

Volume 1  
Number 1  
Fall 2006

# Open WORDS

*Access  
and  
English  
Studies*

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**William DeGenaro**

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**OPEN WORDS: Access and English Studies** is dedicated to publishing articles focusing on political, professional, and pedagogical issues related to teaching composition, reading, creative writing, ESL, and literature to open admissions and non-mainstream student populations. We seek critical work in areas such as instructional strategies, cultural studies, critical theory, classroom materials, technological innovation, institutional critique, student services, program development, etc., that assist educators, administrators, and student support personnel who work with students in pedagogically difficult settings. Articles should consider the particularities of these settings—issues, for example, surrounding the identifier of “open access,” intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, regional and cultural differences, and the range of competencies students bring with them to classrooms—in light of the aims of English studies to empower students’ critical and creative endeavors. We value works pertinent to specialists yet accessible to non-specialists, and we encourage submissions that take into account what interactions with students teach us about the broader, democratic goals of open access educations and English studies.

**OPEN WORDS: Access and English Studies** accepts manuscripts year-round and is interested in theory, critique, qualitative or quantitative studies, narrative, biography, history, or pedagogical practice. Prospective contributors should prepare manuscripts in MLA style with all identifying references to the authors deleted. Submissions should include a cover page, giving the name, address, and institutional affiliation of the author. We do consider longer works, but submissions should try to stay under 30 pages. We will acknowledge receipt of submissions immediately and inform contributors of the status in approximately 8-12 weeks.

Electronic submissions should be sent to John Paul Tassoni at [tassonjp@muohio.edu](mailto:tassonjp@muohio.edu) or William H. Thelin at [wthelin@uakron.edu](mailto:wthelin@uakron.edu). Paper submissions can be sent to John Paul Tassoni, OPEN WORDS, Department of English, Miami University Middletown, Middletown, OH 45042. Please prepare three copies.

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## *Editor's Introduction*

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# Commuting Campuses

JUST BEFORE CLASSES BEGAN LAST YEAR, I HAD LUNCH WITH AN ENGLISH COLLEAGUE, A member of the department at our university for more than twenty years. Over burritos and chimichangas, we discussed various projects that would require our traveling the twenty-five miles between our open-admission regional campus in Middletown and the school's selective central campus in Oxford. We also found ourselves talking about the drive itself, a commute which snakes us through the working-class streets of Middletown and Trenton, pauses us for long periods at railroad crossings, spans stretches of arching country road along Routes 73 and 127, and ends at Oxford's renowned Georgian campus, even perhaps, depending on the time of day, one of its quaint uptown restaurants. "You know," my colleague said, "after all these years, there's still one point on that drive where I freak out and start wondering if I missed my turn."

"I know just where you're talking about," I said.

"Right after 73 merges with 127."

"Yeah," I said. "It happened to me yesterday. I started saying things to myself like, 'Where'd that barn come from? I never saw that before. And what's this bridge?'"

"It never fails," he said.

Representing some thirty-five years of campus commutes, we were both talking about the same stretch of road. On the way to Oxford, one must make a left at a BP station off of 127 onto Route 73; and coming from Oxford, one must make a left onto 73 from Route 127 at the Tropix Saloon. Miss either left—as I have—and you drive miles out of your way on roads that might be described as indistinguishable from the stretch you had been traveling, that section where Route 127 joins 73. I say these portions of road "might be" described as indistinguishable because nothing really keeps them from being described in great detail: there are indeed markers (BP station, Tropix, barns, bridges, etc.) along the way that I could, and should, and do at times use to orient myself, especially of late.

In the course of preparing with Bill Thelin this inaugural issue of *Open Words* and discussing with editorial board members our goals for the journal, I've started to pay some additional attention—albeit a theoretized, politically-motivated kind of attention—to the geography of my campus commute. Resisting the hypnosis that would have me experience this everyday task as a reductive blur of "country roads," I've grown more alert to signs of life along the way, and I've been giving myself hell: What forces would teach anyone that these

places are indistinguishable, and why have I fallen into cahoots with these forces? Certainly, more than sheer terrain separates the city of Middletown—where the median household income, as of the 2000 census, was just over \$36,000 and where nearly 11 percent of house-

“my mind had drawn a stereotype . . . in place of a complex geography”

holds listed incomes of less than \$10,000 per year (United States)—and the Oxford campus—where 62 percent of its first-time, full-time, first-year students in 2003 came from families with annual incomes more than \$100,000 and where nearly 24 percent came from families whose incomes exceed-

ed \$200,000 per year (CIRP). In routinizing this everyday practice of my work—this commute—my mind had drawn a stereotype (“indistinguishable country road”) in place of a complex geography.

Far from being sheer terrain, the 73/127 merger between Oxford and Middletown courses through the western edge of Seven Mile, OH, population 720, of which—despite its location between campuses—the number of residents with postsecondary degrees registers “significantly below” the state average (“Seven”). Aside from the Tropix Saloon and BP Station, you’ll also find along this particular slice of Seven Mile two drive-thrus, two farms, an automotive shop, a portion of the Norfolk Southern railroad, and a mill—sure signs of life I’d somehow lost driving in hazes between my basic writing classes at Middletown and graduate seminars in Oxford, between my meetings with non-traditional student groups maneuvering new financial aid policies and students preparing reading lists for their doctoral examinations, between senate and committee meetings at both campuses, each with distinct yet overlapping agendas. Indeed, this two and one-half mile 73/127 merge itself persists in various historical, institutional, cultural, and economic dynamics that produce policies, practices, and attitudes that not only dictate traffic density, but also differentiate and distance students, administrators, and teachers along the way. Carrying, among other things, West Virginia bituminous coal to steel mills and power plants around the world, and serving Jefferson Smurfit Corp, Middletown’s fifth largest employer (City), the Norfolk Southern has delayed my arrival at more than one committee meeting. At the same time, a state mandate to allow open access to state universities for any graduate of any Ohio charter high school within commuting distance does little to detain Oxford’s ability to maintain its “Yale of the West” image (Moll 43), which it manages through the open-access branches that accept the commuting students who might not otherwise meet Miami’s selection criteria (58). Without this state mandate, the traffic flow upon this road would look slightly different—slightly but, nonetheless, different.

Even accounting for this complex geography (and perhaps more so now in light of it), I still occasionally freak out on my commute between campuses, but I've begun to understand these freakouts in a radically different manner. In essays such as "Body-Subject, Time-Space Routines, and Place-Ballets," David Seamon has discussed ways everyday movements, like the drive to work, take the form of habits. He talks about "the inherent capacity of the body to direct behaviors of the person intelligently, and thus function as a special kind of subject which expresses itself in a preconscious way usually described by such words as 'automatic,' 'habitual,' 'involuntary,' and 'mechanical.'" (155). For Seamon, there are sequences of preconscious tasks we undertake for most daily routines. He would call the undertaking of such a sequence—like my hypnotically following 73 through Trenton, through its merger with Route 127, left at the BP—a "body ballet."

When travelers like myself sustain such "body ballets" over a length of time, the dances become "time-space routines." And when you have many such "time-space routines" combined in a particular area, you get what Seamon describes as a "place-ballet," which produces in us our senses of place—"a feeling," adds cultural geographer Tim Cresswell—"of belonging within a rhythm of life in place" (34). Seamon's vocabulary helps to

"Our particular  
time-space routine . . .  
refuses hegemonic  
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seamlessness. . . ."

describe what I should experience after a dozen or so years of driving the same route between the regional and central campuses: a time-space routine marking my participation in and capitulation to the ballet rhythm that constitutes the place(s) in which I work.

Given this, I find added significance (beyond what my co-editor terms basic defects in my driving) in that I still periodically freak out while driving between the open-access and selective campuses that are Miami University. In light of Seamon's vocabulary, I can see the freakout my colleague and I experience along that 73/127 merge as the mosh-pit middle of the place-ballet that might otherwise haze over my commute's complex geographies. Our particular time-space routine—the commute and its freakout—refuses hegemonic illusions of seamlessness, challenges higher education's uncomplicated promise of enlightenment and upper mobility: our time-space routine is correlative to a place-ballet that, rather than capitulate to hypnosis, startles at the twists and turns (or lack there of), inclusions and exclusions, pedagogies, course policies, administrative decisions, grant proposals, and life circumstances that can link or distance selective institutions and open-admission schools, as well as mainstream and non-mainstream constituencies at any one site. Thinking of access more generally—in regard

to any teacher, administrator, or student representing any nontraditional (whatever this might mean at whatever place at whatever given time) constituency—I read the freakout as a critical perspective on a broader place-ballet that at various times and various points can resist or affirm boundaries between academic achievement and cycles of poverty and exploitation. In this sense, I consider the freakout that I share with at least one English colleague (and how many others?) as not just symptomatic of my job's peculiar geography, but as necessarily adjunct to any map charting transections of access and English Studies.

I cannot think of the goals our board has set out for *Open Words* and not know the road linking my campuses entails a map broader and more nuanced than any Mapquest version. We unfold a map that must take into account, among other populations, the 4.4 million minority students attending Title IV institutions in the United States and its outlying areas. Our map notes nearly 39 percent of all college students will attend two-year campuses (National Center 3), recognizes that close to that same percentage of students, at all colleges and universities, will be above the age of 25 (“College Enrollment” 22), and acknowledges students coming from poor families are six times less likely than students of affluent backgrounds to achieve SAT scores that will make them competitive for admission to selective institutions (Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin B18). Our map identifies, as well, the institutional, pedagogical, and local factors that might arrest such students' movements along the way to postsecondary degrees (standardized tests? tuition costs? anti-intellectualism? remedial courses? an undependable automobile? an inflexible boss or spouse or attendance policy? the digital divide?), invite border crossings (scholarships? student loans? “Great Books” programs? open admissions? Head Start? public assistance? mass transit? distance learning? handicap stalls?), or demand new maps be drawn (critical pedagogy? canon critique? writing centers and studios? queer theory? the Posse Foundation? service learning? universal design?). Given the difficulties in drawing to scale such a map, I'd be surprised to learn of any individuals committed to the development and maintenance of a democratic society who didn't find themselves bedazzled now and then along their route. In the same light, I'd be wary, especially, of any compulsion to discern distance in terms of space alone—wary of any invitation onto any academic or social or career “path” that tells us there is only neutral terrain and individuals need only navigate accordingly.

*Open Words* provides a map that reflects accurately and responds creatively to the place ballets that teachers, students, administrators, politicians, and community leaders experience, disrupt, transform, or generate when they engage issues of democratic access arising through work in English Studies. The journal's contributors, in other words, dwell in the tension between opportunities they seek for the educationally and economically underprivileged and the realities of the undemocratic world in which we live. Rather than view as sheer

terrain the path through academic achievement, career advancement, and personal fulfillment, they mark the diverse and oftentimes conflictual ideologies, theories, and practices shaping higher education, and they suggest ways that we in the field can negotiate its complex geographies, if only to be more aware of the cultural, social, and institutional forces that impact our goals to ensure access for a maximum number of students representing a diversity of interests and concerns.

*Open Words* publishes, then, articles focusing on political, professional, and pedagogical issues related to teaching composition, reading, creative writing, ESL, and literature to open admissions and other “non-mainstream” student populations. We seek critical work in areas such as instructional strategies, cultural studies, critical theory, classroom materials, technological innovation, institutional critique, student services, program development, etc., that assist educators, administrators, and student support personnel who work with students in pedagogically difficult settings. We also seek a variety of forms to represent adequately the dynamics and documents that shape college life for the economically and educationally underprivileged: not only conventional papers such as the classroom studies, teaching narratives, in-class ethnographies, and empirical work on students that already comprise the field, but also works that help us to represent a broad range of places and interactions in which access is developed or denied.

Such works might take the forms of histories of basic writing programs and other institutional histories, multi-genre texts, new theoretical approaches to the concerns of the field, interdisciplinary work, work on digital writing and new medias vis-à-vis “access,” work that engages the politics of open-admissions education, interviews with or autobiographies and biographies of administrators, politicians, teachers, students, activists, theorists, and more collaborative work, such as dialogues between people working in different college divisions like student services and deans’ offices, as well as academic departments, or between authors and students, or pairings of reviews of authors’ books with brief dialogues between teachers, students, and author. Taking into account the complex geographies comprising roads of access, articles should consider the particularities of their settings—issues, for example, surrounding the identifier of “open access,” intersections of race, region, class, disability, gender, and sexuality—in light of the aims of English Studies to empower students’ critical and creative endeavors.<sup>1</sup>

We value works pertinent to specialists yet accessible to non-specialists, and in this vein, our editorial board has discussed what it means to dwell in the tension between selec-

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1. My thanks to our editorial board for participating in a listserv dialogue devoted to our journal's mission. For points in this paragraph on topic and genre possibilities, I especially want to thank Bill Thelin, Jennifer Beech, and Bill DeGenaro. I am indebted as well to Ira Shor, who suggested we revisit our CFP.

tive functions that typically attend the production of a scholarly journal (submission, resubmission, acceptance, rejection) and the aims of open access. Just as “open admissions schools at their best provide multiple routes of access to higher education,” one of our board members has suggested, “the journal might open multiple routes of access to scholarship.” While considering the articles that comprise this first issue, our board has, then, reflected upon “gatekeeping” issues that might arrest access of scholars whose professional experiences or relationship to issues of access might not lend themselves to generating texts one might conventionally regard as scholarly. At the same time, we’ve resisted an “anything goes” approach to selection not only by valuating pieces that might, ultimately, be of use to people committed to open-access education, but also by complicating notions of “use” so as not to confine ourselves to a limited view of academic genre or subject matter. With each submission, our reviewers consider the work’s relevance to the teaching of English with regard to issues of access, but we have not welded notions of relevance to any particular time frame, as pieces might have relevance to how teachers, students, administrators, and community members think about higher education in the long term, but not necessarily how they might function in classrooms today. In the same light, we’ve also measured relevance in terms greater than that which might be tied immediately to class work, as so many attitudes, beliefs, and practices constitutive of higher education throughout an array of sites (faculty lounges, committee rooms, chairs’ and deans’ offices, barrooms, kitchen tables, factories, archives, even billboards) impact teaching at some point. We also sought not to tie relevance to any over-specialized notion of “open admission,” as theories and practices influencing teaching and policy at even selective locations may have applicability (if not directly) to struggles for democratic access, and we felt that overspecialization might serve only to stigmatize open-admissions work, rather than bridge gaps between mainstream and marginalized factions of higher education.<sup>2</sup>

This inaugural issue, in particular, traverses multiple areas across higher education institutions and beyond that can determine degrees of access. Beth Virtanen’s contribution, for instance, charts the life circumstances of working-class students and the ways these circumstances shape their first-year college writing experiences, and Sandra Young examines the politics infusing the administration of grant monies, particularly how pressure to quantify outcomes might adversely affect the “at-risk” population one grant had originally intended to serve. In addition, Ann Larson’s article looks critically at ways open-admission schools articulate their aims to the public and how these articulations eventually shape the identity of the institutions themselves in ways that can eschew historical and persistent struggles;

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2. My thanks here to Chris Gallagher, Pegeen Reichert Powell, Mike Rose, Seth Kahn, Bill Macauley, Helene Androne, and once again, Bill Thelin, for their thoughts on evaluation criteria.

and William DeGenaro argues for the necessity of engaging the historical debates shaping basic writing instruction at specific sites, noting that access is often won or lost in discourses that long precede the entry of any one new teacher upon a scene.

Moving through and amongst many such scenes, this and future editions of *Open Words* will scrutinize issues integral to access and, at the same time, indicate that no one scene is inviolate. The struggle for democratic access to higher education begins in countless places at any one time, and each of these places is scored to various degrees with the interests and tensions that shape the struggle to begin with. My own drive between Middletown and Oxford, for instance, does not reflect two distinct poles representing democratic access

“access to higher education begins in countless places at any one time”

and elitism. As transected as the road that takes me there, policies and practices originate at the central campus in the name of access, such as provisions in the Miami Plan for Liberal Education that ensure students take courses focused on non-dominant perspectives and such as revisions in eligibility requirements for the Honors Program that focus less on standardized tests

scores and grade-point averages, thus allowing for a more diverse collection of Honor Scholars. At the same time, stringent course policies in some classes and decreasing night offerings at the regional campus are among factors that continue to block, or at least slow, access of students to associate and bachelor degrees. Even what first might appear as an interstice between competing notions of access, the 73/127 merge, is itself enmeshed in forces constructing these sites on either end of it, forces that determine its traffic density—who travels, how fast, and in which direction, and the degrees to which travelers respond to signs of life along the way, or not.

*Open Words* represents an attempt to indicate and examine all of these places that impact access to English Studies in higher education and all of those places in which English Studies impact access, drawing newer, more complicated maps to help us all drive faster and more alertly and more deliberately. This is a journal designed to help us see well-worn areas in new and helpful ways and to draw critical attention, as well, to areas we often fail to see either due to old exclusions or our own capitulations to the place-ballets that routinely situate us and that could stand to be performed differently.

