CHAPTER 6.

OUTSIDERS LOOKING IN: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF REMEDIATION BEYOND THE ACADEMY

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> Every 5 to 10 years, we experience cycles of remediation bashing . . .
> Usually at the end of a cycle or remediation bashing, there is regulation or policy created that is sometimes helpful and sometimes not.
>
> – Boylan qtd. in Levine-Brown and Weiss,
> An interview with Hunter R. Boylan

Since its institutionalization as a formal area of study in the 1970s, rhetoric and composition/ writing studies and its various subdisciplines have been shaped by actor-networks that are external to the discipline and even higher education itself. In his chapter in this collection, John Paul Tassoni seeks to map the networked knots and nodes that have a stake in basic writing (BW) on his campus at Miami University.[1] Tassoni's observation is that, "[M]ore people, programs, and offices than would admit so have a stake in BW" and that discourses of access comprising their conceptions of BW's history and function help sustain its place (precarious as it sometimes seems) at the university. Tassoni's work using networked theories to map the discursive influence that these various stakeholders have on BW in his local context serves as a useful model for a WPA interested in identifying similar patterns and opportunities on their own campuses. This chapter extends that discussion to include a conceptualization of the discursive networks within which BW operates on a more global scale, moving beyond the local institutional context to the broader professional and public discourses that shape BW across the US.

According to Bruno Latour (1988), "[T]he word network indicates that resources are concentrated in a few places—the knots and nodes—which are

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1   My larger argument in this chapter draws on documents that use terms such as "remedial" and "developmental" to refer to what compositionists would consider basic writing courses, so I will use those terms interchangeably here.

connected with one another—the links and the mesh: these connections transform scattered resources into a net that may seem to scatter everywhere" (p. 180). In the fields of basic writing and developmental education, the actors who represent "the knots and nodes" where resources are most concentrated are increasingly distanced from both the actual work of teaching such courses and the scholarly communities that have studied them for the past fifty years. This chapter examines the relationships between just a few of the nodes in the larger discursive network that influences basic writing today: non-profit organizations, the popular press, and state legislators. My analysis suggests that given the enormous influence of these extra-institutional actors, writing program administrators who are responsible for basic writing programs must be aware of how both local campus actors (see also Tassoni in this collection) and stakeholders beyond the institution can exert rhetorical influence that can—and often does— dramatically alter the scope of a basic writing program (Reid, 2018).

It is no secret that remediation has historically been disparaged in both public and academic discourses (and as Mara Lee Grayson notes in her chapter in this volume, the weaponization of curricula to serve an exclusionary function in basic writing and other first-year composition (FYC) courses ought to give any WPA pause). Too often, however, conversations about the efficacy of basic writing are influenced by institutional needs, as remedial enrollments wax and wane depending on the exigence of the moment: students who place into remedial courses are admitted in higher numbers only when enrollment needs take precedence over an institution's "standards" (Soliday, 2002). Because the status of basic writing is perpetually in flux, remedial courses and programs have, unsurprisingly, rarely enjoyed institutional stability. In recent years, however, there has been a dramatic shift to curtail or even outright eliminate remediation in higher education (Mangan, 2013; Parker et al., 2014). This veritable "war on remediation" (Fain, 2012; Flannery, 2014; Landesman, 1999) has evolved as pressure increases to push students through college toward degree completion as quickly as possible.

Innovative models such as stretch (Melzer, 2005), studio (Grego & Thompson, 2007), and, most notably corequisite models such as the Accelerated Learning Program developed by Peter Adams and his colleagues at the Community College of Baltimore County (Adams et al., 2009) provide students with additional support as they progress through their coursework, while also making remediation less visible to administrators and other stakeholders. Tassoni's contribution to this volume offers another example of the ways in which BW is rendered invisible at the institutional level, although, as he noted, "multiple institutional sites intersected with, foreshadowed, and named-without-naming the demographic, economic, pedagogical, and architectural matters shaping trajectories of BW at the school." The efforts that make BW less visible, coupled

with the pressure that BW instructors often face to reform developmental education with the goal of moving students through their degree programs more quickly (Two-Year College English Association, 2014), speak to a need for developmental educators to be included in the broader (often beyond the institution) conversations about developmental education (Two-Year College English Association, 2014).

