

# “Admission to One. . . Admission to All”: The (End of the) Radical Dream of Open Admissions in the Post-Desegregation South

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*ABSTRACT: This essay describes Open Admissions in the South during postsecondary desegregation, providing a comparative analysis of policies and debates in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Georgia. Statewide Open Admissions policies emerged in the 1960s as part of superficial efforts to comply with desegregation but were ineffective; consequently, they were overturned in court in favor of increased remediation and selective admissions in four-year colleges and universities. Desegregation litigation consistently presented literacy remediation as key to desegregation, undermining civil rights activists' arguments for transformative Open Admissions programs that proposed nonselective admissions coupled with the transformation of historically white universities' programs and policies. Desegregation enforcement may have delegitimized radical Open Admissions by presenting remediation, particularly Basic Writing, as key to accessing higher education for students of color—a persistent rhetoric in Basic Writing scholarship that must be reexamined in light of this history.*

*KEYWORDS: corequisite Basic Writing; desegregation; directed self-placement; Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); Open Admissions*

“Admission to one of the institutions within the state system means admission to all of them. Admissions standards shall be uniform and uniformly applied with no elitist criteria at any level.”  
—*An Alternative Plan for the Desegregation of the University System of Georgia*

“The current practice of open admissions to all four-year institutions is counter-productive, both in terms of educational

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objectives and racial integration. The objective is not simply to admit students into college, but to educate and graduate them.”  
—*United States v. Louisiana* (1989)

In 1973, a report on Open Admissions programs in New York, Nebraska, and California was submitted to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) by a curriculum institute at the University of Nebraska.<sup>1</sup> Authors David Rosen, Seth Brunner, and Steve Fowler concluded, “No American institution of higher education currently operates under a real open admissions policy.” They argued that Open Admissions required several policy conditions to be in place: free public higher education, the elimination of mandatory remedial coursework, the hiring of racially diverse counselors, the elimination of grades, and childcare services on campus, among other things. These recommendations reflected a radical vision of access to higher education—one that sought to disrupt the “racial and economic discrimination that regulates entry to this system” (Rosen, Brunner, and Fowler 7). At the heart of this vision was a belief that Open Admissions should support the desegregation of historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs).<sup>2</sup>

In reading Rosen, Brunner, and Fowler’s report on eastern, west coast, and midwestern programs, I can’t help but notice the absence of the geographic region I call home, the South. This absence is especially marked given the underlying theme of desegregation in the report, which, like most histories on the subject, does not imagine Open Admissions as a southern phenomenon. Perhaps they assumed that southern universities resistant to desegregation would be unlikely to adopt Open Admissions, but if that is the case, they overlooked numerous Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that have operated in the South since the 19th century with Open Admissions. Despite this omission, their report is interesting because it accurately predicted that Open Admissions, as it had been adopted by HWCUs, would not accomplish desegregation. They highlighted unrealized demands for social justice in higher education that persist today. However, by overlooking southern programs, they could not predict that policy failures in Open Admissions institutions would be scrutinized in desegregation litigation, fueling the political turn against Open Admissions after the 1970s.

This history of a fractured and ultimately failed southern Open Admissions takes the influence of the civil rights movement and HBCUs on Open Admissions seriously, as scholars Amaka Okechukwu and Carmen Kynard implore us to do. Drawing from legal rulings, archival records, and institutional histories in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Georgia, I describe the

role of Open Admissions in the South from the 1960s through the 1990s. While Open Admissions at HBCUs predated the 1960s, I focus on this period to show how desegregation litigation undermined Open Admissions, which court rulings viewed as responsible for Black students' attrition. The cases I describe in formerly segregated states were what I call *nominal Open Admissions* policies designed to avoid obvious discrepancies between admissions requirements at state-funded HWCUs and HBCUs. States argued that they did not racially discriminate because admissions were open. Yet remediation requirements in these state systems still made admissions and graduation contingent on literacy performances set by HWCU standards and policies.<sup>3</sup> These strategies constituted what Eric Darnell Pritchard describes as the "normative regulation, policing, and surveillance" of literacy in school, which has historically been used against African Americans (59). In contrast, civil rights activists demanded *transformative Open Admissions*, nonselective admissions policies coupled with the elimination of systems of grading, mandatory remediation, and non-degree-credit courses.

In this article, I begin by situating southern Open Admissions within the national context of Open Admissions and desegregation. I then analyze nominal Open Admissions policies in Tennessee and Louisiana, which I argue were an attempt to stall desegregation by appearing cooperative. These policies were eventually struck down by the courts for failing to result in desegregation. Their failure affirmed growing opposition to Open Admissions and strengthened support for tiered admissions and the remedial role of community colleges. Finally, I recover arguments for transformative Open Admissions in Georgia, which warned that increasing state preferences for tiered admissions and conventional remediation would perpetuate segregation and harm HBCUs—a prediction that has proven accurate (Carnevale et al.; Perna et al.). This history explains the backlash against Open Admissions in the context of stalled desegregation and the retrenchment of civil rights progress.

