observational studies as well as theoretical discussions on relationships between basic writing and reading, or the study of literature, or speech, or listening. The term "basic writer" is used with wide diversity today, sometimes referring to a student from a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse, and sometimes referring to a student whose academic writing is fluent but otherwise deficient. To help readers, therefore, authors should describe clearly the student population which they are discussing.

We particularly encourage a *variety* of manuscripts: speculative discussions which venture fresh interpretations; essays which draw heavily on student writing as supportive evidence for new observations; research reports, written in nontechnical language, which offer observations previously unknown or unsubstantiated; and collaborative writings which provocatively debate more than one side of a central controversy.

A "Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award" is given to the author of the best *JBW* article every two years (four issues). The prize is \$500, now courtesy of Lynn Quitman Troyka. The winner, to be selected by a jury of three scholars/teachers not on our editorial board, is announced in our pages and elsewhere.

## *Editors' Column*

Readers of *JBW* often ask why the journal no longer publishes thematic issues, as it did when Mina Shaughnessy and Sarah Fortune were the editors. The explanation which we have always given is that such issues are too difficult to complete in a timely fashion. In fact, it was only when Lynn Troyka became editor of *JBW*, and stopped organizing each issue around a central theme, that it began to adhere to a regular schedule of publication. This particular issue of *JBW* represents a departure from that wisdom.

After returning from the Fourth National Basic Writing Conference, "Critical Issues in Basic Writing: 1992," held in College Park, Maryland, on October 8–10, we approached David Bartholomae about publishing his keynote in *JBW*. He readily agreed, but also suggested that we solicit other papers from the plenary sessions of the conference. Further consultation with several other members of the Editorial Board who had also attended, confirmed his and our view that the keynote and the plenaries of the 1992 conference deserved full and immediate coverage in the basic writing community's journal of record. Therefore, this issue of *JBW* represents our first thematic issue in many years.

The Fourth National Basic Writing Conference was anything but a dull "academic" event. Speakers did not hesitate to present strongly felt and often controversial views of "critical" issues in basic writing pedagogy and theory. There was constant discussion and debate—both during the scheduled sessions and at coffee breaks and meals—about what basic writing is or should be. Some even questioned whether, in fact, our discipline has a legitimate claim to exist.

Forthcoming issues of *JBW* will contain other papers presented at the concurrent sessions at the conference, in particular reexaminations of Mina Shaughnessy's work and legacy.

Before introducing each of the papers, we must express our gratitude to the Executive Committee of the Conference on Basic

Writing that planned and organized the event, and to conference chairs Eugene Hammond and Carolyn Kirkpatrick—both for putting together such a stellar event and for their enthusiastic response to our proposal that the keynote and plenaries be published in *JBW*. CBW is a special interest group of CCCC. The conference was cosponsored by NCTE and the University of Maryland.

In the keynote address, David Bartholomae characterizes much of basic writing “as a way of naming (and producing) a curriculum, an area of study, a type of writing and writing practice—as a way of organizing (and producing) that version of the social world represented in our colleges and universities....”

In the second article, Peter Dow Adams describes the preliminary results of an informal study about the “success rate” of writers in the basic writing program at the college. He calls into question whether the benefits of such separate programs outweigh their disadvantages and suggests further statistical investigation and exploration of curricular alternatives.

Tom Fox argues that having students overcome the real social and political barriers of racism, sexism, elitism, and homophobia are necessary requirements to support any claim about the relationship between language mastery and academic or economic access.

Jerrie Cobb Scott explores those factors she identifies as contributing to the recycling of a deficient pedagogy. The paper challenges basic writing professionals to move to a higher level of critical consciousness in designing and implementing a pedagogy of success, thereby eliminating recycling deficits into programs designed for marginalized students.

Jeanne Gunner considers the negative consequences resulting from the lack of a clear definition of a basic writing professional and the importance of reasserting the value of teaching as central to this definition. Karen Greenberg takes issue with David Bartholomae’s assertion that most basic writing courses are “obstacles rather than opportunities.” Instead of marginalizing students, she believes that basic writing programs, particularly at CUNY, fulfill Bartholomae’s notion of “sorting students into useful and thoughtful groups,” and teach large numbers of high school students, transfer students, and returning adults the “linguistic, cognitive and social components of academic literacy to make the transition to college level work.” William Jones discusses the success of historically Black colleges, rooted in expressions of existential attitudes of resistance, which include Black religious folk statements and the blues, as providing models for

writing programs for inexperienced Black and Latino students. Mary Jo Berger describes what basic writing teachers and administrators can do to improve both the status and the funding of their programs.

Finally, we are delighted to welcome Professor Peter Rondinone, director of journalism in the English Department of LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, to the Editorial Board, beginning with this issue. His work in journalism and its usefulness in the teaching of basic writing will make a strong contribution to *JBW*.

— *Bill Bernhardt* and *Peter Miller*

David Bartholomae

# THE TIDY HOUSE: BASIC WRITING IN THE AMERICAN CURRICULUM

*ABSTRACT: I want to use this paper to think about basic writing as a way of naming (and producing) a curriculum, an area of study, a type of writing and writing practice—as a way of organizing (and producing) that version of the social world represented in our colleges and universities. Hence my two epigraphs: I would like, for the moment, to be a nominalist; as best as I can, I would like to think about the history of the term “basic writing” and the role of the intellectual (and the culture and its institutions) in its production.*

The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage.

—Gayatri Spivak  
“Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Remember, in Foucault’s passage in his *History of Sexuality*: “One must be a nominalist.” *Power* is not this, *power* is not that. *Power* is the name one must lend to a complex structure of relationships. To that extent, the subaltern is

---

*David Bartholomae, professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, and for ten years director of composition there, was twice visiting professor (once as a Fulbright lecturer) at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain. A past chair of CCCC and of the 2nd MLA Literacy Conference, he has written widely on composition theory and composition instruction, and now coedits the Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture. With Anthony Petrosky, he is coauthor/editor of The Teaching of Writing (U of Chicago P, 1986), Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts (Boynton, 1986), and Ways of Reading, 2nd ed. (Bedford, 1990).*

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the name of the place which is so displaced from what made me and the organized resister, that to have it speak is like Godot arriving on a bus. We want it to disappear as a name so that we can all speak.

—Gayatri Spivak, in an interview with Howard Winant, “Gayatri Spivak on the Politics of the Subaltern.”

1.

I found my career in basic writing. I got my start there and, to a degree, helped to construct and protect a way of speaking about the undergraduate curriculum that has made “basic writing” an important and necessary, even an inevitable, term. This is a story I love to tell.

I went to graduate school in 1969 under an NDEA fellowship (NDEA stands for National Defense Education Act). The country had been panicked by Sputnik; the Congress had voted funds to help America’s schools and children become more competitive. The money was directed toward math and science, but NCTE wisely got its foot in the door and saw that at least a token sum was directed toward the humanities, and English in particular, and so NDEA helped send me to Rutgers to graduate school. You could think of it this way—I went to graduate school to save the world from communism.

Because I was an NDEA fellow, I went to graduate school but I never had to teach, at least not until I was well into my dissertation. And so, in 1973, when the money ran out and in order to see what the job might be like, I asked my chair if I could teach a course. He agreed and I found myself teaching Freshman English for the first time.

I did what I was prepared to do. I taught a course where we asked students, all lumped into a single group, “Freshmen,” to read an essay by Jean Paul Sartre, and I gave them a question to prompt their writing: “If existence precedes essence, what is man.” This was my opening move. By some poor luck of the draw, about half of my students were students who we would now call “basic writers.” I knew from the first week that I was going to fail them; in fact, I knew that I was going to preside over a curriculum that spent 14 weeks slowly and inevitably demonstrating their failures. This is what I (and my school) were prepared (by “English”) to do. I want to cast this moment, in other words, as more than an isolated incident. I want it to be representative.

One student wrote the following essay (you can visualize the page—the handwriting is labored and there is much scratching



out). The writer's name is Quentin Pierce:

If existence precedes essence man is responsible for what he is.

This is what stinger is trying to explain to us that man is a bastard without conscience I don't believe in good or evil they or meaningless words or phrase. Survive is the words for today and survive is the essence of man.

To elaborate on the subject matter. the principle of existentialism is logic, but stupid in it self.

Then there is a string of scratched out sentences, and the words "stop" and "lose" written in caps.

Then there is this:

Let go back to survive, to survive it is necessary to kill or be kill, this what existentialism is all about.

Man will not survive, he is a asshole.

STOP

The stories in the books or meaningless stories and I will not elaborate on them This paper is meaningless, just like the book, But, I know the paper will not make it.

STOP.

Then there are crossed out sentences. At the end, in what now begins to look like a page from *Leaves of Grass* or *Howl*, there is this:

I don't care.

I don't care.

about man and good and evil I don't care about this shit fuck this shit, trash and should be put in the trash can with this shit

Thank you very much

I lose again.

I was not prepared for this paper. In a sense, I did not know how to read it. I could only ignore it. I didn't know what to write on it, how to bring it into the class I was teaching, although, in a sense, it was the only memorable paper I received from that class and I have kept it in my file drawer for 18 years, long after I've thrown away all my other papers from graduate school.

I knew enough to know that the paper was, in a sense, a very skillful performance in words. I knew that it was written for me; I

knew that it was probably wrong to read it as simply expressive (an expression of who Quentin Pierce “really was”); I think I knew that it was not sufficient to read the essay simply as evidence that I had made the man a loser—since the document was also a dramatic and skillful way of saying “Fuck you—I’m not the loser, you are.” I saw that the essay had an idea, “existentialism is logical but stupid,” and that the writer called forth the moves that could enable its elaboration: “To elaborate on the subject,” he said, “let’s go back to survive.”

The “Fuck You” paper was a written document of some considerable skill and force—more skill and force, for example, than I saw in many of the “normal” and acceptable papers I read: “In this fast-paced modern world, when one considers the problems facing mankind....” I know you know how to imagine and finish that essay. It has none of the surprises of the fuck you essay. It would still, I think, be used to classify its student as a “normal” writer; the other would identify a “basic” writer.

I could see features in the fuck you essay that spoke to me in my classroom. I did not, as I said earlier, know how to read it. I didn’t know how to make it part of the work of my class. I failed the “basic writers” in my Freshman English class and I went to my chairman, Dan Howard, a man whom I admired greatly, and I told him I would never do this again. I would never teach a course where I would meet a group of students, know that some would fail, watch those students work to the best of their ability and my preparation and then fail them. It was not the job for me. I would rather be a lawyer. (This is true, not just a joke; I took the law boards.)

He said, “Why don’t you set up a basic writing program” and gave me my first full-time job. A year later I went to Pitt, again to work with a basic writing program. The one decision I made was that I was not going to get rid of Jean Paul Sartre. I wanted to imagine a course where students worked with the materials valued in the college curriculum. I did not want to take those materials away from them. I wanted, rather, to think about ways of preparing unprepared students to work with the kinds of materials that I (and the profession) would say were ours, not theirs, materials that were inappropriate, too advanced. And so we set up a seminar, with readings and a subject or theme to study (so that basic writing students, we said, could work firsthand with the values and methods of the academy); we did this rather than teach a “skills” course that could lead, later, to “real” work.

I felt then, as I feel now, that the skills course, the course that

postponed “real” reading and writing, was a way of enforcing the very cultural divisions that stood as the defining markers of the problem education and its teachers, like me, had to address. In its later versions, and with my friend and colleague Tony Petrosky, the course became the course reported in *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*. I am thrilled to see that there will be talk about this kind of course here at the conference today. There are versions of the course being taught in the most remarkable variety of settings—city schools, rural schools, Indian reservations, high schools, colleges for the deaf. The course is still being taught at Pitt, with wonderful revisions. The two features of the course that have remained constant are these: difficulty is confronted and negotiated, not erased (the Jean Paul Sartre slot remains); students’ work is turned into a book (the fuck you paper becomes an authored work, a text in the course).

Now—as I said, this is a story I love to tell. It is convenient. It is easy to understand. Like basic writing, it (the story) and I are produced by the grand narrative of liberal sympathy and liberal reform. The story is inscribed in a master narrative of outreach, of equal rights, of empowerment, of new alliances and new understandings, of the transformation of the social text, the American university, the English department. I would like, in the remainder of my talk, to read against the grain of that narrative—to think about how and why and where it might profitably be questioned. I am not, let me say quickly, interested in critique for the sake of critique; I think we have begun to rest too comfortably on terms that should make us nervous, terms like “basic writing.” Basic writing has begun to seem like something naturally, inevitably, transparently there in the curriculum, in the stories we tell ourselves about English in America. It was once a provisional, contested term, marking an uneasy accommodation between the institution and its desires and a student body that did not or would not fit. I think it should continue to mark an area of contest, of struggle, including a struggle against its stability or inevitability.

Let me put this more strongly. I think basic writing programs have become expressions of our desire to produce basic writers, to maintain the course, the argument, and the slot in the university community; to maintain the distinction (basic/normal) we have learned to think through and by. The basic writing program, then, can be seen simultaneously as an attempt to bridge AND preserve cultural difference, to enable students to enter the “normal” curriculum but to insure, at the same time, that there are basic writers.

2.

Nothing has been more surprising to a liberal (to me) than the vehement (and convincing) critique of the discourse of liberalism, a discourse that, as I've said, shaped my sense of myself as a professional. I have been trying to think about how to think outside the terms of my own professional formation, outside of the story of Quentin Pierce and my work in basic writing. I am trying to think outside of the ways of thinking that have governed my understanding of basic writers, of their identity as it is produced by our work and within the college curriculum.

To do this counterintuitive thinking, the critique of liberalism has been useful to me. Let me provide two examples as a form of demonstration.

Here is Shelby Steele, in the preface to *The Content of Our Character*, talking about how he writes. I like to read this as an account of the composing process, the composing process NOT as an internal psychological drama (issue trees, short-term memory, problem-solving, satisficing) but as an accommodation of the discursive positions (the roles or identifications) that can produce a writer and writing. It is also a program for a liberal rhetoric, a way of writing designed to produce or enforce the ideology of liberalism (in this case, the argument that differences of race and class don't matter):

In the writing, I have had to both remember and forget that I am black. The forgetting was to see the human universals within the memory of the racial specifics. One of the least noted facts in this era when racial, ethnic, and gender differences are often embraced as sacred is that being black in no way spares one from being human. Whatever I do or think as a black can never be more than a variant of what all people do and think. Some of my life experiences may be different from those of other races, but there is nothing different or special in the psychological processes that drive my mind. So in this book I have tried to search out the human universals that explain the racial specifics. I suppose this was a sort of technique, though I was not conscious of it as I worked. Only in hindsight can I see that it protected me from being overwhelmed by the compelling specifics—and the politics—or racial difference. Now I know that if there was a secret to writing this book, it was simply to start from the painfully obvious premise that all races are composed of human beings. (xi)

It is a remarkable statement and enacts, in the paragraph, the link between an attitude (a recognition of common humanity, looking beneath surfaces) and the discursive trick, the “sleight of word,” to steal a phrase from Gayatri Spivak, the displacement this position requires/enables in the act of writing. The attitude that all men are equal produces a text where the overwhelming specifics—and the politics of racial difference—disappear. It is a figuration that enables a certain kind of writing. It is, I think, a writing we teach in basic writing (the control of the overwhelming details, the specifics; the erasure or oversight of the problems—personal, social, historic—that produce basic writing), just as it is a writing we perform, in a sense, in the administration of basic writing programs, making certain “overwhelming specifics” disappear.

When I first came upon this book, I knew that I was supposed to be critical of Steele (that he was a conservative, an old-fashioned humanist); I knew I was supposed to be critical before I could perform or feel the critique. Actually, I’ll confess, I loved his book and what it stood for. It evokes sympathies and identifications I have learned to mistrust.

Here is a different statement about writing, one that is harder to read (or it was for me), this time by Patricia Williams, from her remarkable book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. It is not, directly, a critique of Steele, but it speaks a version of writing and the writer that stands opposed to his. It is not, I should say quickly, what we would have once called a “Black power” statement on race and writing—that is, it does not simply reverse Steele’s position (Steele argues that he must forget he is Black) to argue that a writer must remember, discover her Blackness, to let race define who, as a writer, she essentially is. Williams’ argument is not produced by the same discourse.

Williams’ position is different; it sees subject positions as produced, not essential, and as strategic. Williams’ book thinks through what it is like to write, think, live, and practice law as a Black woman—that is, to occupy positions that are White and Black, male and female, all at once.

She recalls a time when, back to back, a White man and a Black woman wondered aloud if she “really identified as black.” She says:

I heard the same-different words addressed to me, a perceived white-male-socialized black woman, as a challenge to mutually exclusive categorization, as an overlapping of black and female and right and male and private and wrong

and white and public, and so on and so forth.