John Paul Tassoni

February 2006

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Beth L. Virtanen

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## **Brad, Sean, and James: Saying What They Mean in Voices that Sound Like Themselves**

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM WEEDS OUT MANY WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS BEFORE WE, COLLEGE educators, ever see them. Open admissions programs, however, give some of these students a chance. When we find such students in our classrooms, we must understand that their discourses might strike us as rough or even oppositional. These students might challenge us as, through abysmal high school grades or dropping out all together, they have already refused once to cooperate with the system that asked them to give over their senses of self, or identity, that firmly underpin their means of expression. Paulo Friere teaches us that such resistance might stem from a student's decision "not to accept what is perceived as violating his or her world" (123). Our challenge, then, is to make curriculum meaningful to this population by integrating their worlds into our courses and by fostering their development of methods of negotiating positions for themselves in our classrooms and in the academy at large. To examine how such students can apply tenets of their world into their course work, I conducted case study research on three young men who had been expelled from their high schools and entered college after earning GEDs.

I have known Brad, Sean, and James for a long time and met them through my friendship with their families. I did not teach them freshman composition nor did they take their composition courses at the same time. Brad and James attended the same college while Sean attended a different one, but all were open enrollment institutions. Brad and James started college at the "normal" time, at eighteen and nineteen, the year after they would have graduated from high school. Once Sean earned his GED, he enrolled at his college a couple years after he would have graduated from high school. After they finished their first year at small colleges in the Upper Midwest, they all transferred to a larger regional university, again in the Upper Midwest, where they continued with their studies. The change, they said, was to pursue programs that were not offered by the smaller schools.

I visited with them repeatedly during the course of their composition classes in casual circumstances over coffee at their homes and mine. We discussed all aspects of their courses as we visited and often discussed more than writing courses. During the heart of this study, I direct-

ed and redirected questions to them and collected papers from them. They did not, however, provide me with extensive drafts as they did not save versions of their work as they composed. Nevertheless, I was able to call them by phone for clarification of any detail and did so often.

All three grew up in homes headed by single mothers and have had limited contact with their fathers. Financial support was unavailable or limited from their absent parents, so the issues of living were rendered more complicated than they might otherwise have been. I think that the significant impediments to these students' successes in life early on have seriously impacted their educational careers, for they bear attitudes of hostility toward those in authority and tend to want to force issues of equity and social justice in a system that often seems to care only for orderly conduct and their overt conformity to the social order that has neglected their own basic needs. Nevertheless, these three young men, with dogged determination, refused to give in to the system that appeared obviously to be failing them and, thus, they continued challenging that education system to be able to say what they meant while they attained certification of the knowledge they acquired within that system in the form of a diploma. Students who have come through such hardship are indeed different from mainstream students; nevertheless, they can and do succeed in spite of the impediments to their success in and outside the classroom. They are, finally, remarkable in their persistence—both in pursuing what they term as a “true” education and in resisting its authorship of them in terms of conformity to an elite or mainstream, middle-class way of being or in removing themselves from the system.

In essence, these three young men may have wished, as David Seitz suggests, “to distance themselves from the social capital of mainstream education and its form of institutional identity, even while they work for the economic capital they hope will come with a degree” (221). Simply, the ways of being made available to them by their high school reinforced only options for lives suited to manual labor of one sort or another. The discourse of college presented another option, albeit one closed to them via their high school, but one they encountered upon entrance into higher education. The values underpinning this identity incorporate the social capital of the middle class which is embedded in “a middle class point of view, the one privileging so-called rational discourse and argumentation” (Linkon, Peckham, and Lanier-Nabors 151). In negotiating their entrance into academia, Sean, Brad, and James tried to create a balance between the competing discourses, a balance respectful of their own senses of self (see Tingle 224). However, their identities should not be construed as static because of lack of exposure to a “multiplicity of social situations” as has been suggested by Linkon, Peckham, and Lanier-Nabors in their summary of Tingle's work (152), for Sean, Brad, and James moved geographically and intellectually with their mothers who had sought higher education and had some inkling of its worldview and the trade-offs that were expected of them

and even taken for granted by the educational system before they arrived at university. Like Tingle, Brad, Sean, and James were “rewriting” their relationship to the working class from which they originated, and they were also selecting from the array of possibilities made available to them via the middle-class enterprise of higher education (see Bloom).

In spite of everything, Brad, Sean, and James were optimists. They believed that the education system, at its origin, was designed to be fundamentally fair and that it has somehow been twisted into its current state of unfairness and “bastardization,” obviously accepting on some levels the mythology of the American Dream. In their utopian notion of higher education, however, adoption of a “new” set of cultural capital (“baggage”) was not their desired outcome. Instead, they defined the goal as a “developing” of self and an acquisition of “knowledge” that would allow them greater control over their work and leisure. They fully believed that education should and eventually will embody the utopian spirit that is particularly American; their interactions and writings in college composition courses reflect that utopian aspiration and that dogged determination to see the project to fruition.

James, Sean, and Brad are charming young men who have worked very hard to find what they needed from education—specifically, classes that were interesting and challenging and extracurricular activities that did not involve aggressive and physically punishing activities. Of course, they did not follow rules of behavior that required their compliance with tracking into vocational courses. Instead, they sought to argue with instructors about the content of their courses. Brad, for example, insisted that the art teacher define the nature of art. James simply would not go to auto mechanics class, and Sean wanted to take issue with the presentation in his US History class of the Americas as a “vacant continent” that Columbus discovered.

Issues with regulations also impacted these young men’s academic opportunity. Eventually, Sean was forced, because he was caught smoking, to sign a contract that if he were caught smoking again he would be expelled. When the assistant principal smelled smoke on him at a later time, he was expelled even though he had not had a cigarette or been caught with one in his possession. Each in his own way contributed to his expulsion. James and Brad spent the remainder of that school year “in heaven,” playing music together eight to ten hours each day. Sean became employed as a night shift delivery person. Each finished only his sophomore year of high school before expulsion. Thus, they had little formal education of any sort, vocational or academic. Their attitudes toward academic knowledge remained as they were—opposi-

“blanket opposition to giving over authorship of their compliance”

tional—and those attitudes which may have caused much of their difficulty in high school remained the motivation for their success in college. The opposition, however, was not blanket opposition to the culture of school. It is best understood as blanket opposition to giving over authorship of their compliance to the strictures of education. As Tingle says of his own working-class experience in higher education, “I would conform but in my particular way” (224). Simply put, Sean, Brad, and James wanted to be in charge of their individual compliance and the shape it took.

## The Literature

As working-class students, Brad, Sean, and James's roles as authors were informed by their relationship to the academic community, where they tried to arrive at truths that are operable for them within the “universe of discourse” in which they found themselves (see Berlin 244–247). As authors of freshmen essays, students' work is determined in their struggle to negotiate their eventual positions in the larger world. What they say, how they say it, and their reasons for saying it are related to their prior educational experience, their ability and desire to produce Standard English, their sense of fitting into the social and cultural milieu of higher education, and their goals in life. Composition researchers have noted this relationship. Lynn Z. Bloom's “Freshman English as a Middle-Class Enterprise,” Mina Shaughnessy's *Error and Expectations*, and J. Elspeth Stuckey's *Violence of Literary*, as well as the works of Ira Shor and Mike Rose, all discuss the aspects of negotiation working-class students undergo in their composition classes in order to pass through these gates which have the potential to exclude them from higher education. Most specifically of interest here are discussions of attitudes—both of professors and students—which have consequence for how these three young men were received in higher education.

Regarding Brad, Sean, and James's perceptions of themselves in higher education, prior research suggests that working-class students often see themselves as “unique individuals” (see Fox 81–88; see also Shor *When Students Have Power* 6–7; Hourigan 50, to name a few). But in the analysis there tends to be a sense that such perceptions are ill-conceived or simply wrong. I think, however, that Brad, Sean, and James, although not unique in the world, are in many ways “unique” in terms of subjectivities expected to be constructed by students in the process of their educations. I am arguing that they are in some ways unique when compared to others occupying the same classrooms. To understand Brad and James's senses of being “unique individuals” in “sink or swim” situations (Shor, *Empowering Education* 61), it is important to understand their prior histories to a degree. In *Literacy as Social Exchange*, Hourigan explains how students themselves help us to understand how they develop writing abilities. (See “The Case of Ms. L” 109–124).

In Brad, James, and Sean's cases, all three attended the same high school, and all three belonged to the sector of society that has not traditionally attended college—the working class. I am suggesting that, within the mindset of working-class students, the attainment of a college degree is not presupposed as it might be for students from other backgrounds. These young men also attended open enrollment, public institutions that have traditionally, according to Soliday, provided education to working-class students who sought higher education (732). The relationship between working-class status and the attainment of a university education is a complex issue as is demonstrated by the educational attainment of these young men's mothers. All three had mothers who had successfully earned undergraduate degrees and sought white-collar employment. Nevertheless, their mothers all maintained strong identification with their working-class families, perhaps because those families had provided them the impetus to seek out higher education in the first place. Both Sean's and Brad's mothers were in graduate school, living in poverty and trying to manage. James's mother became ill and was confined to a wheelchair and dependent on disability services for their maintenance.

In the midst of this, all three attended a high school that was located in the rural area near the institution where Sean's and Brad's mothers pursued advanced degrees; thus, the school system serviced the local community, including those from the lowest to the highest sectors of society. These three young men, in high school, belonged to the poorest sectors of society in spite of the fact of the “bootstrap” efforts of their mothers. Because the three young men were from the working class, school advisors tried to track them into vocational pursuits and into sports where some administrators felt they might excel. Even in early high school, Sean and Brad neared six feet tall and were built large. James was shorter and huskier, appearing the typical football linebacker. None of the young men, however, was particularly interested in vocational pursuits or sports, and all smoked cigarettes. Brad and James, interested in music, concerned themselves with protecting their hands from the punishment of manual labor and American football. Sean simply did not like either.

The uniqueness they felt in college, I think, came from their knowledge of how slim their chances were for being there and how tenuous tolerance for “their kind” was in education overall. Throughout high school, they were repeatedly suspended for a variety of transgressions, many stemming from pranks enacted because of the boredom of their classes. Many of the pranks, however, did not warrant suspension, according to the young men. Each, after many suspensions, was expelled, and each entered an alternative high school to take courses toward graduation. Each completed a GED and enrolled in a junior college or small private college where he began education in earnest. College, finally, allowed them to select more challenging classes than the “appropriate sections” they had experienced through the

tracking system in high school. If they are unique, it is in their explicit and reflective knowledge of the sorting mechanism of education whose determination as unacceptable they narrowly missed.

By talking to Sean, Brad, and James, I also came to a greater understanding of how they positioned themselves in the composition classroom in order to maintain their own

“explicit and reflective  
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sorting mechanisms  
of education”

senses of self while at the same time complying to the demands on them vis-à-vis the class. Their responses to the demands on them in the classroom add a new dimension to the research that asserts that working-class students use mimicry to facilitate their success in the academic environment (See Hoggart; Rodriguez). In fact Sean, Brad, and James engage in measured compliance

to demands of classroom only to the degree that they determine within strict limits that they set for themselves through their own idiosyncratic determining principles. Sean said, “I do what I need to do, but not necessarily exactly what the Prof. wants me to do.”

Spellmeyer suggests, for working-class students “[T]he experience of higher education was an ordeal of the most radical dissociation, an experience that obliged them to make choices more costly and irrevocable than any faced by children from affluent families” (58–59). This concern resonates throughout the narratives of academics with roots in the working class, particularly Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* and Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* as well as the accounts collected in the work of Dews and Law. Sean, Brad, and James, however, work to limit the dissociation they undergo as they consistently demand accommodation of their points of view, and they have gotten into trouble when teachers reject working-class students’ work *because* of class issues embedded within them and the language in which they are presented, as is documented in Brodkey’s “Literacy Letters” and my own “Working-Class Students.” Like Finn’s students, they have “attitude,” that is, “varying degrees of oppositional identity” (x), the kind of demeanor that rejects the teachers before the teachers can reject them and that can disrupt a classroom; they assert that attitude, pressing their instructors to accept language that might not be accepted by the elite social order of the academy while trying out the rhetorical moves of engaged critical thinking in presenting their cases. Brad said, “I sit in the back of the room so I can see what’s going on and talk when I need to. . . . Most of the time, though, I don’t feel the need.” His bravado does not cover up the joy he felt when his English professor *wanted* to discuss the nature of art.

As well, Sean, Brad, and James's behavior in the classroom contradicted or at least complicated research that shows that working-class students' comply with teacher authority in order to get good grades, as is suggested by Hoggart and Rodriguez. These three tended to conduct themselves more like Herbert Kohl's students who engage in sabotage in order to disrupt the class when it ignores their points of view or as Patrick Finn's students who formulate oppositional identities to resist conforming to the unacceptable ones presented within the discourse of education (x). As well, the three complicate Bloom's assertion that working-class students "want and expect their work to be done in Standard English" (670). These three want to use Standard English when they want to use it, and they want their own languages validated in the classroom when they choose to use them.

Like Ira Shor's students who exist in deep Siberia, that is in self-imposed isolation from the interaction within the classroom in response to years of not having their concerns addressed there, Brad, Sean, and James can only be lured into participating in the classroom discourse when it addresses their own interests and does not censure their points of view (see Shor, *When Students* 61–101). Their inclination did not suggest that agreement is synonymous with not being censured, for they did not want to be placated. These three young men perceived disagreement with their points of view as a matter of respect, for censuring a point of view is preventing it from being articulated or dismissing, rather than engaging, it in discussion. Like Kohl's students, however, the three often preferred to challenge the dominant point of view. In addition, while Brad, Sean, and James wanted models of what might be done in terms of argumentation and rhetorical strategy, they needed to choose to accept those models as valid in developing voices they could trust in higher education, in such a way as Villanueva recounts in *Bootstraps*. The struggle, according to academics with roots in the working class, is to find room for their home languages and knowledge in the academic environment. The examples by academics from the working class serve here. Dews and Law; Shepard, McMillan and Tate; Ryan and Sackrey; Zandy; Tokarczyk and Fay—all cite working-class experiences in higher education in which they negotiate how they will position themselves in relation to the pressure upon them to conform to certain ways of being. For James, Sean, and Brad, the struggle was how to make the academy make room for them and their own voices without too directly risking the threat of expulsion.

When Fox insists, citing Hoggart and Sennett and Cobb, that for working-class students, "academic success depends on breaking these important and potentially enriching class bonds," he makes an assertion that endangers Brad, Sean, and James's well being (88). Like any students from working-class backgrounds or not, they needed to maintain vigorous and intimate bonds with their families as a normal course of living. Further, these young men

needed these nurturing and supportive relationships in order to be able to deal with the challenges of higher education. "Knowing," says James, "surely can't mean forgetting half of what you started with."

## **Processes of Writing**

Because the three did not complete their high school education, they had not written any papers prior to college. They had no experience in the abstract discussion of the rhetorical function of essays, so they knew neither the form nor the function of an essay. In order to understand the product they were supposed to produce in their composition classes, they needed explicit instruction. Because of their extra-curricular writing experiences, however, they understood relatively quickly the function of the parts of the essay. In Emig's terms, they used their "reflexive" process to inform their "extensive" work. James, for example, likened the introduction to the "intro" to the songs he commonly wrote, in which the tempo, melody, key, "riffs," and interest were established, before the lyric began. In relating the two, composing popular music, including composition and lyrics, he incorporated a strategy from prior knowledge to understand the abstract function of the introduction to the essay.

The conclusion, James likened again, not to chorus, but to the finale of a musical piece in which the significant rhythms and lyrics are emphasized, to highlight the "essence" of the work. By drawing a correlation between two divergent genres, James used prior knowledge to inform himself in completing the writing task. In doing so, he reported the exercise as mutually informative to both his musical compositions and his essay writing skills.

In terms of the body of his essay, James construed its structure as similar to the verses of a song. Each verse moves the meaning of the song forward, with the chorus functioning as connective between and separator among the parts, as well as a repeated reference to the overall point of the composition, much like the references to the thesis that occur within the body of an essay. Drawing upon his knowledge of composition in one genre, James quickly came to understand the function and "movement" of the essay. In addition, he quickly developed a sense of competence in writing that was quite profound, considering his lack of formal education in the academic essay.

Typical of the three students under study, James's writing process began with brainstorming to find a topic, for he preferred to generate his own rather than to write on one assigned by the teacher. He called his brainstorming looking for a topic that "inspires" him. To get inspiration, he said he tried to focus on a single idea that he liked, which could lead to his inspiration. When he was inspired, he found it easier to generate ideas to direct and support his topic. Once he felt he had generated "a fair amount" of information, he moved to the writing phase where he developed paragraphs around the ideas he had generated and a work-

ing thesis that tied the paragraphs together. In his own words, he said, "I play around to see what works." And he said, "It works when it makes sense, the sense I'm trying to make." Thus, he wrote for his own ear, rather than for the ear of a critic or instructor.