The history I describe here troubles the assumption that Basic Writing programs played a key role in desegregating HWCUs, during or after Open Admissions. Black activists did demand Open Admissions as part of desegregation, according to Okechukwu, but the establishment of such programs met strong political opposition to the idea of altering admissions requirements for the purpose of redressing racism. This backlash pushed most remedial coursework out of four-year colleges (Okechukwu). Similarly, Kynard has demonstrated that Open Admissions was accepted briefly for its political utility in constructing "the image of public higher education as egalitarian,"

but was quickly abandoned when white stakeholders no longer wanted or needed that image (166). As Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu, Mary Soliday, and Steve Lamos have detailed in their histories, Basic Writing programs were racialized as serving students of color, even when they remained majority white. While writing instruction was included in demands for Open Admissions by activists, students of color, and faculty, Tessa Brown has shown that such programs operated in institutional environments that worked against them: marginalizing faculty of color, disproportionately failing students of color, and graduating white students at higher rates. The history of southern Open Admissions parallels this national history, demonstrating the limited and political nature of Open Admissions at HWCUs. Southern states that used Open Admissions programs to try to avoid litigation remained unwilling to adopt the policies that activists demanded.

What, then, does this history suggest we should do about Basic Writing? As a white scholar, a writer using what April Baker-Bell calls “White Mainstream English,” and an only occasional teacher of Basic Writing (mostly outsourced to community colleges in my post-desegregation state), I am cautious about the conclusions I draw from this history. My language proficiency has never been questioned, and my access to education and employment has never been threatened by racist language assessments. I will not resolve a thirty-year-old debate over whether Basic Writing contributes to segregation, which has played out in the pages of *Journal of Basic Writing*. In 1993, William Jones argued that Basic Writing programs were “Jim-Crow way stations for minority students” in HWCUs, but he argued in support of alternative approaches taken at HBCUs (73). In 1997, Ira Shor called Basic Writing placement “our apartheid.” Recent scholarship on the history of Basic Writing pedagogy and labor (Brown) and placement practices (Molloy, Fonville, and Salam) details how Basic Writing at HWCUs stems “root and branch” from segregation and white supremacy. Elsewhere scholars have pointed out that Basic Writing histories are themselves segregated, focusing primarily on HWCUs and leaving out HBCUs and activist movements (Royster and Williams; Kynard; Ruiz). My contribution is to show that there is a southern history of Open Admissions—a tradition both of segregation and of activism—a history that troubles existing representations of Basic Writing as *itself* an access strategy. Access cannot be reduced simply to pedagogy or placement practices; rather, access is always governed by political and institutional policies that determine who enters and exits college, and in the U.S. those policies historically were used to maintain segregation and white supremacy in higher education.

## **Situating Postsecondary Desegregation in the History of Open Admissions**

The Open Admissions movement emerged at the intersection of two historical developments in the mid-20th century: the tiering of postsecondary institutions by admissions requirements, popularized in the 1960s based on Clark Kerr's model for the California system, and demands for the desegregation of HWCUs. These debates over admissions and institutional tiering were precipitated by the enrollment expansion of higher education following World War II and by civil rights activism and protests on college campuses in the 1960s. The California model, which became influential nationally, adopted Open Admissions only within a lower tier—typically, community colleges. However, activists in the late 1960s and 1970s demanded Open Admissions apply to elite universities as one of many changes necessary to desegregate HWCUs.

Most famously, in 1969 at the City College of New York (CCNY), Black and Puerto Rican protestors demanded changes to admissions practices and the founding of ethnic studies programs within the City University of New York (CUNY) (“Five Demands”). These demands included the guaranteed admission of all high school graduates in the city, resulting in demographic enrollment proportionate to the city's high school graduates. Students also stated that every admitted applicant should “receive checks and the proper courses to overcome individual deficiencies” (“Five Demands”). Citing this demand, the Board of Higher Education of the City of New York proposed an Open Admissions policy to encourage “the ethnic integration of the colleges,” but it also stressed the need for remedial programs to ensure that the “open door” would not become “a revolving door” (189). The bargain over admissions was therefore conditioned on retention, which politicians, courts, and institutions began to use to measure the success of desegregation-era programs. What made this condition risky for CUNY is that Open Admissions applied to (and therefore risked the reputation of) CUNY's most prestigious institutions; it was not isolated to a lower tier of access institutions, as in the California model (Soliday).

However, the broader philosophy of Open Admissions—that is, democratic access to higher education with the aim of racially reparatory programs—predated CUNY's program. Kynard credits HBCUs with “inventing both the theory and sustained practice of open admissions” (177). Both state-funded HWCUs and HBCUs employed non-selective (but racially restrictive) admissions prior to the enrollment expansion of the

1940s and 1950s (Okechukwu). But unlike HWCUs, many HBCUs offered non-discriminatory Open Admissions, courses on Black literature and history, and innovative support programs, including novel forms of Basic Writing—all before CUNY.<sup>4</sup> Although HBCUs had a record of successfully educating Black students, their policies did not become a model for HWCUs during desegregation, particularly in the South where failed resistance to desegregation turned to minimal compliance designed to avoid litigation.

