

## Guest Editor's Introduction: **Finding Ourselves Here**

THE ECONOMIC WOES OF THE NATION—INDEED OF THE WORLD—cannot help but impact higher education. States contribute less money to universities and colleges than in years gone by, and increased student tuition does not seem to offset the lost revenue. Yet, institutions of higher learning find funds for buildings, dorms, and football teams, a situation which troubles educators, especially those of open-access students. While we could use smaller class sizes, more tutors, investment into on-campus child care facilities, better counseling services, and, of course, more full-time positions with benefits and livable wages for instructors so as to teach better, the priorities on many campuses seem to be elsewhere.

Rather than helping to bridge the gap between the working and middle classes, higher education appears to be continuing the class-based inequalities of K-12 education that Patrick Finn documents in his book, *Literacy with an Attitude*. Finn reviews much of the research into disparities found in funding, opportunities, and pedagogies among affluent, middle-class, and working-class schools, concluding that students are tracked early on in their schooling to reproduce in their adulthood the social class into which they were born. Higher education often has been seen as democracy in action—the method by which working-class students can succeed. Instead, institutions pay less attention to needs associated with the working class, such as remedial programs, and privilege disciplines that produce revenues through grants and corporate sponsorship. The liberal arts, which can expose students to the critical literacy needed to challenge class stratification, languish in many colleges and universities, growing increasingly more reliant on adjunct and/or contingent labor and having demands placed upon them for “accountability” in the form of dumbed-down curriculum and regressive assessments.

With more desperate working-class students turning to the university for relief in the form of job training, critical educators need to respond, both in finding ways to help students with their immediate needs and in teaching them about the forces that work against them. It would be nice if our education could directly supply gainful employment for the masses, but it does not. So while not ignoring the education necessary for students to prepare themselves for the workforce, our goal should be critical citizenry toward challenging the status quo. The world of capitalism confuses many students, as policies seem to lack consistency and logic. The need for job creation gets tied to national and state deficits. We are told that privatization is good when it comes to profit, but losses become a matter of public responsibility. And we

are told that, somehow, reducing the power of unions so that fewer well-paying, public sector jobs are available will benefit workers. We fight wars in countries that did not attack us. We give tax breaks to corporations so they will invest in the American economy, but unemployment continues to rise. Michael Parenti refers to this as a concerted effort toward the “Third Worldization” of our country (35). Instructors need to make students aware of this process in order to fight against it.

I could not help but think of these pressing concerns as I again read the articles that make up this issue of *Open Words*. Each author's dilemma in some way connects to the dire circumstances we find ourselves in. The economy, after all, forces choices on us. Laura Rogers, for example, tells us she started teaching in a correctional facility because she needed a job and discusses how prisons lost funding for college programs due to cuts, leading her to conduct workshops for inmates. Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano sought to find a placement process that would respond to the needs of their open-admissions students but had to also recognize the demands placed on university resources in order to enact stronger procedures. Certainly, teaching at a regional campus of Kent State University at least partially contributes to the perspective M. Karen Powers gives about the ways in which class has been elided in institutional documents. Yet, as always, when times look bleak, committed educators remain resolved to serve students and fight the status quo. These authors' articles, although differing considerably, all share a commitment to righting wrongs.

We start with M. Karen Powers's in-depth examination of the mission and diversity statements of community colleges and top public research universities in “Good Citizens' in a Twenty-First Century University: Social Class, Institutional Texts, and the (Anti-)Democratic Politics of Place.” Powers finds that social class is simplified in the dominant discourse of institutional texts, leaving alive the troubling myth of community colleges and higher education in general as the great equalizers. For at-risk students in perilous economic times, the opportunity presented by community colleges reifies class stratification. Powers argues for re-imagining a future in which open-admissions students will have their needs met by institutions that take seriously the role of higher education as a democratizing tool.

In “First-Year Composition Placement at Open-Admission, Two-Year Campuses: Changing Campus Culture, Institutional Practice, and Student Success,” Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano take traditional placement processes to the task for not addressing the complexities surrounding open-admissions students. They argue for a multiple-measure approach toward “student readiness” that is locally situated. Recounting the progress they have made in the University of Wisconsin system, Hassel and Giordano discuss the time and resources needed for such a project to flourish but show the benefits that accrue as a result.

Finally, Laura Rogers in “The Secret Souls of Criminals: A Different Prison Teaching

Story” reflects on the question asked of her by an inmate in the prison where she worked: “Why are you here?” Rogers examines the dominant explanations for teaching to such a non-traditional population and assesses the possibility that she is complicit with the system of discipline and punishment in offering education to the prisoners. She understands, ultimately, that only in confronting the truths about herself can she ask for the respect and trust of her students.

Paulo Freire taught us about the frustration liberating educators face in “swimming against the current,” and he cautions us about expecting from education what it cannot do: “transform society by itself” (Shor and Freire 37). Yet, he concerns himself equally with those who turn away after discovering the limits of education, “denying every effort, even important ones. . . and fall[ing] into a negative criticism, even a sick one” (37). I find it important as the co-editor of *Open Words* to never ignore the strides made by individuals to implement change. We wonder, sometimes, at the end of the day, what we have accomplished, what we are doing here, merely teaching in colleges and universities while suffering surrounds us. But this is where we find ourselves. Through our critiques, our innovations in facets of administration, and our intervention in the lives of those forgotten if not demonized in society, we make a difference. It is a difference worth remembering.

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## **Works Cited**

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Parenti, Michael. *The Face of Imperialism*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2011. Print.

Shor, Ira, and Paulo Freire. *A Pedagogy for Liberation*. New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1987. Print.