That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance. Law too often seeks to avoid this truth by making up its own breed of narrower, simpler, but hypnotically powerful rhetorical truths.

Acknowledging, challenging, playing with these as rhetorical gestures is, it seems to me, necessary for any conception of justice. Such acknowledgment complicates the supposed purity of gender, race, voice, boundary; it allows us to acknowledge the utility of such categorizations for certain purposes and the necessity of their breakdown on other occasions. It complicates definitions in its shift, in its expansion and contraction according to circumstance, in its room for the possibility of creatively mated taxonomies and their wildly unpredictable offspring. (10–11)

And over and over again in her book, she offers this as the figure of the writer:

But I haven't been able to straighten things out for them [her students] because I'm confused too. I have arrived at a point where everything I have ever learned is running around and around in my head; and little bits of law and pieces of everyday life fly out of my mouth in weird combinations. (14)

There is a double edge to this comparison. On the one hand, Williams represents the critique of liberalism and its easy assumptions, say, about the identify of African Americans and White Americans, or Workers and Owners, or Men and Women. It defines sympathy as something other than the easy understanding of someone else's position; it makes that sympathy, rather, a version of imperial occupation, the act of the taking possession of someone else's subjectivity. The pairing also represents how writing and the writer might be said to be figured differently when one reconfigures the relationship of the individual to convention, the writer to writing, including the conventions of order and control. Williams' writing is disunified; it mixes genres; it willfully forgets the distinction between formal and colloquial, public and private; it makes unseemly comparisons. In many ways, her prose has the features we associate with basic writing, although here those features mark her achievement as a writer, not her failure.

Here is a simple equation, but one that will sum up the thoughts this leads me to: to the degree to which the rhetoric of the Ameri-

can classroom has been dominated by the topic sentence, the controlling idea, gathering together ideas that fit while excluding, outlawing those that don't (the overwhelming, compelling specifics); to the degree that the American classroom has been a place where we *cannot* talk about race or class or the history of the American classroom, it has taught both the formal properties and the controlling ideas that produce, justify, and value the humanism of Shelby Steele, that produce Patricia Williams' text as confusing, unreadable (which, in a classroom sense, it is—our students are prepared to find her writing hard to read and his easy), and it produces basic writing as the necessary institutional response to the (again) overwhelming politics and specifics of difference. It is a way of preserving the terms of difference rooted in, justified by the liberal project, one that has learned to rest easy with the tidy distinction between basic and mainstream. In this sense, basic writers are produced by our desires to be liberals—to enforce a commonness among our students by making the differences superficial, surface-level, and by designing a curriculum to both insure them and erase them in 14 weeks.

In her recent work, Mary Louise Pratt has argued against the easy, utopian versions of community that have governed the ways we think about language and the classroom. In linguistics, for example:

The prototypical manifestation of language is generally taken to be the speech of individual adult native speakers face-to-face (as in Saussure's famous diagram) in monolingual, even monodialectal situations—in short, the most homogeneous case linguistically and socially. The same goes for written communication. Now one could certainly imagine a theory that assumed different things—that argued, for instance, that the most revealing speech situation for understanding language was one involving a gathering of people each of whom spoke two languages and understood a third and held only one language in common with any of the others. It depends on what working of language you want to see or want to see first, on what you choose to define as normative. (38)

If you want to eliminate difference, there are programs available to think this through. In the classroom, similarly, she argues, teachers are prepared to feel most successful when they have eliminated “unsolicited oppositional discourse”—that is, the writing they are not prepared to read—along with parody, resistance, and critique, when they have unified the social world in the image

of community offered by the professions. Who wins when we do that, she asks? and who loses? Or, to put it another way, if our programs produce a top and bottom that reproduces the top and bottom in the social text, insiders and outsiders, haves and have nots, who wins and who loses?

This is not abstract politics, not in the classroom. Pratt acknowledges this. In place of a utopian figure of community, she poses what she calls the “contact zone.” I use this term, she says,

to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (34)

She extends this term to classrooms and proposes a list of both the compositional and pedagogical arts of the contact zone. Imagine, in other words, a curricular program designed not to hide differences (by sorting bodies) but to highlight them, to make them not only the subject of the writing curriculum, but the source of its goals and values (at least one of the versions of writing one can learn at the university). Pratt lists the various arts of the contact zone. These are wonderful lists to hear as lists, since they make surprising sense and come out of no order we have been prepared to imagine or, for that matter, value.

These are, according to Pratt, some of the literate arts of the contact zone: autoethnography (representing one’s identity and experience in the terms of a dominant other, with the purpose of engaging the other), transculturation (the selection of and improvisation on the materials derived from the dominant culture), critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression. (Imagine these as the stated goals of a course.) And these are some of the pedagogical arts: exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral; ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories); ways to move *into and out of* rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of *cultural mediation*. (Imagine these as exercises.)

Now—the voice of common sense says, basic writers aren’t



ready for this, they can't handle it, they need a place to begin. But this sense makes sense only under the sway of a developmental view of language use and language growth (and "developmentalism"—cherishing and preserving an interested version of the "child" and the "adult"—this, too, is inscribed in the discourse of liberalism). Thinking of development allows one to reproduce existing hierarchies but as evidence of natural patterns—basic writers are just like other writers, but not quite so mature. One could imagine that oppositional discourse, parody, unseemly comparisons, if defined as "skills," are the equal possession of students in *both* basic writing and mainstream composition courses. In fact, one could argue that "basic writers" are better prepared to produce and think through unseemly comparisons than their counterparts in the "mainstream" class. Pratt rejects the utopian notion of a classroom where everyone speaks the same language to the same ends; she imagines, rather, a classroom where difference is both the subject and the environment. She gives us a way of seeing existing programs as designed to hide or suppress "contact" between cultural groups rather than to organize and highlight that contact.

Now of course education needs to be staged, and of course tracking makes strategic sense; of course one needs a place to begin and a place to end or to mark beginnings and endings, but it is not impossible to think beyond our current sense of beginnings and endings (of basic writing and the courses that follow), beyond placement exams that measure the ability to produce or recognize the conventionally correct and unified text.

There is caricature here, I know, but one could imagine the current proportion of students in basic writing courses and mainstream courses redistributed by an exam that looked for willingness to work, for a commitment to language and its uses, for an ability to produce a text that commands notice, or (in Pratt's terms) for the ability to produce opposition, parody, unseemly comparisons, to work outside of the rhetoric of authenticity, to produce the autoethnographic text. Or we could imagine not tracking students at all. We could offer classes with a variety of supports for those who need them. These might be composition courses where the differences in students' writing becomes the subject of the course. The differences would be what the course investigates. We would have, then, a course in "multiculturalism" that worked with the various cultures represented in the practice of its students. There would be no need to buy an anthology to find evidence of the cultural mix in America, no need to import "multiple

cultures.” They are there, in the classroom, once the institution becomes willing to pay that kind of attention to student writing.

There is caricature here, but so is there caricature in our current accounts of *the* basic writer and his or her essential characteristics. There is a great danger in losing a sense of our names as names—in Patricia Williams’ terms, as rhetorical gestures, useful for certain purposes but also necessarily breaking down at the very moment that we need them.

Or—to put it another way. Basic writers may be ready for a different curriculum, for the contact zone and the writing it will produce, but the institution is not. And it is not, I would argue, because of those of us who work in basic writing, who preserve rather than question the existing order of things.

### 3.

Developmentalism. Certainly the most influential conduit for this discourse in American composition is James Britton. He has been given the kind of saintly status given Mina Shaughnessy. He seems to represent (in his sympathy for the other, for children, for diversity, for growth and empowerment) a position beyond positions. This is, of course, a sleight of hand, and a problem, one we share in producing when we read Britton generously. (And let me be quick to say, I understand all the good reasons why we might read him generously.)

As a way of thinking outside of Britton, both about writing and about children, but also about professional work and about the consequences of such thinking, I want to turn to a comparatively unknown book, *The Tidy House*, one that could be thought of as a countertext to *The Development of Writing Abilities*. It is written in a similar time and place, in the late 60s and early 70s in Britain. It looks at the same subject: writing and schooling.

In Steedman’s words, this is what *The Tidy House* is about:

In the summer of 1976, three working-class eight-year-old girls, Melissa, Carla and Lindie, wrote a story about romantic love, marriage and sexual relations, the desire of mothers for children and their resentment of them, and the means by which those children are brought up to inhabit a social world.

This book, which takes its title from the children’s narrative, offers an account of their story, and suggests what interpretations we, as adults, can make of it. Their story, which is structured around two opposing views of child-care held by their two central female characters, served the

children as an investigation of the ideas and beliefs by which they themselves were being brought up, and their text can serve us too in this way. (1)

I'll confess that I have been very much taken by this book. It is beautifully written, sensible, evocative, surprising. And it powerfully suggests the roads not taken by composition studies and its professionals.

The book begins with the girls' story, called "The Tidy House." It is written all in dialogue. Here, for example, is the children's account of what adults say to each other in bed at night when they are making babies:

What time is it?

Eleven o'clock at night.

Oh no! Let's get to bed.

Ok.

'Night, sweetheart, See you in the morning.

Turn the light off, Mark.

I'm going to.

Sorry.

All right.

I want to get asleep.

Don't worry, you'll get to sleep in time.

Don't let us, really, this time of the night.

Shall I wait till the morning?

Oh stop it.

Morning.

Don't speak.

No, you.

No. Why don't you?

Look, it's all over.

Thank you, Mark.

Mark kissed Jo, Jo kissed Mark. (43-44)

Steedman's work on this story leads her to women's accounts of their lives in the working-class neighborhood of the girls, to Henry Mayhew and the words of girls from the streets of London in the 19th century, to domestic education and the historical uses

of children's writing. And, in Steedman's career, it has led to interests in history and autobiography, in the production of "the child" in England.

Steedman saw in the student's story a history of social practices, practices that not only argue about educability and appropriateness but about how girls become women and what it means to live within one's class. Teachers are not prepared, she argues, to see history and culture in the classroom or in the work of its children.

It is almost impossible for a teacher to look at a room full of children and not see them in some way as being stretched out along some curve of ability, some measuring up to and exceeding the average, some falling behind. This is the historical inheritance we operate with, whether we do so consciously or not, and it has been a matter of "common sense" and common observation rather than a matter of theory to know as a teacher that children of class IV and V parents are going to perform relatively badly compared with children of higher socioeconomic groups. (5)

And, "What teachers know as a result of this history, and as a matter of 'common sense,' is that, in general, ability groupings turn out in practice to make rough and comprehensible matches with social class divisions."

For Steedman, as both a teacher and a social historian, the fundamental question is how these young writers, given their positions as girls and as working-class girls, can negotiate, understand, and critically confront those versions of themselves that are written into the social text. An uncritical schooling, an education in language divorced from its social and political contexts, would effectively preserve the narratives of class and gender within which these children find themselves (within which they write "their" story). For Steedman, the writing done in school gives both the professional and the student access to a history and attitudes and feelings shaping their particular moment. Writing is the way history, class, and culture become manifest in the classroom, in an environment that pretends to stand outside of time.

What Steedman suggests is not just a direction for research but a different version of professional responsibility, where as professionals who manage writing in institutional settings we might see that writing as material for an ongoing study of American life and culture. It is a telling irony that on my campus, where young working-class women write, scholars go to archives to "discover" working-class writing by women.

To learn to read her students' story, Steedman went to a record of children's voices from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. To learn to read her students' stories, Mina Shaughnessy went to her heart—to the remarkable sympathy which would allow her to understand the work of students distinctly different from her in culture and sensibility. Shaughnessy's text, in a sense, is the quintessential liberal reflex; it demonstrates that beneath the surface we are all the same person; it writes her students' lives, needs, desires into a master text that she commands. Basic writing, as an extension of that moment, preserves that project: fitting students into a version of who they are as writers that we tend to take for granted, that seems to stand beyond our powers of revision and inquiry, because it is an expression of our founding desires to find, know, and help (to construct, theorize, and preserve) basic writers.

4.

So what in the world have I done here. I find myself characterizing basic writing as a reiteration of the liberal project of the late 60s early 70s, where in the name of sympathy and empowerment, we have once again produced the "other" who is the incomplete version of ourselves, confirming existing patterns of power and authority, reproducing the hierarchies we had meant to question and overthrow, way back then in the 1970s.

We have constructed a course to teach and enact a rhetoric of exclusion and made it the center of a curriculum designed to hide or erase cultural difference, all the while carving out and preserving an "area" in English within which we can do our work. Goodness.

Now, at the end of my talk, it seems important to ask, "Do I believe what I have said?" If this has been an exercise in reading against the grain of the discourse that has produced basic writing (and, I said, my work as a professional), do I believe this negative, unyielding rereading?

The answer is yes and no, and sometimes yes and no at the same moment. Let me conclude, then, with a series of second thoughts (or "third thoughts" as the case may be).

If you look back over the issues of the *Journal of Basic Writing* (or at programs and courses), there is a record of good and careful work. I couldn't begin to turn my back on all that or to dismiss it as inconsequential. We can all think immediately of the students who have been helped, of college careers that have begun with a basic writing course. Good work has been done under the name of basic writing by both students and professionals. I cannot get

over, however, my sense of the arbitrariness, the surrealism, of the choices represented by the sorting of students in actual basic and mainstream classes. Looking at the faces, working with the writing—the division never makes anything but institutional sense. There are cases to prove that the idea is a good one. There are cases to prove that the idea is all wrong.

And there are problems of error—of controlling the features of a written text—that stand outside of any theorizing about basic writing as a form of resistance. It seems to me finally stupid to say that every nonstandard feature of a student's prose is a sign of opposition, can stand as "unsolicited oppositional discourse." If I think back to Quentin Peirce's essay, some of the "errors" could be read as oppositional, but not all of them and not all of them for the same reasons. At the same time, the profession has not been able to think beyond an either/or formulation—either academic discourse or the discourse of the community; either argument or narrative; either imitation or expression. Part of the failure, I think, is rooted in our inability to imagine protocols for revision, for example, that would negotiate rather than preserve the differing interests of students and the academy. We do not, for example, read "basic writing" the way we read Patricia Williams' prose, where the surprising texture of the prose stands as evidence of an attempt to negotiate the problems of language. I want to be clear about this. Williams is a skillful, well-educated writer. The unconventional nature of her prose can be spoken of as an achievement. She is trying to do something that can't be conventionally done. To say that our basic writers are less intentional, less skilled, is to say the obvious. But we would say the same thing of the "mainstream" writers whose prose approximates that of Shelby Steele. Their prose, too, is less skilled, less intentional than his. It is possible, it seems to me, to develop a theory of error that makes the contact between conventional and unconventional discourses the most interesting and productive moment for a writer or for a writing course. It is possible to use the Steele/Williams pair to argue that when we define Williams-like student writing as less developed or less finished than Steele-like student writing, we are letting metaphors of development or process hide value-laden assumptions about thought, form, the writer, and the social world.

Let me think back to Quentin Pierce. Do I believe in the course represented in *Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts*—do I believe it is a reasonable way to manage his work as a reader and writer? Yes. I believe deeply in that course. At my school, it changes every time it is taught—with different readings, better writing assignments.

But in principle, I believe in the course. Someone else will have to produce its critique. I can't. At the same time, I should add that a similar course is being taught at a variety of levels of our curriculum at the University of Pittsburgh. It is also the mainstream composition course and an introductory course for majors. There are differences that could be called differences of "level" (for the students more accustomed to reading and writing, we choose assigned readings differently; the course moves at a different pace; sentence level error is treated differently). It is, however, the same course. And the students who are well-prepared could easily be said to need extra time and guidance in learning to see the limits of the procedures, protocols, and formats they take for granted—the topic sentence, reading for gist, the authority of the conclusion. The point is that while I believe in the course, I am not sure I believe in its institutional position as a course that is necessarily prior to or lesser than the mainstream course. Do I believe Quentin is served by being called a basic writer and positioned in the curriculum in these terms. I'm not sure I do.

I don't think we can ignore the role of the introductory writing course in preparing students to negotiate the full range of expectations in the university (as it reproduces the expectations of the dominant culture), including linguistic convention, correction, etc. Does this mean a separate course? No. Does it mean we identify and sort students in useful, even thoughtful ways? No.