Postsecondary desegregation, as historian Peter Wallenstein argues, was an extended process (19). In 1890, the second Morrill Act required segregated states to establish or fund public HBCUs in order to continue receiving federal land grant funding for higher education. From 1890 through 1935, seventeen states operated legally segregated postsecondary systems, and HBCUs enrolled and graduated nearly all Black students in higher education in the U.S. (Wallenstein; Wooten). As Wallenstein explains, HWCUs might best be characterized not as white, but as anti-Black, reserving their most ardent resistance for Black applicants. Following the 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, southern states resisted desegregation, employing strategies, ranging from violence to stalling tactics, to maintain segregation in higher education (Wallenstein). After *Brown*, eight states operated segregated university systems until the passage of the Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which denied federal funding to any institution that discriminated on the basis of race (Wallenstein 16). However, when racial patterns in enrollment persisted, HEW was forced to issue Title VI citations against states, a process that involved litigation and oversight from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) (Brown; Perna et al.). This enforcement raised questions about whether institutions had any legal obligation beyond removing race-based admissions. In other words, if a state's universities remained racially identifiable, but race was not explicitly used to deny admissions, was a university considered desegregated?

This question became increasingly important as investigations by the OCR in 1969 revealed patterns of segregation in more than half of formerly segregated states (Haynes). These investigations prompted HEW to monitor states' desegregation process. If HWCUs and HBCUs in the same state had different admissions requirements, particularly in terms of required standardized test scores, those differences made the state vulnerable to accusations that it was using admissions to maintain segregation. Mississippi was taken to court for this reason, after the state's flagship HWCUs (the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi) adopted a minimum ACT score of 15 in the 1960s,

more than twice the average score of Black students (Supreme Court of the United States, *United States v. Fordice*). While the state defended tiered admissions as maintaining academic standards, the court called this defense a “midpassage justification for perpetuating a policy enacted originally to discriminate against black students” (Supreme Court of the United States, *United States v. Fordice*). Tiered admissions were clearly segregationist in the South after *Brown*.

In contrast, nominal Open Admissions policies in states like Tennessee and Louisiana were less obviously segregationist. These policies functioned as the postsecondary equivalent of “freedom of choice” plans, which were implemented by non-compliant K-12 school districts under the auspices of giving students a choice to attend either the historically white or the historically Black school in the district, placing the onus for desegregation entirely on students. In 1968, the Supreme Court ruled in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* that freedom of choice plans did not promote desegregation because the choice was artificial: Black students feared attending the white school, and white students viewed the Black school as inferior. But in 1969 the Supreme Court affirmed that *Green* did not apply to higher education by upholding an Alabama district court ruling that argued K-12 desegregation would “probably resolve” the problem of college segregation, so no action was needed beyond nondiscriminatory admissions (United States District Court, M.D. Alabama). It was not until 1992, in *United States v. Fordice*, that the Supreme Court conceded that admissions policies were suspect in university systems with a history of segregation, and, as Justice Antonin Scalia noted in his partial dissent, this also made Open Admissions policies suspect where they had been used in segregation.

State-wide Open Admissions was adopted not out of sincere interest in desegregation or a recognition of HBCUs’ effective access strategies, but because nominal Open Admissions posed little threat to the segregated order of higher education. As I show below, Tennessee and Louisiana presented nominal Open Admissions policies as evidence of their commitment to desegregation, but by the 1980s, courts dismantled such programs, finding them counterproductive to desegregation. Their solution was tiered admissions, with remediation viewed as critical to desegregation but now further distanced from four-year colleges and universities by its placement primarily within community colleges. These decisions undermined Basic Writing innovations at HBCUs by framing Basic Writing primarily as means of keeping underprepared students out of regular college coursework at four-year HWCUs. Consequently, the philosophy of Open Admissions for racial justice

was delegitimized, and Black students were further coded as underprepared in educational policies.

### **Nominal Open Admissions and the (Re)Turn to Remediation in Tennessee and Louisiana**

Nominal Open Admissions in the South following *Brown* might best be understood as states justifying ongoing segregation by pointing to identical race-neutral, non-selective admissions policies at public HWCUs and HBCUs. But nominal Open Admissions did not radically alter admissions requirements in the 1960s, when the role of standardized testing was still ill defined. Rather, states retroactively crafted the defense that they did *not* create differential admissions requirements in the 1960s (as Mississippi did) to resist desegregation. For example, in *Geier v. University of Tennessee*, the United States Court of Appeals summarized Tennessee's defense of its policies: "While conceding. . . a state-imposed dual system of public higher education prior to 1960, [Tennessee's trustees] contend that the State fulfilled its constitutional obligation to establish a unitary system when it instituted an 'open-door' admissions policy." As a legal defense, nominal Open Admissions represented freedom of choice. In practice, the focus on admissions ignored how literacy remediation policies restricted HBCUs and implemented systems for linguistic racism at HWCUs.