Once he had a draft, he began a process of reading, criticizing, and correcting it with an eye toward what he wanted to say. His focus was on capturing his meaning in a way that expressed clearly his intentions. In his first drafts, he reported excessive repetition, which he eliminated in succeeding drafts, "tweaking with" the paper. He called it "listening" to his work as he develops it, adding, deleting, rearranging, and rephrasing. Once he was satisfied with his own work, he considered the assignment to make sure his work would satisfy his instructor and made modifications he thought necessary.

He did not consider the language of his work until the last, editing phase. At that point, he felt he had critical distance from his work, as he generally set it aside for a day or two. In this final phase, he "listened" to the work as though he were the audience, hearing inflection and rhythm, and tried to anticipate which phrases and words might offend his audience. In his essays, he generally left in such words as "bullshit" or non-standard figures of speech, for example, "put a buck in my pocket," because he did not think they are difficult to understand. However, he "translated" some colloquialisms he believed would cause his reader difficulty in terms of understanding or that could be overly offensive. For the most part, however, he resisted changing his language because he felt that some changes result in differing emphases or a lack of exactitude. In his own estimation, Standard English was sometimes too "sterile."

Finally, James reported that writing essays was a foreign activity. Even at the close of his composition class, he said that essays are difficult for him to write because of his lack of familiarity with them. In contrast, he noted that he has written more than a hundred songs, but at the close of his composition course he had written only four essays. He believed that he would get more comfortable writing essays as he went through school, but he did not think he would ever be as comfortable with that genre as he was with the more creative genres, including music, poetry, and short stories.

Sean, unlike Brad and James, did not write music or lyrics and did not play an instrument; nevertheless, his writing process bore a strong resemblance to theirs. He looked, for example, for inspiration through consideration of the potential of possible topics, listing and generating ideas until he found one subject that motivated him. If he was given a topic, he began by brainstorming about it directly at the keyboard, taking a couple of hours to write "whatever comes to mind on the topic." Then he printed the "draft," and read what he had written to find what he believed he "had to say about it." His approach, typical of these three students, resembled Peter Elbow's "expressive" writing. Next, he considered the organization,

cutting and pasting his work until he organized paragraphs by topic and section into coherent units, and then wrote a thesis statement and introduction. Finally, he wrote a conclusion, which he considered his “final word on the subject.” Generally, he liked to disperse his writing into blocks of no more than two hours spread over the course of three or four days, but often time constraints required him to compose a paper in two days. In that case, he generated all his information on the first day and revised and edited on the second.

Like James, he did not compose with the teacher in mind and did not worry about grammar, mechanics, and punctuation until the proofreading stage, which, he believed, is after the revising stage. Sean, however, was a little less concerned with offending his reader and was therefore much more likely to use expletives and slang. As transitional material, he used expressions, such as “to criticize this puppy” or “getting the ball rolling.” He responded to his instructor’s comments on his language, with little concern, noting “no one was ever killed by a word,” and suggested that English professors should “get over it,” meaning that instructors should accept his voice as it is, caustic, sarcastic, curious, and lively.

“his voice as it is,  
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When requesting instruction of their teachers, these three students, at the beginning of the course, were intent on coming to understand the form of the essay, its rhetorical moves, and its substance, and they did not concern themselves with the length of their work. Because they sought comprehensive coverage of a particular issue, they exhausted the topic; therefore, they tended to overrun the page requirement, for which their composition instructors did not penalize them. The average paper written by these three students exceeded six pages, with the shortest being five and the longest nine.

## **Their Topics**

In their composition classes, Sean, Brad, and James wrote on the topics of censorship, the effects of pornography, the problems of propaganda, personal voice, the importance of freshman composition, and responses to literature read for class, including a novel. Except for the paper on the importance of freshman writing, no topic was specifically required, although the issues they discussed were introduced in the classroom.

In terms of choosing topics, all three students sought out controversy. They looked for challenges at every turn, and each paper they wrote strives to challenge the dominant point of view and to provide thorough coverage of an issue or problem. cursory examination of their writing bears this out. Instead of coming to premature closure or offering simple

solutions, these three were apt to point out the complex nature of both the problem under consideration and a variety of solutions that have been proposed. For example, when discussing the problems of pornography, the class pointed out its damaging effects on women. Contrary to that point of view, James pointed out in his paper the damaging effects on men because of the underlying assumption that men are supposed to enjoy abusing and subjugating women, something he found profoundly disturbing and which was ignored by the dominant discussion.

Discussing sexism, Brad pointed out the need to see beneath the surface of gender-biased words and affirmative action policies, for these correctives fail to acknowledge the underlying problem, which according to Brad, functioned at the level of the everyday. He used, for example, the reality of growing up in a world where he had been expected to "take it like a man" and where women are supposed to "look pretty," expectations that guarantee the propagation of an underlying sexism. He concluded this paper with a recommendation for education about both the causes of and solutions to sexism, not in a "quick-fix" manner, but one that truly examines—in the context of its creation—the sexism from which we are striving to emerge. He wrote,

What we need is not a quick fix to cure the right now. What we need is a cure that will last a long time so that the future Americans won't have to deal with the problems created by sexism and so that future generations don't have to deal with the problems created by the solutions to the problems of sexism today.

In this essay, Brad seeks not to validate his point of view by comparison with the dominant nor to validate the dominant by comparison with his point of view. He looks to correct the oversimplification evidenced in the dominant point of view and the possible correctives to it.

These three also relied on explicit personal example to demonstrate personal struggle with the dominant discourse. To illustrate, I cite Brad's work at length because it speaks to his knowledge of the power of the dominant point of view and the consequences of not espousing it:

I have seen censorship in the schools I went to as a child. The teachers and staff would not let the students speak up about what was going on in the classrooms or the hallways, the sale of drugs, the intimidation. Even the Superintendent of schools encouraged people to drop out of high school to keep up the school's appearance, so the school would look like a nice place where all the children got good grades and went on to college.

I think that one of the main reasons I'm a high school drop out is because of the censorship that my school placed upon me and my peers. We were censored in many ways. We were not allowed to speak out about any of the injustices we wit-

nessed because we did not appear to be ideal students. We could offend somebody. I say that censorship, as a whole, is wrong. People need to know what is going on in their world.

Brad's honesty in this essay was typical of him, but his reality is not typical of students in higher education. Given his background in education, he also knew that disclosure opened him up to potential repercussions from others in the class as well as the instructor, but he offered the information in spite of that risk. Many working-class students would not have opted for the risk and would have covered over the fact of the GED rather than announcing it. In some ways, Brad perversely tempted fate and almost asked others to make negative judgments so that he could take issue. In this instance, nothing resulted in response to his disclosure, but he wanted sometimes, in some way, to challenge the pat assessments educators often make about students' suitability for learning, assessments that they have wrongly made about him based on characteristics such as class affiliation and its accompanying vernacular.

Further, Brad relied on his own local knowledge to inform the support for this essay, drawing other examples from the O.J. Simpson trial, the adult cartoon *Beavis and Butthead*, the lawsuits filed against the rock star Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest, the rumors of government cover-ups of the existence of extraterrestrial life, the Vietnam War, and the programming policies of cable companies. He drew together support from a variety of sources to place the topic of censorship in a relatively comprehensive backdrop as a means to analyze the problems inherent in its practice, seeking, not closure, but greater understanding of the issue, a tactic demonstrated consistently by these three students.

In addition to critical analysis, James included the following poem, which he first wrote for a creative writing class, as an illustration in his essay on personal voice. I cite it here:

***Slightly Obsessed Woman***

I watch you every day  
secretly and silently,  
hoping you won't recognize me.

I hold onto your picture at night,  
caressing and smashing it  
with the same delight.

I've listened to you talk on your phone  
with other women.

It doesn't bother me anymore,  
I have moved on. (Haven't I?)

I watch you every day  
secretly and silently.

It keeps me whole.

Here, James demonstrated the variety of voices at his disposal, which are typical of these three students who are not willing, in expression, to maintain the limitations that are set out by the instructor that would suggest he follow the constraints of the assignment. James's use of poetry within the required essay is a subtle form of resistance to the strict requirements of the essay genre, but one that he thought the instructor was likely to accept. His explicit goal was to push past the limits without upsetting the instructor. Through our discussion, I got the sense that James wanted to demonstrate a kind of voice that would both surprise and please his instructor, who had not been expecting that type of writing from him. In some ways, it could be construed as an overture of friendship or an acknowledgement of the possibility of their mutual respect for one another, that he indeed did possess a subtle skill that warranted such respect. He also characterized it as a conversation starter that could lead to a greater conversation about voice, one that could link writing to verse, to lyric. Underlying the overture, however, was James's understanding that this type of writing was not expected by the instructor and that it might be unwelcome in an essay assignment.

James's sense of reality required him to have an ability to think beneath the surface of the problem and to incorporate more than one voice in his endeavor to communicate in the academic environment. As he wanted to connect his home and academic lives, so too did he want to make linkages among and within his intellectual projects. Thus, discourse could be said to accommodate verse and prose, the argumentative and the lyrical. The communication to which he aspires is founded on equal footing between communicants with each respecting the other's abilities and loyalties.

Together, the three demonstrate a high level of self-disclosure through their writing because they cannot seem to limit themselves to taking a prescribed stance toward any issue. They always seek to upend a pat answer, looking for complexity that may reside beneath the placid surface of a simple solution. In essence, however, they put every point of view at risk, their own and the dominant. To illustrate, Sean calls into question the dominant ideology and his own biased response to it in the following example:

I turned the television on last night and watched the latest missile strikes on Iraq. As

I watched I realized the only way I have encountered Islam was through bombings and war. And it started to bring to mind all the news features I had ever seen on or about Islam and its people, and I realized that a good eighty percent of them had to do with terrorist attacks and the subsequent retaliatory attacks launched at those who were international “aggressors.” It’s interesting to see and hear only the terrible things a people does. This kind of bad press gives such a negative view of this very religious people that when one encounters an Islamic individual, particularly in the U.S., one thinks “freaking terrorist” or maybe “killer,” or maybe even in terms such as “camel jockey.” What affects these people’s judgment is a propaganda war waged by the United States that reflects its foreign policy in that area. And what I find the most terrible part of this is that I personally feel that Islamic people tend to favor fanaticism. Realizing this makes me uncomfortable because I’m not informed, yet I make a generalization about it, so I’m going to learn why there is no god but god.

Again, Sean calls into question both the dominant and his own personal knowledge, in some senses demonstrating his willingness to explore all points of view, interrogating publicly even his own. Through his rhetorical tactic of naming the slurs, he does not back away from the ugliness of the words. Instead, he uses their power to reinforce his point that stereotypes are ugly and need to be critically deconstructed to examine and neutralize their power. His concession, from “fu—ing” to “freaking” was based on his assessment of his audience. He felt that his “middle-aged male, conservative and God-fearing” professor from a very “yuppy” background would reject his use of the former. Had the instructor had other characteristics, he said, he might have left in the other word, using quotation marks as he had with “freaking.”

“he does not back  
away from the  
ugliness of the words”

All three believe that any point of view worth espousing can withstand challenge. In issuing challenge, they rely on a variety of sources, validating their points of view in a global sense rather than by relying on a single context. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Ozzy Osbourne is cited next to the authors of the Warren Report in a discussion of censorship.

When I read their work as a whole, I have to wonder if it would not have been easier for them simply to pick a point of view and support it rather than to present such complicated arguments instead. For these three, the straight forward reply to the assignment is not appropriate, however. Only when we understand that their writing reflects their views of the world, I think, do we begin to get the point. For Sean, Brad, and James, the world was never straight forward. On the one hand, they are persons in their own rights

at home with their own opinions and places in their families. On the other, school required them to pretend that they were something they were not: (a) they were middle-class students with the appropriate language and worldviews, (b) they were working-class students with corresponding vocabularies and vocational aspirations, or (c) they were aspiring to leave behind the working class by excelling in sports. None of these options fitted the young men who wished for something other. The three were connected both to the academic and the working class, and they were wishing to assert those connections in their work. Thus, it is small wonder that the points they asserted complicated, rather than simplified, the matter.

## **Conclusions**

Brad, James, and Sean's orientations toward the subject matter in writing courses seem to correlate with their sense of acceptance within higher education. These students were expelled from high school and felt they had to make their education responsive to their needs in order to meet their own goals, for easy acceptance of the dominant point of view would have in some way negated their own struggle to be true to themselves while they were attaining an education. In asserting themselves, they risked a lot as they revealed truths about themselves that marked them as different from the mainstream and called into question customary ways of thinking.

They began writing with a general topic of personal interest in mind and developed their arguments in relation to the issue that they saw underlying that topic. They oriented this writing to their perceived audience, which is public, but they relied on themselves to guide the assertion of their positions. Once they exhausted the points they want to assert, in revision they addressed those objections they anticipated their audience would make. These three students did not resent the constraints of Standard English, as do some students from the working class, because they did not always choose to conform to those standards. During proofreading, they made changes only to reduce confusion or when the other word choices were certain to alienate the audience (the instructor) and necessarily detract from the work; however, they often chose their own idiom instead of the more objective tone sanctioned by Standard Academic English when that tone did not include vulgarity. They agreed on one point: it is good to "bother" your readers with your tactics because they will then think about your arguments, but it is not productive to alienate them. Thus, they strove for a tense middle point in their work.

Essentially, these three, regardless of their similarity to other students, were fundamentally different from most in their experiences with education. They were, from their own and most other perspectives, "unique individuals in sink or swim situations." But that does not mean we can pretend their perspectives can be ignored or discounted because they are

either working class or troubled. Instead, we need to see them as variations of the typical student—multi-informed, curious, grounded in specific knowledges, and willing to wrestle with new ideas. While their writing processes are relatively straight forward, their continued reliance on their own “ears” for guidance in what they want to say, rather than on a developing sense of SAE discourse, is remarkable when they have faced so much pressure to conform. In their insistence on their own authorship, on their own perspective, on representing in their works the complexity they know about the worlds they occupy, they weave together multi-vocal works in which we hear their complex realities rather than artificially simple ones designed to placate.

Their writing strategies remind us as instructors of English to be aware of the individuals who populate our classrooms who are and are not working class, who embody complicated and difficult educational and personal histories, and who have overcome a lot in order to sit in our classrooms. They are there to engage in discussion with us and not to be dismissed because their allusions are raw or novel. Posing themselves as our other intellectual rivals, they also expect us to engage with them in debate and not to dismiss them because their accents sound of a different class or an outside region. When we interact with and guide our students from working and complex families, we need to keep in mind that there is more than one way that they will attain academic success, including modeling on our ways of being in some instances and rejecting or reformulating those ways of being in others.

The issue here is not whether individual instructors in some ways have squelched the voices of these young men. Quite the contrary, these young men, regardless of their instructors' best intentions and good will, need to be able to push against the limits of what they perceive can be articulated in the classroom. After years of being thwarted, they want to engage in the critical thinking necessary to satisfy their own curiosity and the rigors of higher education. Our classrooms need necessarily to maintain space for those who find some of our exercises and “obsessions with perfection” as the “pains in the ass” that they may sometimes seem, and we must also remember to encourage that daring-to-disclose and daring-to-entertain spirit that Brad, Sean, and James so readily exhibit in the classroom. In spite of their troubled academic backgrounds and their adamant maintenance of a multiple-class family allegiance, they have proven themselves to be the kinds of students I have come to enjoy—those who truly engage the discussions presented by the class.

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## **Amazing Opportunities Await: Liberal Mythologies at a Non-Selective University**

IMAGINE A PHOTOGRAPH OF A BLACK MAN IN A SUIT, CAUGHT IN MID-LEAP, ARMS outstretched, mouth open, and eyes looking skyward. Underneath the image are the words:

2005 . . . You are not going to be the same as 2004, the same as 2003. I'm not going to watch you slip away from my apartment window, my seat on the subway, my spot on the stoop. You're the year I'm going to embrace, the year I'm going to focus on my future, converge on my career, celebrate my passions. I welcome you, 2005. Where I go this year is up to me and when I get there, 2006 will welcome me. I want to start now.

This is an advertisement on the New York subway for one of the city's many non-selective colleges. Underneath this text is the name of the institution along with a description of the college as a place where "amazing opportunities await." There are several versions of the ad, all of them featuring people of color. One includes an image of a woman walking down a sandy beach that disappears into the horizon, and in another, a woman sits on a cliff looking out over the ocean.

