

Sharon Crowley

RESPONSE TO EDWARD M. WHITE

The Fall 1995 issue of *JBW* contains an article by Edward M. White entitled "The Importance of Placement and Basic Studies: Helping Students Succeed Under the New Elitism." White began the article by arguing that a "motif" he calls "the new elitism" has begun to affect decisions made about admissions in American colleges and universities. He described the "new elitism" as "the restriction of opportunities to the most deserving – which often means to those from a relatively privileged home" (75). He contrasted the "new elitism" with "egalitarianism, the argument that everyone should have opportunities for success," and suggested that the motif of egalitarianism is currently in retreat among members of legislatures and governing boards of universities (75-76).

I heartily agree with White's analysis of the current state of affairs in American institutions of higher learning, although I prefer to use more openly ideological terminology to describe the cultural pressure that is being brought to bear against open admissions and affirmative action policies. What is happening is that neoconservatives have managed to gain enough rhetorical, legislative and judicial power to begin disassembling the egalitarian policies put in place by the social revolutions of the nineteen-sixties and seventies – namely, the civil rights, women's liberation, and students' movements. The growing power of neoconservatism can be seen with particular clarity in White's home state of California, where the regents of the California State University system recently voted to abandon admissions policies that included consideration of cultural and ethnic diversity.

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I also agree with White that composition teachers and scholars have an important role to play in the recruitment and retention of persons he calls "new students" to colleges and universities. Those of us who teach and think about composition can be proud of the efforts we have made toward helping first-generation college students adjust to and succeed in higher education. However, as White warns us, we cannot relax our efforts in this regard and we must be especially alert at this moment to insure that "new students" are not shut out of college educations by the neoconservative will to stop history and to preserve the place of the traditionally privileged. This responsibility is increasingly important in an economy that has systematically denied good-paying jobs to persons without college educations and where hard-won workers' rights are increasingly threatened by recent hiring practices.

Despite these areas of agreement, there is an important point of difference between White and me. In his article White acknowledged my argument that teachers and scholars of composition studies ought to consider abolishing the universal requirement in introductory composition. He read my position as complicit with the new elitism when he suggested that compositionists who advocate abolition of the requirement are the "theorists" of the new elitism (78). From where I sit, there are two serious difficulties with White's analysis.

First, my proposal to abolish the universal requirement was made with the interests of "new students" very much in mind. Despite White's attempt to marshal evidence in favor of testing as an instrument of retention for such students, I do not think that the universal requirement serves them or any students very well. The universal requirement began at Harvard—an elite university then as now—as an attempt to certify that students who enrolled under the new elective system were suitable "Harvard men." In other words, the universal requirement began life as an instrument of exclusion. It was openly used in this way until the late sixties. During the nineteen-fifties, for example, Freshman English served overcrowded universities as a second level of admissions. Teachers of the course were regularly ordered to fail half of the students who took the course; those were the days in which five grammatical or mechanical errors in an essay earned its author an "F." That Freshman English is a repressive institution was not lost on students who participated in the social movements of the sixties. Because of their resistance, the requirement was lifted briefly during the seventies at some universities, although it was rapidly reinstated during the manufactured "literacy crisis" of the late seventies and has remained firmly in place at non-elite colleges and universities ever since (Connors 1996).

I doubt whether the exclusionary institutional function of the universal requirement can be radically altered at this late date in its history. But I have already made these arguments in the work that White

kindly cited in his article. In this context I will add one argument to those I have already expressed: In the current mean-spirited political climate, I doubt whether we serve “new students” well by using mass examinations to segregate them into classrooms that can be readily identified as remedial or special.

Which brings me to my second difficulty with White’s analysis. I am a little startled to find myself aligned with neoconservatism since my position on the requirement has also been taken to task in *Academic Questions*, the magazine published by the conservative National Association of Scholars. This group truly is the academic arm of the “new elitism,” and they have gone on record as opposing the egalitarian gains made in universities during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. In their manifesto, the NAS argues that “the admission of seriously underprepared students creates the realistic expectations and frequently leads to frustration and resentment.... Disadvantaged students deserve ample assistance, yet disadvantage need not coincide with race or ethnicity” (8). The NAS “urges” universities to admit “inadequately prepared students only when realistic provision can be made for remediation” (9). They are a bit more frank about their agenda in an editorial recently published in newspapers across the country, where they lament universities’ shortening the school year, eliminating comprehensive exams and theses, and easing requirements and prerequisites over the last thirty years. The authors of the editorial, Stephen Balch and Rita Zurcher – respectively president and research director of the NAS – also note with alarm the “dramatic increase in the number of schools offering what best can be described as ‘remedial’ composition courses (though the word is avoided) frequently for credit” (4a). They also remark that in 1993 “required courses in English composition . . . slipped” to “just 36 percent of ‘America’s best’ colleges.” These are the folks who engineered the rejection of an innovative syllabus for freshman writing at the University of Texas/Austin by arguing that such courses ought to teach grammar and formal fluency; these are the folks who want to reinstate the sort of nonelective liberal arts education – complete with hefty prerequisites and requirements in composition, math, and foreign language – that was typical of the nineteenth-century classical colleges which admitted only white men from “good” families.

My dismay at being associated with the politics of the NAS has, I hope, a political edge. If Professor White can convince the readers of *JBW* that my proposal to abolish the universal requirement is conservative, they may dismiss it from consideration insofar as their sentiments lie with the liberal impulse to provide higher education to all who want it. There is an ideological confusion here that bears examination, I think. It is perhaps analogous to the difficulty faced by radical feminists who campaign against pornography. Liberals accuse such

feminists of censorship, of attempting to deny the free speech of pornographers. Sometimes liberals characterize anti-porn feminists as prudish and narrow-minded, too. In this case the ideological confusion arises because radical feminists have created a truly radical definition of pornography: while liberals still classify pornography as free speech, radical feminists define it as violence against women. This redefinition renders the liberal complaint about feminist prudery literally beside the point. Nonetheless, since the redefinition goes against the grain of liberalism (which is unfortunately masculinist), it just doesn't mesh very readily with liberal thought. Perhaps something like this is happening in White's reading of my position. Persons who define the universal requirement as an instrument of students' liberation and potential success, as White seems to do, will of course be alarmed by any proposal to lift it (particularly in the current ideological climate, which is certainly not liberationist). I hope that my position on the requirement is neither liberal nor conservative but radical, not because it is chic to be radical but because it strikes at the root of our institutional difficulties as writing teachers. These difficulties stem, in my opinion, not from our curricula or politics or from our ineptitude or that of our students, but from our institutional obligation, imposed on us from elsewhere, to coerce everyone in the university into studying composition.

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