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MEANNESS AND FAILURE: SANCTIONING BASIC WRITERS

ABSTRACT: This article considers the systemic attack on economically impoverished students in higher education. The locus of consideration is a group of students enrolled in the University of Minnesota General College under a pilot welfare reform program. Terminated abruptly for political reasons, the project failed, with impacts on the student-parent participants. The authors' face-to-face relationship with the students is the basis for reflection on the broader issue of access.

We fear that the focus of this set of essays—the “state of Basic Writing”—may be alarmingly beside the point. Three decades into the enterprise, the basic writing community knows a great deal about how to teach writing among students who are unpracticed in the creation of extended prose texts and unschooled in the ways of academic discourse. When basic writing teachers have reasonable training, reasonable teaching loads, and reasonable support, they can do fine work, and may be observed doing so in a range of sites around the country. We have plenty of insightful work on how good basic writing curricula shape the abilities and life prospects of diverse students. To be sure, we have disagreements about the role of basic writing in the curriculum, about how we represent our students, and about the wisdom or ethics of how we name the work we do. But as a profession, we know a lot about the competing varieties of what to teach and have access to good models for how to do it.

In this brief piece, we'd like to focus not so much on the state of basic writing as on the state of access to higher education among disenfranchised students. In this we are hardly original or alone. In the last half-dozen years, in fact, wonderful books have treated the sub-

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ject—we'd recommend as a good starting list Marilyn Sternglass's *Time to Know Them*, Tom Fox's *Defending Access*, and Lavin & Hyllegard's *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged*. What we exploit, perhaps in counterpoint to the optimistic fine work of others, is a local failure of the authors' own making. We offer this portrait of our failure and the resulting consequences for the economically impoverished women we sought to teach as a basis for reflection on the very tangible limits of what basic writing programs can hope to do when access to higher education is stripped from students whose life circumstances are socially and economically vexed. In doing so, we hope to add a sense of urgency regarding the question of access to higher education among populations traditionally served by basic writing programs. We can't see ourselves responding very intelligibly to the *JBW* editors' call for thoughts on the state of basic writing without first considering our very visceral recent struggle with the state of basic *writers* and their increasing erasure from higher education.

Here's our story. In 1996, as a result of changes in federal laws, Minnesota passed so-called welfare reform legislation, to be effective in 1997, replacing the established program of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Under Minnesota's version of this national initiative (the "Minnesota Family Investment Program" – MFIP), welfare clients were placed under severe limits on access to benefits. The new MFIP rules provided for a lifetime maximum of five years of support, health coverage, limited child care benefits during job preparation and work, and the opportunity to engage in supported job training for up to a year (two years with case manager approval) while transitioning into employment. Like its counterpart programs in most states, MFIP's rules were aimed at rapid transition to work among the targeted welfare clients, nearly all of whom are single-parent women. While not stated explicitly, the clear goal of the new welfare programs like MFIP is rapid movement into low-skill entry level employment for single mothers. Implemented in local variations by all states in 1998, the new welfare laws reconfigure patterns of the social contract in ways that create new obstacles for access to higher education among some of the most disenfranchised citizens. (Some states, such as Maine, have been more thoughtful in building access to four-year higher education into the welfare reform mix.)

At the University of Minnesota, we and our colleagues approached new welfare legislation with some optimism about higher education's possible role. For twenty-five years, General College has served student-parents with special child-care and counseling programs through its HELP Center (Higher Education for Low-Income Persons). Until 1997, we held contracts with several local counties to provide higher education for welfare recipients under the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children welfare program, supplemented

by child-care grants from local corporations and foundations. Prior to 1997, hundreds of women receiving welfare benefits had entered the University of Minnesota through this program, earning degrees and becoming self-supporting in well-paying jobs.

In view of the HELP Center's successful experience under former welfare laws, a mixed group of University academic advisors (one of them an alumna client of the program), faculty, and administrators sought ways to provide meaningful access to higher education for impoverished women under new MFIP legislation. The group contained seasoned HELP Center advocates for student-parents, a widely published and nationally respected family economist with an academic interest in welfare reform, basic writing teachers and other faculty, the General College's academic affairs director, financial aid counselors, and student employment personnel. The group represented a wide range of attitudes toward welfare reform, from radical hostility to MFIP to centrist openness to options that might reduce women's dependency on government welfare programs.