When it comes to the administration of a basic writing program, it is important for WPAs to consider ideologies that are shaped by discourses beyond the university, as the influence of the popular media, legislative efforts, and nonprofit organizations can quite literally make or break a program. Despite this reality—one that is all too familiar to those of us who specialize in basic writing—there is little scholarship in WPA studies that looks closely at how a WPA responsible for a basic writing program might negotiate these external forces. The challenge lies in identifying where such conversations are taking place and, importantly, where power is concentrated in these extra-institutional discursive networks. The aim of this chapter is to examine one small portion of the discursive network centered on developmental education reform through an analysis of the following series of documents: the report titled *Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere* published by Complete College America (CCA) in 2012, *The New York Times* coverage of remediation from 2012–2019, and official documents from the state of Connecticut's highly-publicized shift away from traditional remediation, PA-1240. As Latour (2005) argued, a close reading of documents offers a useful method for analyzing an actor-network. Examining the processes through which a network forms requires, according to Latour, an analysis of the documents produced by different actors in a network to reveal the ways in which the network has been codified. My analysis reveals that nonprofit organizations such as CCA have heavily influenced the development of a crisis discourse surrounding developmental education, one that is strengthened through its circulation through intermediaries including the popular press and state legislators. The strength of this network has ensured that the notion that developmental education does not work and must be reduced or eliminated has become what Latour might refer to as a "black box," or a settled matter that represents an established fact. The problem with "black box" theories, Latour (1988) argued, is that they often hide the complexity of a topic behind the guise of an established truth (in this case, that developmental education is problematic and demands reform). What actor-network theory offers here is an analysis of *how* the "truth" that developmental education needs reform has been constructed through an assemblage of actors, mediators, and intermediaries, as well as through the creation of anti-groups that help to affirm boundaries within the network while also delegitimizing other perspectives (Braga & Suarez, 2018).

143

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA AND DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION REFORM

In *Writing and School Reform*, Joanne Addison and Sharon James McGee (2016) analyzed the networks of influence on higher education policy that stem from high-stakes testing and, perhaps even more importantly, the agendas of private foundations. Their analysis centers primarily on the expansion and support of the Common Core Standards, with particular emphasis on the influence of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, an organization that has provided a great deal of funding support to the Common Core Initiative. Importantly, Addison and McGee note the financial support from the Gates Foundation extends beyond "just the research, design, and implementation of the Standards" to include "how they are funding supporting networks," such as the National Writing Project where they have had opportunity to influence Common Core pedagogy as well (2016, p. 46). Through the development of the support network, non-profits such as the Gates Foundation are able to exercise influence over multiple nodes in the network, strengthening their links and reinforcing a consistent message that is ultimately accepted as a black-boxed "truth."

The influence of the Gates Foundation on Common Core is but one example of the impact that a private non-profit organization can have on education policy and practice. One of the most powerful actors behind developmental education reform—influencing both the popular media and legislators—is CCA, a non-profit organization that has been heavily funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In materials related to college completion initiatives, CCA is regularly (and often uncritically) cited as a source of significant evidence in favor of eliminating traditional remedial sequences to move students toward graduation more quickly. The influence of the Gates Foundation in particular has been noted by Katherine Mangan (2013) as "unprecedented," largely due to his work through his own foundation and "intermediaries like Complete College America" (para. 2). Mangan furthers, "The influence of a major foundation and its grantees in state policy discussions makes some experts uncomfortable, since as a private entity Gates is not accountable to voters. They contend that the strategy bypasses colleges themselves and imposes top-down solutions, seeking quick fixes for complicated problems" (para. 5). As Nicholas Tampio (2019) has noted, the Gates Foundation offered strong support for the eventual implementation of Common Core Standards and, in the spring of 2019, announced a focused effort to engage in educational lobbying to define the value of a college degree, a move that Tampio argued will "disrupt higher education." Moreover, Philip Kovacs and Hazel Christie (2008) suggest Gates' funding supports "organizations [that] perpetuate discourses and narratives that stand in opposition

to democratic school alternatives, ultimately reducing the likelihood that democratic school reform will ever take place" (p. 12).

In terms of basic writing, the work of CCA has been foundational to the construction of what has come to be known as the "completion agenda" (Lester, 2014; Two-Year College English Association, 2014). The completion agenda, promoted by "aims to collect more and better data about students' educational progress toward degrees, to enact new policies that incentivize increased graduation rates and improve the efficiency of degree production, and to tie funding to increased completion rates" (Humphreys, 2012), was spurred forward by President Obama's 2020 College Completion Initiative, which challenged colleges and universities to create clearer pathways for students to progress toward degree attainment (Pierce, 2015). While on the surface these appear to be laudable goals, little attention is paid to the complex circumstances that impact students' ability to complete coursework, leading to policy decisions that have far-reaching impacts on basic writing (Two-Year College English Association, 2014).

