

NOWHERE TO GO: BASIC WRITING AND THE SCAPEGOATING OF CIVIC FAILURE

ABSTRACT: Mandates to reduce remediation rates at California State University campuses have been heralded publicly by administrators as a return to standards. This article considers the consequences of expelling students who do not complete remediation within one year. Detailing the local options facing disenrolled students, the article proposes that the lack of educational choices is analogous to the institutionalized absence of alternatives for basic writing programs. It also analyzes the contradictory rhetoric of official policy, linking the elitist return to standards to the defunding of public education in California during the 1970s.

The horizons of our culture...are always disappearing, fading into deeply held but ambivalent convictions about how elitist claims on powerful discourse can coexist with egalitarian education.

—Susan Miller, *Textual Carnivals*

Not long ago I visited a basic writing class at my university in which the students were examining different forms of cultural myth-making the authors of the class textbook call “the California Dream.” Toward the close of a discussion preparing the class to read several arguments about higher education and the reasons it may and may not make good on the promise of a path to a better life, a student responded, “We always hear about how good education used to be and how bad it is now.” Then she turned to me as the outside visitor and asked, “What happened?”

I was struck immediately by how rare such a question is, but even more by how personally this student took the rhetoric of crisis that traditionally shadows public schooling. It was not lost on her that, sociological explanations aside, she didn’t measure up, wasn’t as good as previous generations of students. Her placement in a basic writing class did nothing but confirm what I want to propose is a state-sponsored sense of failure.

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The question, "What happened?" seems not to figure into the ongoing campaign to eliminate basic writing and math courses from California's state university system. What Ed White identifies as a national return to elitism in higher education, such efforts to return to standards transform education in the public mind into "a personal privilege rather than a public good," turning what was once an investment into an unyielding expense (20). The effect of this change in sentiment and its corresponding war of words will be felt most severely in places that combine the effects of urban and rural life, places like Fresno, where I teach. This essay considers a few of the local consequences of legislating a reduction in remediation, of eliminating basic writers in the name of quality. In what follows, I am trying to speak about only one region, so I am mindful of Peter Mortensen's reminder that whatever lessons we might draw from these examples, such things must be seen in local terms. Perhaps it will bear some similarity to where you teach and live. When I began this essay, I was thinking mostly about the educational alternatives available to students who are geographically isolated. But now I'm thinking too about our discipline's own lack of options, the absence of horizons for basic writing itself, a space invented to create horizons where none were visible before. This paper is about those ambivalent convictions, about the institutional ironies that embody them, about the people who pay for our inability to think clearly about them.

California's Remediation War

At the beginning of California's economic freefall in the early 1990s, frantic cost cutting in the CSU made remedial writers visible again. Though the university had done its best to make them invisible in the curriculum by denying the courses they take any meaningful academic credit and by staffing those classes with contingent labor whose own literacy was taken as credential enough, when it came time to comb budgets remedial programs looked like wasted money, rework the high schools should have accomplished. Following a series of public hearings up and down the state in 1996, the CSU Chancellor's Office revised its initial plan for a one-time remediation cure in the form of additional entrance requirements beginning in 2001. In the face of negative response to the method if not the goal of ending remediation, the Chancellor's office altered its timetable but not its objective. Instead, the students and citizens of California were promised "a series of targets and a sophisticated approach to standards development..." The ultimate objective was and continues to be a reduction in the need for remedial coursework to no more than 10% of the incoming class by 2007. In the meantime, California State Universities will give students one year to complete remediation. After that, they

will be “encouraged to seek education elsewhere.” Half a dozen years later we’re still waiting for the conversation about standards. The “series of targets”? Well, that seems to have been a euphemism for students.

For the moment I want to ignore the obvious link to the meanness of California’s political climate. But it would be wrong not to read the threat to college literacy and math programs in light of political campaigns to end affirmative action, end public services for non-citizens, and end bilingual education. For the moment, I just want to think about the space simultaneously opened and fenced by basic writing programs. Basic writing teachers are always challenged to avoid “losing a sense of our names as names” (as Bartholomae puts it): at CSU Fresno, we try to remind ourselves not to believe too much in how the university describes what we’re doing, not to believe fully in the distinctions rendered by outdated placement mechanisms that make one group of writers full-fledged entry-level members of the university while consigning the others to the hardest no-credit, total-performance course they’ll ever take. Our general inability to tell without a test score reference where our incoming students belong points out that campus placement test cut-offs represent one of the biggest fictions in academic life. Yet it is that fiction that tells the trustees we have “a serious problem.”