While we approached the question of welfare reform from a number of points on the political compass, we had in common an understanding of and commitment to the capacity of higher education to contribute to the long-term material well-being of women and their children living in poverty. We knew that family median income among households in which an adult has a baccalaureate degree is 175% of that in a household in which the adult has only a high school education. We knew that fast training and entry-level jobs under so-called "workfare" had produced neither living wages nor sustained employment among former welfare recipients in a neighboring state whose experiment with "workfare" predated the national mandate for welfare reform. We knew from census data that baccalaureate education of the parent in a household maps onto all sorts of quality-of-life indicators, most of them dear to the hearts of welfare-reform and family-values advocates: higher family income; higher educational attainment among children in the family; increased percent of life spent economically independent; higher rates of employment; increased work-life expectancy of children; better health; higher rates of home ownership; better access to health insurance; increased participation in citizenship functions such as voting; higher rates of volunteerism; lower incidence of incarceration, lower rates of participation in government assistance/welfare programs; and lower "out-of-wedlock" birth rates. In short, we knew that traditional baccalaureate education provided a framework for realizing the core goals of welfare reform: economic and personal autonomy with demonstrable intergenerational impacts.²

The program we proposed was surprisingly simple. Women who elected to participate and who were approved by their case managers for inclusion would be supported by MFIP in their first two years of

enrollment in the University. With child-care support, they would use the maximum training period allowed by MFIP law, transitioning during the second year to student employment at twenty to thirty hours per week to meet state requirements. During the first year, in addition to a normal academic pre-major program, participants would engage in a series of non-credit job-preparation sessions taught by counselors and more experienced peers on a range of subjects, from time management to workplace conventions to computer skills and the like, in preparation for campus employment. Student jobs, ranging from parking attendant to lab assistant, pay significantly better than do typical entry-level retail and light manufacturing jobs in the area, a feature of the program which led the students' case managers in the community to see it positively. Following their transition year, student participants would essentially work their way through college via student employment and financial aid or full-time civil service employment with tuition benefits, as do thousands of their non-MFIP peers, while maintaining child-care and health benefits under normal MFIP procedures.

In setting out to include baccalaureate education as an option under new welfare reform legislation, we were neither naïve nor particularly hubristic. The HELP Center had successfully offered assistance to a generation of women who came to the University as single parents in poverty. We knew how to do this. Legal Aid attorneys advised us that we were within the new welfare reform law in constructing the program. The U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) concurred that this was an idea worth testing, providing what was to have been a three year grant for start-up and research costs. And the administrators of MFIP at the state level gave a reluctant go-ahead for the pilot program.

Because we knew we were launching a fishbowl program in which any failure might be used to exclude from consideration future proposals for baccalaureate education under MFIP, we sought to keep the initial pilot program small and well-controlled, with a pilot group of twelve women and a target of adding just fifty new students each year. Participants were selected only with the concurrence of their county case managers and only as part of a negotiated long-term plan to become independent from welfare.

But in the autumn of 1998, just as we were finishing identification of our pilot group for enrollment, Minnesota's political climate changed markedly. Fueled by young first-time voters and disgruntled working-class voters, a former show-wrestler and talk-radio personality was elected governor on the Reform Party, defeating heretofore popular traditional liberal Hubert Humphrey II. Equally important, fuelled by the backlash vote that elected the new governor, control of

the Minnesota House of Representatives shifted toward a more conservative base under a new Republican majority. The incoming governor made it clear in a televised confrontation with students that the state would not “pay for the mistakes” of single mothers seeking college education, and key committee chairs in the House were now occupied by conservative supporters of a strict interpretation of welfare reform. Six weeks into the first academic term for our participants, permission to pursue the pilot program was rescinded by the state. Despite a welfare budget surplus of over \$160,000,000 and a general budget surplus of over \$2,000,000,000 (a lot of money in a relatively small state like Minnesota), counties were forbidden to place any new students into the program, and those already in the program were ordered to quit. Program staff, students, and community allies fought the ruling. Although several students in the pilot program successfully sued the state and received a temporary injunction barring their termination from the program, no new MFIP students would be enrolled. Faced with the prospect of having no clients, we resigned the FIPSE grant in the second year. It is likely that current students from the pilot will be “sanctioned” (lose some or all of MFIP funding and non-cash supports) if they continue in the University. They will have used up their training time and incurred debt without the opportunity to complete their education with even reduced MFIP support. In Minnesota, at least for the time being, welfare recipients have been erased from four year higher education. We failed them.

Because all students who enter the University of Minnesota through General College enroll in the two semester basic writing sequence, we used a section of that course as one of the common “cohort” elements of the pilot program. In retrospect, it is fortunate that we did so, because in the students’ writing we were able to capture a sense of the participants’ aspirations for themselves and their children. Moreover, as the program began to come apart, we were able to see in the students’ writing and in a related video project the hope they felt upon their initial enrollment and the pain they feel at their impending exclusion from the privileged/privileging world of the University. One of the women wrote, as part of her basic writing course’s first assignment:

My son and I are walking up to the welfare department. My son is at my side, his mittens keep falling off, so we have to keep pushing them back on. His nose is red and we are both really cold. There is a man standing outside smoking a cigarette. He turns to my son and says, “what is up little man?” My little boy says, “food stamps.” I kind of smile to myself, because my son really doesn’t know what that means, he just knows that he gets to go to the store and buy some ice cream.

We walk into the lobby, sit down, and wait for our num-

ber to be called, I show up extra early, hoping that they will see that welfare recipients can be responsible, deep down I know that doesn't really matter, because they already have preconceived notions about welfare recipients. We are lazy and just don't want to work....