That nominal Open Admissions was symbolic is evident in comparing admissions policies before and after 1960 at Tennessee State University (TSU), the state's public HBCU, to its flagship HWCU, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK). Founded in 1912 in Nashville as the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School, TSU was by 1946 a master's-level land grant HBCU accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools ("Undergraduate Catalog 1946-47"). Both before and after 1960, admission was open to any applicant who was 16 years old, submitted high school transcripts, took appropriate placement tests, and could "furnish satisfactory evidence of good moral character (usually the recommendation of the high school principal)" ("Undergraduate Catalog 1946-47" 25; see also "Undergraduate Catalog 1965-66" 35).<sup>5</sup> By comparison, UTK had similar policies before and after 1960, although after 1960 students took the ACT for placement, whereas before students took "whatever other tests are set by the Committee on Admissions from year to year" ("General Catalog: 1955-56" 72; "General Catalog: 1962-1964" 22). Although there were changes



after 1960, Open Admissions served primarily as a rhetorical strategy, and it did not preclude the use of testing for placement into remedial coursework.

Admissions may have been non-selective, but state policies provided mechanisms for literacy surveillance, including requirements that students pass an English proficiency test to graduate and that faculty report students for English 'deficiencies' at any time to the Committee on Student English ("Undergraduate Catalog: 1946-57"; "Undergraduate Record 1955-56").<sup>6</sup> Unlike UTK, TSU resisted and rewrote these requirements in the late 1950s. In 1957, TSU removed the committee and reporting system from its catalogue, although the requirement to pass the Junior English Test (later renamed the English Proficiency Test) in "simple expository English" remained ("Undergraduate Catalogue 1957-58" 39). As late as 1975, UTK still had an official policy allowing faculty to report any student's English usage by

simply check[ing] the column headed 'English' on the quarterly grade sheets. A student checked by any faculty member will be required to remedy the deficiency through work in the Writing Laboratory. Remedial work in the laboratory shall be started as soon as possible after the student has been notified of his deficiency and shall continue until the student's performance in English has been declared satisfactory by the laboratory[, ] instructor, or both. ("General Catalog: 1975-76," 19)

These forms of literacy surveillance gave a predominantly white faculty at UTK a means of making proficiency in White Mainstream English a determinant of whether a student could progress through a college degree. Such policies provided a system for linguistic racism that operated independent of admissions and differentiated practices at HBCUs and HWCUs during nominal Open Admissions.

In contrast, TSU's writing program developed innovative approaches to placement and course credit under the direction of Alma Dunn Jones, an alumna of the college with an MA from Columbia, who served as the Chair of Freshman English and Composition from 1932 to 1972 ("Undergraduate Catalog: 1971-73"; TSU, "Sixty-Seventh"). Through the early 1960s, TSU placed Basic Writing students into English 100, "English Fundamentals," "A non-credit course designed for students who give evidence by entrance examination of their inability to meet the standards of English 101" ("Undergraduate Catalogue 1963-64" 129). Upon passing English 100, students took 3 quarters of first-year composition focused on "various areas of the

communication skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening” (“Undergraduate Catalog 1946-47” 143). It is worth noting, however, that students would have taken this course alongside courses on Black history and literature and core courses teaching “the contribution that all races and nations have made to our present civilization” (“Undergraduate Catalog 1946-47” 148). In 1965, TSU replaced English 100 with alternative support offered through the Communications Clinic, an integrated reading, writing, speaking, and listening center founded in the 1950s. This arrangement allowed students to earn credit for first-year composition and receive academic support at the same time. In the early 1970s, this curricular structure was formalized into a paired non-credit laboratory course—an innovation predating modern corequisite or studio Basic Writing courses (“Undergraduate Catalog: 1971-73” 99). The Clinic also expanded to serve all students, who could attend the Communications Clinic voluntarily (“Undergraduate Catalog: 1971-73” 11). Additionally, TSU provided support options for students who failed the English graduation test: students could choose either to attend the Clinic or audit a composition class (“Undergraduate Catalog: 1971-73” 31). These curricular revisions provided flexible approaches that destigmatized writing support and offered options to students.

However, TSU’s approaches to writing remediation changed after *Geier v. University of Tennessee* (1979) ordered its merger with neighboring HWCU, the University of Tennessee at Nashville (UTN), ruling Open Admissions a failure for desegregation. By 1975, UTN’s enrollment remained nearly 90% white, and TSU’s enrollment remained nearly 90% Black. At UTK, Black enrollment was still only 6.4% of the total student enrollment (United States Court of Appeals). The merger of UTN into TSU allowed TSU to remain an HBCU, but it ended Open Admissions and implemented new admissions policies requiring a minimum ACT score and limiting conditional admissions to no more than 5% of admitted freshman (“Undergraduate Catalog: 1981-1983” 12). In other words, the ruling not only dictated placement methods, it limited the number of remedial students TSU could admit. Additionally, the merger expanded the non-credit Basic Writing courses TSU offered. Basic Writing was divided into two non-credit courses, ENG 098 and ENG 099, the former focused on sentences and paragraphs and the latter on paragraphs and essays (“Undergraduate Catalog: 1981-1983” 80). Students who failed the required graduation test also had to enroll in a remedial course (“Undergraduate Catalog: 1981-1983” 28). These changes replaced flexible support with conventional non-credit coursework consistent with state HWCUs. The state’s failure to adopt TSU’s innovations undermined the university’s

Basic Writing program, resulting in more remediation requirements and the erasure of a historic corequisite model from Basic Writing history.