Think of our situation this way: we are taught in some disciplines to trust the bell curve of a normal distribution. The trustee’s dream for reducing remediation to 10% depends on seeing underprepared students confined to that narrow tail to the far left of the curve. But they have no real sense of whether a 10% remediation rate is achievable. In fact, the trustee’s own policy statement claims the end result will be “a virtually unprecedented university...” yet it never asks why this might be unprecedented. This untalented tenth suggests an entrenchment of a remedial paradigm built on what Mike Rose debunked some time ago as the myth of transience: a few tear-out worksheets, couple of hours having grammar checked in the writing center, and a happy return to what the trustees call “the primary gateway for social mobility and economic advancement.”

Yet with a 53% remediation rate on our campus—a figure typical of many California State University campuses—the placement cut-off dividing supposedly incompetent basic writers from their competent peers bisects the distribution curve at nearly its mid-point. We have achieved the daunting task of dividing the average from the average. There is an unlimited supply of anecdotal testimony from our writing center and first-year comp instructors that they cannot tell who should be in basic writing and who shouldn’t based on performance. So imagine half on either side of the cut-off to be nearly interchangeable. Who disappears when we reduce remediation from half to 10%? The lucky?

The good? The Trustees' report records concern that their new policies might intensify social disadvantage, asserting that

Our urban and remote schools in particular have struggled with a variety of societal and fiscal challenges that have made it difficult to offer satisfactory education to all students. The trustees, therefore, are determined to not apply solutions that might have a punitive effect. (Subcommittee on Remedial Education, 1)

The official summary of the CSU Trustee's Committee on Education policy ends with the following assurances, intended, I think, to link these changes with widely held assumptions about the purpose of college in what we insist is a meritocratic society:

The proposed policy is intended to help ensure that students come from high school well prepared to make the most of their college opportunity. It is intended to maximize access to a university education guaranteed by the Master Plan, and to promote excellence with diversity within the student body of the CSU. It is intended to reinforce the opportunity for all students to develop their academic abilities. As a public university committed to providing educational access to all citizens, especially those for whom other forms of higher education are financially and logistically out of reach, the CSU is sensitive to keeping the doors of access and opportunity open to qualified students. (Pesqueira and Hoff, January 1996, 5-6)

The contortions of this rhetoric will sound familiar to most of us. This sort of semantic bait and switch is not just indicative of logic of democratic exclusion but exemplifies the rhetorical shift White has observed. The desire to exploit the power of what Peter Mortensen calls the discourse of "better reading, better writing, better roads, better paycheck, better life" may not be entirely honest, but it works (182). In fact, it works so well the educational-industrial complex is largely responsible for so many students believing that a university education is the key to their futures. That they persist in the face of their considerable unreadiness appears to be what has motivated the California State University system to declare open season on remedial programs using a rhetoric that produces the very crisis conditions it purports to reflect.

Standards, Access, and Needs

Permit me a more generous reading and let me suggest that the rhetorical backflips of the trustees' report mirror our own tortured conversations in the scholarship and administration of basic writing in

Composition. We still have not figured out how to think through basic writing as opposed to thinking with it, facing its negative consequences as openly as we have celebrated its achievements. As David Bartholomae has pointed out in "The Tidy House," the discourse of basic writing was helpful for a while, creating a space for students and necessary research, but now institutionalized it seems incapacitated by the contradictions it could not resolve.

Tom Fox is one of a number of teachers who have sought to clarify those contradictions. Fox argues that often our commitments to access conflict with our sense that empowerment implies meeting standards. Whether done of pragmatism or nostalgia, Fox reasons that teachers are susceptible to the pairing of standards and access because it gives us "a sense of action and power, a sense that we are making a difference in our students lives" (41). Because of this, Fox says we are "terrifyingly close" to conservative cultural critics who draw a direct relationship between increased access to higher education and what they (and any person over thirty) perceive as a decline in the quality of student work. When access is tied unilaterally to some perceived set of objective standards, it ceases to be a very meaningful term. Fox would go further, asserting, "The contingency between access and standards associated with vague notions of academic discourse or an economically valued standard English is a lie" (42).

These are hard words for writing teachers, harder still for program directors who keep this whole mythotragic enterprise in motion. Fox sympathetically admits:

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? (43)

Fox suggests that what we might have left is a more sophisticated approach to standards, perhaps like the one promised by the trustees' report on remedial education. Fox suggests that for once standards might be contingent on access too, instead of the relationship being unilaterally drawn the other way. Interestingly, the authors of the trustees' report cite the California Postsecondary Education Commission on Educational Equity and its insistence that we cannot achieve equity until "pluralism and excellence are equal partners in a quality educational environment" (Pesqueira and Hoff, July 1995, 5). Yet seldom do we hear public calls for more pluralism, only renewed excellence.