CCA: DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION REFORM AND "REMEDIATION: HIGHER EDUCATION'S BRIDGE TO NOWHERE"

The homepage of the CCA website immediately frames remediation as an educational crisis, emphasizing with red shading that "barriers to student success are clear: low credit enrollment, poorly designed and delivered remedial education, overwhelming and unclear choices, and a system out of touch with the needs of students who must often balance work and family with their coursework" ("Homepage"). To address this "crisis," CCA advocates a number of initiatives, including rethinking remedial education to include co-requisite courses that provide "just in time support," in favor of stand-alone remediation. The presence of crisis rhetoric is unsurprising here; Addison and McGee's (2016) analysis reveals that calls for accountability in response to crisis discourse and the exertion of influence from philanthropic organizations have a long history of interconnectedness, as crisis discourse fuels the perceived need for structured interventions, for example, standardized tests or privately-sponsored initiatives.

To highlight a perceived crisis in developmental education, CCA published a scathing and widely-cited 2012 report titled *Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere*. In this report, CCA reinforces the persistent message that remedial coursework is unquestionably a barrier to success. The "bridge to nowhere" is illustrated on the document's cover, with a graphic of a partially constructed bridge that repeats throughout the document to illustrate that remedial courses allow students to fall rather than cross safely to the next stage of their academic careers.

The negative association between remediation and college completion (the primary agenda of CCA) is made evident with a juxtaposition with drop-out rates. According to the report:

> Remediation is a classic case of system failure:
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> Dropout exit ramp #1: Too many students start in remediation. More than 50 percent of students entering two-year colleges and nearly 20 percent of those entering four-year universities are placed in remedial classes. Frustrated about their placement into remediation, thousands who were accepted into college never show up for classes. With so many twists and turns, the road ahead doesn't seem to lead to graduation. Can an "open access" college be truly open access if it denies so many access to its college-level courses?
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> Dropout exit ramp #2: Remediation doesn't work. Nearly 4 in 10 remedial students in community colleges never complete their remedial courses. Research shows that students who skip their remedial assignments do just as well in gateway courses as those who took remediation first. Never wanting to be in a remedial class in the first place and often feeling that they'll never get to full-credit courses, too many remedial students quit before ever starting a college class.
>
> Dropout exit ramp #3: Too few complete gateway courses. Having survived the remediation gauntlet, not even a quarter of remedial community college students ultimately complete college-level English and math courses — and little more than a third of remedial students at four-year schools do the same.
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> Dropout exit ramp #4: Too few students graduate. Fewer than 1 in 10 graduate from community colleges within three years and little more than a third complete bachelor's degrees in six years (2012, pp. 2-3).

The emphasis here on "dropout exit ramps" is noteworthy, as it serves to align developmental courses with not simply slower progress toward a degree, but rather students' giving up altogether. In this report, CCA also emphasizes a racial disparity, pointing out that remediation can be a "dead end," symbolized by dead end yellow road sign throughout the report, accompanied by extensive lists of percentages that reflect student success in remediation based on racial demographics, a rhetorical move that implies that remedial courses inhibit the success of students from historically marginalized

communities (2012, p. 6).[2] Additionally, the beginning of the report asks "Can an 'open access' college be truly open access if it denies so many access to its college-level courses?" (2012, p. 2). This language suggests that appeals to equity and accessible education from developmental educators and faculty at open-admissions institutions who support developmental education are divorced from the reality that students who enroll in those courses face and, in fact, ultimately do more harm than good to students who are academically at-risk. This powerful rhetorical move on the part of the authors of the CCA document shifts agency from professionals in the field and instead redirects it to CCA and its related initiatives.

To further establish its own expertise, for each of the above "dropout exit ramps," CCA proposes a solution: to prevent students from needing remediation, implement Common Core Standards in high schools, a move that directly reflects the values of the Gates Foundation (Addison & McGee, 2016). If current remedial models don't work, the report suggests, replace them with a co-requisite model and/or embedded tutoring. To help students progress through gateway courses, CCA suggests that extra support time is built into the credit-bearing class, such as in the co-requisite model, rather than offered in a separate, non-credited course.

THE POPULAR MEDIA AS ACTOR

In Latour's construction of ANT, documents exert agency as non-human actors that comprise a network. He wrote: "Instead of simply transporting effects without transforming them, each of the points in the text may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of a new translation. As soon as actors are treated not as intermediaries but as mediators, they render the movement of the social visible to the reader" (Latour, 2005, p. 128). Jenna Morton-Aiken's chapter in this volume further argues that textual evidence (archival records in her case) can allow WPAs to identify structures that might otherwise be invisible, allowing for a deeper critical reflection on existing knowledge. Below, I apply a similar logic to an analysis of *The New York Times* coverage of remediation to make visible the extent to which *The New York Times* has served as an intermediary for CCA's argument about reform in developmental education.