This advertisement is not selling a traditional college education or even training in the kinds of skills that might make a graduate more employable. This advertisement is selling the American Dream. The target audience is clearly people who live in apartments, ride the subway, hang out on stoops, and nurse uncelebrated passions. The photos that accompany the ad campaign further specify the intended audience. Another version of the ad features a photograph of an infant and the headline: "he just received the best New Year's gift, a parent with an education and a career." The power of these ads is in strong, active verbs such as "focus," "converge," "embrace," and "celebrate," and in their insistence that success is the result of "focused" individuals taking action to improve their families' circumstances. The tagline: "where I go in 2005 is up to me" is suggestive of the ideology deployed through such rhetoric: effort creates its own opportunities and success awaits those who are willing to summon enough character to take a step towards that distant horizon.

Unlike selective institutions where children of professionals are educated to assume their own place in the social hierarchy, non-selective colleges and universities cannot create

an identity, shape a marketing strategy, and attract students based on claims to status and prestige. Nor can they make grand claims about their students' job prospects after graduation since graduates from non-selective institutions must compete with graduates from more prestigious colleges in a tight job market. Non-selective institutions must nevertheless forge

“[N]on-selective colleges and universities cannot create an identity, shape a marketing strategy, and attract students based on claims of status and prestige.”

an institutional identity that is attractive to student-customers. Slick advertising campaigns seek to appeal to potential students by taking advantage of the anxieties of dead-end jobs, low pay, and unemployment and by placing the blame for those anxieties on those afflicted: *if 'amazing opportunities await,' these ads seem to say, you have no one to blame but yourself for not 'focusing' and 'converging' on your 'passions.'* Institutions like the one in the ad market American Dream mythology by portraying themselves as providers of upward mobility to those meritorious and deserving few.

Advertising campaigns, though perhaps the most explicit, are not the only ways that non-selective institutions forge an identity and develop a recruitment strategy.

This article presents a case study of the self-representation/marketing apparatus that one institution employs to recruit the working-class students of color who make up the majority of its student body. One claim of this essay is that in non-selective colleges and universities, marketing and self-representation are often indistinguishable and that the discursive alliance between recruitment and self-definition can be read as the dominant narrative of non-selective admissions policies. To the degree that these narratives participate in and reinforce liberal mythologies of achievement and failure, they deny the reality of institutionally structured failure in higher education and protect institutions from the kind of scrutiny that might illuminate the role that non-selective colleges and universities play in a highly regulated arena of access and exclusion. For Roland Barthes, myth names the form that dominant ideologies take as soon as they come to be perceived as natural, unquestioned, and uncontested. Barthes' work on how sign systems become myths, is thus a useful method in examining how myths operate in the daily, lived experience of teachers and students.

## Rhetoric and Ideology: A Case Study

I take the New York subway to a private, non-selective college where I teach Composition and work in the campus writing center. At the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University, 46% of students identify as Black, 15% as Hispanic, and 20% as white. The average income of these students families is about \$31,000, less than half the average of families at LIU's sister campus, located in a Long Island suburb. At \$651.00 per credit hour, tuition is twice the cost of tuition at the City University of New York. Ninety-three percent of LIU students rely at least, in part, on financial aid.<sup>1</sup> Each day as I emerge from the subway on my way to work, after having been inundated by ads for the transformative power of mass higher education, I am greeted by a giant billboard advertising my own campus. Against a white background, half a dozen hands, some black, some brown, are reaching upward, trying to grasp something just out of reach. The ad reads: together we can change the world.

Soon after I started teaching and tutoring at LIU, I noticed that students often disappear. One semester I tutored Shatiqua, a Black woman from Brooklyn and a new high school graduate. She was starting out in LIU's basic writing program because she had performed poorly on the one-shot writing placement test that the college administers to all new students. At the end of the semester, Shatiqua and I made plans to work together the following semester. But I never saw her again. Brenda, a Latina, was in my basic writing class. She became the subject of some research I conducted on literacy narratives. A single mother in her thirties, Brenda was trying to give her children the "educated parent with a career" promised in the subway ads. She was holding down a job, raising her two daughters, and attending school full-time. I stayed in touch with her for two years before she, too, disappeared. When I was finally able to reach her by phone, she told me that she had dropped out for what she hoped would be a temporary period of readjustment. After working all day and coming home to cook dinner for her girls, she was simply "too exhausted" to do her homework. She had failed several classes and hated to see her tuition money wasted. She told me that she hopes to return to school when she can be more focused.<sup>2</sup>

Stories like these are common at LIU. Statistics for the 2002–2003 academic year list the retention rate—the number of students who return for their sophomore year—at 29% and the six-year graduation rate at 21%. Behind these numbers are the stories of people like Sha-

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1. The vast majority of students who graduate from LIU take more than four years to complete their degrees. At this tuition rate, most of these students will owe more than \$50,000 after six years of study.

2. As federal and state aid is reduced, more students must bear more of the cost of a college degree. These burdens fall hardest on low-income students. See the NCES ([nces.ed.gov](http://nces.ed.gov)) report "The Debt Burden of College Graduates" as well as the December 23, 2004, *New York Times* article "Students to Bear More of the Cost of College."

tiqua and Brenda,<sup>3</sup> who wanted to go to college and ran into difficulties along the way. Since LIU does not keep adequate records once students are no longer enrolled, it is difficult to tell whether most students drop out for good, transfer to other institutions, or eventually return to LIU to complete their degrees. Nevertheless, *U.S. News and World Report* cited these statistics when it ranked LIU as a fourth tier university, the bottom rung, in the Northeast region. Questions about the value of this kind of ranking notwithstanding, LIU's reputation as an institution of higher learning has never been strong. Yet, troubling numbers like these have had a curious effect on enrollment at LIU: it has increased. The 2003–2004 academic year saw the largest total enrollment in ten years. The success of LIU in recruiting students despite appalling levels of student failure can be measured in how effectively the institution represents itself as a site where “amazing opportunities await” the deserving and dedicated.

### **LIU's Mission Statement and Liberation Mythology**

Evidence of LIU's ideological relationship to its students (and faculty) is located in the discursive apparatus through which the university articulates its mission and asserts an institutional identity. The university's position on matters of retention and graduation can be found in LIU's “Mission” and “Presidential Vision” statements. I call these “public texts” because they are available on the university website and are widely distributed in promotional and recruitment material for the campus. These texts are evidence of a liberal mythology that serves as the basis for the development of recruitment strategies as well as for constructions of institutional identity.

LIU's public texts work within and shore up an institutional mythology of student preparedness and student progress that places “liberation” at the center of institutional discourse. The university's utopian “Vision” and “Mission” statements participate in and reinforce nationalistic narratives of belonging and possibility like the mythology of the American Dream and the related mythology of individual achievement in the face of near-impossible odds. The ideology that informs LIU's public representations provides a glimpse into the relationship between non-selective institutions of higher learning and subject formation. These self-representations are articulated within state-sanctioned meritocratic myths about equality and opportunity in America.

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3. In 2003–2004, 72% percent of LIU students were women. Several other non-selective colleges in the New York area also have a largely female student body. At LIU, most students major in one of many “professional” programs on campus such as Nursing, Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Pharmacy, or Education. This suggests that, despite mass higher education, a traditional liberal arts degree is still the bastion of white, middle- and upper-class privilege. Working-class women of color, especially those with children, are more likely to choose a major in response to the pressure to earn a living in a tight labor market. Traditional gender roles also ensure that any job caring for others is still considered women's work.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines myth as “depoliticized speech” that functions to make “contingency appear eternal . . . [Myth] has turned [reality] inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature” (142). LIU’s Campus Mission empties reality of history by claiming that the institution began with a mission that is still its driving force today. In other words, LIU turns the historical circumstances that facilitated the opening of the campus and informed its inaugural mission into nature by proclaiming the idealized, depoliticized value of those initial commitments. The LIU Mission begins:

Expressed in its still-relevant motto *Urbi et Orbi*, the mission of LIU since 1926 has been to open the doors of the city and the world to men and women of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds who wish to achieve the satisfaction of the educated life and to serve the public good. Its mission is to awaken, enlighten and expand the minds of its students.

Since LIU’s Mission is “still relevant” after eighty years, it is emptied of its historical contingency. It becomes a universally acknowledged force for “the public good” and the theological inflection in the word “mission” is brought to the surface. LIU’s liberatory mission, rather than an explanation or a justification of daily practices, becomes self-evident and a thing in itself.

The concept of “liberation” also resonates in LIU’s description of its origin, a foundation narrative that naturalizes an elite interpretation of history. In LIU’s version of events, the school is a neutral site that facilitates upward mobility for students from “all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds,” or at least for those who can afford—or borrow the money—to pay tuition. The campus’s mythical origin reinscribes power relations by rhetorically positioning students as the beneficiaries of the school’s commitment to education despite the historically situated realities that shape the lives of students like Shatiqua and Brenda. The Mission statement is a performance of the institution’s power to impose its foundation narrative as an ultimate truth in the face of the failure of the vast majority of its students.

But has LIU failed? The institution sets up the terms of student progress and success according to the essentialized values expressed in its Mission. The 360-word Mission refers to

“ . . . ‘Vision’ and ‘Mission’ statements participate in and reinforce nationalistic narratives of belonging and possibility like the mythology of the American Dream . . . ”

LIU's "diverse" student body no fewer than 10 times. The university defines these students as follows: students from "all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds," students from "urban backgrounds," students who are "new to America and new to the English language," students with varied "cultural, ethnic, religious, racial, sexual" identities. LIU's reiteration of its commitment to "diversity" elides the social constructedness of the term by implying that middle-class white people are the unmarked (unraced, middle-class, and male) norm. The university's Mission participates in the American mythology of equality and opportunity and Horace Mann's nineteenth century mythology of education as "the great equalizer" by highlighting its commitment to providing access to the "American Dream" to a non-traditional student population. The power of the institution's rhetoric is thus in the alliance between LIU's foundation narrative and American "bootstrap" mythologies. Such mythologies posit failure as an individual rather than an institutional affair.

That LIU's institutional discourse mirrors nationalistic narratives of equality and individualism becomes even more clear when a close reading reveals that the Mission language further naturalizes the meritocratic mythology in which the university is primarily invested. Nowhere does LIU speak of its "oppressed" or "working-class" students; no public texts speak of the school's commitment to what Barthes calls "proletarian culture" or "proletarian art" or language (139); the Mission does not declare its willingness to educate "students from New York's urban ghettos" because in LIU's signification of reality, success is primarily a matter of personal choice that transcends race or class oppression. The dissemination of such a mythology is crucial in an institution with a record number of students, most of whom will leave college before graduation.

The LIU Mission thus evokes the supreme contradiction upon which the university's identity is precariously balanced: the naturalization of the concept of "diversity" as a term to ascribe value to characteristics held by different groups and a reification of the concept of individualism as an essential component of American mythology. The LIU website boasts of its commitment to "access and excellence," a paradoxical position in which everyone is welcome but only the smartest and most dedicated will succeed. This rhetoric places the burden of failure on the students themselves instead of the institution that rewards only according to ability. The Presidential Vision Statement extends this contradiction by boasting its record as a place for a "nationally competitive" student body as well as other highly motivated students who yearn to make a difference for themselves and their communities but whose potential has yet to be realized. It must be our sacred obligation to create in all those who come to this great University, regardless of their prior preparation, a capacity for and a commitment to academic excellence, individual achievement, personal growth, cultural enrichment, and civic responsibility.

Barthes writes that "language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it" (137). LIU's Mission does not merely describe the kind of education the institution offers its students; it imposes a political reality on students and faculty. The LIU Mission claims an institutional goal for itself by signifying a socially constructed and politically expedient idea of America as a diverse collective made up of equally valued individuals who each have access to opportunity but succeed (or fail) according to personal "motivation" and "individual achievement." The LIU Mission describes students in the passive voice, as people whose potential "has yet to be realized." Yet LIU's "sacred obligation" to its students is described using the strong, active verb: "to create." This rhetoric implies that education is something that is done *to* students *by* the institution and its agents. Students are rhetorically stripped of agency as they pass through the gates of the institution to be liberated.

The "Mission" template is uprooted from narratives of nationalism and imposed upon the LIU student body and faculty as a governing principle. The university solidly positions itself in the role of providing the euphemistically labeled "unprepared" with access to the university *at the same time* that it participates in the meritocratic project of culling from the masses a tiny academic elite who will be *created* anew as cultural and civic leaders.

The LIU mythology also facilitates an ideology in which getting a good job and becoming enlightened are interdependent. The university is one of the few institutions in society that claims to provide people with economic, social, and a kind of spiritual upward mobility. The Mission's goal to "awaken, enlighten and expand the minds of its students" is deeply connected to what Barthes calls "bourgeois ideology" in Western culture. This ideology "spreads over everything" (139); it is so pervasive as to be invisible and thus unnameable. LIU aligns itself with an Arnoldian perspective of culture in which the job of educational institutions is to liberate minds and deliver willing students from darkness into light. This progression is conflated in LIU mythology with the kind of job training that working-class students so desperately want. James Berlin, in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, suggests that this kind of rhetoric is a result of the decreasing economic value of a college degree: "In a post-Fordist environment, a college degree no longer ensures a secure job and a comfortable way of life. It is more likely instead to be no more than a certificate qualifying a graduate to compete for one of the comfortable positions at the center of the job circle" (50). If a college degree, especially one from a fourth-tier institution, is not a ticket to economic security as it perhaps once was, the institution must offer students more symbolic rewards such as "enlightenment" and a sense of accomplishment that are not necessarily accompanied by economic advantage. An emphasis on helping deserving students from "diverse" communities earn college degrees has turned into a statement about the kind of people the Great University creates, a subject formation most accurately signified as *citizen*. The LIU Mission is

rhetorically effective like the subway advertisements are effective in that they signify ideas that are already in wide circulation in the larger culture: people succeed or fail largely on their own merits, and a college education offers far more than money—it offers intelligence and self-respect.

## **LIU's Presidential Vision Statement and the Myth of Meritocracy**

LIU's Presidential Vision statement is perhaps the best example of this mythology. It draws specifically on nationalistic narratives of equality, opportunity, and individualism by invoking key phrases such as "sacred obligation," "individual achievement," and "cultural enrichment." The statement further affirms that "this special vision . . . has existed from our origins." The Vision's foundation narrative is closely aligned with popular narratives of the origins of the United States as an egalitarian alternative to Britain's class-stratified society. The Presidential Vision statement represents the institution as a site where the ideals of the institution dovetail with the democratic values that make America the "land of opportunity."

To represent itself as egalitarian in the midst of what would by any other terms be a crisis of student failure, LIU foregrounds its commitment to students "regardless of their prior preparation." The university's non-selective policy is a key component in the precarious balance that the university must maintain to keep its identity (and its recruitment strategy) intact. The Vision's language thus makes it clear that LIU is ideologically committed to liberal notions of what a university is supposed to do: assimilate the meritorious into high culture (or at the very least train them for middle-class professions) and *create* a belief in the value of that culture in everyone else. This meritocratic goal is essential to a mythology of the American Dream that naturalizes the dominance of a tiny elite. The irony is that as the university proclaims its willingness to lend a helping hand to the underprivileged, it must ignore the history of racism and class-stratification that serves as the basis for liberal commitments to open access.

In American Dream mythology, students who fail to earn their degrees may have succeeded according to the logic of a meritocracy. "Success" in these terms is measured by how well these students are interpellated into a subjectivity that sees individual effort and ability as the primary paths to achievement. This interpellation, at the very least, ensures that the myth will thrive despite and even because of socioeconomic inequality. In other words, students who drop out before graduation may have succeeded at taking the university's Mission to heart: to fail at a school that is committed to educating and liberating everyone "regardless of their prior preparation" is to be unworthy of the meritocracy's promise.

The success of that discourse in shaping reality for LIU students is one possible reason why an institution that almost none of its students can afford to attend maintains a 21% graduation rate without suffering a crisis of identity (or a financial one) or without having to answer to those students it fails.<sup>4</sup>

How might teachers in non-selective colleges like LIU resist the mythologies that prop up the status quo? One option includes the development of a critical pedagogy that encourages students to explore the ways these institutions market themselves to people like them. In *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Ira Shor argues that the task of critical teachers is to encourage students to “*extraordinarily reexperience the ordinary*” (93). Teachers could design a series of assignments problem-posing marketing and recruitment efforts at non-selective institutions. For example, most LIU students ride the subway or bus as their primary means of transportation. I might ask students to take special notice of the advertisements for colleges and universities on their ride to school including the headlines, text, and any images that accompany the ad. As an in-class group assignment, I might ask students to compare their data and come up with the top five schools whose ads appear most often. Once these schools have been identified, students can begin to ask: why are these schools and not others advertised on public transportation? Who does the audience for these ads seem to be and why? How do these schools market themselves to potential student-customers? What are the dominant themes driving the ads? What explicit and implicit messages about education and upward mobility are these ads sending? How do those messages mirror “bootstrap” mythologies in American culture? Are those myths compatible with the material realities of non-traditional students’ experience? Finally, students could create their own advertisements depicting the relationship between schooling and upward mobility from their point of view. Encouraging students to explore these questions could part of an ongoing effort by compositionists to teach students to read the institution’s own language as myth and then ask: who do those myths serve?<sup>5</sup>

While the pedagogical response to dominant mythologies at non-selective institutions is one way to push back against institutional efforts to shape reality, it does not fully address how we, as teachers and professionals, are implicated in institutional rhetoric. To examine institutional self-representations is not to step back and observe but to acknowledge that we are always working from within the structures that reproduce the system we set out

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4. A search of [collegeresults.org](http://collegeresults.org) suggests that when it comes to low graduation rates, LIU is not alone. Of 15 schools nationwide with a majority of working class and/or students of color, six had graduation rates under 20% and only two had rates over 50%.