There was much talk at the Maryland conference about abolishing basic writing and folding its students into the mainstream curriculum, providing other forms of support (tutorials, additional time, a different form of final evaluation). Karen Greenberg and I argued this point at the open session. I am suspicious, as I said then, of the desire to preserve "basic writing" as a key term simply because it is the one we have learned to think with or because it has allowed us our jobs or professional identities. I think it would be useful, if only as an exercise, to imagine a way of talking that called the term "basic writing" into question (even, as an exercise, to treat it as suspect). Would I advocate the elimination of courses titled "basic writing" for all postsecondary curricula beginning next fall? No. I fear what would happen to the students who are protected, served in its name. I don't, in other words, trust the institution to take this as an intellectual exercise, a challenge to rethink old ways. I know that the institution would be equally quick to rely upon an established and corrupt discourse (of "boneheads," of "true college material," of "remediation"); it would allow the return of a way of speaking that was made suspect by the

hard work and diligence of those associated with basic writing. As Shaughnessy told us, the first thing we would need to do to change the curriculum would be to change the way the profession talked about the students who didn't fit. Will I begin to formally question the status of basic writing at my own institution? Yes. In a sense, this was already begun several years ago by graduate students in our department, and by my colleague, Joe Harris.

I suppose what concerns me most is the degree to which a provisional position has become fixed, naturalized. "Basic writing," the term, once served a strategic function. It was part of an attempt to change the way we talked about students and the curriculum. We have lost our sense of its strategic value. "Basic writing," it seems to me, can best name a contested area in the university community, a contact zone, a place of competing positions and interests. I don't want to stand in support of a course designed to make those differences disappear or to hide contestation or to enforce divisions between high and low. It seems to me that the introductory curriculum can profitably be a place where professionals and students think through their differences in productive ways. I'm not sure more talk about basic writing will make that happen.

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Peter Dow Adams

## BASIC WRITING RECONSIDERED

**ABSTRACT:** *The author questions whether the benefits of separating basic writers into homogeneous classes continue to outweigh the disadvantages. To answer this question, he proposes that we gather data about the success rates of our current basic writing courses, revise freshman composition courses to insure they will be able to respond to a wider range of student abilities, and experiment with "mainstreaming" volunteer basic writers into freshman composition to study their success rates. His preliminary data on the success rates of students in basic writing courses at his school justify further investigation of this topic.*

Consider for a moment a comment made by a student on a teaching evaluation form. The student, whom I'll call Carla, wrote, "I'm really a bad writer, but my teacher thinks I'm a good writer, so this semester I have written good papers so that she won't find out how bad a writer I really am."<sup>1</sup> When I heard about Carla's comment at a conference recently, it immediately elevated my opinion of student evaluations and ultimately called into question my fundamental assumptions about basic writing. It is this second effect that I want to discuss in this paper.

Most of us who teach writing at the college level, and many who teach at the elementary and secondary level, have observed over the years that a widespread practice in American public schools—the tracking of students—is a dangerous one and can be justified only when the students being segregated have needs that cannot be met in a heterogeneous classroom. Imagine the effect on

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Carla if she had been placed in a basic writing course: we would have said to her, “We don’t expect you to be able to write well.” I wonder how Carla would have written in response to that message. Among the other dangers frequently pointed out, are the following:

- Students placed in lower tracks are often stigmatized in the eyes of their peers, their teachers, and themselves.
- Students placed in lower tracks may be demoralized by the experience and may perform to the expectation indicated by their placement.
- Students placed in lower tracks are often deprived of role models who are proficient at the subject matter and at the behaviors that are valued in schools; this danger is especially critical in environments using peer groups.
- Students placed in lower tracks are often then subjected to “dumbed down” materials and instructional approaches that insure they *never* catch up with their peers in other groups.
- In addition to the dangers listed above, students may be placed in lower tracks erroneously, compounding the tragedy.

While college-level teachers have generally agreed with the dangers of tracking in the public schools, we have perhaps not recognized the tracking system that most of us participate in daily: I am speaking, of course, of basic writing classes. It is a widespread practice in all but highly selective institutions to assess students’ writing abilities when they arrive on campus and to segregate them into writing classes according to those assessments. We may not think of this as tracking, but surely it is, and just as surely it involves all the dangers I listed earlier as inherent in tracking. Students placed in college-level basic writing classes frequently experience the same negative effects as their elementary and secondary school counterparts. And in many cases, they suffer these dangers in courses that *do not receive college credit*.

Despite these dangers, most colleges and universities have, over the past twenty years, developed basic writing programs that place weaker writers into programs—sometimes involving several semesters of courses—that amount to a tracking system. These programs have been designed with the best of intentions: to help basic writers become proficient college-level writers. The *dangers* associated with tracking have been seen as less compelling than the *benefits* that result from such programs, benefits such as the opportunity to tailor reading and writing assignments to the levels of the students and to address the frequency and severity of error

in these students' writing.

However, in those same twenty years, our understanding of how to teach basic writing has changed considerably. First, we have learned that most of the kinds of instruction we employed when we initially developed basic writing courses proved not very beneficial. We no longer spend semesters drilling students in grammar or requiring that they write a series of mechanical paragraphs conforming to prescriptive patterns. We have recognized the flaws of what Andrea Lunsford calls the "assembly-line" approach to teaching writing (first you master the sentence; then you work on paragraphs . . . ) (254).

Second, scholars as diverse as Patrick Hartwell and Glynda Hull have helped us recognize that error is best addressed in the context of writing and not in separate drills.

Third, work such as Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts* has demonstrated that good education occurs when "novices are asked to perform as experts" rather than when they are asked to perform simplistic or mechanistic tasks.

All these findings have gradually but consistently pushed the pedagogy of the basic writing classroom in one direction: toward that of the freshman composition classroom. As Pat Bizzell put it at the summer conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) in 1988, we are now teaching fairly much the same way whether we are teaching in a basic writing classroom, a freshman English classroom, or a senior writing seminar; students are writing, and we and they are talking about their writing. The *levels* of performance may differ but the *types* of performance demanded are quite similar.

And if what we are doing in the basic writing classroom is no longer significantly different from what we do in college-level writing classrooms, then the justification we once had for segregating basic writers may have evaporated. If we no longer have basic writers work through pages of drill and practice, if we no longer restrict basic writers to paragraph-length writing, if we no longer require basic writers to write mechanical five-paragraph essays, then we may have much less reason than we did in the past for employing what amounts to a tracking system.

I am not prepared to recommend that we discontinue basic writing courses and "mainstream" basic writers into freshman-level writing courses. For one thing, there is plenty of evidence that many students *are* being helped in significant ways by basic writing courses. But I do think it is time we begin to question seriously whether segregated basic writing classrooms are the *best*

environment for helping basic writers develop into proficient college-level writers.

Before we can answer this question we need to do three things:

- Gather systematic data on how successful our current approaches to basic writing are.
- Reexamine our freshman composition courses to insure that they will be able to respond to a wider range of student abilities. This might mean more individualized instruction, more workshop formats, more peer response groups, more writing center support, and less lecture/discussion in which everyone is assumed to have the same needs. But this is a direction in which most of us in freshman composition are moving anyhow.

We also need to give some thought to how we respond to students who fail freshman composition on their first attempt, because more of them probably will. It may be that having them repeat the same course is not the most positive response. It may turn out, for example, that special sections for students who have failed the course are in order, sections with smaller numbers of students and more individual attention perhaps. And I would argue that such sections are probably a good idea whether basic writers are taking freshman composition or not.

- Initiate pilot programs or experiments, which are rigorously evaluated, in which volunteer basic writers are mainstreamed into freshman English classes.

Two events seem to have conspired this past summer to provide the impetus for my beginning work on the first of these three tasks. At my community college's commencement last June, the usual eight to nine hundred students graduated, but only three students I had taught were among them, and all three of them had been in sophomore-level courses. Not one of my basic writers walked across the stage. And this year was not unlike each of the fourteen other graduations I have attended at Essex Community College. The absence of my basic writers at graduation set me to thinking. I wondered just how many students who take basic writing courses actually graduate, or even make it through English 101, for that matter.

The second event has, in fact, been building for the past year. Like most states, Maryland is experiencing extreme financial strain. Vacancies are remaining vacant, broken equipment is remaining broken, and faculty are learning the meaning of furloughs. And then, this summer, talk has begun of actually eliminating pro-

grams. Much to my surprise, the lower of our two basic writing courses is being mentioned as one of the possible cuts.

I was even more surprised to learn that my good friend Gardner Pond, the division chair of Social Sciences, was among those suggesting that our lower-level basic writing course might be eliminated, so I invited him to join me for dinner at my favorite Indian restaurant. During our discussion, Gardner confessed that he *did* think the course should probably be eliminated because “it just doesn’t work; it isn’t successful.” That assertion raised an interesting question for me: just what would Gardner consider “success” in such a course. Just what would I?

Let me pause here to outline the writing program at Essex. All students are required to pass English 101, freshman English, with a C or higher to graduate. Based on an assessment of writing skills, about 35% of our students are placed in the upper-level basic writing course and another 10% are placed in a lower-level basic writing course. This latter group, once they pass the lower-level course, must also pass the upper-level one. It is this lower-level basic writing course, into which our weakest writers are placed, about which questions have been raised.

Virtually all students at Essex are required to take the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) as the first stage of the assessment process. A number of us have attempted, so far unsuccessfully, to replace this multiple-choice test of grammar skills with one or more writing samples. But the TSWE remains our primary means of assessment because it can be administered and scored easily without the intervention of the English faculty. This means that a student driving around the Baltimore beltway, if seized by a desire for enlightenment, can turn off at exit 34, walk into the Human Development Building, be assessed in writing (and in math and reading) and be registered in under two hours. Without an appointment. From eight in the morning till eight at night. Twelve months out of the year. No waiting a week for the results of a writing sample. No having to come on a particular day when the writing assessment is being conducted. None of that. Instant gratification; instant registration. And, at a school where ease of access is a primary goal, it is extremely difficult to convince the community that we should change to a writing assessment that either takes several days to evaluate or that requires that students come on a particular day when a writing sample is being administered.

So we work around the TSWE. We assess virtually all students a second time by asking for a writing sample at the first class

meeting of each writing class so any errors in placement can be corrected. In addition, students who score within four points of our cutoff score for English 101 on the TSWE are urged to complete a writing sample, to insure that they are placed correctly, and any student who requests it, is allowed to complete a writing sample.

Now back to the question my friend Gardner Pond raised: what would we consider success for the basic writing course?

Let's assume that success for a student placed in the lower-level basic writing course is defined as passing both of the basic writing courses and passing English 101 with a C or higher. With that definition in mind, it's still not easy to answer Gardner's question. Think about it for a minute. These are students who have scored the lowest possible score on the TSWE. They are likely to be students attending college against very long odds. They are unlikely to have experienced much success in education. Their confidence and their motivation may be extremely shaky. Their personal lives often include job and family situations that compete with school for their attention. They may know little about how to "go about" being a student. Many of them have full-time jobs and/or are single parents.

And we are asking them to succeed in two semester-long basic writing courses, for which they receive no college credit, before they even attempt English 101. Further, many of them do not succeed in the basic writing courses on their first try, so it can be three, four, or even five semesters before they qualify for English 101.

With all this in mind, what percentage of these students would have to succeed—that is, pass the two basic writing courses and achieve a C or higher in English 101—to consider the lower-level basic writing course successful?

At the Indian restaurant that night, Gardner opined that surely 50% of the students should succeed. After some discussion, he was down to 25%, but that was about as low as he was going.

And, frankly, I don't know the answer myself. In fact, I don't even know how one would come up with the right answer. At dinner, I proposed a minimum of 10%. We teach about 200 students a year in the lower-level course. If 10% of them pass, I argued, that's 20 students who can actually succeed in college—who, without our basic writing course, would not have had a chance. Of course, we would like the rate to be higher, but, I argued, running ten sections a year to "save" 20 students a year is not unreasonable (you can tell I was getting worked up when I

started talking about “saving” students.) But I do know that this is a question the writing program at Essex is going to need to answer, and I would like to suggest, it is a question all of us in basic writing should be prepared to answer.

And of course, there is a second question. What percentage of our students *do* succeed in our basic writing programs? This, at least, is a question I know how to answer. It is a question that can be addressed by that old standby: data.

I'd like to suggest that we need to develop this kind of data and to share it with each other and with our colleagues in basic reading and math programs, so that we have some way of beginning to convince our well-meaning colleagues in other disciplines that expecting 50% of the bottom tier of basic writers to succeed is unrealistic. And I suggest that more and more of us are going to need to answer these questions as these budget difficulties continue. Most importantly, we are going to have to demonstrate our successes to our colleagues, to administrators, to government officials, and to taxpayers.

It may be that, at some schools, writing instructors can call up a computer center, tell someone what data they need, and a few days later receive a crisp, green and white printout with just the data they requested. If you have never tried to acquire data like this, let me warn you, it may be more difficult than you think. At my school, such data is extremely difficult to come by, if we get it at all, taking as long as six weeks. And when the data finally arrives, we usually find out we didn't ask exactly the right questions. So, we must revise our request and wait another six weeks for a second printout, which is likely also, not to tell us exactly what we want. What writing instructors need is to be able to sit down at the computer and ask it questions and then revise the questions depending on what we find out. And most mainframe computer operations just don't allow that, even if we knew how to do it.

So one thing I'd like to recommend is that we start collecting our own data on our own IBM, Apple, or Macintosh computers. In 1982, using an Apple IIe with an amazing 55K of memory, we began to collect data on the assessment and the grades of every student who was assessed or who took a writing course at Essex. What I want to convey here is how *easy* this is to do; every writing program in the country should, in my opinion, be collecting this kind of data. All that's required is a fairly standard data base—a program that is easy to learn and of which there are dozens for every kind of microcomputer—and a little effort. For each student you open a computer file and record that student's name, social

security number, assessment results, and the semester and grade for each writing course he or she takes. Once the system is set up, a work-study student can enter this data from photocopies of the grade rosters we all turn in at the end of each semester.

In 1982 we started such a data base because our mainframe computer could not help us enforce our assessment and placement system. We wanted to be able to look students up in the computer and determine which writing course they should be in. But shortly after setting the system up, we found we had a powerful tool on our hands, one that we could use to answer questions about how well our program was working.

Back in the eighties, answering such questions seemed interesting but not essential. Now, in the nineties, we'll need to come up with such answers as our programs, just like lots of others, undergo scrutiny from those charged with finding ways to save money.

We now maintain our data base on a Macintosh with a hard disk drive. Using this equipment, in one weekend I was able to learn a considerable amount about the success of our lower-level basic writing course. Table 1 shows the percentage of students placed in each of the three levels of writing courses in calendar years 1988 and 1989.