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2   This assessment is true in some instances, particularly when placement into and advancement from BW courses is based primarily on the goal of assimilating students into a standard academic discourse (see Grayson in this collection). At the same time, however, BW courses can also provide needed time for students who, for a variety of reasons, may benefit from a slower pace and additional instructional support. While reform in some areas of developmental education is needed, I would argue that eliminating it entirely or dramatically reducing its availability can also introduce new barriers for some students.

BASIC WRITING IN THE POPULAR PRESS

The popular press functions as a non-human actor in the broader network of discourse about remediation and, as has been well-documented in the field's scholarship, often reifies the notion that remediation is ineffective and damaging to an institution's status. In "How We Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise," published as an open letter to the editors of *Journal of Basic Writing*, Lynn Quitman Troyka (2000) highlighted the many opportunities she perceives that basic writing as a field has missed to stabilize its image beyond the academy. Specifically, Troyka wrote, "Didn't we realize that most consumers of media, white- and blue-collar workers, professionals, homemakers, community leaders, legislators, educational administrators, and even faculty and students would be frankly repelled by what aspiring college students clearly did not know?" She continues, "Why did we not anticipate that the 114 newspapers, eager to sensationalize, would jump on the chance to print examples of college basic writers' writing before they took catch-up courses?" (pp. 114-115). Troyka's reference here is to an example of crisis rhetoric (Addison & McGee, 2016) that surrounded *The New York Times* review of Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations in 1979, a review that included the publication of some unedited writing produced by students in basic writing courses (Dember, 1975).

Published just a few short years after the now-infamous "Why Johnny Can't Write" *Newsweek* (Sheils, 1975) article that, according to Trimbur (1991), sparked the notion that the United States was facing a literacy crisis, *The New York Times*' publication of unedited writing from students placed into remedial courses did little to bolster public opinion about the writing abilities of that generation's newly admitted college students. Decades later, the discourse of literacy crisis reappears with *The New York Times* reviews of James Traub's (1994) controversial book, *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College*. In what was later honored as a New York Times Notable Book (Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010), Traub offered an inside look at basic writing courses at City College, to evaluate the success of the Open Admissions experiment at CUNY. In an overwhelmingly positive review of *City on a Hill*, A. M. Rosenthall (1994) wrote of City College: "The admission requirement, Mr. Traub explained, was reduced drastically . . . Given the quality of education in so many New York City high schools by then, that was simply surrendering to mediocrity, and everybody knew it" (p. 7). The implication here is not subtle, as Rosenthall suggests that Traub's work reveals that Open Admissions—and its byproduct, remedial course offerings across CUNY—served to do little more than lower the standards of a once-great institution. The positive attention that Traub's work received was echoed in the coming years as *The New York Times* reported on the phase-out of

remediation at CUNY's senior colleges in the late 1990s, much of which emphasized the watering-down of curriculum that was the natural byproduct of a senior college offering developmental courses (see Arenson, 1998; Gleason, 2000).

Given that *The New York Times* has long been recognized as an influential actor in the construction of the public image of remediation, it is important to consider how the paper has continued to cover remediation and developmental education in the current era of reform. In the section below, I offer a brief analysis of the relationships between actors and the discursive construction of remediation as a crisis in a small corpus of *The New York Times* coverage of remediation from 2012–2019.

REMEDIATION IS A ROADBLOCK TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Overwhelmingly, the articles I examined emphasized the notion that placement into remedial courses is a hindrance to student success and completion. This position was expressed by acknowledging two studies that "have found that community colleges unnecessarily place tens of thousands of entering students into remedial classes" (Lewin, 2012, para. 1). Alina Tugend (2016) extends this claim to add that colleges should "require fewer remedial classes to improve students' basic math and English skills." In another article, Lewin (2014) points out that "1.7 million students begin college in remediation . . . but only one in 10 remedial students ever graduate" (para. 7). Elizabeth Harris (2017) similarly wrote of remedial courses that "many students, frustrated that they are sitting in class without progressing toward a degree, drop out" (para. 2). Though *The New York Times* coverage has been consistent in suggesting that remedial courses are detrimental to student success, it is worth noting that much of this discourse has been constructed within the context of community college reform. In other words, dramatic changes to remediation are contextualized as one of several needed changes at the community college level, including better placement measures, more advising, and lower costs, all of which is closely aligned with the work of CCA and other proponents of the Completion Agenda. Despite these other concerns, though, the push to eliminate or radically reduce remediation is prominent in this coverage, thus providing a significant contribution to national conversations about these topics.