Rather than facilitating desegregation, the merger prompted a massive white flight in enrollment. By 1983, nearly 80% of TSU students were Black, and more than 90% of entering freshman were Black; prior to the merger, the combined enrollment of TSU and UTN was 51.2% white (Warnick). In *Geier v. University of Tennessee*, the judge had warned that “the efforts of TSU to retain its identification as a black university... has had a strongly deterrent effect upon its attractiveness to white applicants” (United States Court of Appeals). Although the comment was intended as a caution against a Black identity for the merged TSU, it predicted the ongoing challenges that TSU would face due to white students’ attitudes about HBCUs. TSU’s desegregation was challenged again in 1984, and the settlement again presented TSU’s “black identification” as a problem (United States District Court, M.D. Tennessee). That settlement set a goal of 50% white enrollment by 1993. To accomplish this, the settlement required TSU to raise its GPA and ACT scores over 5 years, with a cap on the number of students admitted by “alternative admissions standards” and placed into “developmental education programs” (United States District Court, M.D. Tennessee). The settlement stipulated that state community colleges could not change their admissions requirements, since they provided access to higher education. In other words, the settlement made TSU’s admissions more selective, limited its remedial programs, and assigned community colleges the responsibility for remediation. These policies reveal how selective admissions was part of a policy approach designed to mitigate TSU’s historical identity as an access institution for Black students in order to attract more white students. The settlement did not permit Open Admissions or the flexible writing support that had characterized TSU’s past efforts. Rather, it cast Open Admissions as a threat to white students’ perceptions of HBCUs and therefore a threat to desegregation.

While Tennessee’s termination of Open Admissions shows the effect that desegregation litigation had on HBCUs and Basic Writing, Louisiana’s history demonstrates the judicial logic behind similar rulings against Open Admissions. Louisiana adopted nominal Open Admissions after a 1954 case (before *Brown*), *Constantine v. Southwestern Louisiana Institute*, ordered the state’s HWCUs to admit Black students. In her chronicle of this history at one HWCU, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL), Nicole Pepinster Greene describes how desegregation-era Open Admissions racialized remedial writing instruction.<sup>7</sup> As she details, ULL faculty viewed Basic Writing as critical to desegregation during Open Admissions, but ULL’s Basic Writing

course, English 90: Remedial English, was fraught with pedagogical and retention problems that perpetuated racism. As Greene reports, faculty allowed students to write in “nonstandard English” on informal journaling assignments but not for essays (Greene 74). This approach, according to Baker-Bell, “perpetuates anti-blackness as it adheres to a politics of respectability, surrenders to whiteness, and does not challenge Anti-Black Linguistics Racism” (28). Presenting Black English as inadequate for professional or public writing presumes ongoing white supremacy in the academy and workplace by requiring White Mainstream English for success. Accordingly, Greene found that Black students disproportionately placed into remediation, failed, and dropped out (Greene 75-85). ULL also hid its retention data and misrepresented enrollment and pass rates when reporting to the desegregation enforcement monitoring committee (Greene 85).<sup>8</sup> Greene’s history suggests that nominal Open Admissions in Louisiana allowed some HWCUs to implement policies that determined admission to regular college coursework on the performance of White Mainstream English.

Greene’s history of ULL may not reflect every Open Admissions program in Louisiana during this time, but it demonstrates that nominal Open Admissions programs had practices and policies that contributed to higher attrition rates for Black students—a problem that the court specifically used to justify overturning Open Admissions in 1987, when a review of Louisiana’s progress found segregation had worsened in the prior decade (Diamond). In 1988, the enrollment of ULL was 79.2% white, Louisiana State University was 88% white, and all state HBCUs had enrollments that were more than 80% Black (United States District Court, E.D. Louisiana). The district court found that Louisiana’s Open Admissions “fail[ed] to organize students by academic ability,” which it argued explained why less than half of students admitted graduated within six years, with the highest attrition rates in the state’s HBCUs (United States District Court, E.D. Louisiana). Critically, the ruling cast racial disparities in attrition rates as a failure to provide *enough* remediation, rather than a failure of the kind of remediation being offered or other system and institutional policies that contribute to attrition. This ruling claimed that Open Admissions had a demotivating effect on high schools and that raising admissions requirements in four-year institutions would “forc[e] high schools to respond to the preparation challenge” (United States District Court, E.D. Louisiana). The court then ordered Louisiana to develop a tiered admissions plan, with remedial programs phased out at selective institutions beginning in 1990. Meanwhile, community colleges were given a larger role in desegregation as they were ordered to provide “remedial

education of those who might be excluded from the less accessible four-year college system, thereby helping to ensure a racially balanced system” (United States District Court, E.D. Louisiana). This ruling cast remediation in a larger role and created new obstacles, such as transfer, that displaced responsibility for desegregation onto high schools and community colleges and allowed the state to control public HBCUs’ admissions policies (Harbour; Wooten). Clifford P. Harbour argues that states assigned community colleges the role of facilitating desegregation to avoid making larger changes to their university systems (148). As the Louisiana ruling demonstrates, that role was defined by remediation policies that avoided larger questions about racial disparities in retention.