**Table 1**  
**Results of Assessment, January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**

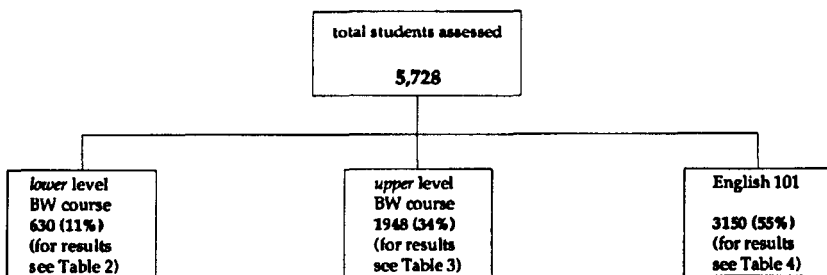
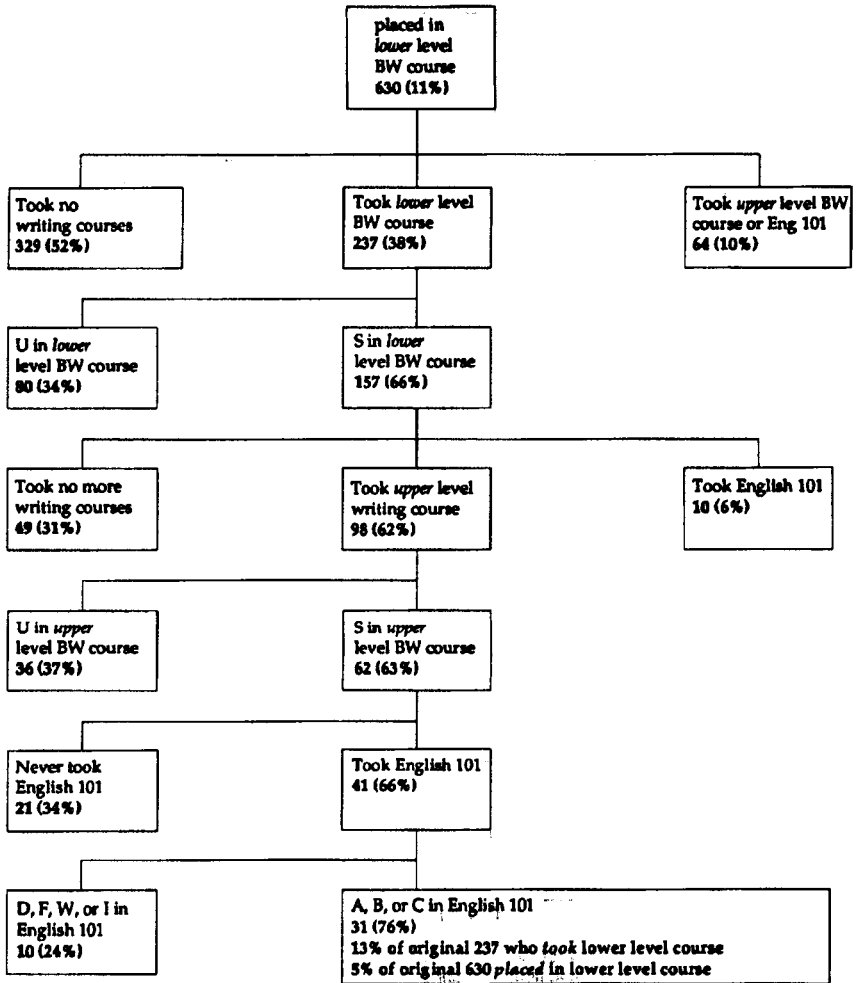


Table 2 provides a breakdown of the experience of those students placed in the lower-level basic writing course. We were startled to find that 329 of the 630 (52%) students assessed and placed in the lower-level writing course never took any writing course at Essex. We don't, of course, know why these students never took a writing course, but it seems likely that discovering they needed to take two noncredit courses before they would be



**Table 2**  
**Results for Students Placed in Lower-Level BW Course,**  
**January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**

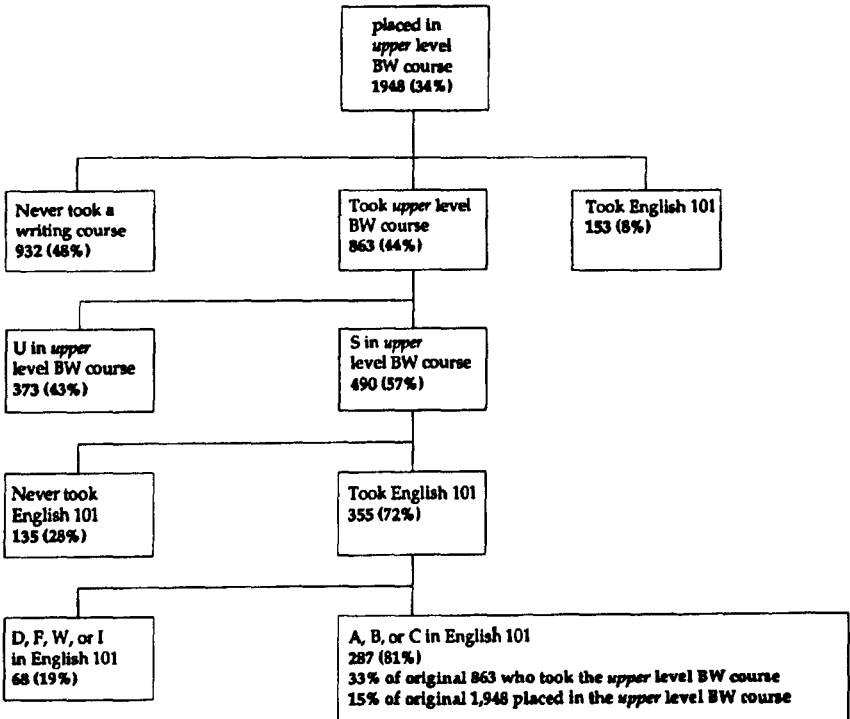


allowed even to attempt freshman English was an important factor in their decisions. This percentage drops to 48% for students who were initially placed in the upper-level basic writing courses (Table 3) and to 38% for those placed directly into freshman English (Table 4). All these percentages were much larger than we expected and certainly deserve further investigation, but it is clear that the lower the placement, the greater the chance that a student who came to be assessed in writing would never even attempt a writing course.

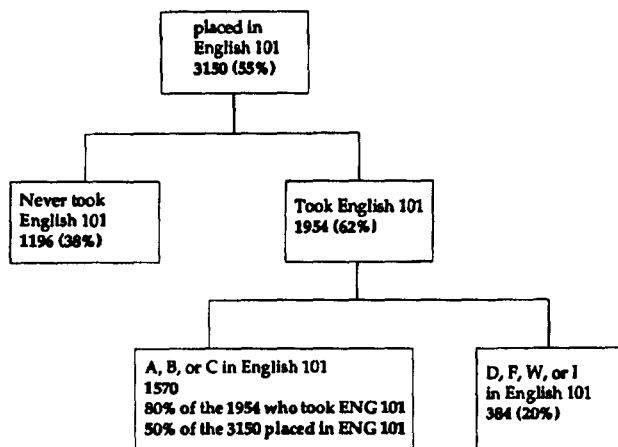
Table 2 also answers most directly our original question about the success rate of students placed in the lower-level basic writing course. Of the 41 students who took freshman composition, 31 (76%) passed, which suggests that students who pass the two basic writing courses *are* prepared for college-level writing. However, these 31 students are a mere 5% of the original 630 placed in the lower-level course and only 13% of those who actually *took* the lower-level course. These success rates are certainly not a ringing endorsement of the program, but just how to interpret them requires data on the success rates of other students for comparison.

Table 3 provides comparable data for students initially placed in the upper-level basic writing course. At the bottom of this table, we find that 33% of the students who took the upper-level course ultimately achieved a C or higher in English 101 (compared to 13% of those placed in the lower-level course). These 287 stu-

**Table 3**  
**Results for Students Placed in Upper-Level BW Course,**  
**January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**



**Table 4**  
**Results for Students Placed in Freshman English Course,**  
**January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**

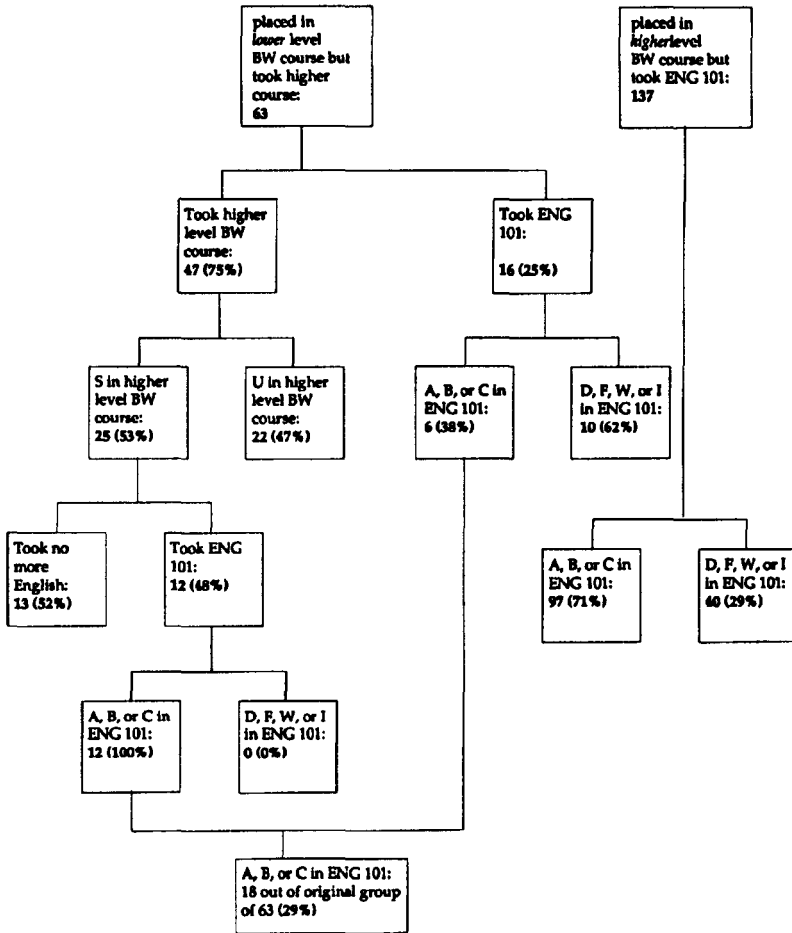


dents constituted 15% of the original group who were placed in the upper-level course. These students succeeded at close to three times the rate of those placed originally in the lower-level course, but, of course, they did arrive with higher level writing skills.

Table 4 shows comparable data for students initially placed in freshman composition. Eighty percent of those who took English 101 achieved a C or higher, which constituted 50% of those who were originally placed in the course.

These comparisons make the success rates for the lower-level course look fairly disappointing, but then we are comparing apples and oranges; we're comparing the weakest writers with those who have been assessed as better writers. However, until we begin to allow basic writers directly into freshman composition, it will be difficult to find similar groups of students to compare with. Difficult but not altogether impossible. A small number of students, originally placed in basic writing courses, found a way to evade our placement system and take higher-level courses, for which we had declared them unqualified. Table 5 provides a look at the success rates of these students. Of those students placed in the lower-level basic writing course but who took the *higher*-level course anyhow, 18 out of 63 (29%) ultimately succeeded in ENG 101, more than double the success rate for students who were placed in the lower-level course and took it. Of those students placed in the upper-level basic writing course but who took freshman composition despite their placement, 97 out of 137 (71%)

**Table 5**  
**Results for Students Who Took a Course Higher Than the One**  
**They Were Placed In, January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**



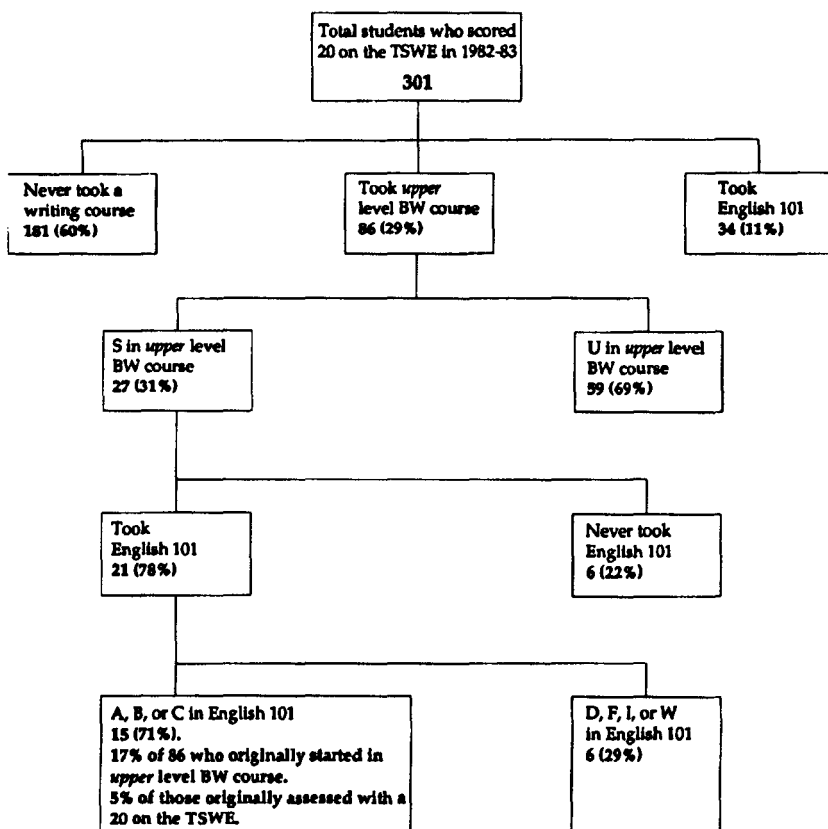
succeeded in freshman composition, again more than double the success rate of those placed in the course who took it (33%).

These data would seem to indicate that students' chances of succeeding in the writing program are actually reduced by taking basic writing courses in which they are placed. However, a word of caution is in order. The students who managed to evade the placement system and take courses for which we had determined they were not qualified were not necessarily typical of students placed in basic writing courses. They may well have had much

stronger self-esteem than the typical basic writing student; they may have known that they had not made much effort on the placement exam; or they may have been atypical in other ways. So we cannot assume that this small sample represents what would happen if all basic writers were mainstreamed in freshman composition. Nevertheless, their success rates do raise questions which need to be answered before we decide that separating weak writers into basic writing classes is in their best interest.

We were fortunate to have data on one other group of students who could be compared with the students placed in the lower-level basic writing course. Until 1984, Essex did not offer a lower-level basic writing course, so all basic writers were placed in the

**Table 6**  
**Results for Students Who Scored 20 on TSWE Before**  
**Lower-Level BW Course Existed and So Were Placed in**  
**Upper-Level Writing Course**



upper-level course. We did, however, maintain a data base on all students even then. Table 6 reports the results of students who scored 20 on the TSWE, and hence would have been placed in the lower-level course had it existed, but who were placed in the upper-level course because that was all that was offered.

These students are the most similar to students placed in the lower-level course today. In fact, a larger percentage of them—17% as compared to 13% of today's students, who had to take the lower-level course—actually succeeded in passing freshman composition with a C or higher. As with the other comparisons, these data are not conclusive but they certainly raise questions about the effectiveness of our basic writing courses, in this case, the lower-level course.

All too often, research raises more questions than it answers, and this is certainly the case with this study. We would like to know what happened to that enormous group of students who dropped out without ever taking a course at all? Did most of them drop out of college altogether? Or did most of them end up in some other school? Is there anything we can and should do to reduce the size of this group? And what about the successful students who take courses above those they are placed in? Are they unusual in significant ways?

But most important, we need to know whether more basic writers would ultimately succeed in freshman composition if they were mainstreamed into it? This question can only be answered through an extensive research effort in which, under rigorous experimental conditions, we allow basic writers who volunteer, to move directly into freshman-level writing courses and study how they do. The results of this preliminary investigation would seem to justify such further studies.

So let's return to Carla for a minute—the student whose teacher thought she was a good writer. Think about the message we are sending to Carla and her classmates when we place them in basic writing courses: they may logically interpret our actions as saying that we do not expect “good writing” from them. Surely it is worth some investigation to see if sending a different message by letting Carla and her classmates directly into freshman composition might not give them the confidence and the challenge they need to produce “good writing.”

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Reported anonymously at the annual conference of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) at Austin, Texas, on May 23, 1989.

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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 clichéd 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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Jerrie Cobb Scott

## LITERACIES AND DEFICITS REVISITED

**ABSTRACT:** *This article identifies two factors that contribute to the recycling of deficit pedagogy in programs designed for what Rose calls "students on the boundary." The first factor is traditional, technocratic definitions of literacy, viewed here as a mechanism for importing deficit theories into the content of instructional programs and accounting partially for the "missed" education of marginalized students, including students in basic writing programs. Shifting the focus to the "mis-education" of teachers, the discussion explores the second factor: "uncritical dysconsciousness," defined as the acceptance, sometimes unconsciously, of culturally sanctioned beliefs that, regardless of good intentions, defend the norms, superiority, and privileges of the dominant group. The paper challenges basic writing professionals to move to a higher level of critical consciousness in designing and implementing a pedagogy of success, thereby eliminating recycling deficits into programs designed for marginalized students.*

Why do we continue to revisit the issue of deficit pedagogy, particularly in programs designed for what Rose calls "students on the boundary?" It is reasonable to assume that we have either failed to get to the root of the problem or refused to accept the explanations offered. In this discussion, I identify two factors that

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contribute to the recycling of deficit pedagogy in basic writing and other programs targeted for marginalized students. The first factor is traditional, technocratic definitions of literacy, viewed here as a mechanism for importing deficit theories into the content of instructional programs, resulting in the “missed education” of marginalized students. The second factor has to do with attitudes that pervasively but persistently resist change, notably in the delivery of instruction. To explore attitudinal effects on pedagogy, I offer the concept of “uncritical dysconsciousness,” defined as the acceptance, sometimes unconsciously, of culturally sanctioned beliefs that, regardless of good intentions, defend the advantages of insiders and the disadvantages of outsiders. Throughout the second part of the paper, I present “think abouts” to challenge professionals working in basic writing programs to move to a higher level of critical consciousness and toward nondeficit approaches to programs targeted for marginalized students.

### **Definitions of Literacy**

One clear linguistic indicator of an important societal problem is the redefinition of terms. Certainly “literacy” has been redefined often enough over the last two decades to give us pause. Do we need yet another definition? What does the term literacy really mean? And, have the various definitions moved us to a point of meaninglessness rather than meaningfulness? This discussion is less concerned with the precise definitions of literacy than with their effects on our approaches to instruction.