5. See Reichert Powell for another analysis of the perpetuation of dominant mythologies in institutional discourse.

to critique. Becoming a reader of these myths enabled me to view my own complicity in a system that perpetuates inequality by naturalizing it. If asserted uncritically, commitments to “equality in education” or “democratic access to college,” keystones of much of the rhetoric of educational reform, can begin to mirror liberal mythologies that elide the material realities of white supremacy, class-stratification, and gender oppression. It is not only students who are assigned a disempowering subjectivity in such a discourse. In a world where non-traditional students are constructed as consumers of educational products, teachers are represented as little more than the retailers of symbolic rewards whose “liberatory” promise is steeped in a discourse that functions to maintain hegemony. As teachers and scholars in non-selective institutions, it is important to remember that students are not the only ones producing texts that deserve our attention. Our work should debunk the ideological systems that reproduce inequality *and* enable us to confront the myth of our own good intentions.

“enabled me to view  
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Sandra Young

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# **Academic Legerdemain: When Literacy Standards Become a Sleight of Hand**

## **1. The bare stage**

### **Introductions and the long-term problem**

With newly-minted Ph.D. in hand, I accepted a tenure-track teaching position (my first) that brought me to rural Alaska. I was to be the only English faculty member at a very small extended campus of the University of Alaska Southeast. On paper, this campus and I seemed a good fit. They needed a generalist, and as a generalist, I brought with me several years of university teaching, administrative work, and community service. What I didn't know is that I was entering into a situation that would call into question my role as a teacher, my ethics, and my career.

When I interviewed at this campus, I was stunned, as many city-dwellers are, by the remarkable beauty of Alaska. I was also aware that my ideas of this state were conditioned on Hollywood and TV renditions of reindeer and salmon and moose. Oh my. So before arriving in Alaska, I did my homework. I learned that Alaska Native secondary students had one of the highest non-retention rates of all minority groups, a figure of about 25%, according to Richard St. Germaine, citing a 1994 National Center for Education Statistics report ("Drop-Out Rate Among American Indians and Alaska Native Students: Beyond Cultural Discontinuity"). The issues are innumerable, reports Nancy Gale in her 1991 article, "Fighting Alcohol and Substance Abuse among American Indian and Alaskan Youth," and include dysfunctional families with histories of drug and alcohol abuse, often approximating 80%, and fetal alcohol syndrome. Native families experience a higher than average occurrence of domestic abuse and their children receive inadequate (often poor) academic preparation. Added to these influences is a culture that tends to distrust Western education because its competitive, individual-focused instruction is anathema to the collectivist society of many Alaska Natives who celebrate the "we" and not the "I." As a white woman, therefore, I was a member of the often mistrusted dominant white culture that was larger than the Native population.

Yet, as Native and non-Native educators and a host of others continue their ongoing

attempts to address these issues with varying degrees of success, there are small successes sprinkled throughout Alaska. One, Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka, Alaska, prepares students for college by providing a boarding school setting, an innovative academic program taught by a number of Native teachers, and boasting a graduation rate of about 68% (in 1993) according to Kathleen Cotton's 1994 analysis of the school, "Applying Total Quality Management Principles to Secondary Education."

"what happens when  
assessment, standards,  
and culture collide"

Also while I was in the last stages of finishing and defending my dissertation, my new college was celebrating its reception of a U.S. Department of Education grant.

In this essay, I offer my experience and discuss what happens when a well-intentioned grant fails because it loses its

focus from serving students to preserving the grant. I discuss the plan of this FIPSE grant; I examine what happens when assessment, standards, and culture collide; I address what happens when literacy standards are re-defined and work to cloud the meaning of the concept; and I explore what happens when professional and institutional pressures encouraged faculty to compromise professional, personal, and ethical standards.

## **2. The magicians**

### **This FIPSE plan**

The desire to find a solution to improve Native education is a noble one. Academics, administrators, legislators, social workers, business leaders, and the Native community have for years sought answers to this perplexing problem. One solution was offered by a University of Alaska Southeast campus in U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant. Perhaps the Holy Grail of postsecondary grants, FIPSE, according to its website, is a "small program . . . [that] has established a record of promoting meaningful and lasting solutions to various, often newly emerging problems." What sets FIPSE apart from other grants is its focus on "widely felt problems . . . rather than on special interest groups or prescribed solutions"; its responsiveness to "local initiatives . . . to local problems . . . that have wider influence"; its "action-oriented approach . . . usually involving direct implementation of new ideas"; and its "risk-taking." Funding roughly the top 3%, the FIPSE program generates a pool of applicants that are highly competitive and aggressive. A FIPSE grant is quite the feather in any college's cap.

The University of Alaska Southeast campus grant, "Academic and Cultural Support for First-Year Alaska Native Students," quotes statistics that are compelling. According to the

grant, the "1993 Education Task Force of the Alaska Natives' Commission reported that approximately 30 percent of Alaska Native students leave Alaskan high schools without a diploma . . . [E]nrollment statistics of Alaskan post-secondary institutions demonstrate that while Alaska Natives comprise 13 percent of the State's population, only 9 percent of the 30,793 students enrolled in 1990 at all state campuses were Native students" ("Academic and Cultural Support"1). My research from a variety of sources including the FIPSE grant, the 1991 U.S. Department of Education Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, Lynn Olson's "Achievement Gap Widening, Study Reports," and Janet Ponessa's "SAT, ACT Scores Up but Racial Gap Remains," all confirm that this gap between the educational achievements of white and non-white (including Native American and Alaska Native) students continues.

This FIPSE grant offered a solution to close the educational gap between Native and non-Native students and promised Native students success in college. This grant's solution hinged on the success of introducing Native students, many from remote bush villages, to college culture and thereby academic perseverance, through the creation of a living situation (in the dorm) similar to that of their homes, and recruiting local Natives to serve as mentors. The assumption proffered the idea that creating an *academic home*, a "family," would help alleviate homesickness, a strong element in college non-retention rates in Alaska, and, therefore, Alaska Natives would thrive as students. However, because so few Alaska Native students choose post-secondary education, the pool of talented students was very small, and those students often opted to attend the university in Anchorage or Fairbanks. Consequently, many of the grant students were inadequately (often poorly) prepared for college, and some were simply poor high school students (average high school GPA was D).

When I arrived in Alaska, the grant was beginning its second year of a three-year grant period. The previous grant "program leader" had been replaced by a non-Native, white married couple. Before that fall semester, about a dozen students from about a dozen villages, towns, and cities, representing about a dozen kinds of lifestyles and ethnicities, came together to create a "collegiate 'family'," with the FIPSE program leaders living elsewhere ("Academic and Cultural Support" 4), functioning as surrogate parents.

The premise of this FIPSE grant, the linchpin of its success, was that the "collegiate family groupings" would acculturate Native students to the academic environment and, therefore, produce student-scholars ("Academic and Cultural Support" 4). Unfortunately, problems began immediately. Mentors were unreliable. The FIPSE program leaders, already on-call 24-hours, were unprepared for the volume, complexity, and variety of complications the dozen or so students produced. Some students who had never lived away from home, and some who had never lived in a place with more than 150 people, were now treated as adults and expected to conduct themselves as adults. Isolated from their peers and homesick, some students

continued their pre-college habits of drug and alcohol abuse. Many of the students dismissed the education process and by mid-term were failing more than one of their classes.

But the most egregious failing of this FIPSE grant was the abandonment of the grant's basic tenets: "to serve the students of this project well" (4). To the administrators of the FIPSE grant, success apparently came to be measured *not* by the achievements of students, but in implicitly encouraging faculty to lower their standards in order to retain the grant. The grant administrators never, to my knowledge, issued a memo stating how to preserve the grant. Instead, at the regular faculty and advisor meetings, the grant administrators peppered us with cautionary words about being team players and issued thinly veiled observations that faculty needed to work harder.

To save the FIPSE grant, administrators re-defined the standards of literacy, compromised the academic success of the grant students, and engendered a situation where faculty valued their careers before their ethics or students.

Students were lost. The grant was saved.

### **3. The illusion**

#### **Assessment, standards, and culture collide**

Bolstered by the successes of Mt. Edgecumbe High School's boarding school environment and influenced by the general understanding of a student's need for supportive family and friends, defined goals, cultural and academic relevance, self discipline, and small class size, this University of Alaska Southeast campus undertook to combine many of these elements in designing the FIPSE grant. Its "three-year project" would attempt to solve the problems of "barriers to educational success" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 4). Notably, the grant identified the "loss of traditional support structures, including both traditional family mentors (usually aunt/uncle, grandmother/grandfather in the Native cultures of Alaska) and close rural village relationships, resulting in emotional and cultural isolation at the critical stages when the student's traditional value system and self-concept are most challenged" (4).

As the "core of the project," the FIPSE grant administrators' proposed solution involved the following requirement:

the creation of collegiate "family" groupings to augment the support of natural family and village relationships, as well as to provide a more culturally appropriate academic support structure than the typical institutionalized student service units. The collegiate families will collectively develop the coping skills necessary to succeed in a new, frequently intimidating, social and educational environment, thereby overcoming the isolation which most Native students currently experience as college freshmen. (4)

These "collegiate 'family' groupings" were to be led by an "educator/mentor *representing* [emphasis mine] the "Apa or Uppa (the elder leader, in Alaska cultures usually the Uncle or Aunt, Grandfather or Grandmother), thus filling the central role in the traditional Native educational process" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 5). As stipulated by the grant, students were to "commit to the family for two consecutive semesters of study . . . reside in a group environment and participate, with the mentor, in organized family activities" (5).

This sounds like a perceptive, sensitive approach to problem-solving. Who would argue with a solution that encourages a seamless transition from the student's home family to "collegiate family groupings"? But what happened calls into question a fundamental misunderstanding behind the initial premise of the grant, to create a "collegiate family." To become a family, as many blended families will attest, may take years and require hard work. To imitate, or even replicate, the Alaska Native student's home family demands time, hard work, and a profound grasp of a student's culture. The Native "collegiate family groupings," however, were led by white "educator/mentors" who, though they were supposed to "represent the Apa or Uppa (the elder leader)" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 5)—an already daunting expectation—quite simply did not know enough about the Native culture. Furthermore, to "[r]e-enforce this family bond," students were to be "housed together, share meals, and participate in a year-long career planning course (3-credit per semester)" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 5-6). The reality was that some students lived in the dorm, some students took meals together, and most students completed the planning course. But not all the grant students lived in the dorm; some students were from the college town and lived at home or elsewhere.

Another of the grant's propositions stated that an "additional continuing effort . . . will be interaction between . . . students and Native Alaskan families and community members . . . as well as Native leaders serving as appropriate role models and mentors" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 6). In fact, students had limited contact with the community, and Native leaders willing to become mentors were difficult to find. One student's father, a community leader, did serve as his son's mentor; other students who lived in the community had self-made support systems around them.

The grant's other promises included continued contact from students with their families by telephone, letters, a "collegiate family production of videotapes," and e-mail. Did students write and call home? Probably. Did they e-mail? Probably, but only if their town or village had the technology to offer Internet access and had electronic capacity, and most did not. Did they produce a videotape? Did all of these efforts work to relieve homesickness? Did these efforts retain students? Did these efforts produce the scholar/student?

Recall that the FIPSE grant's premise was to re-create a home-like setting in the dorm (a "collegiate family") in order to dispel homesickness and perpetuate cultural connections.

Yet, the three most successful grant students in my classes were from the college's town and lived at home. Those students who lived in the dorm did not, on the whole, adhere to the grant's "family" structure. The dorm students, most of them on their own for the first time, often were overwhelmed and heady with their new freedoms and became just as susceptible as non-Natives to the dangers of those freedoms. But remember that these students were supposed to be in a "family" structure, mentored, and participating in strategies to "establish self-determination skills and high levels of personal responsibility for decision-making and academic persistence" ("Academic and Cultural Support" 6). The "collegiate family groupings" and the "educator/mentors" were supposed to recognize potential problems and solve them. An idealistic endeavor to be sure. In reality, drug and alcohol use/abuse proved to be the most damning of the problems.

"cutting classes,  
missing deadlines,  
quizzes, and tests,  
dismissing assignment  
instructions"

My experiences with the grant students in two academic years of the grant's tenure were shared by many of my colleagues. In private conversations with my colleagues, we shared our experiences with some typical student behavior: cutting classes, missing deadlines, quizzes, and tests, dismissing assignment instructions. We also experienced some atypical student conduct: the visibly hung-over student. As educators we struggled to find ways to overcome these issues.

Even in my basic writing class, which included roughly 90% of the grant students, many of these students were at a writing and mechanical skills level far below that of other basic writing students I've taught. As a way to combat the poor skills of my students, I altered the course content by focusing on expository writing for a longer period of time instead of moving into analytic work. I held extra office hours, encouraged students to talk with me before and after class, and worked with them in small groups. However, like the students of many of my colleagues, most of my grant students were failing.

Yet instead of addressing the issues of students' poor attendance, mediocre skills, and failing grades, the grant administrators relaxed academic standards of literacy and assessment. Instead of believing that Native students can succeed at higher education, the grant administrators implicitly dictated to its faculty a mandate to find ways to pass grant students, to give the grant students special treatment. How? Suggestions included giving students extra credit and allowing extra time to complete assignments, giving small quizzes instead of tests, dropping bad grades, not counting absences.

This well-intentioned grant failed, I believe, because in their determination to retain the grant and to produce the kinds of results the grant promised, the grant administrators generated an environment that focused on keeping the grant at just about any cost and replaced the initial reason behind the grant—"to serve the students of this project well" (1)—with an unreasonable one—to keep the grant. Secondly, the grant failed because when the grant administrators created an imitation dorm "family," this isolated students physically and emotionally from their peers, and as a result, this isolation worked to perpetuate pre-college abusive behaviors.

#### **4. The rabbits escape from the hat**

##### **Literacy standards and FIPSE students**

The chief battle in the war between perception and reality concerning the FIPSE grant, involved the statement: "the project has established a goal to retain all . . . students through two consecutive semesters" (7), which was followed by a statement found in the "Management Plan" section of the grant: "100% of students who enter the . . . program will complete 2 full-time semesters of postsecondary work . . . with a GPA of 2.0 or higher" (4). While the second statement seeks to clarify the first, it instead adds troubling requirements. The first statement contends that it is a "goal" of the project to "retain all . . . students through two consecutive semesters"; the second statement seems to omit the "consecutive semesters" requirement but then layers its own conditions when it declares that students "will complete 2 full-time semesters," and they will do so with a "GPA of 2.0 or higher" ("Academic and Cultural Support"4). It seems to me that any grant that declares that *all* of its students will finish two consecutive semesters with C's, points implicitly to an understanding that grant students would receive passing grades.

Lisa Delpit in *Other People's Children* and others have pointed out just how damaging such a relaxation of standards can be for students coming from minority cultures. To pass students "without attending to obvious deficits . . . [in order] to function effectively" (Delpit 38), may be useful in salvaging grants, but it is ultimately one of the worst options for the student populations these grants are meant to serve. Giving grant students special treatment robs them of the opportunity to acquire the literacy skills necessary to succeed in the dominant culture, which in Alaska is the white culture. Yet, when Delpit defines the concept of how literacy is understood, she states that the practice of literacy, an unequivocal good in Western civilization, is also "typically a solitary endeavor" that can "also promote alienation in communities that value collaboration and interaction" (93-4). The FIPSE grant administrators did not insist on a standard of literacy that taught students how to participate and be successful in Western-oriented education and society.

Nor did the grant administrators insist on promoting “collaboration and interaction” (Delpit 93) by privileging what Scott Richard Lyons, in his essay, “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?,” calls “*rhetorical sovereignty*,” the “inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires . . . to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449–450). The grant did not seek to establish cross-cultural communication that encourages teachers to use their knowledge and resources while celebrating and acknowledging the rich tapestries of multiple intelligences and experiences that Alaska Native students bring to the classroom. Indeed, the FIPSE program leaders (the married couple) had almost sole contact with grant students outside of the academic setting.