NAMED ACTORS/ACTANTS IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES* COVERAGE OF REMEDIATION

In the case of *The New York Times* coverage of remediation from 2012–2019, there was a great deal of consistency in terms of the actors who were most often

named in the articles that I analyzed. Surprisingly, non-profit organizations were among the most frequently referenced sources of data about remediation and/or college completion rates across the corpus I analyzed. These nonprofits are listed below, along with indications of their relationships with CCA that were evident after a quick Google search of each one.

President of Education Trust

The president of Education Trust served as keynote speaker at the "2019 CCA Annual Convening" (Complete College America, 2019).

Jobs for the Future

Co-author with Complete College America on a report titled "Core Principles for Transforming Remedial Education" and recipient of $17 million in funding from the Gates Foundation. (Mangan, 2013).

National Center for Education Statistics

Their report "Remedial Coursetaking at U.S. Public 2- and 4-Year Institutions: Scope, Experience, and Outcomes" cites the CCA's *Remediation: Higher education's bridge to nowhere* report (Chen & Simone, 2016).

Gates Foundation

Complete College America was established with funding from the Gates Foundation (Mangan, 2013)**.** The Gates Foundation provided almost 1.5 million in funding to Complete College America in 2020 (Complete College America, 2020).

Brookings Institute

Their article "Addressing Academic Barriers to Higher Education" cites data from Complete College America (Long, 2014).

American Association of Community Colleges

Their report "The State of College Completion Initiatives at U.S. Community Colleges" noted that data from Complete College America is controversial (Kilgore & Wilson, 2017).

The Writing Revolution

No obvious mention of Complete College America.

National Association on Teacher Quality

No obvious mention of Complete College America.

It is important to note that non-profit organizations (and their spokespeople) were referenced more frequently in these articles than were research centers associated with universities. In other words, the work of these non-profits (many of which translate the work of CCA) is forwarded through *The New York Times* coverage more than is scholarly work from research centers associated with universities. The research centers named included the Center on Education Policy at George Washington University, Pennsylvania's Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy at University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia Teachers College.

While these actors all provide perspectives that are useful in understanding current trends in remedial education, it is noteworthy that no specialists in rhetoric and composition were explicitly named (though several specific instructors at CUNY campuses were identified); the majority of the information that circulates in *The New York Times* coverage about remediation is based on perspectives from non-profits, research centers at institutions that do not offer remedial coursework, and, at times, college administrators. Individuals who specialize in teaching developmental courses are rarely referenced in these articles, further reinforcing the point that the prominent discourses about remediation are influenced by external actors. One article goes so far as to declare that "there is a notable shortage of high-quality research on the teaching of writing" (Goldstein, 2017, para. 35). Although basic writing has been heralded by some scholars as the starting point for the professionalization of the modern field of composition studies (Horner, 2000), that such a field of study even exists is hardly visible in these articles. While Goldstein's article does reflect some knowledge of composition studies' emphasis on the writing process, there is virtually nothing in any of the articles included in this study that points to expertise in rhetoric and composition to contextualize some of the concerns raised in the studies sponsored by non-profit organizations and university research centers. Given the already-marginalized status that basic writing typically enjoys in most institutions (Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010), this erasure of disciplinary expertise in the public discourse about remediation is troubling. Add to that the emphasis on perspectives of non-profit organizations (many of which are associated with CCA), and it becomes clear that CCA exercises a great deal of influence over how the discourse about remediation and college completion is constructed for public audiences.

LEGISLATIVE INFLUENCE ON BASIC WRITING

The popular media is far from the only source of influential discourse about developmental education and remediation. At the state-level, developmental writing courses are increasingly influenced by legislative agendas. According to the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness, 56 pieces of legislation that

addressed developmental education were introduced across the country in 2017 and 15 were enacted, signifying that legislation does, in fact, play a critical role in the ways that developmental courses are structured and funded, along with how students are placed into such courses (Whinnery, 2017).

The influence of this so-called "legislative activism" has largely been the reduction, elimination, or complete reform of developmental reading and writing programs across entire states (Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010; Schrynemakers et al., 2019). The Education Commission of the States identifies 33 states that have legislated placement and/or assessment policies for developmental courses (Education Commission of the States, 2022). The same source also highlights 26 states that have legislated the delivery and/or curriculum of developmental courses in formats such as corequisite course offerings, stretch models, studio or mandatory tutoring, and/or summer bridge programs—notably absent here are stand-alone developmental courses, which are becoming increasingly unpopular (Education Commission of the States, 2022). Miller et al. (2017) point to such examples in Florida, Wisconsin, and Idaho in anticipation of the potential for legislative interference into developmental courses in the Pennsylvania State system where they teach, noting concern that they might lose the credit-bearing developmental course at their institution in favor of a "reformed" alternative (p. 1).