I am nervous today, because I am going to ask for an education. This is not the first time I have asked for one. The workers there all respond the same way, they tell me "you are too old, or that just isn't part of our program." Today I am ready; I have all the information they need and all the possible arguments played out in my head. Finally my number has been called, and my son and I walk back to a little cubical. My worker begins by telling me that I have been sanctioned for that month and I won't receive any money. I asked, "why am I being sanctioned?" She then explains to me that I didn't have the necessary paper in that month. That is when I realized that she had someone else's file and not mine.

My worker pulls out a list of jobs for me that pay an average of six dollars an hour, I explain to her that a single parent cannot adequately provide for their children on six dollars an hour, and what I really need is an education. My worker takes a deep breath and rolls her eyes....

That week I began working for the welfare department, they put me at the front desk stuffing envelopes and talking with the welfare recipients as they come in the door. During those weeks of working there I counted only a few women who didn't show visible signs of domestic abuse, I watched the workers tell those women who had just been beaten the night before that they have to get a job and that caring for their children is just not enough....

When I began at the University, I was very nervous. I found comfort in the other women and the staff was very supportive. I would like to receive a degree in Early Childhood Family Education. When getting a degree I would be setting a good example for my son to follow and it would better prepare me to help him to go on and get a higher education someday as well.

The staff at the University still fights each day with the legislation and the welfare department to keep the program going. I feel very fortunate to be here and I truly hope the program remains for many more women needing and wanting to continue their education. I am hopeful as well that someday people will begin to understand that the only way out of poverty is with a good education [sic].

Another wrote:

As a child, I was always told that education is very important, yet no one provided me with the tools needed to be successful in an educational environment. One reason is because my home life has always been dysfunctional. My parents (although separated) were both addicted to crack-cocaine, so there was very little emphasis on homework and studying. I eventually learned that school was important and why. Between the ages of six and ten, I used school as a safety net. I wanted to go to school to get away from all the crap that was going on at home. It was during this time that I learned that [a degree] could free me from the oppression that my family endured because of a lack of education.

As I entered my teenage years, my parents' addiction worsened, making it increasingly hard to pursue my education. By this time, I had three younger siblings for whom I was responsible. I began missing classes so that I could send my brothers to school and care for my baby sister. Within months, I was not attending school at all. I stayed hopeful and tried to keep up with my school assignments on my own. Unfortunately, the school I attended automatically failed students who miss ten days of class.

I decided that if I was going to get an education, it would have to be on my own terms, and the only way to achieve this would be to get married. At the time, I didn't realize that getting married would take me a step further from reaching my educational goals, the reality is, when you are on your own you have to support yourself. I spent the next five years working at White Castle instead of working on a degree.

So here I am with one month's experience in a university, I hope to be a lawyer.... I am still considerably overwhelmed, but I know that I am in the right place. Everyday I am learning new things. Each time the sun rises and sets, I look at it in different ways, I have learned that there is more than one way to solve a problem. I learned to analyze ideas. I have gained emotional self-sufficiency. Even if this program were to end tomorrow, no one can erase the knowledge I have acquired thus far. I will carry it with me forever. Most importantly, I will pass all that I learn on to my children and always stress the importance of education [sic].

In the end, we marvel at the students. They understand the ways in which their lives are contextual, the ways their lives intertwine with the machinery of the institutions they encounter. They understand

themselves in relation to their poverty and in relation to the convergence of social forces which construct their poverty. They are more than good Freireians. They are promising writers. They are good mothers, and, if they'd been given the chance, they would have been good students and good employees.

Our depressing experience constitutes a sample, at best, of the dynamics of exclusion at work in higher education. Statistics tell part of the story: low-income people continue to be far less likely to attend college than their middle-income and high-income peers (Choy).³ Press coverage of the CUNY crisis makes the politics of access visible, and occasional articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or *The Nation* focus our attention on the larger landscape of access (see such recent articles as Alan Jenkins' "Leveling the Playing Field: An Opportunity Agenda" in the *The Nation* and Joel Hardi's "State and Federal Governments Urged to Improve Training of Welfare Recipients" in the *Chronicle*). But because we know *these* women, because we recruited *them*, because we got to know *their* children, and because we worked with *them* over the last year as writers and video-makers, the dynamic of their exclusion has a real face. We're denied the comfort of abstract arguments and numbers in this instance. Erasure of impoverished women from higher education under the banner of welfare reform is no longer for us part of an abstract argument about access or about representing the "other" in our construction of basic writing. For us, it's become twelve distinct people with aspirations, children, sweet writing voices, and no place in our university.

The state of basic writing? Elegant, from where we sit, in unimaginable ways. But the writers are being disappeared.

Notes

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2. All the information given in this paragraph can be found in a single article: "Private Correlates of Educational Attainment" in the *Postsecondary Educational Opportunity* newsletter. It's worth adding this newsletter's email <tmort@blue.weeg.uiowa.edu> because this is such a rich monthly source that too few people use.

3. The specific citation here is a small part of a treasure trove of educa-

tional statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics website: <http://nces.ed.gov>.

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