Narrow definitions of literacy, or even the perception of only one kind of literacy, account in part for deficit approaches to instructional programs designed for students who either fail in schools or are failed by the schools. For example, remedial or developmental programs, including basic writing programs, often identify their target population in relation to the narrow definition of literacy, the ability to read or write. At the outset, then, such programs assume that the learner has deficiencies that must be remediated. Based on the logic that these deficiencies can be precisely diagnosed, the next logical step is to prescribe methods for correcting the deficiencies. We now know that it is merely wishful thinking that allows us to assume that learning processes are so neatly packaged, or that we have reached a level of understanding of learning that allows us to pinpoint discrete skills and a sequence for learning that has psychological reality for any one learner, much less a whole group of learners.

The notion of “unpacking literacy” (Scribner and Cole) can

be found in evolving definitions of literacy, some of which support and others that reject deficit approaches to instruction. In support of deficit approaches to instruction for nonmainstream groups is the view that explains literacy in terms of membership in advanced, high-tech cultures, particularly those that use an alphabetic writing system (Ong; Goody and Watt). This way of defining literacy leads us to a division among the cultures of the world—literate vs. oral cultures; it is inherently biased against oral literacy. Culture is also discussed in relation to the term “cultural literacy,” the Hirschian model (Hirsch, 1987). While expanding the definition of literacy to include knowledge, the Hirschian viewpoint is biased toward the shared knowledge base of the dominant group or, more accurately, information and facts that the dominant group stores. If this viewpoint is carried into pedagogy, it can easily import the baggage of a deficit pedagogy, precisely because it makes unimportant the knowledge base of different subcultures within a diverse society.

Rapidly gaining attention among language educators are definitions of literacy that are not inherently biased against certain groups and that support nondeficit approaches to instruction. One such term is critical literacy, defined as neither a skill nor membership in a particular group, but an act—the act of socially transforming oneself to the level of active participation in and creation of a culture. Emphasis is placed on the use of creative and critical sensibilities of the general culture as well as its subcultures, to include nonmainstream groups. From the Freireian perspective, the importance of literacy rests with the ways we use reading, writing, and speaking skills so that our understanding of the world is progressively enlarged (Freire).

Work in anthropological studies, note Bloome and Green, argues for “reconsideration and redefinition of what counts as literacy in the broad sense, and literacy learning and pedagogy more specifically” (2). Similar views are held by scholars of this persuasion.

[They] share a rejection of technocratic views of literacy and education. They reject the view that literacy consists of decontextualized cognitive and linguistics skills and that becoming literate is defined by the acquisition of skills. Instead, literacy and education are viewed as social and cultural practices and actions that vary across cultures, communities, and across situations even within the same setting. Thus, there are multiple literacies rather than a single literacy and individuals may be literate in multiple ways. (2)

A point not to be overlooked about these various ways of defining literacy is that each definition varies according to purposes for defining. Bloome suggests an instructionally motivated purpose for anthropological studies: "The promise and substance of anthropologically based research on teaching the English language arts lie, in large part, in the possibilities and vision it yields for social equality in and through educational settings" (2).

I believe that instructionally motivated definitions of literacy are best conceptualized in ways that include the do's and can do's of the population to be served, rather than their weaknesses or differences from other groups deemed successful. Concerned that narrow definitions of literacy, e.g., the ability to read or write, yield instructional models often targeted toward problems associated with ways that nonmainstream groups differ linguistically and culturally from mainstream groups, I set out to define literacy broadly enough to be inclusive of multiple literacies and diverse ways of using literacies by different groups.

Thus, I define literacy as ways of knowing, accessing, creating, and using information. Literacy is neither a product nor a finite state, but a process that changes in response to different contexts. From this perspective, reading and writing are two important tools of literacy, particularly in a print-oriented society such as ours. There are, however, other tools of literacy, including oral and visual skills that can be represented in both print and nonprint forms.

This view of literacy has worked well in my own work, yielding a variety of models that seek to enhance multiple sensibilities through multisensory perceptions. One example is the Visual-Print Literacy model (Scott, Davis, and Walker). Developed in collaboration with an artist, Willis Davis, this instructional program encourages students to access information from both visual and verbal texts, to create meaning—multiple meanings, and to use those meanings to read the different messages in their personal, social, and academic worlds. It is important that the visual-print literacy program, as well as others, evolve from a definition of literacy that rejects deficit approaches to instruction.

In short, my definition of literacy, along with those that basically reject the technocratic orientation mentioned by Bloome, guards against importing the negative baggage of deficits into instruction, thereby allowing for instructional content that might otherwise be reserved for the so-called gifted or normative group. Narrowly defined definitions constrain content to what is perceived as simple, but is experienced as boring, insignificant, irrelevant, and nonchallenging to all, including basic writers.

## Attitudes and Uncritical Dysconsciousness

Widely acknowledged is the pervasive manner in which attitudes affect instruction. From self-fulfilling prophecies, a recurring theme of the 1960s and 1970s, to their behavioral manifestations in student-teacher interactions discussed widely in applied anthropological linguistics of the 1980s and the early 1990s, attitudes may be seen as a mechanism for resisting change. As we approach the twenty-first century with a more rigorous agenda for change, we are challenged toward greater understanding of how attitudes affect teaching and learning.

Clearly, the research on linguistic and cultural diversity has played a significant role in the restructuring of curricula, including the integration of information about language differences into language instruction for ethnically and socially diverse students and the infusion of multicultural content across disciplines. Nevertheless, many questions regarding attitudes as mechanisms for resisting change remain unanswered, leaving the problem of deficit approaches to instruction for marginalized groups unresolved.

Without reviewing the literature on attitudes, suffice it here to say that we know more about what the negative attitudes are than about how to change them. Noting the importance of the "will to educate all children" to effective education in a pluralistic society, Hilliard calls for deep restructuring:

Deep restructuring is a matter of drawing up an appropriate vision of human potential, of the design of human institutions, of the creation of a professional work environment, of the linkage of school activities and community directions, of creating human bonds in the operation of appropriate socialization activities, and of aiming for the stars for the children and for ourselves academically and socially....The beauty and promise of true restructuring is that it will provide us with the opportunity to create educational systems that never have existed before, not because they were hard to create but because we have not yet made manifest the vision or tried to create them. (35)

The vision of creating educational systems that never existed is widely sought after, as evidenced in the New American Schools program's (1991) call for break-the-mold innovations in educational programs, presumably changes that will address the needs of a diverse student population. However, as Hilliard's explanation of deep restructuring suggests, restructuring is needed not only at the level of content, but also at the level of attitudes that

ultimately determine how the content will be delivered.

The three examples below illustrate what can happen if we limit restructuring efforts to surface level changes in the curriculum: (1) linguistic differences, cast in the traditional delivery mold, treat differences as deficits (Scott, 1992); (2) literature-based reading programs, delivered in the same manner as basal programs—popularly referred to as the basalization of whole language approaches, import the same pedagogical problems that the literature-based programs sought to resolve; and (3) a reductionist approach to multicultural education lends itself to a devaluing, rather than an appreciation and understanding, of the richness and potential unifying dimensions of diversity. The challenge, I submit, is to find ways to bring about deep restructuring to accompany the surface-level restructuring of curricula. And this will require a fuller understanding of various forms of marginalization.

There is now a growing body of literature in the areas of racism, sexism, and classism that has implications for the more general problem of marginalization. Moreover, it appears that this work could be of use to teachers. I offer here some notions about “uncritical dysconsciousness,” not as models but as “think abouts.” Think first about the term uncritical dysconsciousness, a phrase coined from critical consciousness and dysconsciousness. “Critical consciousness,” notes King, “involves an ethical judgment about the social order,” whereas dysconsciousness is “an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (154). Broadening the two terms to cover various forms of marginalization, I use uncritical dysconsciousness to refer to the acceptance, sometimes unconsciously, of culturally sanctioned beliefs that, regardless of intent, defend the advantages of insiders and the disadvantages of outsiders. As teachers, we tend to operate without questioning the extent to which practices deviate from the ideal, socially sanctioned ideologies of society or how our individual processes of self-identity interplay with the self-identity of students. To fail to critically examine the practiced vs. the preached ideologies of society or the student vs. the teacher’s self-identity is to support, through uncritical dysconsciousness, the recycling of attitudes that resist changes that benefit those marginalized in school systems.

What can be gleaned from discussions of ideology and self-identity is that we have largely focused on one side of the marginalization coin—the problems, ideologies, and identity of outsiders, resulting in a pattern of defining problems in relation to

inequities experienced by the disadvantaged but finding solutions in the ways and means of the advantaged. On the other side of the coin, there also exist problems, ideologies, identities among insiders. We might think about exposing both sides of the coin, thereby providing a more balanced picture of what needs to be changed and a fuller understanding of resistances to change, or more specifically, the staying power of deficit pedagogy for marginalized students.

In the article "Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity and the Mis-education of Teachers," King illustrates how a group of preservice teachers, accustomed to accepting the ideals of the democratic ethic, may readily accept what Tatum calls the myth of meritocracy: the belief in a just society where individual efforts are fairly rewarded. Focusing on ethnically based marginalization, King found that her students tended to link racism to either the distant past—slavery, individual cases of denial, or lack of equal opportunity—or to normative patterns of discrimination. King concludes that these responses show the general failure to recognize structural inequities built into the social order. Of importance to this discussion, the responses point to the ease with which one can ignore the differences between the practiced and the preached ideologies of society. Teachers can easily move toward a sense of hopelessness because of their inability to change the past, their understanding of the problem as individual cases of discrimination for which they are not responsible, and their social distance from the problem. Further, if attention is focused on only the experiences of outsiders, in this case African Americans, it becomes easy to provide a rationale for deficiencies. Despite the 1970s and 1980s preachings and teachings about differences, rather than deficits, Hull, Rose, Fraser, and Castellano explain that, "We struggle within a discourse that yearns for difference, and difference, in our culture, slides readily toward judgments of better-or-worse, dominance, Otherness" (24).

To rectify the problem of conflicts between practiced and ideal ideologies, King suggests the use of counterknowledge strategies that allows teachers to consciously examine their ideologies about "otherness." I am suggesting that one way to hurdle the difference-transformed-to-deficit obstacle and the self-fulfilling-prophecy pattern is by providing a context for examining the democratic ethic of social equality from the point of view of both the advantaged and disadvantaged, looking particularly at who benefits and who suffers from structural inequities that are built into the social order and allowed to have a practical existence that

contradicts the culturally sanctioned ideals of society. By examining societal ideologies from both perspectives, it should be possible to diffuse the thinking that confuses differences with deficits, a confusion that serves to justify the recycling of deficit pedagogy.

We also have an imbalance in the focus on self-identity. A good deal of attention has been given to the development of self-identity among nonmainstream groups—how for example, identity influences resistances to change toward the norms of the dominant group, including language (Ogbu). Looking at only the student side of the identity issue, it is easy to overlook the teacher side. Regardless of the qualifying basis for marginalization—ethnic group, gender, religion, income, or membership in developmental or remedial programs—self-identity will vary among individuals within a group as well as across groups. Moreover we each move in and out of marginalized status, teachers and students alike. Teachers in basic writing programs, for example, often share their students' sense of marginalization. Having linked self-identity to attitudes that affect student-teacher interactions, I suggest that exposure to various ways that individuals develop self-identity would provide a more balanced and useful way of understanding interactions among people in general and between teachers and students in particular.

Focusing on ethnically based marginalization, Tatum's discussion of the development of self-identity illustrates the importance of viewing self-identity from the dual perspectives of outsiders and insiders. In her analysis of stages in the development of White and Black racial identity, she uses a journal entry of a White male to illustrate the first stage of White racial identity development, the Contact stage. This stage is characterized by the lack of awareness of cultural and institutional racism and of White privileges, and "includes curiosity about or fear of people of color, based on stereotypes learned from friends, family, or the media" (13). She uses the journal entry of an African American female to illustrate the first stage of Black racial identity, the Preencounter stage. In this stage the African American absorbs many of the beliefs and values of the dominant group. Both journal entries were produced in a psychology course that treats issues of racism, classism, and sexism:

As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage....I was taught to



see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group. (Tatum, 13)

For a long time it seemed as if I didn't remember my background, and I guess in some ways I didn't. I was never taught to be proud of my African heritage.... I went through a very long stage of identifying with my oppressors. Wanting to be like, live like, and be accepted by them. Even to the point of hating my own race and myself for being a part of it. Now I am ashamed that I ever was ashamed. I lost so much of myself in my denial of and refusal to accept my people. (10)

The final stage of each group represents a comfort zone that facilitates interactions across groups. For African Americans, the internalization/commitment stage is characterized by a positive sense of racial identity, sustained over time, allowing the individual to practically perceive and transcend racism and to develop and execute a plan of action. For White Americans, autonomy, the final stage, is marked by racial self-actualization, an ongoing process that leads continually to new ways of thinking and behaving regarding racism.

Three points are of special interest to this discussion: first, Taylor's discussion shows the problem of attitudes to be so deeply rooted that students resist talking about them; second, a process is involved for both mainstream and nonmainstream students, ending with behaviors that are more accepting of differences; and third, variations in identity development may be seen as potential sources of conflicts between members of different ethnic groups, and implicationally between students and teachers, as each brings different sets of self-qualifiers to the classroom setting. In essence, the questions of, "Who am I?" and, "Who are you?" affect interactions between teachers and students.

Tatum suggests that resistances can be reduced and development promoted by creating a safe classroom atmosphere and opportunities for self-generated knowledge, and by providing a model to enhance understanding of one's own processes and that utilizes strategies that empower one to act as change agents. I am suggesting that more attention be given to discovering how self-identity of teachers and students affects the context for learning. If treated as tendencies that people follow when their status is viewed as marginalized or nonmarginalized, the developmental stages may serve as a heuristic device for exploring deeply rooted attitudes that allow the resurfacing of deficit approaches. To "think about"

is the question of how different ways of defining oneself affect student-teacher interaction in the classroom and therefore the delivery of educational programs. Drawing on different sources of information, e.g., racism, sexism, classism, it is possible to generalize findings to the broader issues of marginalization, student-teacher interaction, and the kinds of changes needed to produce learning environments where students and teachers of diverse backgrounds confront the problems of resistance that negatively affect student-teacher interactions. No matter how the surface structures of the curriculum are restructured, without deep restructuring we can expect problems in the delivery of instruction.

In this era of new democracies and transformed curricula, it will be important to move toward a balanced treatment of attitudes, one that actually allows us to see both sides of the marginalization coin. To fail to do so is to continue to struggle with the ills of uncritical dysconsciousness. In no way can we expect educational reforms in curriculum to bring about educational changes, without also addressing the attitudes that shape the context for learning. We need, as Hilliard notes, "deep restructuring," and that involves the restructuring of frames for thinking about marginalization and changing practices that recycle deficits.

Why do we continue to revisit the issue of deficit pedagogy, particularly in relation to programs designed for students on the boundary? This presentation suggests not an answer, but different ways of thinking about the roots of the problem. Evolving definitions of literacy allow us to think differently about how definitions affect pedagogy. The notion of uncritical dysconsciousness challenges us to think about attitudes that are embedded in a complex matrix of societal ideologies and individual stages in the development of self-identity, two of the areas that can affect the effectiveness with which we deliver restructured instructional programs. The bottom line is that both knowledge and the care we take in delivering knowledge are important. Simply, very simply, students don't care what we know unless they know we care.

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Jeanne Gunner

## THE STATUS OF BASIC WRITING TEACHERS: DO WE NEED A “MARYLAND RESOLUTION”?

*ABSTRACT: Unlike the Wyoming Resolution, the professional statements that have been issued in recent years have enabled certain professional groups to gain status and power over the composition/rhetoric profession at large; unfortunately, their interests do not necessarily complement the interests of basic writing professionals. Basic writing teachers must consider the negative effects of the lack of such professional definition, particularly the lack of our influence within the larger field. By considering a “Maryland Resolution,” we can address our status problem and, more importantly, join in reasserting the value of teaching as our primary professional purpose.*

The professional conversation that goes on in journals, conferences, and the meetings of special-interest groups has recently been very taken up with the issue of professional self-definition, prompted by concerns about professional status. What has emerged as a tool in this struggle for professional status is a particular rhetorical form—the professional statement or resolution, of which there have been three major examples: the Wyoming Resolution, the CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards, and the Writing Program Administrators’ Portland Resolution.

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For those of us in basic writing, three problematic issues arise from this phenomenon of professional statements: 1) we don't have one, which means that we have not been participating in the professional conversation as a professional group, which means in turn we have not constructed a professional definition or defense of basic writing in the specific form adopted by other professional groups, and we have instead been existing as subalterns within the larger profession; 2) the statements that have been published speak not at all or at best tangentially to and for our interests in basic writing, and yet by this default they still represent us professionally; and 3) the three available statements offer competing views of the profession, and the one currently holding sway—the CCCC Statement—does not serve the best interests of basic writing and basic writing professionals; in fact, I would argue, it actively threatens us as a professional field. Thus the question that forms the focus of this argument: Do we need a Maryland Resolution to address our status problem and represent the interests and values of teachers of basic writing?