PUBLIC ACT 12-40 IN CONNECTICUT

One example of how this larger network connects to a specific local context is the enactment of a statewide policy shift for developmental education, Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (2012) Public Act 12-40 subtitled "An act concerning college readiness and completion." This legislation focused explicitly to direct "public community colleges and state universities to reconfigure how remedial/developmental education is delivered," with three available options: college-level courses, college-level with embedded support, or an intensive college readiness program OR one semester of remediation (Connecticut, 2012, p. 1). In the case of the latter, students should progress to college-level coursework within a semester (Connecticut, 2012, p. 1). The legislation was initially proposed after a state legislator "attended a 'remediation institute' hosted by Complete College America" (Mangan, 2013).

Fain's (2012) report on PA 12-40 for *Inside Higher Ed* framed this move as a legislative effort to eliminate remediation across the state (though the official documents for PA 12-40 suggest otherwise). In the *NEA Today* article, Flannery (2014) referred to the legislation in Connecticut, Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia, "the war on remediation" (p. 4). This "war on remediation" could, as many have noted, result in some significant educational cost to students. Patrick

Sullivan (2015) offers an insider's perspective on the implementation of PA 12-40 initiatives on his own campus at Manchester Community College. He noted one of the most controversial elements of the new legislation was that it pushed students who had placed below a standardized test cut-off out of college class-rooms, as they were initially to be "remediated" at adult literacy centers before beginning college coursework. After some debate, the Connecticut community colleges and regional universities were permitted to develop transitional programming for these weakest students, ensuring that they wouldn't be denied access to higher education, but, as Sullivan noted, the original goal of dramatically reducing remedial offerings was eyed as a potential model for other statewide reforms across the United States.

The official documents generated for PA 12-40 include the senate bill itself, a two-page document that highlights the goals of the bill, and a 45-page report of results after the first year of implementation (State of Connecticut, 2012; Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, 2012; Brakoniecki et al., 2013). An analysis of this discourse identifies a discursive emphasis on three areas also visible in *The New York Times* coverage of remediation: the problem of high-stakes placement testing, the problem of low completion rates for students who begin in remedial courses, and the lack of alignment between high school and college curricula. Of particular concern for developmental educators was the move to dramatically shift the delivery of remedial coursework. According to the bill:

> Not later than the start of the fall semester of 2014 and for each semester thereafter, no public institution of higher education shall offer any remedial support, including reme-dial courses, that is not embedded with the corresponding entry level course, as required pursuant to subsection (b) of this section, or offered as part of an intensive college readi-ness program, except such institution may offer a student a maximum of one semester of remedial support that is not embedded, provided (1) such support is intended to advance such student toward earning a degree, and (2) the program of remedial support is approved by the Board of Regents for Higher Education. (State of Connecticut, 2012, p. 2)

The subtext here is that stand-alone remediation is not an effective ap-proach for helping students to advance toward degree completion, an echo of the discourse of remediation reform that is also evident in *The New York Times* coverage. The supplemental document noted that "Common methods of remedial education are not successful for most students. Only 8% of com-munity college students taking remedial courses earn a credential within three

years" again invoking the discourse of reform (Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, 2012, p. 2).

The same document also includes a subtext which suggests that secondary education in Connecticut was not providing adequate instruction to prepare graduates for college-level work. This is visible in the bill's emphasis on implementing Common Core standards in Connecticut high schools and alignment of high school and college curricula, noting that because many students have not been engaged with Common Core curriculum, "Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, as well as other higher education institutions, have been partnering with priority school districts to redesign 12th grade math and English courses in order to minimize remediation needs" (Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, 2012, p. 2). In addition to its emphasis on the problematic nature of remediation, the above quote also suggests that a Common Core curriculum in high school has the potential to "solve" the remedial "problem" in the state, a position that fails to acknowledge the sociocultural and socioeconomic disparities that might influence a student's academic trajectory. The document *does* acknowledge that "African American, Hispanic and low-income students are disproportionately enrolled in remedial and developmental courses (72%, 70%, and 71% respectively, compared to 56% for White students and 29% for non-low-income students)" (Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, 2012, p. 1). But without context, those statistics do not offer a full picture of *why* students who represent these demographic groups often place into remediation and/or why such placement might impact completion.