What happened? The grant students quickly learned that they were a special group; they were told how important the grant was; they were encouraged to remain an intact group, and, even though intercultural interaction was not prevented, grant students became increasingly isolated from their non-Native peers. Non-grant students quickly learned that the grant students were the entitled ones. Non-grant students, on several occasions, told me that they knew grant students were “being passed” without doing the work to justify the pass; non-grant students discerned from a variety of tacitly implied ways that grant students were being judged by a very different academic rule book. Remember that this is a very small campus, and students talk. The result was that some grant students learned from others that special status can create special circumstances—passing grades—and some grant students used this special status to continue in their pre-college habits, including the dismissal of education.

And what was the response of the grant administrators? This FIPSE grant is important, the faculty was reminded. And, tugging at faculty emotions, the grant administrators often cautioned that losing the grant jeopardized the education of Native students. Yet in order to do what the grant implicitly required, faculty were confronted with the real prospect of having to compromise their academic and literacy standards.

The grant itself was now the problem.

By mid-term, the grant administrators were unhappy with teachers who had failing students. We were told to do a better job and to find ways to pass students. Most English teachers I know will do backflips to help students be successful. We all know the drill—we hold extra office hours, provide extra help, get tutors, take students to learning centers, accept late work, and offer countless suggestions in an effort to serve students.

Find ways to pass students. This ambiguous sentence managed to instill and perpetuate in me fears of failure, not only to my students, but to my profession, and to myself. In almost twenty years of college teaching, I had never been told to find a way to pass a student. This was my first posting, and I was scared of losing it.

When W.C. Fields was on his deathbed, he was found reading the Bible. Not a religious man, he was asked why. His response was that he was looking for loopholes. I went in search of loopholes. I found one located in directions for assigning grades. A grade of “No Basis” (NB) could be given if a student disappeared from class or turned in insufficient work to merit a grade. I had taught at three colleges prior to coming to the University of Alaska. These places did not issue a grade of NB.

In further conversations with my colleagues, I learned that the NB was, indeed, a popular grade distributed to grant students. Why? Since the NB does not factor into the student's GPA, this grade seemingly relinquished responsibility of the professor of record. The FIPSE grant *Management Plan* promised “2 full-time semesters of post secondary work . . . with a GPA of 2.0 or higher.” As a result, the student who did not officially drop, the student who did not request an incomplete, the student who simply disappeared, or failed to turn in work could be given the NB and that grade would not alter his/her GPA. Therefore, the NB grade was the perfect solution of grant administrators whose mandate was for teachers to pass students. Then the grant administrators advised the faculty to award the NB grade to *any* student who might reasonably (another ambiguous term) warrant it. But for teachers laboring to find ways to pass students, the NB grade had many disquieting ethical implications.

## **5. On another stage**

### **Basic writing students**

My students were sweet, troubled, funny, hard-headed, artistic, and lazy. A typical mix. They were also, however, some of the most academically ill-prepared students I had ever encountered, and most, I found, were products of a secondary educational system composed of “poor teaching at best and institutional racism at worst” (Delpit 38). Most of my students' teachers were non-Native and “temporary”—meaning their teachers were from the Lower 48 and lured to Alaska with the promise of a very high salary to teach in the villages. Most “temporary” teachers lasted no more than three years. Most were ill-prepared for the kinds of challenges that Native students presented. To most teachers, multiculturalism meant Hispanic or African American students, and their schooling in how to teach multicultural students involved using multicultural texts. Lyons points out that the brand of “mainstream multiculturalism” taught to students in education programs “may affirm the rightful and creative existence of Indian cultures and peoples among others,” but it also tends to “focus on the *people* but typically not the *nation* and that isn't necessarily the practice or honoring of Indian sovereignty” (457).

Regrettably, I was no exception. I like to think that I overcame my lack of preparation by intense seat-of-the-pants study. I like to think that I became a good teacher of Native students, but maybe I was just another Western teacher armed with multicultural texts and not a

clue of how to truly teach multicultural students. Over the course of my two years teaching grant students (and other Native students), I saw in some Native students' attitudes and behaviors a resistance to Western education. But what truly dismayed me was the look of disillusionment I saw in some students' eyes. Even those students who were specially selected as recipients of this grant, were often cynical about what a Western education could do for them.

In each semester of my two-year involvement with the grant, I taught a basic writing class. All of the grant students started their college writing experience in the basic writing class, and in each of those semesters, I had both new grant students and those repeating the course. In each of my four semesters of teaching basic writing, I had five or six grant students, other Native students, and non-Native (mostly white) students.

On their first day in class, the diagnostic essay prompt asked students to tell me about life in their home town. Their essays were awful. Students committed so many mechanical errors (spelling, grammar, sentence construction, and paragraph development) that their ideas and meanings were lost in a quagmire of fragments, run-on sentences, and missing thesis statements. I didn't return their essays and immediately began retooling my course content, writing exercises, assignments, and readings to address the multitude of writing and reading issues that my students represented. Though I used a different handbook for each of the four semesters, I stuck with two primary texts, *New Worlds of Literature*, edited by Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter, and *Language Awareness*, edited by Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark, because they were especially inclusive in regards to culture and ethnicity. And I thought both texts contained interesting writing.

As a way to introduce students to reading college material, I chose *New Worlds of Literature*. The format of the text included fiction, poetry, drama, and essays; the text's sections were titled "Home," "Family," "Heritage," "Language," "Aliens," "Fences," "Crossing," "Americans," and "Beliefs"; I liked the format and thought the movement of writing from home to beliefs seemed appropriate for my new students.

In the first month of each of my four semesters with grant students, we worked our way through each of the sections of the Beaty and Hunter text. In each class, we read the poems, discussed them, and then students chose one of the poems to respond to in a short (about 200 word) journal entry. Sometimes I imposed a specific assignment; for example after reading Diane Burns' "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question," I asked students to try writing a poem of their own about the kinds of stereotypes they, as Natives, encountered. Not surprisingly, they wrote about one of the stereotyped images I had of Natives. When I came to Alaska, for example, I expected Native students to have "Indian" names. They didn't, and the only student who had an "Indian" name told me that her grandfather was from a tribe in the Lower 48. So much for my childhood of watching westerns.

In another assignment, after reading R.T. Smith's "Red Anger," I asked students to discuss the anger of the speaker and to make a list of things that angered them. In addition to the many pet peeves (such as notably irritating siblings) that anger all of us, many stu-

"his family earned some of its income by giving tourists . . . what they wanted—Native dances, ceremonies, and rituals"

dents wrote about Western tourists who wanted to see Natives act "Native." One student wrote that since tourism is such an important industry in Alaska, his family earned some its income by giving tourists to his village what they wanted—Native dances, ceremonies, and rituals—all for the price of admission.

Each of these specific assignments, very emotional in nature, sought to encourage these students, self-conscious and well-schooled in the Native ways of modesty, to begin to find their voices. And they did.

Slowly. Very slowly. Though I asked students to read from their journals, few volunteered, and I did not collect their journals because I wanted that first month of college writing to be free from criticism. Even so, by the end of the first month, students should have had eight journal entries. By the end of the first month, however, some grant students began missing classes; others did attend class but didn't write. True, other Native and non-Native basic writing students had attendance issues, and some of them failed to write as well, but all of us noted the conspicuous absence of the grant students and their lack of attention to assignments.

After that first month of reading and studying poetry, we moved to selections from the text *Language Awareness*. Like the Beaty and Hunter text (and many others), *Language Awareness* takes students on a journey of discovery of the uses of language. Unlike my use of *New Worlds of Literature*, I didn't make use of each *Language Awareness* section and cherry-picked what I thought would be interesting readings that would provide motivating assignment prompts.

I use portfolio grading so students may revise as often as they need to before the portfolio is due at mid and end terms. In all my basic writing classes, I focus on whatever grammatical or mechanical issue most of the students needed work on. The grant students (and others) needed work on every aspect of writing. Also, since no developmental reading course existed, basic writing students, most of them poor readers, struggled with many reading assignments.

In all my composition classes, students bring their essay drafts to class, and after

instruction in how to conduct the peer review workshop, they work in groups on each others' essays. But because the basic writing class was so small (usually about seven students and only four students with drafts), the entire class would workshop each of the essays. Each class day included re-reading parts of the text, reading student essays, identifying errors, and addressing how to remedy them. Each class also revolved around the appearance and/or disappearance of grant students.

Two spectacularly different outcomes demonstrated the depth of issues I was facing. One event began with a reading of Paul Roberts' "A Brief History of English." Though this reading and its assignment came during the later half of the semester, students struggled with the text. And then while discussing my assignment—write a brief history of your language—some Native students pointed out how the use of English had led to the elimination of some Native languages. This comment, in turn, caused some white students to point out how dependent Natives are on whites, which, of course, led to a discussion on affirmative action. All of this was happening before students even wrote their essays. Now, I'm all for engaged classroom discussions, but what happened next was at once a democratic success—the class voted that they didn't want to write the essay (the warring students united to defeat the essay topic), and a pedagogical failure—they didn't write the essay.

On the bright side, students had little trouble reading Donald V. Mehus' "Contemporary American Graffiti," and they enjoyed writing about the graffiti found around campus, including Tlingit profanity. Educational for me, too.

Yet, more grant students failed the course than non-grant students. I gave the NB grade when I felt it was warranted but not often enough to please the grant administrators. I was told that there was something wrong with my teaching if so many students were failing. I was told to find ways to pass students.

The progress of grant students was dutifully reported at the faculty/advisor meetings. In addition to absences and poor work, teachers and advisors discussed how grant students (and others) demonstrated signs of drug and alcohol hangovers. Based on conversations from teachers and advisors, the grant administrators knew that students were experiencing difficulties in and out of the classroom, but instead of addressing what was happening in any meaningful ways, the grant administrators seemed to hope the issues would just go away.

While my work with the grant administrators became contentious and I left the university, my experience with all students, and especially grant students, confirmed that students, in ways great or small, struggle with college. My grant students' end term cover letters to me addressed the strengths and weakness of their semester and also spoke of the frustrations of their poor writing skills and their surprises when they overcame writing problems. Here, are the voices of a few of the grant students:

Ginny,<sup>1</sup> from a small village, had spotty attendance and repeated the class twice before passing. She wrote, "Every day is a struggle for me because every day I look at what I have done and realize that I have not got the skills to succeed."

Toni came from the college town and lived at home. She wrote well, one of the few A students. Yet in her letter, she wrote honestly of her difficulty with writing: "This class turned out to be tougher than I thought. . . . I certainly didn't expect the roadblocks I encountered."

Tina, also from the college town, was especially hard on herself. Using a sports metaphor, she describes her difficulties: "I really felt the ball was rolling in my court . . . but somehow the ball kept going out of bounds. Then suddenly it was half time, and when the game resumed it was a push to win the game!" She passed the class.

Nick, another college town student, and one of the few to have a college-educated parent, passed the class the first time. He wrote, "I like that we share what we have written and help each other. I have found that I actually really enjoy English after many [y]ears of having a[n] extreme disliking of the subject."

Claire struggled throughout the semester but passed. She wrote, "I believe my writing skills have improved, but I need to improve more than what they are now."

In my two years there, I taught 17 grant students. There were success stories. Five grant students in my classes did quite well. Three of the five were from the college's town; one village student whose parent was a teacher was the most successful of the village students. All of the passing students came from families that put a high value on a college education. These five grant students were the only students in my classes who successfully completed "2 consecutive semesters . . . with a GPA of 2.0 or higher." I believe that these students would have succeeded without the grant.

And the other grant students? Some stayed with the program for two semesters or more. Some transferred to other University of Alaska locations. A few went into vocational fields. Others dropped out.

## **6. The empty stage**

### **Problems and solutions, and lessons learned**

Hindsight is tricky.

The FIPSE grant failed for two basic reasons: first, what the grant administrators wanted grant students to accomplish collided with many of the students' poor academic preparedness and behavior; second, teachers were covertly intimidated into lowering their academic and literacy standards in order to save the grant.

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1. "Ginny," "Toni," "Tina," "Nick," and "Claire" are invented names.

First, the grant failed because it set unrealistic expectations for itself. To state as a criterion of the grant that "100% of students who enter the . . . program will complete 2 full-time semesters of postsecondary work . . . with a GPA of 2.0 or higher" is, quite simply, an untenable goal. This goal cultivated a situation that placed retaining the grant as a primary responsibility and the teaching of Native students as a secondary consideration. It also placed faculty in impossible situations. The faculty had three choices: pass students regardless of requisite skills; give students the NB grade when it was not warranted; or continue to follow their own ethics and teach, thereby possibly placing their careers in jeopardy, which points to the second reason the grant failed. The grant failed because the grant administrators fostered an environment of academic legerdemain when it advised faculty to lower its academic and literacy standards.

A solution to both of these problems is one that Delpit and others have consistently promoted—teach students the literacy skills they need to survive in the dominant culture but also understand that the reason some students reject literacy is they feel that literacy and the dominant culture first rejected them (160). Furthermore, Don Trent Jacobs and Jon Reyhner in their article, "Preparing Teachers to Support American Native and Alaska Native Student Success and Cultural Heritage," describe how teacher-centered classrooms work against Native student collectivist upbringing. Educators with diverse populations must learn the language necessary to persuade minority students that acquiring literacy standards necessary to function within the dominant discourse does not necessitate abandoning Native ways. Simply passing students through the educational system is damaging to all concerned.

Also, the artificial environment created by the "collegiate family" isolated some Native students from their peers both in terms of their housing and their emotions. Therefore, abusive behaviors continued. To their own discredit, many grant students drank and took drugs. Destructive student behavior coupled with grant administrators who turned a blind eye to students created a situation in which students ignored the educational opportunity afforded them. Many grant students became complacent about their behavior and education because they were allowed to do so.

Another possible solution would be to work within the Native community to find the mentors promised in the grant. Ardy SixKiller Clarke articulates this point in his article, "Social and Emotional Distress Among American Indian and Alaska Native Students," when he states that "families with strong traditional values positively impact the academic success of . . . students." Recall that the grant students who fared the best lived in the college's town.

The grant also failed because it could not provide that vital connection between the Native students and their heritage. A more inclusive program that brought together grant and non-grant students might have helped prevent that "special," albeit inauspicious isolation that

occurred between grant and non-grant students. In fact, Kathleen Cotton posits such an approach by suggesting that students, rather than be isolated by ethnicity, be encouraged to form culturally heterogeneous cooperative learning teams. Drawing on the research finding of Gordon Allport, Cotton suggests these teams sought to increase intergroup contact under conditions in which students: (a) have equal status, (b) get to know one another as individuals, (c) have common interests and similar characteristics, (d) associate with one another according to equitable social norms set by leaders, (e) have an interest in cooperation, and (f) can advance individual or group goals through cross-cultural interaction. In addition, drawing on a host of other researchers, she argues that intercultural contact among students is beneficial (a) when it is extracurricular and social as well as academic, and (b) when it's frequent and sustained ("Fostering").

What happened instead was that the grant promoted the kind of exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness that William G. Tierney champions in his study, "The College Experience of Native Americans: A Critical Analysis." Tierney advocates "working with Native Americans toward a participatory goal of emancipation and empowerment" (323), which would create an environment in which students continue to learn to negotiate their way between cultures. In doing so, Tierney contends that students will continue to advance their own cultural awareness so that they will be able to succeed in the dominant society without losing their Native cultures and traditions. Both Cotton and Tierney point out that when students feel safe and respected in the classroom they are more inclined to take advantage of educational opportunities and to continue the work necessary to increase literacy.

There are other lessons learned. In the report produced by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, "Toward True Native Education," and cited in the *Journal of American Indian Education*, Native educator G. Mike Charleston calls for an "education that sincerely attempts to make American education more culturally relevant and supportive of native students and native communities" (27). Lyons calls for a "radical rethinking of how and what we teach as the written word" (450), especially in the "nature of their textual representations" (458). Charleston, Lyons, and others articulate one of the lessons I learned—simply using multicultural texts and providing an open forum for diverse opinions and voices does not automatically make a multicultural, multi-ethnic teacher. No one is advocating that Native Americans or Alaska Natives not learn to read and write. What is advocated suggests a complex need for cultural understanding.

What else did my experiences in Alaska and my Native students teach me? I learned that I had to do more than understand and transmit the dominant culture's code of literacy. I had to listen and to work to incorporate into my pedagogy the ways of knowing and learning that Native students brought to the classroom. I learned, again, that context is everything.

My most important lesson came from an Alaska Native friend, someone who lives peacefully in both Native and Western worlds and is the result of both Native and Western education. She told me that by making myself available to my Alaska Native students and by letting my students get to know me as I got to know them, they would respect me.

Finally, the FIPSE grant administrators' injudicious use of academic legerdemain—encouraging the lowering of academic and literacy standards to preserve the grant—seems to perpetuate the perception that Alaskan Native students are unable to succeed without the razzle-dazzle of sleight of hand. That perception is one best left in the magician's hat.