The Wyoming Conference, the CCCC, the Council of Writing Program Administrators—all have produced a document that defines their membership and calls for recognition of their professional worth. I think it will be worthwhile for those of us in basic writing to look at the three major statements to examine what they have achieved for the groups they represent, and then to address the issue of developing a statement of our own.

Of the three statements, the Wyoming Resolution speaks most broadly and most eloquently (and, I might add, most briefly) about the demoralizing and debilitating effects of the poor working conditions and lack of professional respect that composition teachers collectively often experience. But what has the document actually achieved? Three major successes, I think: Most importantly, it created profession-wide recognition of the problems faced by the professionally marginalized and the solutions they desired. Through the resolution, marginalized faculty exercised their right to be heard by the larger professional group, to be identified with that group, and to be incorporated into it via its system of resolution, discussion, committee formation, voting, and adoption. In other words, the Wyoming Resolution entered the system of the professional organization. By doing so, it helped constitute as an influential professional group within the CCCC the people whose views and interests it represented.

As a second achievement, the Wyoming Resolution generated a high level of solidarity among writing teachers when it was pre-

sented to the profession at large, joining the different strands of the profession, the part-time through the tenured. It helped diverse members of the profession align themselves with each other, transcending institutional differences and defining a shared professional foundation through the call for equitable salary and working conditions for teachers of writing.

What the original resolution emphasizes is that term: teachers. In its three sentences, the Wyoming Resolution cites the word “teachers” or “teaching” seven times. Thus the third critical achievement of the Wyoming Resolution was professional validation: it was the first professional statement to cite teaching as our defining activity, our most important function, our primary interest. By so doing, it demanded respect for teaching as a professional activity at the postsecondary level. It attempted to legitimize what we do as serious academic work worthy of recognition within institutions of higher education—recognition as it exists within such institutions, in pay and other material signs of status.

In these three achievements—professional self-definition, solidarity, and professional recognition of teaching—the Wyoming Resolution spoke to the interest of basic writing professionals. I say “spoke,” past tense, because the resolution is no longer a viable professional statement, despite its original powerful impact. The marginalized faculty whose concerns generated the Wyoming Resolution became so much a part of the professional conversation that they threatened to become a central voice and force in it. As James Sledd has argued, the Wyoming Resolution threatened to become too powerful, endangering the exploitative labor practices that support the privileged status of what Sledd calls the “boss compositionists” (275). The group of professionals whose privileges had been indirectly attacked provided the ideological direction for the next document, the CCCC Statement. As in the power generated by the Wyoming Resolution, the Professional Standards Committee used the established method of gaining professional power—it defined a set of values, sought recognition, and asserted itself as the profession’s voice, speaking both to higher administration explicitly (in the mass mailing to deans and chairs) and implicitly to the profession as a whole, claiming for itself the right to define the profession’s prevailing interests and values (see Gunner, “Fate”).

Thus the CCCC Statement has supplanted the Wyoming Resolution and the group constructed by it, preserving traditional professional privilege by shifting the focus of professional concern and discussion away from teachers and teaching and toward

a preoccupation with the research and tenure process. For those who endorse this view of the profession, the CCCC Statement serves as a unifying code, a statement of values, self-definition, and definition of self to others.

The next national resolution, the Portland Resolution, developed under the aegis of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, is modeled on the CCCC Statement (its formal title is also "Statement of Principles and Standards," with an appended subtitle of "Guidelines for Writing Program Administrator Positions"). The group represented by the Portland Resolution again followed the same path of professional self-construction and empowerment by going through the statement, presentation, and endorsement process. In detailing guidelines for the WPA's terms of employment, the Portland Resolution encodes professional values and establishes consensus and precedents for the conditions of WPA positions, thus claiming for its constituents the right to define explicitly the position and the field.

What CCCC and WPA have done is to wrest responsibility for their fields from the general profession of English studies and to assert themselves as distinct, self-governing entities responsible for a defined area of the larger field and functioning as unified groups with their own agenda, values, and ways of operating. As a result, each group has gained power, authority, and status within the profession. The CCCC has been especially effective in constituting itself as the reigning professional voice of composition and rhetoric, in part by adopting the same institutional practices as the Modern Language Association. Its success can be measured by considering the extent to which the MLA has been forced to recognize and incorporate into its own system the members and the agenda of the CCCC.

The CCCC and WPA documents focus on the professional group itself—not on students, curriculum, theoretical frameworks, or, heaven forbid, ethics, all of which are central to the text and spirit of the Wyoming Resolution. The Wyoming Resolution is finally not so much a professional statement as it is an ethical appeal to the profession to defend teachers and teaching. It is perhaps then not surprising that it has done so little in material terms for the disenfranchised faculty who inspired it. It is not written in such a way that it forms a recognizable group of professionals who have the means to organize themselves and exert influence within the profession. By speaking in terms of teachers and students, it separates its constituents from the system of professional power, a position that we in basic writing will find familiar.

The problem with the professional demise of the Wyoming Resolution and the ascendancy of statements like those put forth by the CCCC and WPA is that they do not represent the interests and values of those of us in basic writing. The concerns of teachers of basic writing as a distinct professional group have not been part of the professional discussion; clearly, we have failed to make an impact on the profession at large. Our failure, I argue, is due to the fact that we have yet to constitute ourselves as a professional group. Instead, we have been content with our identity as composition's version of the Peace Corps, volunteer teachers going into the educational hinterlands to do good in the face of appalling conditions, assuaging the larger profession's social guilt, and expected to find our labor its own reward. In other words, we have to this point defined ourselves in ethical, not professional, terms. While we are likely to find the Wyoming Resolution the professional statement most congenial and relevant to our situation in basic writing—one of low status, poor working conditions, ill-defined terms of employment, and overall exploitation having a deleterious effect on our efforts to teach students to write—the differing outcomes of the Wyoming Resolution and the CCCC and WPA statements tell us that we must move beyond a stance based on ethics alone. Without sounding overly cynical, I'd like to suggest that our profession operates for the most part in material, not ethical or idealistic ways. Thus it is time for us to formulate a stand on who we are in relation to the rest of the profession and to define ourselves and our field in the rhetorical form which the profession has adopted, the language of the resolution. And thus the question, "Do we need a 'Maryland Resolution'?" a statement that says who we are, what we do, and why we matter, a statement that constructs us as a presence and force in the profession at large.

Without this self-definition, we face a continuing lack of status that stems from our being narrowly associated with the classroom and curriculum. In the past, some of us have hoped that our professional status would improve with the rise of basic writing theory and theoreticians; in recent years, basic writing has come to incorporate multiple research orientations and theoretical frameworks. Yet as the research and theoretical work has grown, we have not seen an accompanying elevation in the field's academic status. Rather, the inverse has occurred: researchers and theoreticians who began as basic writing professionals have allied themselves with more status-bearing professional groups, leaving basic writing behind. We suffer from what can be termed the Prufrock syndrome: we remain invisible, useful but unimportant, while the



Prince Hamlets of the profession rise above our field. To be fair, there are those who have maintained their commitment, the conference keynote speaker being one major example. But it seems clear that we will not see our professional status improve through the reflected glory of theoreticians; their work is not redefining us in a way that will resolve our status problem.

And probably we should not seek a way into the profession that does not reflect our actual practice. If the teaching of composition in general differs in one way from the teaching of literature by virtue of the amount of time spent in close contact with students and their written work, then the teaching of basic writing represents a radical extension of this difference and stands apart from freshman and advanced composition teaching in the proportion of hours that we must devote to students, as a class and individually. Yet the prevailing professional statement, the CCCC Statement, enshrines research, not teaching, as the validating professional activity. Therefore, it is in our interest to work against an elitist trend in the profession, to reassert the value of teaching, especially the kind that has been derided in the past as "in the trenches," and to revive the voice of Wyoming. We can do this through a basic writing resolution, helping to swing the professional pendulum back to a commitment to diversity and demystification of the academy. This kind of self-definition, then, is the first step we need to take in seeking professional status.

The second step involves seeking a national presence. A further source of our current status problems lies in the fact that on the national level, we are a weak voice in the professional organizations. As members of the Conference on Basic Writing (CBW), we are a special interest group of the CCCC. "Special interest group" is another way of saying minority, which is another way of saying marginalized, contained, and disempowered. Our special interest group status has the effect of insulating us from the larger and more powerful organization; we are not directly a part of the mainstream. We have no representatives on the major CCCC committees, for example, no member explicitly identified as the spokesperson for the interests of basic writing. The result of this peripheral presence is the increasing absorption of basic writing as a field into Freshman English.

The same is true of our existence within our own departments. Because we are typically involved in teaching rather than administration (administration as the WPA has defined it, not the untenured coordinator positions common to basic writing), our interests are usually not directly represented within composition/rhetoric programs. Thus we are viewed as outsiders in our own

departments, and what we do is treated as unrelated to the department's mission. Basic writing professionals need to demand the academic right to participate in departmental governance so that they may speak on behalf of basic writing as a professional activity, and to have their efforts backed up by the national organizations.

The third step in remediating our status problem is asserting ourselves as the representatives of our field. By drafting a statement of professional self-definition, presenting it to basic writing professionals and the profession at large, and obtaining their endorsement, we can establish ourselves as an influential professional voice. Such a statement should have multiple audiences to achieve the goal of raising our status. We need to address higher administration, to continue the struggle started by Wyoming to obtain professional conditions; we need to address the composition/rhetoric profession itself, to force it to recognize the role it has played in oppressing teachers of writing and teachers of basic writing in particular; and we need to address each other, to come to some consensus on who we are, what we do, and why we matter.

Do we need a Maryland Resolution? The alternative is to continue in our marginalized position, risking further erosion of our disciplinary authority and further losses in institutional support for us and our students. In my opinion, we cannot afford not to make a statement of our own.

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Karen L. Greenberg

## THE POLITICS OF BASIC WRITING

**ABSTRACT:** *The author summarizes her remarks at one of the "Critical Issues" panels at the Fourth Annual CBW Conference. Her topic was "Writing Assessment and its Political Implications for Basic Writing Students and Teachers." The author discusses some of the political challenges that basic writing programs face today and describes strategies for meeting these challenges. Drawing on her experiences directing basic writing programs in a public urban university, she suggests ways to improve basic writing instruction and assessment so as to empower basic writing students.*

When people ask me what I do, I always answer, "I'm a basic writing teacher." I did my doctoral research on basic writers, and I teach at least one basic writing course every semester. In addition, I direct my college's Developmental English Program (which includes basic writing, reading, and ESL courses). I am familiar with the literature on basic writing students and pedagogies, and I conduct my basic writing courses as student centered, collaborative writing workshops. I believe in what I do.

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Therefore, I strongly disagree with many of the assertions made by David Bartholomae in his keynote speech at the Fourth Annual Conference on Basic Writing in Maryland. David characterized most basic writing courses as “obstacles rather than opportunities.” He stated that most basic writing programs “marginalize students” and “preserve them as different.” He also accused basic writing teachers of “merely satisfying [their] liberal reflexes” by trying to make students “more complete versions of themselves” in courses that “don’t work.” David was equally unimpressed with the assessment procedures used to place students into basic writing courses. He asked the conference participants, “Do you sort students into useful or thoughtful groups?”

I take these challenges to heart, since in addition to being a basic writing teacher and coordinator, I also conduct research on writing assessment. I study writing assessment programs, instruments, and procedures because I know that valid, reliable assessment is the best means of demonstrating and guaranteeing that students are improving their writing abilities. From my research, I know that many basic writing programs *are* sorting students into “useful and thoughtful” courses that have helped thousands of inexperienced writers persevere and succeed in college.

My two vocations—basic writing and writing assessment—have taken me across the country, to seminars, conferences, and workshops on teaching and testing students’ writing. At every one of these meetings, I have listened patiently to college writing teachers complain about testing and about having to evaluate their students, their courses, and their programs. I have heard all of the arguments: “Assessment is a destructive intrusion into the learning process.” “Our current assessment tools are inadequate.” “We teach process, so we should not test product.” “We cannot quantify the skills and abilities that we value most in our writing courses.”

The terrible irony of these beliefs is that the resistance of basic writing teachers to designing and implementing effective assessment procedures and instruments creates a vacuum for university administrators or state legislatures to fill. If basic writing teachers are unwilling to design measures that evaluate the effectiveness of their programs and courses (or lack thereof), administrators, legislators, and accrediting agencies are ready and willing to step in and take over. If this occurs, we may soon see our programs decimated or eliminated.

State-mandated assessments of college basic skills programs are sweeping the country. Taxpayers and their representatives

want evidence that the millions of dollars they give to finance public colleges is providing for “quality” education. Many states are attempting to link the public funding of higher education with the results of state-developed tests. For example, the New Jersey Department of Higher Education has developed the College Outcomes Evaluation Program—uniform standardized tests that purport to measure student learning and their reading and writing skills. Even more far-reaching (and ominous) is the Colorado Higher Education Assessment Program, mandated by the Colorado state legislature and developed by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. Results on this literacy assessment program are linked to the financial appropriations of all public colleges in Colorado.

If reactionary political academics and budget-minded administrators and legislators join forces with composition “stars” like David Bartholomae to attack basic writing programs, then these programs are doomed. Students will have to “sink or swim.” Given the priorities of most universities, underprepared writers will not benefit from any of the tens of thousands of dollars that schools would save by ending placement testing and basic skills instruction. Most of the money will probably be spent on small senior seminars, on the library, on research projects, and on visiting professors. Indeed, if enough people subscribe to David Bartholomae’s views on basic writing, there won’t be any basic writing instruction in college much longer.

The only way we can make sure that underprepared college students continue to get basic skills instruction is by showing that our basic writing courses are—to use David’s words—“useful and thoughtful.” In order to do this, we must lessen the divergence between theory and reality in basic writing classrooms at many colleges and universities.

In *theory*, our profession’s perspectives on basic writing have changed dramatically since the publication of *Errors and Expectations*, a mere fifteen years ago. In theory, we now no longer believe in or use a “deficit” or “remedial” model to define basic writing students, skills, and courses. Theoretically, no longer do we create learning objectives for our basic writing courses based on what students “lack,” nor do we reduce these objectives to rule-governed steps that each student must master in the same order. And, of course, we are no longer obsessed by correctness, since we now understand the cognitive and linguistic differences between composing and editing, between generating language and identifying errors. Finally, we think we know what our basic writing students are learning and how well they are learning it because we are

continuously examining and responding to changes in their essays and in their composing and revising processes. Right?

Wrong. Much of the evidence that I have seen indicates that in too many schools none of these assertions is true. Despite critical insights into basic writing gained from research in composition, in cognitive psychology, and in applied linguistics, too many basic writing courses are still based on a remedial model, and too many basic writers are still subjected to skills/drills content and to pedagogies that conceptualize writing as a set of subskills that must be mastered in a series of steps or stages. Finally, many programs continue to define student writers as “basic” based on their ability to identify and correct errors in someone else’s sentences or texts.

Basic writing programs and instructors who teach students “The Least You Should Know About English” (the title of a best-selling basic writing textbook) probably deserve to be eliminated, since they ignore the critical issues in basic writing today, including questions such as the following:

1. What is the role of assessment in the labeling of students as “basic writers”?
2. What kinds of assessments might be appropriate for making decisions about students’ writing course placements?
3. What relationships exist between writing assessment and writing instruction?
4. What curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative techniques should be used in basic writing classes to help students improve their writing processes and their essays?
5. What is the role of assessment in evaluating students’ writing competencies, proficiencies, or exit from courses?
6. What criteria, procedures, and evidence should we use to determine whether our basic writing programs and courses are effective?

Let me answer some of these questions by describing basic writing instruction and assessment at The City University of New York (CUNY). All CUNY basic skills courses (in writing, reading, and English as a Second Language) are aimed at improving students’ academic literacy and preparing them to succeed in the intellectual community that college represents. Thus, the most important goal of all of our basic writing courses is to help students develop more sophisticated ways of thinking and writing, based on induction, deduction, generalization, and evidence. Two other objectives that CUNY’s basic writing courses share are increasing students’ sensitivity to the power of language and strength-

ening their positive attitudes toward reading, writing, and revising.