More attention to the material and cultural concerns that often impact students' placement into remedial courses is evident in a section of the 2013 report by Brakoniecki et al. summarizing feedback from stakeholder surveys—after the bill was already passed into law. These survey results highlight some important challenges that students who place into remedial courses might face that simple skills assessments might not address. First, the socioeconomic needs of students are hinted at with the acknowledgment that access to technology is necessary and that online learning might be a barrier for some students. Perhaps most important, however, is the statement referring to "personal/life challenges" that impede student success (Brakoniecki et al., 2013, p. 23). As any basic writing instructor knows too well, students disappear from class for any number of reasons, few of which are generally academic in nature and instead are rooted in the socioeconomic and personal circumstances that too often impact student success (Whitfield, 2014). Additionally, the report acknowledged, "Students needed additional support through the registration process for their next semesters," which speaks to the difficulty that many students have with negotiating the bureaucracy and culture of college life, rather than their abilities to write grammatical sentences (Brakoniecki

et al., 2013, p. 23). As basic writing and developmental education scholarship suggests, students' personal challenges, socioeconomic backgrounds and access to funding and money, and abilities to navigate academic systems and networks are not *some of* the problems that students who place into remedial courses face; rather, these are *the* problems that hinder retention and persistence (see Adler-Kassner & Harrington, 2002; Soliday, 2002; Sullivan, 2015). Relegating these significant obstacles to a few lines results in a significant disconnect between disciplinary expertise and the legislative discourse regarding developmental education reform.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BASIC WRITING

The formation of an actor-network is dependent on the ability of a "key actor [to] successfully [align] a series of other elements [actants]" (Michael, 2017, p. 34) and to form associations with other actors (Latour, 2005). It is clear from the examples above that CCA has succeeded to form an actor-network by utilizing *The New York Times* and state legislatures to serve as intermediaries of its message regarding the need for reform in developmental education. To be sure, there is value in the initiatives that CCA promotes, and in certain institutional contexts, eliminating remedial courses in favor of another model works well. The work of teacher-scholars such as Peter Adams and his colleagues at the Community College of Baltimore County and Katie Hern of the California Acceleration Project has been invaluable in providing new pathways for supporting students who might otherwise fail to meet benchmarks for enrollment in credit-bearing composition courses. Additionally, Complete College America and the Gates Foundation have provided funding for countless important postsecondary initiatives across the country. Dismissing out of hand the positive impacts of these organizations and their missions would be a mistake.

At the same time, while it is crucial to avoid a situation wherein students are stuck in a remedial sequence for so long that it deters their progress, the corequisite model that is increasingly put forth as an alternative is not a panacea and nudging underprepared students forward more quickly does not necessarily meet every student's needs equally (Adams et al., 2009). Alexandros Goudas and Hunter Boylan (2012) argued that "to put the blame squarely on the shoulders of developmental education for its students' low completion rates, as most recent remedial research does, is an overgeneralization that does not account for other factors that contribute to high dropout rates" (p. 6). The CCA documents fail to acknowledge the complexity of college completion for students from diverse backgrounds, particularly for two-year college students who often must "stop-out" for personal reasons and therefore may not complete a degree in a designated time frame (Ernst et al., 2015, p. 4). In a presentation for the 2018

National Association of Developmental Education conference, D. Patrick Saxon et al. directly address the extent to which the relationship between placement in developmental courses and attrition is drawn from "seriously flawed research or [has] been misrepresented by advocacy groups to support their agenda," citing CCA as a specific example. Elsewhere, CCA has been critiqued for its work to target state governments and legislatures as sites for educational change by pushing performance-based funding models (Walters, 2012) and failing to acknowledge the complex socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural concerns that might inhibit student progress toward a degree. As Tassoni notes in this volume, Basic Writing can easily function as a "retrofit" to a "core institutional identity," one that is not inclusive to the demographic of students that BW courses often support. His work illustrates the local impact of ignoring the socioeconomic and cultural forces that often shape BW.

The above is only a small representation of the evidence-based critiques that push back against the notion that developmental education is inherently damaging to students' chances of success. Rather than appearing in the pages of the popular press or in official documents or statements from state legislatures, these critiques are largely confined to the pages of scholarly journals with a much more limited readership. Richard Besel (2011) pointed to Latour's argument that in scientific discourse, "black box" theories are established "only after a particular theory has emerged victorious in this agnostic process against its competitors that it becomes reality and knowledge" (p. 124). By exerting influence across multiple nodes of the discursive network that surrounds basic writing and developmental education, including the popular press and state legislators, CCA has been able to establish a "truth" simply by engaging enough actors to repeat and reinforce the same message and pushing its critiques to the margins. As Jeanne Gunner (2002) noted, dramatic changes to a program that are supported exclusively by theory or scholarship from composition are "likely to have little effect on the larger ideological values that form the programs we administer and teach" (p. 8). In the current moment, only a fraction of the voices of experts in basic writing and developmental education are gaining traction in public discourse—namely those who are aligned with powerful non-profit organizations that are pushing an agenda of reform. While there is value in those perspectives, they are not the only perspectives on developmental education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