If the relationship between improved standards and restricted access is a lie, what do we make of the programs we have worked so

hard to build? Perhaps we begin by testing, not simply accepting, Bartholomae's claim that

basic writers are produced by our desire to be liberal—to enforce commonness among our students by making the differences superficial, surface-level, and by designing a curriculum to both insure and erase them in 14 weeks. (12)

Is this what we do where I work? In Fresno, I inherited a vintage mode-driven basic writing program. Overhauling it meant disassembling a program to rebuild it from the ground up: helping graduate TAs learn the field they worked in but knew little of, beginning a conversation about what might help our students and how to teach it. Trying to make basic writing a college-level course and still help students who need extensive writing practice, we have created a course which trades two bad hours in a placement test for 16 weeks of comprehensive, no-credit performance, complete with complicated and uncertain assessments of writing which try to value the complexity of beginning writers' ideas without disregarding rhetorical control. The student grapevine at my school carries word that if you can make it through English A, English 1 will be easy.

I don't know how we teachers of composition reconcile the stories we tell ourselves about the significance of our teaching in the current and future lives of our students to the possibility that basic writing makes basic writers. There is certainly enough disconcerting research on the historical link between education and social position to question the fundamental progressive myth to which we have subscribed.

Telling the Truth

Peter Mortensen's analysis of James Traub's nostalgia for the old City College of New York makes much of Traub's claim that City achieved superior moral status as a civic institution because its meritocracy provided an avenue for "poor, talented boys" to enter the middle class. Unintentionally proving Fox's point, Traub's argument relies on the reader's acceptance that access alone is not a moral achievement and that over the years the "erosion of standards...has diminished that moral status."

Mortensen makes a compelling case for locating the truth by locally situating the nostalgic narratives aimed at remediation. Mortensen claims that with the complicated nature of institutional politics over language "it is going to be difficult for any academic figure to cultivate local ground in order to address a local audience on a subject such as the literacy of college students" (194). If I understand what is entailed

here, telling the truth about literacy will mean confronting the various discourses that surround the issue of remediation with ethical representations of literacy: what it is and does and how it is learned and from whom.

For example, anti-remediation momentum in the largest states leads toward a clearly stratified system of senior and junior colleges, with junior colleges still working under the premise of open enrollment. If open enrollment has been a failure (as is the argument for those wishing to reclaim the university's elite status), we have to ask why open enrollment would be any more justified at a community college. Why would it be any more successful at opening up a path to the middle class?

In a recent *CCC* article called "After Wyoming," Jennifer Trainor and Amanda Godley document one answer to this question many of us have heard over and over: "the community colleges are specialists in this sort of thing. It's also their mission." Trainor and Godley analyze the ways recycled arguments about standards and access are mediated by claims to professional specialization and what Sharon Crowley has critiqued as the discourse of student needs. The potential for abusing the discourse of needs is demonstrated through an example showing how administrators justified outsourcing the teaching of basic writing, thereby making BOTH students and teachers disappear. The logic is as simple as it is simple-minded: the university will look as though it has reneged on its commitment to pluralism if it eliminates remedial classes, yet to maintain appearances we must eliminate these curricular threats to excellence. The solution? Send students to community college *for their own good*. In essence, the university declares that the needs of the student warrant their relocation to institutions where the faculty is trained to help them.

I have heard this argument on my campus, too. Never mind that a growing portion of the local community college faculty is comprised of the same people teaching basic writing on our campus. What seems to matter most is how the discourse of needs maintains appearances. As a new conscript into writing program administration, I am surprised how much this issue of appearances matters. As a solution to the problem of low placement test scores, it has been repeatedly proposed that we should allow students to begin taking our placement tests as early as their sophomore year in high school. This way a passing score might be recorded and forever designate those students as not needing remediation. This does not change the state of things: students will continue to arrive at our campus unready to do some of the work we ask them to do. But it does *appear* to have solved the problem.

These interminable somersaults about preparedness and access, paternalism and choice confirm parts of Sharon Crowley's recent broadside against the universal requirement of freshman composition.

Crowley announces “the requirement has nothing to do with what students need and everything to do with the academy’s image of itself as a place where special language is in use” (257). Extending her analysis, Crowley makes our situation sound bleak:

The discourse of needs positions composition teachers as servants of a student need that is spoken, not by students themselves, but by people speaking for powerful institutions. Like the narrative of progress, the discourse of needs interpellates composition teachers as subjects who implement the regulatory desires of the academy and the culture at large. (257)

In fact, where I teach it is worse than this because sometimes the discourse of needs takes on a life of its own, sustaining all forms of blind advocacy, irrespective of what might genuinely benefit individual students most.