In relocating Basic Writing and Open Admissions primarily to community colleges, desegregation in Tennessee and Louisiana reproduced the same assumptions about Black students that undermined their Open Admissions programs: that desegregation did not require substantially changing HWCUs and that Black students should bear the responsibility for desegregation by completing remediation, now relocated to community colleges. As Harbour argues, the side effect was that, for states, community colleges “only had relevancy and importance in the litigation to the extent their operations were a benefit (or detriment)” to state politics (168). This history suggests that presenting Basic Writing as key to access for Black students ignores the larger system in which access is circumscribed through a racialized and racist system of instruction and surveillance that allows four-year HWCUs to define academic standards, against which non-normative literacy practices and retention rates are measured. Nominal Open Admissions served the pretense of desegregation while eliding (or in Tennessee’s case overturning) transformative Open Admissions. This is especially tragic in light of the vision that many civil rights activists articulated for transformative Open Admissions in Georgia, where, as I will show, selective admissions policies served segregationist ends.

### **“Lily-White” Universities and the Countervision of Transformative Open Admissions**

Historian John Hope Franklin described segregationist practices as full of “contradictions and inconsistencies” because they were primarily designed “to maintain racial distinctions at all costs” (142). Nowhere is this point more evident than in the case of postsecondary admissions in the South: even as some states maintained segregation through nominal

Open Admissions, other states did so with tiered admissions, with the most selective tier of institutions comprising the state's prestigious HWCUs. In Georgia, postsecondary desegregation continually emphasized selective admissions for maintaining academic standards, presenting remediation as key to desegregation. In response, civil rights activists argued that a failure to implement transformative Open Admissions would threaten the identities of HBCUs and result in segregationist remedial programs that perpetuated the exclusion of Black students from the prestigious universities.

During the period in which Georgia was monitored by the OCR for postsecondary desegregation enforcement (1969-1987), Georgia continually presented tiered admissions along with remedial instruction (called Special Studies) as key to its desegregation plan.<sup>9</sup> In 1977, Georgia produced a desegregation plan not unlike what Louisiana and Tennessee later adopted, in which desegregation depended on geographically accessible lower-tier colleges with remedial coursework, arguing that access institutions promote desegregation by providing a path for transferring to the state's top-tier universities, all of which were HWCUs (Oxford et al. I.15). Remedial Special Studies courses in English, reading, and math were described as "the heart of the problem of increasing minority student enrollment" (Oxford et al. I.161). The plan justified this focus by describing the "cultural and educational backgrounds" of Black students as "not conducive to strong academic development" (Oxford et al. II.48). To identify students for remediation, the state required applicants to earn a combined SAT score of 650 for regular admissions, below which students would be required to take additional placement tests (Oxford et al. II.52). However, individual institutions could set that score higher if they wished, effectively allowing institutions to discourage applicants by setting a higher bar for bypassing remediation requirements.

This strategy was criticized by an anonymous group of activists in a counterproposal, *An Alternative Plan for the Desegregation of the University System of Georgia*. Published in 1977, the *Alternative Plan* originated during a workshop on "Problems of Poor People and Minorities in Higher Education in Georgia," attended by citizens, students, and educators (1). The *Alternative Plan* described Special Studies as "a new category of segregated students" (60). Furthermore, the authors pointed out that applying this statewide requirement at all University System of Georgia institutions would turn HBCUs into "primarily remedial institutions—thereby reinforcing the dual system of education" (*Alternative Plan* 60). Indeed, data from SAT score distributions from 1975-1976 showed that this requirement would place 1.2% of incoming freshman into Special Studies at the University of Georgia, the state's

flagship HWCUs; in contrast, 75.4% of first-year students at Savannah State, one of the state's 3 public HBCUs, would be placed into remediation using this requirement, nearly eliminating the entire freshman class from regular college coursework (*Alternative Plan* 61). The institutional disparities between HBCUs and HWCUs would be insurmountable based on these numbers.

The *Alternative Plan* argued that the state's remediation requirements missed the point. The authors stated:

It is illogical and unreasonable to think that the retention of Black students within higher educational institutions which have historically denied them entry can be achieved without the alteration of those institutions themselves taking place. To simply include a large Black population of students within racist institutions and expect them to do well in an academically and otherwise hostile environment is, at best, foolish.... The [desegregation plan] did not and could not even allude to this problem since the Regents see the problem of the desegregation of the University System of Georgia as merely a problem of the artificial introduction of Black students—in a token manner—into previously white institutions. (*Alternative Plan* 67-69)

Activists criticized the white-centric view of desegregation as remediation. This is not to dismiss racial inequities in K-12 education, although sources suggest that Black students' academic preparation and performance were better than the media portrayed (Boyd). However, by reducing desegregation to a problem of remediation, the University System of Georgia not only reinforced racist stereotypes of Black students as unfit for college, it also crafted structural responses that disproportionately disadvantaged Black students and HBCUs.