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# Why Basic Writing Professionals on Regional Campuses Need to Know Their Histories

## Where is the Historical Scholarship?

Why in an age marked by regressive social policies and unchecked elitism within *all* levels of public education are practitioners and scholars of basic writing largely ahistorical? President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Act provides perhaps the highest-profile iteration of regressive and elitist policy, with its emphasis on top-down federal mandates and high-stakes testing and its failure to engage with the social context of student underperformance. Yet "No Child Left Behind" is, of course, legislation regarding K-12 policy, so a question for those of us working in the context of colleges and universities might be: do we observe similar forms of systematic, policy-level elitism in the world of higher education? One notable policy trend with elitist overtones is the outsourcing of developmental learning from four-year colleges and universities to community colleges, for-profit providers, and other satellites. The example of this outsourcing that put the trend on the radar of many in the field of composition studies was controversial legislation in 1998 that ended remediation at all four-year branches of the City University of New York—long an iconic symbol of educational access. The assumption guiding this trend is that work in "basic writing" and "basic math" remains beyond (or rather below) the mission of institutions of higher learning. *Students should have learned this stuff already*, or so goes the collective lament of the university. And so developmental courses—and by extension developmental students—move to other physical spaces, making the university a markedly more homogenous site in terms of both race and class.

So the landscape of basic writing is a political one. Adler-Kassner and Harrington argue that given the political nature of basic writing's institutional status, instruction should foreground "how definitions of literacy are shaped by communities, how literacy, power, and language are linked, and how their myriad experiences with language (in and out of school) are connected to writing" (98). They propose *literacy* itself as a generative term for the "political" basic writing classroom, advocating a long tradition of using literacy narratives like Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* as jumping off points for students to contemplate their own relationships with cultural literacy, school literacy, and home literacy. Adler-Kassner and Har-

ington's curricular proposal is a useful one, precisely because they insist that basic writing professionals and students contend together with the political nature of basic writing's status within the academy.

I am concerned, though, that the emphasis on literacy-as-generative-theme fails to contend with the outsourcing problem or the larger, inherently political question regarding where basic writing is and is not taught. Literacy is a social and political notion, but our discussions of literacy often become discussions about individuals, not about the broad social context of literacy. Literacy narratives, in the end, are most often stories about individuals.

"critical dialogue  
about the elitism of  
outsourcing is  
facilitated by historical  
narrative and  
historical knowledge"

We recall Mike Rose's own struggles with testing and assessment more than his critique of the systemic reasons for testing. Basic writing has engaged in its scholarship and in its classroom practice with the complex definitions of literacy since at least Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts: A Basic Reading and Writing Course for the College Curriculum*, their 1986 text about the basic writing curriculum they developed at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1980s. The pages of journals like *Teaching English in the Two-Year*

*College* and *Journal of Basic Writing* have taken up the complexity of literacy/literacies. And yet the subfield of basic writing has remained largely apolitical. While the *Journal of Advanced Composition* morphed into *jac*, a theoretically rich publication that engages the politics of higher education, the aforementioned journals made no such transition. So I'm skeptical about the literacy trope's ability to generate critical dialogue about the outsourcing question.

Instead, I believe that kind of critical dialogue about the elitism of outsourcing is facilitated by historical narrative and historical knowledge. And just as the realm of basic writing has remained apolitical, it has remained ahistorical. This is no coincidence. Many of the best-known luminaries in the field of composition studies—from James Berlin to Sharon Crowley to Robert Connors—have narrated numerous histories of college composition in the United States, yet a comprehensive history of basic writing does not exist. *An Historical, Descriptive, and Evaluative Study of Remedial English in the United States*, the dissertation Andrea Lunsford completed in 1977 at The Ohio State University, stands out as a rare scholarly exploration of developmental writing that employs historical methods, and history is not the primary concern of the study.

Other seminal texts in the world of basic writing as subfield also tend to eschew historical methodology. Scholars largely consider Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*—long an icon of a text within basic writing circles and beyond—as well as poet and teacher Adrienne Rich's practitioner account of teaching open-access students in New York City in the 1970s, to be *primary historical documents*, representations of a critical moment and a critical geographical locale. Certainly such documents cemented the City University of New York system as the academic and practitioner center for work in developmental writing. But even though these documents by now have a great deal of historical significance, the work of Shaughnessy and Rich also contains little or no historical methodology.

Another figure associated with the CUNY system, Ira Shor, has probably contributed more than anyone else in the field to conversations about the social and historical contexts of basic writing's institutional development—at CUNY and beyond. In the often-cited and extremely provocative 1997 *Journal of Basic Writing* article "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality," Shor traces basic writing's origins to the 1960s, situating the course as a reaction to campus radicalism. Shor writes, "To help secure the status quo against democratic change in school and society, a basic writing language policy producing an extra layer of control was apparently needed to discipline students in an undisciplined age" ("Apartheid" 92). Shor extended that research in the essay "Errors and Economics," tracing the invocation of the "correctness" trope. Methodologically, Shor's scholarship leans toward critique, a rhetorical move that facilitates provocation, reflection, and praxis—and also prevents the historical narrative from having a comprehensive scope.

Mary Soliday's recent book *The Politics of Remediation* offers a fascinating model of how productive histories of basic writing can be. Remedial English existed long before CUNY's open-access policy and Soliday traces that history from the 1870s to the present, describing early "conditioning" programs, which entailed delaying enrollment for a year so that students could make up for various "deficiencies." Other precursors to present-day developmental writing programs include early iterations of writing placement tests and other high-stakes graduation requirements, which Soliday points to as de facto "basic writing" programs. She proceeds to follow basic writing throughout the twentieth century, as colleges and universities responded to periods of literacy crisis rhetoric with programs stressing the politically attractive "back to basics" labels. Soliday also documents some of the trends Shor has written about throughout his career, such as the management of growth through "differentiation," the founding of mid-rent or middle-prestige university systems, branch campuses and two-year colleges with varying degrees of prestige. Soliday identifies a fascinating and important trope in the history of basic writing: the tendency to make decisions about developmental writing based on institutional needs such as profit, enrollment management, and

good public relations. In fact, Soliday presents a great deal of documentation that suggests institutional need trumps student need. Soliday explains that, ironically, agency (indeed, blame) for the existence of developmental writing tends to fall squarely on students. Each time we as a society fret about poor writing skills, the “always newness” (Soliday’s phrase) of basic writing implies the problem is new, allowing the blame to fall squarely on students.

Soliday’s work cries out (or ought to make us cry out) for greater attention to local histories. Her work focuses primarily on the City University of New York, a system with its own complex history and its own complex dynamics. Her CUNY narrative has a great deal to teach us about how institutions respond to the needs of community members—and the needs and imperatives of the institution itself. Yet New York City finds itself in a unique geographical locale with unique problems and a unique student body. The California State University system, similarly, has seen trends reflective of its own unique situatedness. The point is that each institution inevitably developed and evolved according to a particular set of social factors. Generalizing is difficult. Hence, we need to localize the history of basic writing and locate the origins of English remediation at our own institutions. This is particularly true on regional campuses and at two-year colleges, where “literacy crisis” rhetoric tends to be kicked up an extra notch or two, where the discourse of “student need” often goes unexamined, and where outsourcing is a trend that continues to shape institutional dynamics. Regional campuses in particular are the heirs of the programs in “differentiation” that Soliday describes—sites that remind us of movements to further the hierarchies of higher education that became a legacy of the twentieth century. In this article I’d like to look at how one basic writing course came to exist and then talk a bit about the broader implications of that history.

## **Think Local**

Since the regional campus where I previously taught was founded in the 1960s, the English Department has taught first-year composition and the Learning Assistance Center has offered a one-credit writing tutorial taken simultaneously with the standard composition class. It is not an uncommon scenario at two-year colleges and branch campuses to have a separate academic unit in charge of the so-called “basic skills” classes. In fact, an informal poll of members of the Conference on College Composition and Communication Basic Writing Special Interest Group suggests that at two-year schools, this is a *more* common practice than an arrangement in which the same unit teaches *both* composition *and* basic writing.

What is significant is that this separation between basic writing and first-year comp tends to position basic writing as further apart from the intellectual and disciplinary work of writing studies. While it may be desirable in terms of focus to have a unit dedicated specifically to developmental education, I believe it is undesirable to relegate basic writing to a

place easily forgotten by the academic knowledge-makers. And here, too, is where historical understanding and historical context becomes crucial. Without context, it is easy to look at my own institution's separation of first-year composition and basic writing as a simple and

"a place easily  
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knowledge-makers"

isolated case of situating instruction within the unit with the most expertise. The English Department has composition experts. The Learning Assistance Center has experts in secondary, special, and developmental education. History tells us that such a schism is neither isolated nor simple. Rather, institutions of higher education have a long history of setting up institution-

roadblocks to student success. Sociologist Burton Clark famously analyzed back in the late 1950s the "cooling out function" of higher education—the tendency to depress the aspirations of students. Now I'm not advocating blindly adopting monolithic and overly deterministic concepts like the "cooling out function" and applying those concepts to our own institutions. On the contrary, I'm suggesting that only through localized histories can we interrogate the extent to which these historical forces may be in effect locally.

For years students at my former institution received a recommendation for the one-credit tutorial based on shifting assessment procedures including timed impromptu writings and performance on the Compass Test. The tutorial, which consisted primarily of worksheets and sentence-level exercises, was optional and even students who scored below the designated cut-off could elect to simply not take the tutorial.

In the mid-1990s, the then-director of Learning Assistance and a faculty member in the English Department decided to respond to what they saw as a lack of writing proficiency among students and proposed a new, stand-alone "basic writing" course to be taken *before* composition. Their goals included the institution of a full-three-credit-bearing course that would count toward graduation, count toward full-time status for financial aid purposes, employ a pedagogy that emphasized sentence-level "correctness" within the context of real student writing, and be subject to mandatory placement—all unlike the tutorial.

The proposal for the course laid out a pedagogy that foregrounded—but was certainly not limited to—attention to grammatical and sentence-level concerns. The proposal read, "Fundamentals of Writing offers regional campus students developmental work in grammar, mechanics, diction, and the writing process. Students enrolling in English 007 will focus on both form and content in developing essays in preparation for English 111." The stated objectives include, "To develop students' sense of grammatical precision." And later, it reads:

A number of students arrive on our campus with weak writing skills. Their knowledge of the conventions of written English is deficient even among the more well prepared students. A three-hour course will allow instructors the time needed to present elements of grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and usage in addition to the writing process as a whole. When students have the opportunity to learn from their own work rather than the “grill and drill” approach and achieve meaningful improvements in presentation, they will be more confident in their writing and better prepared . . . (*New Course Request*)

In many ways this course description resists simple characterization. On one hand, the framers of the course resist *worksheet pedagogy* and do not shy away from condemning the “grill and drill approach.” On the other hand, this articulation of course purpose emphasizes concern for sentence-level correctness and mentions “the writing process as a whole” almost as an afterthought. This is a curious juxtaposition of the global and the local, with the local garnering more emphasis. At any rate, accounting for student deficiencies and surface errors appears to be the central concern.

Since the campus is a branch of a larger public university with a “one university” personnel structure, new course approvals must go through the administration of the main campus. The Composition Program and Composition Committee—both seated on the main campus—devoted little time to discussing the new course, despite the fact that they are charged with supporting the teaching of writing at all campuses of the system. Leadership within composition studies had a different pedagogical philosophy than the pedagogy articulated within the new course proposal, and so decided to give the branch campus autonomy, essentially rubber stamping the course. Once again, localized decision-making can be a good thing, but on the other hand, autonomy came with a price: namely, basic writing instruction’s virtual invisibility among units (namely, the English Department and Composition Program) that materially and institutionally have more power than Learning Assistance. Even though the university system had by this point created a well-known program in rhetoric and composition, including a thriving doctoral program, strong faculty with much disciplinary knowledge about writing, pedagogy, and literacy, and resources for ongoing support for curricular change and innovation, virtually no articulation between campuses took place as the new basic writing course went through the proposal and approval processes. Several members of the Composition Committee—members of the committee whose primary appointment was on the regional campuses—attempted on several occasions to convince the Composition Program and English Department to intervene and influence the shape of the proposal. Ultimately, though, the Department concluded that attention to developmental concerns was not within its scope or mission.

Here we observe a fascinating move toward professionalization. The teaching of writ-

ing, within this University system, becomes a legitimate discipline, signified for example by a doctoral program. Yet who is benefiting from this newfound disciplinarity? The academics themselves? Certainly. Students on the regional campus? Not necessarily, as attention to their pedagogical needs becomes the concern of a still non-professionalized body like the Learning Assistance Center.

## **Historical Relationship to Developmental Work**

My sense is that the Department historically has been confused about its role vis-à-vis the work of developmental writing. Consider the following two paragraphs that appeared in a 1977 report issued by a University subcommittee studying the teaching of writing:

Primary responsibility for the development of writing skills lies with the Department of English, which has the expertise to educate the majority of students in English composition. Therefore, much of the burden for correcting whatever deficiencies exist must be carried by the Department. (*Report*)

Notice that by speaking of the correction of deficiencies here the subcommittee explicitly places remediation under the auspices of the Department. Less than a page later, the report reads:

Remedial programs are a third area of responsibility. To deny that some students will require remedial instruction is to force the better prepared students to operate at a level below their potential. Within the structure of our University, the responsibility for remedial instruction is assigned to the Office of Developmental Education. (*Report*)

This passage is fascinating on a number of levels, not the least of which is the emphasis placed on how remedial students might affect (negatively) the “better prepared students.” But what I’m most interested in is looking at this passage next to the previous one. The committee first states that developmental writing *must* be the responsibility of English Departments, and then says the responsibility exists elsewhere. Now you could argue that the committee was contrasting the ways things are and the way things ought to be. But the fact is, the report made numerous recommendations of a large scope, so the committee *could* have recommended that the Department assume the work, or share the work, or lend its disciplinary knowledge to those doing the work, of developmental learning. But the extent of the recommended department contribution is that it *encourage* the University to provide material resources to Developmental Education (which, incidentally, is a department that no longer exists). Yet again, a confused articulation of the relationship between “basic writing” and “composition writing.”

Back to the 1998 proposal for the new basic writing course. From what I can gather, one critical, multi-campus conversation did take place during the proposal process—though it’s significant to point out that the two campuses represented in this conversation were the two

regional campuses, *not* the main campus. That conversation took the form of a series of memos between the faculty member who proposed the basic course, and a faculty member on the other regional campus concerned about the pedagogy of the new course—both members of the University's Composition Committee. This exchange, though not an official part of the activity of the Composition Committee, was an intellectually engaged discussion of competing pedagogies. Both sides offered well-reasoned, sound apoloia for their classroom approaches.

Both sides supported what they saw as "democratic practice" and yet their notions of egalitarianism were quite different. The basic skills proponent worried that denying grammatical skills translated into a kind of elitism. In what seems to have been a spirit of critical collegiality, she asked her colleague, "Would it have been acceptable for you to have even one error per page in your dissertation? Don't you take great pains to edit carefully before you submit a manuscript for publication, your annual report, a committee report, or even a memo?" She continued, "I think we owe our developmental and first-year students much more than syllabi and classes based on politically- and theoretically-correct jargon" (unpublished correspondence). She eloquently speaks of the desires of students on the campus and alludes to students who had expressed to her that they wanted more instruction in formal grammar.

The critic of the skills course also offered an engaged, informed defense of what he calls a pedagogy rooted in "writing as a social act." He writes:

[T]he overemphasis on skills will interfere with higher order concerns . . . I think that you can get to skills through concentration on subject matter, development, etc., but that you'll have trouble (for a variety of reasons) getting at the higher order skills from the other direction. I just know too many students who'll obsess on grammar without ever having developed the ability to orchestrate complex ideas on paper. True, given the current order of things (in my classes, we also talk about the politics of language, about the gender, race, class of the market's language), every student writer needs to be concerned with correctness (for all the reasons you state), but not if they'll never get to all the other stuff that constitutes good writing.

Clearly, these two scholars had very different ideas about what egalitarianism might mean. The basic skills proponent saw grammatical correctness as a means to cultural capital, academic success, and earning potential. Indeed, mechanical skills, in her view, had the potential to put students in the new class on a more equal footing with more prepared students. The proponent of "writing as a social act" saw egalitarianism much in the vein of Adler-Kassner and Harrington, who in advocating a pedagogy of literacy awareness, hoped to impart on students a sense of writing's relationship with issues of power in the culture.