Lately a new version of the discourse of needs that created basic writing has emerged. In the CSU system we are now trying every means possible to identify eligible students as ESL to forestall the two-semester time limit. We are trying to keep students in school by renaming them. Another of the ironies on my campus is that ESL courses that act as pre-remedial courses earn graduation credit for the students enrolled in them. When they have completed the coursework in ESL, they must descend into the no-credit pool of English A before reemerging on the other side in English 1. While this path seems clearly to their advantage, there can be a strong disincentive to self-identify as ESL for resident and native born students whose primary language is not English. Such reluctance has less to do with the stigma of being an ESL student (though there is much of that) than it does with students being intelligent enough to become experts on their own education.

Semester after semester we hear students tell stories of failed high school ESL programs: the ESL instructor who passes out Civics textbooks written in English and then disappears into the back of the classroom; the new teacher pressed into ESL courses because he has a Spanish surname, even though he does not speak Spanish. Though it has one of the highest concentrations of limited English proficiency students (the labeling device of the day), California schools are scandalously understaffed in the teaching of ESL and will do whatever it takes to meet state mandates, as long as it doesn’t require recruiting and paying qualified teachers. The kinds of reports that one hears from students and teachers alike make these phony courses worse than a temporary sham, they’re a long-term trap. Students sometimes know when they are being defrauded, and so they choose the precarious, no-credit path of language acquisition in basic writing, even if it puts them at risk of being asked to leave. By choosing the more difficult route,

students are speaking of their needs. ESL might offer protection, but remediation offers escape.

Crowley and Fox and Elspeth Stuckey suggest the discourse of needs is a trap and a lie. Others have seen in the discourse of needs an avenue of power and advocacy. Literacy historians tell us the experience of people in an industrial age was not commensurate with the emergent rhetoric of advancement, but this fact does not mean that we, living in a far more economically undemocratic time, can simply ignore the possibility that the rhetoric of education and social mobility may have become prophetically more accurate than ever before. Maybe *we*, as advocates for literacy and human potential, have nowhere else to go. Perhaps we have no choice but to use it. Is this a time to propose, as do Trainor and Godley, as does Mary Soliday, as did the writing program at Temple, that the rhetoric of student needs be reconfigured to invalidate the language of exclusion? At CSU Chico, one of our northern campuses, the faculty has ended the quarantine of basic writers, creating a program which does not treat difference as deficiency but instead supports students, whatever their needs, as a supplement to their enrollment in first-year composition (Rodby & Fox).

The assault on basic literacy courses by those desiring a return to the foundations of elitism in education verifies Linda Brodkey's sense that in universities and educational culture, writing is permitted in designated areas only. The rejection of her proposed curriculum in Texas was only a precursor to declaring other sites of writing off limits. If the power of Brodkey's metaphor was its clarification of social, moral, and curricular boundaries, the most frightening aspect of this new exclusivity is the literal relocation of basic writers.

It's hard to imagine that we will ever collectively *recognize* the consequences of this return to elitism as such. The effects will be felt by students and families, be interpreted as individual failure, maybe isolated social injustice, but the society and economy of my region will not collapse. Indeed, the local economy already revolves around an axis of limited opportunity. At a time when our nation's unemployment rate has experienced historic lows, unemployment in Fresno county hovers near 13%. The rate is higher in neighboring counties. As is the case with all such figures, the rates are far higher in some demographic groups than others. Among the highest are the Mexican and Hmong families who send their children (often with considerable reluctance) to the State U in hopes of creating a path out of such a tenuous existence.

Let's leave aside the nagging paradox that students who do succeed in graduating from the university generally must leave the San Joaquin Valley for micro-economies where high-tech and professional jobs are easier to find. That looks too far ahead. What happens when, in the language of the Chancellor's 1997 executive order, students who

cannot overcome poor preparation within one year and are “encouraged to go elsewhere”? What options do they have to act on their material and cultural desires to use education as a path out of economic and social uncertainty?