The *Alternative Plan* proposed transformative Open Admissions with innovative Basic Writing coursework, similar to the approach taken by TSU prior to its merger. The *Alternative Plan* stated, “*open admissions* to all of the public institutions of higher education is essential to their desegregation. By open admissions we mean that anyone who possesses a high-school diploma or G.E.D. certificate should be admitted to any and all of the institutions within the University System of Georgia. Without open admissions the lily-white institutions can at best engage in the shallow charade of tokenism” (10, emphasis in original). The *Alternative Plan* proposed all required courses count toward degree-credit, eliminating pre-collegiate and remedial

coursework (74). Instead of remediation, universities should develop writing support centers and new core courses in reading, courses “relevant to the Black experience and perspective,” and redesigned core courses including “the perspective of Black and other poor peoples... within the presentation of other relevant subject areas” (75). Furthermore, all academic support would be *voluntary*, with students participating in “an extensive program of individualized evaluative counseling for the purpose of ascertaining academic weaknesses that a student might have prior to registration,” and then advised on appropriate, optional support (75). Although reminiscent of today’s directed self-placement and co-requisite approaches to Basic Writing, this model proposed more radical actions, including eliminating grades and allowing students to retake courses “repeatedly until [the student] has developed sufficient skill to exit the course with full credit, based upon the judgment of the instructor concerned” (75). For these activists, a redesigned Basic Writing and core curriculum was as important as the removal of admissions requirements. Unfortunately, the *Alternative Plan* did not change the state’s desegregation plan, and like other segregated states, Georgia continues to have patterns of segregation, particularly in four-year institutions (Litolff).

Georgia’s tiered admissions and Tennessee and Louisiana’s nominal Open Admissions similarly attributed ongoing segregation to Black students’ academic preparation. Rather than enacting transformative Open Admissions, state plans forced HBCUs to alter their policies and programs and to offer extensive, state-mandated remedial coursework. Such resolutions increasingly made the process of negotiating desegregation risky for plaintiffs suing states or universities, especially as policy enforcement under President Ronald Reagan shifted to emphasize HBCUs recruiting white students and faculty. In Mississippi, for example, Black plaintiffs fought for Open Admissions at HBCUs in exchange for higher admissions requirements at HWCUs; however, the courts denied this request and instead mandated admissions and remediation requirements across the state’s institutions (Inman). Nowhere did desegregation emphasize the transformative Open Admissions practices that activists demanded.

The story of Open Admissions in postsecondary desegregation is critical to understanding the history of Open Admissions—its aims and ultimately its end. Desegregation offered an opportunity to rethink the segregated structure of higher education. Instead, states used it to normalize the practices of HWCUs and to justify institutional tiering and state-controlled remediation policies. As Melissa E. Wooten explains, “Surely if there had been will, imagination, and political pressure the region might have developed a



solution that did away with traditionally white colleges in favor of opening schools that had never erected exclusionary admission policies... Instead, traditionally white colleges were understood as mainstream organizations while black colleges were seen as deviations from the norm” (18). The story of Open Admissions and Basic Writing is case in point, as innovative Basic Writing programs and proposals were erased from history by failing to forefront HBCUs’ work creating access to higher education.

### **Post-Desegregation Basic Writing**

While political favor for selective admissions may have played the greatest role in eliminating Open Admissions outside of community colleges, it would be a mistake to discount the role of litigation that ultimately deemed Open Admissions counterproductive to desegregation. These policies did not consider alternative models of writing coursework or a redesigned core curriculum, which activists argued were essential to enacting racial justice in higher education. Rather, the courts and states treated remediation as key to Black student enrollment in HWCUs, rationalizing stalled desegregation as a product of Black students’ academic preparation.

For higher education, this history has had documented negative effects. The movement of Open Admissions to lower tier colleges appears to exacerbate racial segregation. In a 2018 report on enrollment and graduation rates at public institutions, Carnevale and colleagues found that white students are overrepresented in public selective colleges. Black and Latinx students make up 36% of the college population, but only 19% of enrollment at selective public institutions, despite a sufficient number of Black and Latinx students scoring above average on standardized tests (4). The overrepresentation of Black and Latinx students in non-selective colleges, which spend less on students and instruction than selective colleges, results in higher attrition rates and lower degree completion rates for these student groups (Carnevale et al. 8-10). Even more concerning, Black enrollment at selective public institutions has declined in about half of states with substantial African American populations since 2005 (Carnevale et al. 25). Studies also show that ongoing segregation remains worse in formerly segregated states (Perna et al.; Litolff). The reasons for these patterns are likely more complex, but as selective institutions value higher average test scores for entering classes of students, they magnify disparities in standardized testing. The preference for selectivity in admissions perpetuates racial injustice and further normalizes

conventional remediation policies that define who is prepared for college and where students who are “underprepared” should go.