The two found common ground. After several letters back-and-forth they realized they both emphasize process and start with global concerns in early stages of revision, pro-

gressing to more local concerns in later drafts. And the initial contentiousness of the exchange slowly waned. As the two considered each other's points of view, here are some phrases that appeared in their memos:

- “. . . we tend to be polarized into the ‘correctness matters’ and ‘correctness doesn’t matter’ camps—and I don’t see either side making the first move toward compromise. Perhaps we could come up with a new approach that integrates both views.”
- “we can agree that, ideally, we want students to do a lot with their writing: write clearly, creatively, learn through the process, change the world, etc.”
- “I know how hard it is to articulate all the complex motives/theories/histories behind our teaching (how hard it is for me, anyway), and one of the good things I see coming out of this exchange is that we can start dealing with each other rather than with dueling theories.”
- “AHA! . . . I see a point where we are in complete agreement (can you believe it!). I too address problems with conventions after drafting to revise content and when I see a pattern developing with a particular problem. I totally agree that problems with conventions need to be addressed later in the process.”

Some of these comments indicate that not only did the two scholars begin to find common ground, they had the opportunity to clarify their own positions and transcend simple dichotomies: the dichotomy between correctness matters vs. correctness doesn't matter, for example, the dichotomy between theory proponents and critics of theory.

It's also impossible to examine this exchange without placing the dialogue in the context of the 90s. With some frequency, there are allusions to the decade's political correctness debates. The skills proponent continually equates composition theory—and theory in general—with neo-liberal notions of political correctness and multiculturalism, expressing fear of how the “why can't we all get along” mentality is eroding higher education. For instance, she references grade inflation as a natural outgrowth of the touchy-feeliness of theoretically informed composition. Looking back at the 90s with hindsight, I wonder if she should have feared something more dangerous as an outgrowth of the decade of political correctness: the ineffectuality of 1990s liberalism in promoting real, material social change. For as the writing curriculum increasingly came to reflect composition's “social turn,” the Composition Program failed to respond to the elitism inherent in disregarding basic writing—and basic writers—as a component of the teaching of writing within the University system.

The last line of the last letter reads, “I truly believe that we can and will learn a lot from each other—even if we never come to an agreement.” I don't just quote this line because of its feel-good quality. I see a genuine and mutual respect in this exchange and can't help but wonder what might have happened if this level of critical and creative dialogue had taken

place in a more formal environment, with a wider cross section of agents involved with writing and teaching on the three campuses. In short, it was the kind of conversation that might have taken place in a more public arena, that could have had implications for practice, and that perhaps should have informed lively debate at the Committee meetings. Perhaps with a broader conversation, the course could have synthesized some of the positions articulated by these two faculty members.

It's also too easy to say that the rubber stamping of the basic writing course was a case of the main campus disregarding the regional campus because that would be oversimplifying things. In actuality, the regional campus—thinking of its own distinct identity and its own needs—*wanted* autonomy on the issue. Then-Director of Composition explains, “The [Composition] Committee seemed interested most in making the basic writing practices of the two campuses appropriate to their staff and students” (Dautermann). Then-Learning Assistance Director on the regional campus concurs, explaining that the two campuses have wildly different needs and approaches; she joked that the main campus is concerned with “discourse analysis” while the regional campus is working on “its and it's” (Krafft).

“[A]dministrators agreed to put the course on the books, as long as the course didn't literally appear *in the books.*”

The critique of the basic writing enterprise—like that offered by Ira Shor in “Our Apartheid”—frequently places all the agency on the part of administrators and other powerful players, but this institutional context saw the process of differentiation as a kind of a mutual decision more than a top-down mandate. Constituents on the main campus decided to give the regional campuses autonomy on the issue. At least some of the constituents on the regional campuses wanted to proceed without main campus intervention. There was agreement—with some dissenting voices of course—that remediation was a matter best left to the regional campuses.

### **Administration Consider the Prestige Factor**

Higher level administrators on the main campus offered a similar rubber stamp—but for different reasons. Because they were concerned with maintaining the system's prestige, administrators agreed to put the course on the books, as long as the course didn't literally appear *in the books*. Fearful that various public audiences would see the course in the university's catalogue, they quietly added the class to the curriculum and gave the regional campuses latitude to

decide on logistics like placement, pedagogy, and staffing. Revealing the course's existence to public audiences such as alumni and benefactors would have run the risk of damaging the institution's credibility and prestige. Administrators also approved the proposed course number: English 0-0-7, thereby inspiring more James Bond jokes than Timothy Dalton. Actually, keeping a basic writing course under the proverbial radar is not a new concept. Andrea Lunsford reports that prestigious schools like Wellesley and Yale—the earliest colleges to offer “remedial English” classes during the literacy crisis not of the 1970s but of the late-nineteenth-century—frequently omitted course descriptions of remedial classes from their catalogues (40–41).

Once approval on the main campus was complete, the course's founders turned their attention to local administration, which supported the notion that less-skilled writers needed further support on the campus. The only roadblock at the campus level was mandatory placement. Campus administrators were also acutely aware of the prestige factor and feared that mandatory placement into the basic writing class would make the campus seem more like a community college (an association they feared) and less like a university branch. Ironically, campus administrators also feared that mandatory placement would make it difficult for the campus to compete with local community colleges for prospective students. An interesting juxtaposition of concerns, no? On one hand, we do not wish to be equated with community colleges. On the other hand, we do wish to compete with community colleges. Finally, administrators refused to institute a mandatory placement policy because they felt they could only mandate enrollment if the course had demonstrable value as shown by subsequent student achievement in the regular composition course. Administration decided that since GPAs in Composition I differed widely based on instructor (unlike math courses, which *do* utilize mandatory placements, and which show no statistically significant difference in section GPAs), they could never obtain useful statistical evidence about the positive effects of the new basic writing course (Krafft). Since administration was convinced that nobody could “prove” the effectiveness of the basic writing course using quantitative measures, they felt unjustified in instituting mandatory placement but justified in offering the course as a recommended option.

So in Fall, 1998, the campus began offering the three-credit, recommended-but-not-required basic writing course and has steadily offered the course ever since, with an average of twelve sections in the Fall, six in the Spring, and one in the summer. Like the one-credit tutorial, the course is administered by the Learning Assistance Center, so most of those sections have been taught by “academic professionals,” (mostly part-timers and the Learning Assistance Center's one full-time writing specialist) not tenure-stream faculty, although the faculty member who co-proposed the course taught three sections, and I taught one during my tenure there. The course continues to operate in a nearly invisible fashion, not appearing in the University's catalogue, not acknowledged by the main campus, and barely acknowledged

by the regional campus. These unethical labor conditions illustrate another reality of regional campus basic writing: the gulfs between main and branch campus, intellectual and grunt work, are not only cultural but also material. In this system, increased public moneys were earmarked specifically for remediation in the 1970s; that is *not* the case today (Burgoon). This material reality provides yet another reason for basic writing to fly under the radar. As Soliday suggests in her own narrative, institutional need trumps student need and an essential component of institutional need is the imperative for cost-effectiveness. Staffing the courses with part-time faculty on the regional campus as opposed to tenure-track faculty on the main campus is cost effective. Obscuring remediation in an era when public moneys are not being earmarked for remediation is good business. But what happens to student need? Student need, as Soliday suggests, becomes a trope to be paraded out when beneficial for the institution.

This is not to cast aspersions on my former campus or the larger university system it is part of. On the contrary, this short history is illustrative of trends much larger, not the least of which is the persistence of institutional elitism and parochialism. And I think the latter in particular rears its head at regional campuses in an acute fashion. Soliday's thesis about basic writing's service to institutional needs is instructive here. Soliday writes, "The unselective institution exists in order to maintain democratic access without damaging selectivity in a hierarchical system" (13). In other words, the institution can make claims about service and access while also maintaining prestige. My previous institution illustrates Soliday's notion of "differentiation," as the main campus managed to erase its own remediation by outsourcing to a different physical space: the regional campuses. Soliday explains that the 1990s in particular (the decade that saw the birth of my former school's stand-alone basic writing class) saw middle-prestige schools toughen admissions standards while federal education budgets decreased, resulting in students and parents pledging even greater allegiance to the rhetorics of competition and high standards. Soliday suggests that the middle class *wants* higher education to be a site of rigor and even exclusion so that they can feel more secure—and "exclusive."

## **The Imperative for Articulation**

Basic writing professionals ought to be acutely aware of social and political context. We ought to maintain a kind-of class consciousness, an awareness of social position—the social position occupied by ourselves and our students within the academy, and the social position occupied by our differentiated institutions within the hierarchy of higher education. In "Where We Are Is Who We Are": Location, Professional Identity, and the Two-Year College," Karen Powers-Stubbs and Jeff Sommers model the productive value of reflecting on our place within the academy. I want to intensify their call for that awareness of place and add

that *historicizing* one's local "place" is a key to praxis. Marxist critic Georg Lukacs posits that a dialectic between past and present that foregrounds social position and power is a *step toward practical action*. That level of dialectic method—that critical examination of the material

*"historicizing one's  
local 'place' is a key  
to praxis"*

conditions of the past and present—helps us avoid looking at the present as a fixed reality.

Basic writing professionals on regional campuses can institute this dialectic method *in the classroom*. Interrogating literacy, as suggested by Bartholomae and

Petrosky and later Adler-Kassner and Harrington, stands out as one generative strategy for making the basic writing classroom a reflective and critical space. Though, as I've said, literacy awareness strategies often become ahistorical. Tom Fox proposes an intriguing alternative to this ahistorical approach. In *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*, Fox suggests that students and teachers together take up the work of institutional critique. Fox deserves to be quoted at length. Here is the curriculum he proposes:

- writing that interrogates cultural/political commonplaces, that refuses to repeat clichéd explanations of poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other diseases of our society;
- writing that willingly explores and embodies conflicts, that isn't afraid to enter into the messy contradictions of our world;
- writing that critiques institutional inequities, especially in the immediate context of the classroom, the writing program, the department, the university, but also in the institutions that have played an important role in our students' lives;
- writing that demonstrates successful practices of resistance, that seeks historical evidence for possibilities and promise;
- writing that complexly addresses complex issues, that doesn't seek safety in simplicity;
- writing that seeks a wide audience by respecting the dignity of others, yet has the courage to stand against those who are unjust;
- writing that self-consciously explores the workings of its own rhetoric;
- in short writing that seeks to reduce the violence of inequality—the social forces that prevent access. (Fox 92)

In the context of basic writing on regional campuses, I would add to Fox's useful list the notion that writing ought to also reveal the specific—hierarchical and elitist—dynamics of cross-campus relationships and historicize local conditions both on campus and off campus.

Outside of the space of the classroom, those of us who work as basic writing profes-

sionals on regional campuses need to do a better job drawing on mutual strengths and resources. I want to argue that that process starts with two things. Number one, better articulation. Regional campuses can provide rich sites of knowledge production that account for race and class diversity. Main campuses can provide sources of funding and good libraries. Most importantly, we can come to think of scholarly work as encompassing the mission and the ethos of regional campuses. Without romanticizing regional campus work, Cindy Lewiecki-Wilson and Jeff Sommers summarized their survey of two-year campus writing professionals with this concise call-to-action: "[Although open-admissions work] may sometimes feel as though it is waged on a battlefield, our interviews asserted repeatedly that it is intellectually satisfying, although that aspect of our work remains invisible to the public and to the profession" (442). Number two, more historical awareness. By creating broad, contextual histories of remediation and open-admissions education, as well as local histories that attend to the unique dynamics of our home institutions, we who work at two-year colleges and regional campuses can build a usable past the way that composition studies writ large has.

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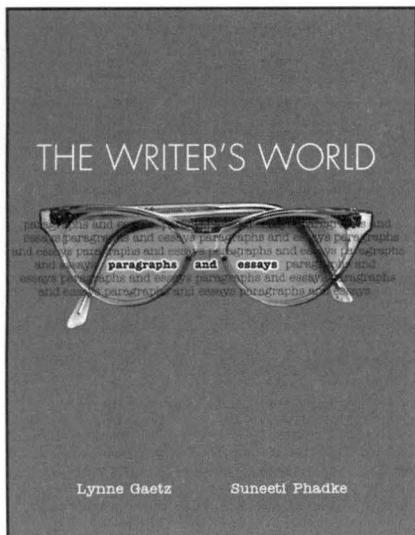
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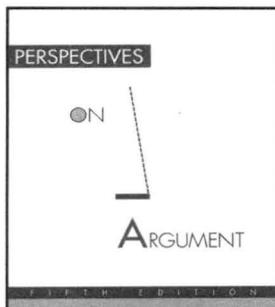
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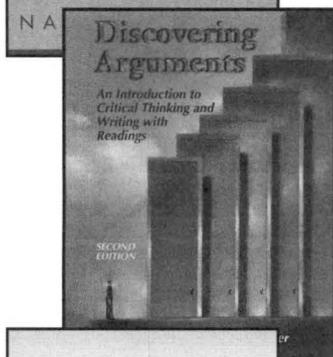


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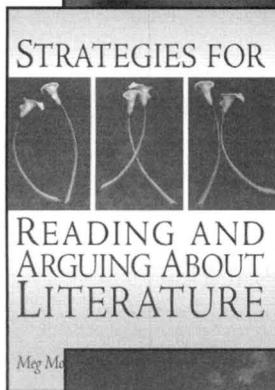


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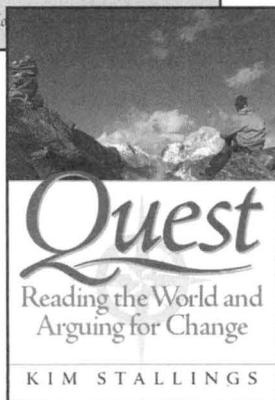


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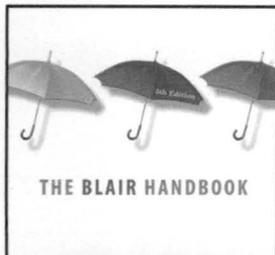
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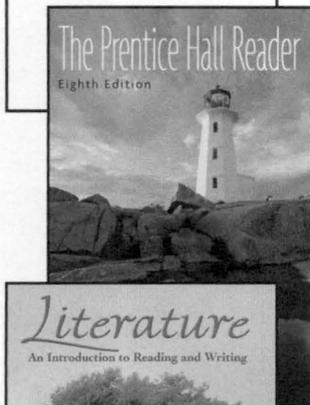


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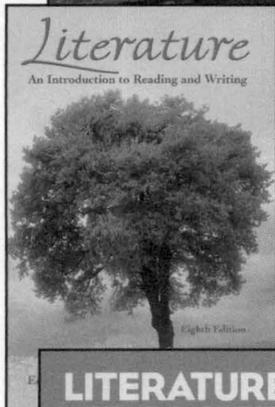


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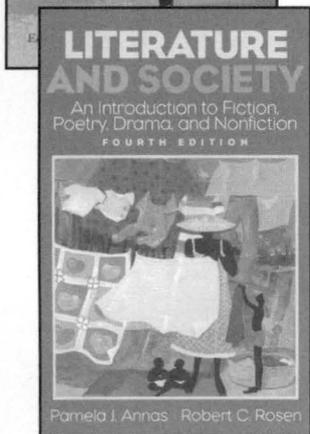


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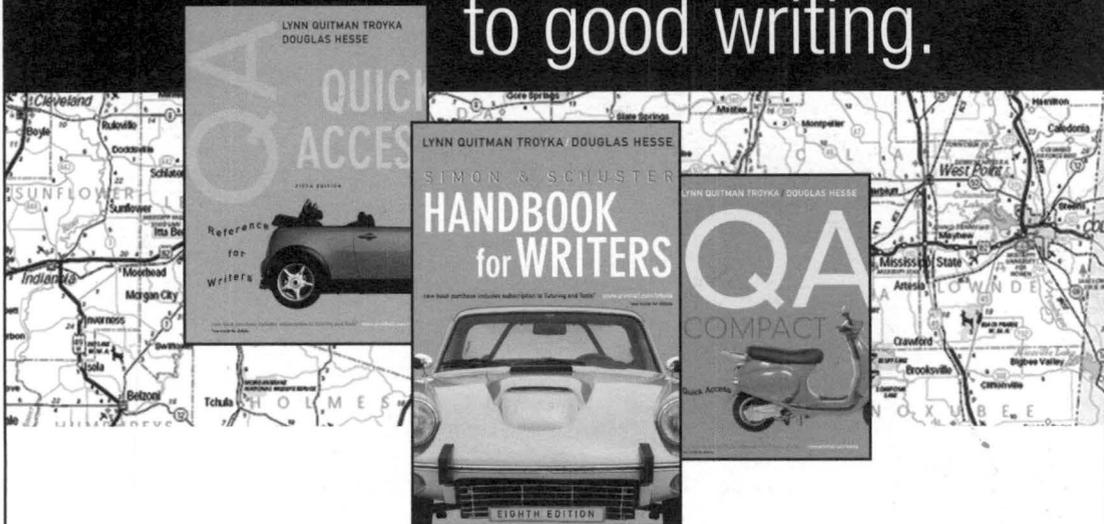
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