Our TAs sampled one-fifth of our basic writing classes to find out. Students almost uniformly answered that community college would be their second alternative. One student seemed to summarize the sentiments of many: “If I go to a JC, I can always come back.” The fact that so many students have calculated pragmatic alternatives is more a byproduct of simply aiming to reach college from poverty than it is an awareness that they may be relocated. But what will these students find at the community colleges in the Central Valley? You know the answer—but here are the distressingly repetitive particulars: At the start of the just-concluded semester, I fielded phone calls from every local two-year college, begging for available instructors. Qualification was not much of an issue. These novice instructors will get no training at their new workplaces. At the same colleges, enrollment in basic writing classes begins at 31 students per class, climbing all the way to 50 for the lowest course offered at one college. Many instructors last semester reported waiting lists as large as the enrollment limit for the course. With pass rates at less than 60% for the course one level below transferable entry-level writing—the return ticket to the CSU—the likelihood of following an undisrupted path to transfer back to a CSU is slim. Our students know the rhetoric of opportunity and second chances, but they know little of the odds. Going elsewhere will too often result in going nowhere.

Scapegoating Civic Failure

None of this answers very satisfactorily that student’s question, “What happened?” California’s 1960s-era Master Plan mandates that we accept the top one-third of the graduating class. We have added courses and test scores to hedge on that commitment. Apparently this was not enough. Now we tell low-placing students that despite the ways their educational system has failed them, we will give them two chances not to fail us or themselves. If they cannot prove themselves by then we will foreclose on rights they don’t even know they have.

Literacy scholars and Compositionists often review the American fetish with educational failure to show how the rhetoric of crisis remains unresponsive to changing demographics and increasingly sophisticated demands on student literacy. Such a counterpoint against the constant drumbeat of collapse helps anyone who teaches writing or stands as the institutional proxy for underprepared students. But it doesn’t account for the very real changes that have taken place.

Within the truth of the rhetoric of failure, there are plenty of cul-

pable parties: schools have failed kids, fake bilingual programs have trapped second-language speakers, students have failed to carry out the responsibilities that accompany free, if compulsory, education; parents have failed teachers, adding to what we must teach. Some targets are easier than others. What students have above all others is a convenient specificity. We can locate them, test them, help and/or punish them. What we rarely recognize is our collective culpability.

Twenty years ago, when politics and populations in California began to move out of phase, the owning class disowned the rising class through the innocuous sounding Proposition 13. In what seemed a sensible response to runaway inflation and capricious property reassessments that saw some older Californian's forced out of their homes because they could not afford the new tax bill, Proposition 13 promised tax relief by freezing the rates by which property taxes could be increased. The backers of Prop 13 made the story about homes, but it was also paying the bills for civil society. In *Paradise Lost*, political journalist Peter Schrag explains that California's golden age during the 1950 and 60s was largely the result of its willingness to invest in public enterprises like education. During that time, voters saw their taxes build parks and freeways and universities that were the envy of the nation. We have been drawing down that investment ever since. California's near collapse during the early 1990s, Schrag argues, came as the result of initiatives like Proposition 13.

Proposition 13 exploited an inherent weakness in the social contract on education. With schools funded through property taxes, it was assumed that property owners had a self-interest in the creation and maintenance of good schools. By 1978, taxpayers were spending more and more to educate those they saw as other people's children. The passage of Proposition 13 gave property owners a few more dollars but it also left the state with a depleted public infrastructure, schools that can't succeed, and a "pinched social ethos" hungry for scapegoats.

Proposition 13 signaled the beginning of a shift in public resources away from the needy to the culturally deserving. It remains the paradigm of redistribution governing education in California. At schools like CSU Chico, cited above for the landmark efforts of Tom Fox, Judith Rodby, and Thia Wolf to improve the status of students classified as remedial, the university's external publication highlights the experience of the General Studies thematic program, an honors program that rewards gifted students with small classes, an integrated curriculum, and plenty of interaction with experienced professors. At my own campus, a large portion of our budget and imagination has been diverted into the creation of an honors college. These are nice, even important programs, but this is not a change mentioned in the rhetoric of crisis. Nor is it mentioned in the trustees' accounting of school and student shortcomings. In the trustees' report, only two short phrases

allude to the effects of the looting of California's education funding. Arguing the need to see the complexity of school failure, the report describes California schools as "strapped for resources" and facing "fiscal challenges." The report goes on to place the blame on poorly trained teachers and inadequately communicated standards of excellence. Once again, access and standards.

The fact that so many California schools look like "trailer parks" [to use the Chancellor's own words] does not seem to be taken into consideration when we decide that students should bear the brunt of their supposed unreadiness for college work.

It could be argued that those who benefited most from California's generous investment are now the ones most responsible for ruining California's education system, the ones mandating its new policies of exclusion. Where were the protective instincts of the trustees when the citizens of California voted to eviscerate their public education system in 1978?

Please don't mistake my concerns about remediation reform for the caricature of softhearted and softheaded teachers who promote self-esteem at the expense of learning. Lots of students who come to college will struggle with the work we put before them. I thought the purpose of a university was to change that.

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