For Basic Writing, the way that HBCUs’ histories were effaced and overwritten by political intervention has limited the visions for programs—an oversight long noted in our field (Royster and Williams; Green; Jackson, Jackson, and Tafari). HBCUs and civil rights activists were strong opponents of standardized testing, and the lack of attention given to their arguments may have solidified the role of testing and mandatory placement in Basic Writing, making it harder to argue for degree-credit for remediation, the mainstreaming of Basic Writing, or alternative placement measures. Post-desegregation remediation policies routinely ignored research suggesting that the predictive value of SAT and ACT scores varied by student and institutional types.<sup>10</sup> The different forms Basic Writing took at UTK, TSU, ULL, and Georgia’s university system suggest that Basic Writing is not a straightforward site of access; rather, policies surrounding admissions, literacy assessment, degree credit, and student agency play as much a role as the course itself in determining its outcomes for students. What might it mean, then, for Basic Writing scholarship to consider policy work as central to the field’s reckoning with its legacy of racism and injustice? As we grapple with the need for pedagogical change, we must also recognize that policies still define access and identities for Basic Writing students. Perhaps this is why HBCUs like TSU innovated in institutional policy work that allowed flexibility, credit, and value for Basic Writing despite the limitations of state requirements.

Could Open Admissions ever restructure U.S. higher education? The recent questioning of SAT and ACT scores in admissions at selective universities suggests that perhaps it could, with sufficient public pressure (Hubler). Yet, if the history of Open Admissions in the South tells us anything, it is that we should interrogate changes to admissions that fail to address other policies. As Horner and Lu argue, Open Admissions was ingrained in the ideology of “equal opportunity” that “tended to equate the work of basic writing. . . with the provision of skills (to ensure equal opportunity). The seeming innocuousness of that equation stems from its denial of social and political oppression, substituting the provision of politically innocent ‘skills’ for political means of fighting such oppression and thus renaming oppression as cognitive lack” (20). The ideology of equal opportunity not only informed Basic Writing pedagogy. It informed admissions, retention, and remediation policies that defined the parameters of college-level literacy. We must change more than just pedagogy or placement practices to unseat this ideology. That is where knowing the history of Open Admissions, and its connection

to desegregation, is necessary. Should the moment return, our field must be ready to understand the full implications of what Open Admissions has meant, where it has been practiced, and what it might mean for the future.

### Notes

1. The Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, which published the report, was one of the curriculum study institutes founded by the National Defense Education Act of 1958, tasked with developing innovative English instruction. HEW was the precursor to the modern U.S. Department of Education.
2. I use the term HWCU, following the recommendation of Lockett and RudeWalker, to describe colleges and universities that excluded Black students, either by law or practice, prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.
3. I use both “remediation” and “Basic Writing” throughout this essay. I use remediation because most legal and policy documents preferred that term and did not use “Basic Writing.” Where appropriate, I use Basic Writing to describe remedial English courses.
4. Segregation was enforced at state-funded HBCUs by the state. Wooten explains that many HBCUs would have admitted white students freely if allowed by the states (25). Efforts at racially integrated colleges and universities were often undercut by outside forces, such as accrediting agencies (Smith).
5. Letters of recommendation were ubiquitous in state-funded HWCUs and HBCUs at the time. In Georgia, a law was briefly implemented in the early 1960s requiring alumni letters of recommendation for segregationist purposes. In Mississippi, recommendation requirements were used to deny James Meredith admission to the University of Mississippi. It is unclear to what extent such requirements at HBCUs may have been mandated by the state or by accrediting organizations.
6. The English proficiency tests may have been a state requirement. The wording at different institutions, even in the early bulletins, is almost identical. The wording does not diverge until the 1970s when TSU changed its policies. TSU and UTK, however, were governed by two different state university systems at that time.
7. ULL changed names three times during the period I discuss in this essay. It began as Southwestern Louisiana Institute, then University of Southwestern Louisiana, and finally the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. For the sake of clarity, I use ULL throughout.

8. The OCR first cited Louisiana for ongoing segregation in its universities in 1969, but Louisiana refused to produce a desegregation plan. After the Department of Justice sued the state in 1974, a desegregation plan was negotiated and implemented in 1981. The state's progress was set to be reviewed in 1987.
9. Unlike Tennessee and Louisiana, Georgia did not have separate litigation. Instead, Georgia was monitored by the OCR, part of HEW, for Title VI compliance, a process that began with investigations of 19 states in 1969 and resulted in citations in half of those states over several decades. Plaintiffs filed suit against HEW for failure to enforce these citations in a case that began as *Adams v. Richardson* (1973). A 1977 ruling in the case, *Adams v. Richardson* (1977), outlined requirements for desegregation plans, which resulted in the 1977 plan. The University System of Georgia's plan was not initially accepted, but after revisions in 1978, it was finally approved and implemented in the 1979-1980 academic year. See also Haynes; Litolff.
10. Two studies from the time are illustrative. Sharon found in 1970 that mathematics placement was more accurate than English placement procedures. In 1983, Baird found evidence that institutional characteristics, including programs, institutional type, location, etc., affected the extent to which typical predictive measures were accurate.

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