The growth and diversification of basic skills instruction at CUNY have led to a variety of basic writing programs across the seventeen undergraduate colleges. Although these programs differ, they all provide supportive and challenging classroom experiences and instruction. Basic writing instruction at CUNY integrates the learning of language and literacy with the development of higher level cognitive abilities. CUNY basic writing teachers provide students with clearly articulated course goals, performance objectives, and criteria for success. Our courses use small-group instructional techniques to facilitate the improvement of students' skills *and* their self-confidence and self-esteem. We try to involve students actively in their learning by requiring them to collaborate on composing, revising, and editing paragraphs, essays, and research reports.

CUNY's writing programs rely on the early identification of students' strengths and weaknesses. All seventeen colleges administer an essay test (The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test) to evaluate the writing skills of entering students. This test asks students to examine a position and to write an expository essay "agreeing or disagreeing" with the position stated in the essay question. The essays are holistically scored by at least two readers (using a six-point holistic scoring guide).

Our placement test was developed by writing teachers who surveyed the research and practice in the field of composition. They decided that the writing skill most essential for success in college-level courses was the ability to write expository/argumentative essays in Standard Written Academic English. Research supports this decision (Purves et al., Ruth and Murphy, White). American college students need to know how to take and defend a position in writing. This is true for native speakers and for ESL speakers, as noted in a recent research report on the academic writing tasks required of undergraduate and graduate foreign students enrolled in American colleges (Bridgeman and Carlson). The report stated that in order to function successfully in American universities, students need to know how to write expository and argumentative essays and reports that reflect the "logical proof, culturally defined levels of formality, and cultural referents of American academic English" (8). The report also noted that the skill considered most important for undergraduates is "skill in arguing for a particular position" (9). This skill is what the CUNY writing placement test and the basic writing exit tests ask students to demonstrate.

At my college—Hunter—each CUNY placement test essay *and* basic writing exit test essay is read by two or three full-time writing teachers. Another administrator and I spot-read hundreds of these essays to confirm the teachers' decisions. For placement purposes, on the first day of class, students are asked to write an in-class "narrative/descriptive" essay. Teachers evaluate their students' in-class essays, and, if they think a student's placement is incorrect, they read his or her CUNY placement essay. Based on the student's performance on these two essays, the teacher decides whether the student should be moved to a different writing course.

Students do well in our basic writing courses. Passing is determined by coursework and by students' scores on a programwide essay test (i.e., no student can pass simply because of his or her diligence or improvement). During the past three years, average pass rates of basic writing students at Hunter have ranged between 80% and 93%.

In addition to pass rates, another important indicator that our courses are helping students is their rate of retention and graduation. According to data collected by Hunter's Office of Administrative Services, more than 36% of the students who graduated from Hunter within the last five years were students who completed basic writing courses. Moreover, approximately 55% of the students who graduated from Hunter within eight years are basic writing "graduates." (Most CUNY students "stop-out" for a semester or more; the average time it takes them to graduate is six or seven years.) The data indicate that students who pass our basic writing courses are as likely to persist and to graduate as are students who needed no basic writing instruction. Thus, I feel justified in asserting—to David Bartholomae and to anyone else who challenges the validity of our courses—that our basic writing courses are preparing students to succeed. We teach them the linguistic, cognitive, and social components of academic literacy necessary to make the transition to college-level coursework. We *are* sorting our writers into "useful and thoughtful groups."

The most important lesson that we have learned from our experiences is that basic writing teachers and administrators must take charge of writing instruction and assessment at their schools. The research on assessment clearly indicates that faculty "ownership" is a necessary prerequisite for instruction and assessment that leads to improved learning and teaching. Basic writing instructors can begin by setting forth—in *writing*—the knowledge, abilities, and values that they expect students to acquire and the



standards that students must meet. Doing this will enable students to take charge of their own learning processes. Specifically, students can use their teachers' or their college's criteria to evaluate their own work and to revise it until they are satisfied with it.

Moreover, basic writing teachers and administrators must learn the vocabulary and methodology of writing assessment *and* of program assessment. There are a variety of effective measures and procedures available for assessment. These include holistically scored essay tests, holistically scored or analytically scored portfolios, interactive computer exercises, structured and spontaneous writing performance assessments, simulation activities, student logs, student and teacher questionnaires, interviews (with students, teachers, and administrators), and collaborative learning exercises that result in group projects. (See Belanoff, Greenberg et al., Ruth and Murphy, and White for information about these techniques.) These kinds of evaluations can provide more accurate assessments of students' writing abilities than we are currently realizing.

To conclude, I know that David Bartholomae is wrong; most basic writing courses are not obstacles to students' progress. They *are* opportunities for students to learn collaboratively—from peers as well as from their instructor—to improve their academic reading and writing processes. Yet I also know just how vulnerable our courses are. Across the country, in current academic, legislative, and public forums, people are debating the extent to which postsecondary basic writing instruction should be offered or required. Indeed, many administrators and professors at my university have argued that students with serious basic skills deficiencies should not be admitted to any four-year CUNY college. These people want to do away with all skills testing, which, obviously, would lead to a diminished need for basic writing courses.

In essence, this strategy exemplifies the “right-to-fail” theory of open admissions education—an approach that, in my opinion, ignores students' literacy problems and allows them to revolve right out of our open-admissions door. I believe that CUNY's current policy of testing entering students' skills and requiring them to take appropriate developmental courses embodies a “right-to-succeed” philosophy. The developmental education and the supportive community offered by our basic writing programs enable students to acquire the academic literacy skills, motivation, and self-confidence to persevere and to succeed in college. Until there is a marked improvement in the basic academic skills of high school graduates, transfer students, and adults returning to

school, basic writing courses will continue to be necessary to improve student outcomes.

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William Jones

## BASIC WRITING: PUSHING AGAINST RACISM

*ABSTRACT: The author argues that racism sustains basic writing programs as Jim-Crow way stations for Black and Latino students by insisting on a hierarchy of intelligence among races. General negative societal perspectives on Blacks and Latinos constitute bedrock beliefs. Black culture counterstates these beliefs in order to assert Black humanity and finds powerful countervailing expression in Black religious folk statement and in the blues, significant repositories of the Black community's existential attitudes of resistance. The success of historically Black colleges results, in significant measure, from such resistance and can serve as models for writing programs for inexperienced Black and Latino student writers, encouraging the development of enabling pedagogies.*

Let me start by using words from a statement on racism I made at the Conference on Composition and Communication in March 1991 in Boston in the special interest group meeting of the Conference on Basic Writing.

"I begin with the assumption that racism is a core feature of American life, that White supremacy is a central tenet, that efforts to maintain White privilege and power spring naturally from its assumption, and that it posits intelligence as innate, unequally

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distributed among individuals and, by easy extension, hierarchically arranged among races. In its insistence on hierarchy, racism situates basic writing programs as Jim-Crow way stations for minority students, for the thousands of Black and Latino students who fill basic writing classes across the nation.”

Racism constructs a particularly negative perspective on its Black and Latino citizens. In 1991, the General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, a nonprofit institute at the University of Chicago, reported that three of four Whites believed that Blacks and Latinos are more likely than Whites to prefer living on welfare, “more likely than Whites to be lazy, violence-prone, [un]intelligent and [un]patriotic”(Poll 10). These opinions are statistically fascinating since never fewer than fifty percent of the 1,372 Whites surveyed had negative opinions of these so-called minority citizens. For instance, of the Whites surveyed, seventy-eight percent believed the Blacks and seventy-four percent believed that Latinos more than Whites preferred living on welfare; sixty-two percent believed that Blacks and fifty-six percent that Latinos were likely to be less hardworking than Whites. Fifty-three percent believed that Blacks and fifty-five percent that Latinos were less intelligent than Whites.

In tone and sentiment, these opinions are similar to the now familiar conclusions drawn by pioneering researchers into the writing behavior of inexperienced writers: that basic writers “[a]re... easily satisfied with first drafts, [t]hink of revision as changing words or as crossing out and throwing away [and r]evis[e] on the level of single work or sentence” (Walwood and Smith 7).

The problem with these conclusions is not that they are inaccurate but that they seem to function as a taxonomy, a description of fixed behavior verified by the research itself. The taxonomy, we should assume, was produced the way taxonomies are produced by botanists and zoologists, natural scientists whose bailiwick it is to produce taxonomies. Natural scientists analyze and differentiate distinctive features and behaviors but codify them only when they are certain that their research has been thorough. Once satisfied, natural scientists write their taxonomies. The taxonomies are fixed. They do not change.

Few, if any, behaviors in writers are fixed although this fundamental observation seems to have been disregarded, for what passes as taxonomical behavior—as fixed behavior—is the description of behavior in an instructional moment that should last only until change can be affected by purposeful teaching and by variations among learners. Only when I realized that *basic writer*, the term

itself, was used with notable frequency, as euphemism and code for minority students could I understand how writing instructors had accepted these conclusions with worshipful silence, without serious questioning. In the early to mid-seventies, the term *basic writer* had a currency similar to *disadvantaged* and *culturally deprived*, but *basic writer* more than those terms observed the etiquette of civil interracial exchange that requires the neutralizing or masking of differences. The price of that masking may have been that we failed to confront, in any serious way, the fact that basic writing is fundamentally framed in terms of deficit, in terms of linguistic and cognitive inadequacies.

My observations here should not be interpreted as assertions that the researchers or their intentions were racist. But I can identify no dissonance between these research conclusions and what Dolores Kohl Solovy and Patricia Brieschkeis call society's bedrock conviction that Black and Latino youths are incapable of high academic achievement (10). Solovy and Brieschkeis were commenting on *Stand and Deliver*, the 1988 film that chronicles the achievement in mathematics of Jaime Escalante and his students at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, making the point that the work of Escalante challenged what those two called the bedrock convictions about the academic abilities of Latinos. On one occasion, large numbers of Escalante's students passed the Educational Testing Service's Advanced Placement Examination in calculus, but there was inexplicable duplication of answers in two areas in the examination, suggesting the strong possibility of cheating. What is notable to me is not these circumstances—the circumstance of the students' achievement or the suggestion that they might have cheated. What is notable is the language that Solovy and Brieschkeis use to characterize society's evaluation of minority students. That evaluation should be viewed as an ethnographic statement, a statement that reveals fundamental, core beliefs held by the culture that generates it. Ethnographic statements are seemingly incidental observations, so routinely made, that they are recognized as characteristic ways a culture construes the world. Such statements capture attitudes that are so pervasive that the statements become cultural truisms. In this light, the statements that the majority culture commonly makes about its Black and Latino citizens reveal the racist underpinning of the majority culture.

Indeed, if Solovy and Brieschkeis' statement is accurate, if it points, in fact, to a core belief, we can only conclude that society does not expect or work for minority academic achievement. If it

is indeed society's belief, it means that all of us—White, Black, Brown, Red, and Yellow—policymakers in the public and private sectors, those in government agencies, foundations and educational institutions; and ordinary people, those of us with ordinary names and ordinary faces, including parents, teachers, school administrators and, sadly, Black and Latino students themselves—have internalized this negative view and are influenced by it. And if the metaphor is accurate—if it is bedrock belief—we can only imagine how deep the belief is. We need also to remind ourselves that, in the real world, engineers intent on constructing where bedrock exists must use dynamite to dislodge the unyielding stone before they can erect the structures they desire.

I am reluctant to claim that minority communities have the power of dynamite to dislodge the effects of racism, but forces to counterstate and push against those effects have produced ethnographic statements that testify that resistance and struggle against racism are central characteristics of the Black community. Such statements emerge in the most improbable places and are so central that they find voice in folk expression, the place that ordinary people store the attitudes, beliefs, and values that define who they are. I delight in finding them in the blues, for instance, and in nonsecular folk expression.

Bessie Smith sings, "I walked and walked / 'Til I wore out my shoes / Can't walk no more / Yonder comes the blues." An unsentimental view of the world emerges here. When Bessie looks over her shoulder, what she sees is life's difficulties. While life is relentlessly trying, even brutal, trouble is not its final definition since Bessie confronts its harshness and, in doing so, defines herself, endures all trouble, transforms and transcends a negative reality to make a world for herself. She is never naive. She never falsifies. Instead, in "Long Old Road," she sings, "When I got to the end of the road / I was so worried down (Repeat the first two lines.) Picked up my bags, baby, and I tried over again." It is the trying over again that informs us how Bessie has chosen to move through the world: audacious, tough, resiliently human.

While we might well debate whether racism is part of what worried Bessie down and whether racism is what she confronted on that road in that song, perhaps we need just to remind ourselves that she did meet racism on a real road in Clarksdale, south of the Tennessee border on the road to Memphis on September 26, 1937—the day before I was born. On that day, she was in an automobile accident that nearly severed her right arm. She was denied admission into one hospital because she was Black and

bled to death en route to another.

Another Black voice, an anonymous Black voice, singing or praying, confronting what life has meted out to her says this: "Trusting in him for my journey / I am not afraid of his name or afraid of hellfire / for I have been killed dead and made live again and am fireproof..." (Johnson cited in Powell xxiii).

To say that she is "fireproof" is to speak powerfully of her resistance to life's vagaries, and since it is a Black voice singing or praying in this land, I contend that part of what she must resist is racism. I contend, further, that that voice and that image of resistance are ethnographic features that are the cultural legacy and spiritual inheritance of the Black community. That resistance has sustained Black people through physical enslavement and its endless social and psychological variations. That same power is available in the present to Black people of conscience who are aware of the pervasive nature of racism and its insistent insertion into every aspect of American life. While that power may wane in difficult times, it is never absent in the Black community.

Where resistance constructs an ethos that influences educational policy and decisions that counterstate the deficit model of minority student functioning, successful programs are likely to be routinely expected and achieved. That resistance is the force behind the circumstances, for instance, that enables historically Black institutions of higher education like Howard, Xavier, Morehouse, and Spelman to distinguish themselves in the difficult area of preparing undergraduates for admission into medical school—sending more Black students into medicine than major White institutions such as Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Berkeley, Columbia, and Northwestern (Chira B8).

If success can be achieved in the science and mathematics preparation that admission into medical school entails, perhaps it follows that such patterns of success can be transferred to other areas. We can all learn from historically Black colleges since it is they that have the longest cumulative record of minority academic achievement in the nation, a record that testifies that achievement follows intention and expectation. Black colleges have welcomed, because for the greater part of our history few other colleges and universities would, the products of underfunded, underequipped, segregated school systems and produced the professional and leadership class of the Black community. They have recognized the existence of student academic talent and motivation even in the face of underpreparation. In the face of low SAT scores and writing samples that would assign students to the rejection pile of

private and state institutions, Black colleges have crafted programs of instruction and academic support that foster competence, balancing and juxtaposing course work, faculty mentoring outreach, and academic advising and individual support that may include peer tutoring and counseling by both professionals and peers.

Successful writing programs for Black and Latino students incorporate features similar to those in the most successful academic programs in historically Black colleges. Where writing instruction exists that testifies to a clear understanding of what students need, and recognizes the societal forces that vitiate achievement, success is available. The most useful pedagogues encourage Black and Latino students to use the intuitive and generative linguistic powers available to them as native speakers of English and as competent bilinguals. We know that process approaches in writing instruction, particularly those that are dialogic, those that encourage students to connect the acts of planning, revising, and editing to the particular problems they have—are potentially powerful, although a central criticism of such instruction is that it too frequently engages students in process activities in superficial ways only. (Applebee *et al.* 13.) Seldom, in any case, is the accumulated knowledge of the profession, knowledge of innovative approaches to writing instruction, delivered in the service of Black and Latino students. We should question, therefore, any pedagogy that may betray an acceptance of a deficit model of minority student academic functioning, understanding that the pedagogies we choose reflect the evaluations we make of students and the understanding we have of their possibilities as learners. What are the assumptions, for instance, about Black and Latino students that recommend courses in logic and critical thinking as major features in basic writing courses? What is the nature of the evaluation that situates grammar instruction as a central feature in a basic writing program? In what way does grammar instruction focus on remediation instead of on literacy, on the complex acts of reading and writing? When grammar instruction is a feature, does it deepen and increase existing linguistic competence or does it hold students hostage until they master the minutiae of workbook grammars.

While we readily accept that a history of instructional neglect of Black and Latino students necessitates the selection and creation of effective instructional strategies, we should not overlook the need for instructors to examine themselves, to understand the value of reflecting the nature and quality of their relationships as



instructors and adults to their students. When electronic and print media transmogrify minority youths into nonstudents, into violence-prone gang members and drug dealers; welfare-dependent idlers; promiscuous, unmarried mothers; and into athletes and clowns; instructors may question whether anyone who resembles the flesh and blood embodiment of those images should be in college classrooms. And when success in the classes of such instructors requires that instructors make unusual efforts on behalf of these minority academic intruders, such instructors frequently shut down. Few instructors—whatever their color or ethnicity—are not troubled, if only occasionally, by the demands that teaching basic writers place on them. Yet instructors may have to rely stubbornly on their own experience of what students do, noting the contradictions between the public image of minority students and instructors' actual moment-to-moment interactions with their youth charges. It might be useful to note that most official reports on minority citizens are dire and to that extent these reports can be dismissed. If we rely on those reports alone to construct our understanding of who Black and Latino students are, for instance, it would be foolish to continue to harness the energies that successful teaching requires.

It is possible to construct a different, more affirming reality, rooted in the enabling experiences we create for students. It is an affirming fact that at Rutgers in Newark, Black and Latino students that the college would not have admitted were it not for the courses and academic support provided by the Academic Foundations Department and Center and the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program, routinely perform at levels that the college requires. In English Composition, the two-semester writing course that all students must complete, former basic writing students have made a grade of B their most frequently earned grade. The quality of their preparation, their seriousness and their insistence on challenge distinguishes them among student writers. Instructors in the English Department report that they can tell which students are former Academic Foundations Department students. That is not a negative comment. The English Department is committed to ensuring that former basic writers do not complain that English Composition is simply more of what they had experienced in Academic Foundations.

In Spring, 1992, the English Department interviewed and selected twenty students who had entered the college as basic writers to participate in a community literacy project—in what amounted to an advanced placement—that provided students op-

portunities for conventional writing instruction and occasions to work with adult community writers. The English Department simply concluded that students who had completed the Academic Foundations Department's developmental writing courses were the most appropriate writers for the enterprise.

Institutional measures underscore the general success of the Educational Fund Program that the Academic Foundations Department serves. The EOF Program, rated number one in New Jersey in 1991, has maintained a ranking within the top ten EOF Programs in New Jersey since the program began in 1969. The latest statistics indicate that, despite recruiting eighty-two percent of its students from so-called areas of "high economic and educational distress," ninety-four percent of the special-admit students are making satisfactory academic progress, accumulating degree credit according to the schedule set by the Department of Higher Education (Smith, R. 4). "The results of the [so-called] Third Semester Survival Formula for the 1989 cohort indicates a third semester retention rate of 85.6 percent, a rate higher than the 75.2 percent retention rate for regular-admit students in the same cohort (Smith, R. 6).

It is a common experience that educators and administrators, even those with intimate, day-to-day experience with Black and Latino students, question the validity of such statistics, wondering whether they have been falsified or whether the admissions practices of the college are so exclusionary that they yield an EOF special-admissions population atypical of students ordinarily admitted through such admissions programs. If we present literate compositions or display the evidence of the composing processes that typical basic writers develop in our writing courses, we are met with the suspicion that such writers were not basic writers to begin with. We have learned that stories of successful students have to be repeated again and again to be heard. Often, even then, they are not accepted. Tales of failure encounter no such difficulty. Told once, however despairing, such stories function easily to deepen the bedrock conviction that Black and Latino students cannot achieve.

In all this, however, basic writing instructors have a choice. Words that I wrote in the statement on racism of 1991 provide an appropriate coda here: "They can either become accomplices in the suppression of students' intellectual and academic growth, rewarding half-literate efforts with accommodating praise and condescending passing grades, or they can counterstate society's negative assertions, offer honest and humane evaluations, develop

enabling pedagogies that acquaint students with the pleasures and challenges of intellectual labor, and, in turn, repair and resurrect their spirits as bulwarks and shields against the indifference and disdain that racism ensures will always be present in classrooms.”

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Mary Jo Berger

## FUNDING AND SUPPORT FOR BASIC WRITING: WHY IS THERE SO LITTLE?

**ABSTRACT:** Knowing how higher education is organized and how it functions can enable basic writing teachers to improve both the status and the funding of their programs. This paper describes those features of higher education which organizational analysts consider crucial to the budgeting process and suggests actions which teachers can take to revise the reputations and the budgets of basic writing programs.

Originally, I wrote the proposal for this discussion in response to the first question in the call for proposals for the National Basic Writing Conference, which read, "Are our institutions renegeing on their commitment to at-risk students?" And my initial answer was, "Yes." As I began to write, however, I also began to wonder. When, exactly, had this commitment to at-risk students occurred?

Maybe, I originally thought, it was during the mid-70s when there was so much spirited and excited discussion of *Errors and Expectations* and I was teaching basic writing at a state university which encouraged enrollment by inner-city, at-risk students. But then I remembered my inner-city basic writing students who had enrolled in an accelerated medical school prep program because

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they could not afford four years of college and another four years of medical school. These students were told, immediately after the English placement test, that they had one quarter—2½ months—to pass the basic writing exam or they would be eliminated from the Bio-Med program, which they had not even yet begun.

Or maybe the commitment existed during the early 80s. Those were the years when some of my basic writing students had to come to campus at 7 a.m. to see me, if they needed help, because I was a Southern California freeway flier, teaching six writing classes at four different campuses. I needed to leave immediately after the 7:30-8:30 a.m. class to drive to my 10 o'clock class on another campus, and many of my students began work at 9 a.m. No Writing Center existed to help them during the evening and so, in order to adapt to their schedules and mine, we tried late-night telephonic tutoring, a method I recommend to absolutely no one.

Or maybe, I finally thought, there was a commitment during the mid-80s when college after college publicly stated its belief in the value of “diversity” and wooed Black and Hispanic students, and returning adults to offset the anticipated decrease in “traditional students.” But then I remembered being told in 1987, in a community college, that the administrative response to a financial emergency was a plan to eliminate the salaries of all of the professional Writing Center tutors in mid-March because, “most students have probably been helped by then.”

I'm sure that all of you have your own war stories. The point of mine is that in 15 years of teaching basic writing from California to Virginia, I missed the commitment, whenever—or wherever—it was. And although the recession has certainly decimated many of our budgets, I suspect that this has occurred because we never did have support within our institutions.

In looking through the tentative program for the National Basic Writing Conference, I was fascinated by the number of architectural metaphors: David Bartholomae's tidy house, William Lalicker's basement, and Richard Siciliano's bridge reminded me of my own long-standing metaphor for basic writing: the top shelf in the closet of the spare room.

This metaphor originated in Ernest Boyer and Arthur Levine's 1972 comparison of the college curriculum to the rooms in a house in an article entitled, “The Spare Room.” They described the portion of each student's program devoted to study of a major (approximately 1/3) as the faculty room: the faculty furnish the

major with courses, keep it clean of unwanted intrusions, and enjoy it, because the major provides them with an opportunity to duplicate themselves, surely an ego-fulfilling endeavor. The portion of the curriculum, about another 1/3, which the students own, love, and sometimes invent, are electives.

General education, the final third, “does not belong to anyone in particular—not the faculty, not the students, not the administration”; hence, Boyer and Levine call it the “spare room.” In my mind, basic writing, with other developmental studies, does not live IN the spare room but rather is hidden from almost everyone’s view—including most of those who teach general education courses—on the top shelf of the infrequently opened spare room closet.

Living in a closet, as gay men and lesbians discovered long ago, is unpleasant: it necessitates the constant pretense of being something else, of identifying ourselves as teachers of “English” or “literature” or “composition,” rather than basic writing. By using the closet as a metaphor, I do not mean to imply that our problems are as severe as those of gay men and lesbians, but I do think that there are similarities. The closeted existence intimates that what we do—teaching students who have somehow fallen through the educational cracks—and what we are—dedicated professionals who do among the most demanding jobs in the institution—are, somehow, shameful, and that recognizing our presence, let alone our value, will destroy traditional “educational values” which seem more and more, to me, like the recently much-touted traditional “family values.” It would be fairly stupid to spend much money on a closet—for faculty positions, for facilities, for improved assessment tools—and the people who make budgetary decisions in higher education may be unfair but they are not often stupid.

I would like to suggest that part of our problem is that we know so little about the house we inhabit: higher education, and that, if we are to jump from the shelf and pry open the closet door, we need to know about the ways our institutions work, and to gather support among faculty and administrators who live in other rooms in the house.

The most realistic description which I have read for how higher education functions is that it is an “organized anarchy,” a phrase coined, again, by Cohen and March. There are two sources of the anarchy: ambiguity and individualism. A university is not a busi-

ness like an insurance agency with definite unambiguous goals. Nor is it a manufacturing plant with a clear, easily measurable technology; the closest we come to a technology is teaching, an activity that involves as much art as skill and that is fraught with ambiguity. Thus, although there are bureaucratic structures, hierarchies of decision-making, in colleges and universities, these structures often do not, as they would seem to, govern all decisions about funding in a rational way.

Although the AAUP, and many of us, would like colleges and universities to be consensus-bound collegiums, most are not that either. Faculty senates have varying amounts of power, but the larger the institution, or the more diverse its activities, the more the faculty senate, although retaining its role as a forum for debate, lacks the resources to implement decisions which depend on funding.

In this anarchical situation, decisions for support and funding are often the by-products, not of efficiently implementing unambiguous goals through a bureaucratic chain nor the result of a consensus reached by professionals, but of unintended and/or unplanned activity; and they are often only loosely connected to even an ambiguous goal such as developing the mind and character of the students. Grants come, and grants go, and interpretations of goals often tend to adapt themselves to the circumstances rather than the other way around. On paper, power may seem to be hierarchical or consensual, but universities are, in truth, places of extreme individuality. Most professors have a great deal of freedom to decide what, when, and whom to teach. Students have an enormous amount of freedom to decide what, when, and where to study. Legislators and donors decide, often without knowing or understanding the system, what, when, and whom to fund.

Anarchy results because of the constant conflict between bureaucratic structures and consensual ones and because of the confused perceptions of many of the people who work in higher education. Some people function as though their institutions were pure bureaucracies, becoming confused, frustrated, and angry when they encounter a situation in which ambiguity rather than clarity is the norm. In my previous example of cutting tutors' salaries, the plan was not initiated by a college business manager or by a dean but by a biologist on an ad hoc Cost Management Committee who told me for several years that tutors were superfluous because writing was easy to teach. As she put it, repeatedly, "Nouns

haven't changed in a thousand years."

Other people, functioning in the notion that shared governance is a reality rather than an ideal, believe that faculty always have the power to make and execute decisions; they become confused and frustrated when it becomes clear that the registrar, not the faculty, has the real power. Others function as though no rules exist at all, the muddle is hopeless, and they are totally powerless.

This anarchy, however, is an organized one, and analysts like Victor Baldrige and Cohen and March have studied it in order to determine the rules by which it functions. I rarely find the political lens through which these analysts view higher education comforting, but I do find that knowing the unwritten rules and customs clarifies the problems and makes personal goal setting more feasible and actions more successful.

I want to discuss six characteristics of higher education which Baldrige explains and state the implications for our actions if we are to be successful in increasing support and, subsequently funding, for basic writing.

The first characteristic is that, in decision-making in higher education, inactivity, rather than activity, prevails. Limited amounts of both time and energy mean that most faculty and most administrators, most of the time, dedicate themselves to their own projects, their own teaching, or their own research. Therefore, most decisions are made by a small number of faculty and administrators. The lesson here, for each of us, is to participate—both formally and informally as much as is humanly possible. We need to seek committee membership; and identify ourselves on committees as teachers of basic writing. The only way that we can gain legitimate status is for influential people within the organization to hear our names and our concerns—over and over again.

Informal participation is easier for some—particularly part-timers and nontenured faculty—than is formal participation. Luckily, it is still true in colleges and universities, that as many projects are begun around the coffee pot as at the conference table. We need to eat lunch with people from other departments. We need to have coffee one floor up or one building over—in the economics department, or with the physicists. If necessary, we need to invent errands which take us into unfamiliar territory, and again, introduce ourselves as people in basic writing.

An example: A very politically astute colleague of mine, a part-time tutor and part-time teacher at a small, liberal arts college, and



a very early riser, realized in October of her first semester, that the man with whom she was having coffee at 7:30 a.m. in the faculty room was the president emeritus of the institution, a man who still had enormous influence within the college. She began to tell stories about her students' backgrounds and their successes, and, occasionally, brought in a particularly interesting paper. The president emeritus became fascinated by how one taught, as he put it, "those impossible students," and so the basic writing instructor told him. Within a few months, the elderly man's respect grew, and he began talking to other administrators and to trustees about the wonderful job being done in the tutoring center and the basic writing classes.

When a proposal was made to convert the tutoring center into office space, he lobbied against the idea so successfully that the tutoring center was given other, much better, space and all new furniture. A small victory perhaps but a victory won by a part-time, untenured instructor.

The second characteristic Baldrige discusses is that participation in decision-making processes tends to be fluid. Thus, different people with different sets of concerns will be present each time a proposal is discussed. A chemist who comes to every curriculum committee meeting when a new science requirement is being planned may stay in the lab once discussion turns to the general education curriculum. The lesson here is to persist. An enormous number of decisions made in any institution affect some basic writing students; we need to be their advocates; to say who we are, and say it frequently. When we have projects and requests, and surely we have many, we need to get on every agenda every week or every month, so that the issues of basic writing and other developmental studies cannot be forgotten.

The third characteristic of "organized anarchy" is that conflict is natural. Partially because of the anarchic situation and partially because of academicians' love of discussion, argument is a constant part of the process of making decisions, particularly in a situation of limited resources. We need not be frightened by conflict but expect it and prepare for it by mustering statistics, arguments, and personal anecdotes; by analyzing the opposition; by remembering all those principles we tell our students about well-constructed persuasive argument.

As in national politics, interest groups are often more powerful than the formal structure would indicate. We need to think about

who, in our institutions, are our natural allies. Most of us are housed in English departments, but surely literature and composition professors are not our only allies; sometimes, they are not our allies at all. Possible other allies include a multicultural office or organization, the athletic office, developmental psychologists, the admissions office, the people who teach developmental math—and any discipline, from physics to philosophy, which requires writing. If we cannot serve on the committees which govern our budgets, we need as many people watching out for our health as we can gather.

Surely, the greatest untapped pool of allies is our students and their parents. Many of our students leave us to become very successful people: both as students in the university and as alumni. We can make sure that they remember us, and that they lobby for our work, in both the private and the public sector.

A system in which both time and energy for decision-making are scarce can be overloaded easily. Overloading occurs when there are more decisions to be made than there are time and energy to make them. And the result of overloading is that decisions tend to be made further and further away from the formal structure, which becomes bogged down with details. We can purposely overload our systems, and then gain, perhaps through oversight, by asking for multiple things simultaneously. We can ask for more staff, for funds for professional development, for more space, for funding for research—you can add to the list. Any one project may be defeated, at any one time, but some projects will, surely, be successful.

Finally, in a period of budget reduction, Judith Hackman, an organizational analyst, argues that budgeting is more a political than a rational process and that those departments which are perceived as central to the mission of the institution fare best. We are central to the missions of our institutions, but we are frequently not perceived that way. I believe that it is within our power to change that perception. When we talk to administrators and to other faculty, when we talk on committees, we need to use the language of the goals of our institutions and to explain over and over how closely those goals are tied to the work we do with at-risk students. Words like “diversity,” and “multicultural” and phrases like “nondiscrimination based on age or race,” and “commitment to fulfilling needs of individual students,” need to become part of our everyday vocabularies. We need to revise the

histories of our institutions to include stories about our successful students: the basic writer who matured into a novelist, or the basic writer who became a congress person. Our stories of students overcoming adversity need to become part of the institutional lore which informally influences so many decisions.

I believe that we also need to examine our place in the structure of our institutions. Most of us are housed in English departments. We need to question whether we will ever be perceived as central to the missions of our colleges if we are a subunit of composition, which is a subunit of the English department. We need to think seriously about moving toward a structure, such as a Developmental Studies Department, which will be perceived as more central to the mission of the institution and which will give us more direct access to the sources of funding.

I want to conclude with four avenues out of the closet and into the entryway, where we belong. First, we need to study the power structures of our institutions, to learn what is, not what seems to be. We must find out who makes budgetary decisions, both formally and informally, when these decisions are made, and what people and what departments have discretionary funds.

Second, we need to publicize what we do, who our students are, what diverse segments of the population they represent, how valuable they are to the institution, and how integral our work is.

We need to organize for action: request or sponsor meetings of basic writing teachers on our campuses to figure out who has what knowledge, and what contacts, figure out what we need and who has the power to help us and then divide up tasks according to ability and interest. We need to formulate a conscious political plan.

Finally and most importantly, I think that we need to talk, something we love to do and something I think we do very well. But we need not to preach to the choir, but to those professors and administrators who truly do not know who we are or what we do. We can tell stories about our work; we can encourage physicists and sociologists to read Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*; we can comment about how much more challenging and how much more fulfilling it is to teach the underprepared than the already prepared. And when we reach the well-lit entryway on our individual campuses, we can make sure that we talk to each other in forums such as these about how we got there.

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