Cultivating an awareness of the actor-networks that exert influence over writing programs is an essential skill for writing program administrators, one that

is often framed through studies of institutional ecologies. Mary Jo Reiff et al. (2015) signaled a need for scholarship in writing program administration to read the complex and interconnected work of writing programs in ecological terms arguing that it's essential to "reveal the dynamic interrelationships as well as the complex rhetorical and material conditions that writing programs inhabit—conditions and relationships that are constantly in flux as WPAs negotiate constraint and innovation" (p. 16). Increasingly, teacher-scholars have incorporated critical analysis of the ways that WPA work functions within these complex networks into discussions of graduate training for future instructors and program administrators that focuses on scenario-based learning (Sura et al., 2009) and disciplinary reading (Reid, 2018). Overwhelmingly, though, existing work in this area focuses on locally-situated examples and fails to examine the larger social and discursive networks that exert pressure onto these local contexts.

In *Basic Writing as a Political Act*, Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington (2002) recall a point made elsewhere by Joe Harris that "compositionists have a history of not communicating well why and how we do what we do to outside audiences" (p. 62). Rather than reacting to policy shifts (as many locally-focused profiles of BW illustrate), teacher-scholars in basic writing must make every effort to craft an effective public message about our field and the many different forms successful developmental support might take. These efforts are best begun in our local contexts, by encouraging administrators and trustees to consider the whole student with concrete examples of academic and personal successes and setbacks. Additionally, we must push back against the notion that developmental instruction is inherently a barrier for students from historically marginalized communities and instead take a more nuanced look at why some students benefit from basic writing courses while others do not. Much of the discourse that circulates about developmental education reform is situated in community college contexts, which are not universally the same across the country, nor are they the same as four-year institutions. Additionally, much of the discourse that pushes against the existence of basic writing courses and programs centers on the racism inherent in placing students based on evaluations that measure little more than linguistic diversity and socioeconomic status. I am in full agreement that such standards should be modified and, where appropriate, eliminated entirely. At the same time, however, basic writing courses have the potential to serve broader purposes and populations, including returning adult learners and adult basic skills students, students with disabilities who need a slower pace, students who are struggling with the cognitive impacts of trauma or mental health challenges, students who are just learning to speak English as an additional language, and students for whom the burdens of work and or home life make concentration difficult and an accelerated course pace nearly impossible.

Because basic writing programs are so deeply entwined with extra-disciplinary and extra-institutional networks and their discursive constructions of remediation, it is important that any WPA whose work includes the oversight of a basic writing program be attuned to these broader conversations to avoid repeating some of the failures that Troyka noted as endemic to the field. With that, a strict adherence to "Ed White's Law—assess thyself or assessment will be done unto thee" is also essential (Griffiths et al., 2017, para. 14). Strong assessment data can provide locally-focused counternarratives about remediation that can push back against the "war on remediation" that has eliminated or redefined developmental course offerings across the country. There is research that indicates that the elimination of remedial courses may actually disadvantage students from historically minoritized communities, if those students are also not close to the cutoff between remediation and mainstream courses (Boatman & Long, 2018).

The above were arguments that my writing program colleagues and I recently had to make in response to a suggestion from administrators that we eliminate one of our basic writing courses to allow students to move more quickly to graduation. While armed with scholarship and our own institutional data that illustrated a dramatic difference in need between students in all of our course levels, it was essential that we, as Tassoni describes in his chapter in this volume, "consider[ed] the extent to which these meetings coursed in a machinery we needed to better understand; our work existed in relation to these other parts of the system." Teacher-scholars in basic writing have long lamented the impact of stakeholders elsewhere in the institution and beyond on their programs (Reid, 2018). But to date, the field is lacking a comprehensive mapping of the actor-networks that are largely responsible for framing the national conversation about remediation. What are the black-boxed "truths" about remediation that are uncritically circulated? What individuals or organizations are driving these conversations and why? How many courses and programs have been altered or eliminated based on data that can be traced back to a single source? Morton-Aiken argues in her chapter in this volume that the curation of archives has the potential to reveal networks and illuminate connections that might otherwise be invisible to researchers. I argue that by applying this logic to a study of discourses that surround developmental education, we can see not only what those discourses are, but also how they circulate and what their tangible impacts might be.

To be clear, I agree with the notion that many approaches to developmental education in the US are in need of reform (including on my own home campus). But as Mary Soliday (2002) pointed out in *The Politics of Remediation,* institutions will always rely on attracting less-prepared students in times of economic crisis, often without the resources to support those same students through their coursework. To ensure that appropriate support is available for all students across

a range of institutional contexts, it is imperative that rhetoric and composition program administrators combat the notion that a widely-adopted practice, such as eliminating remediation, is necessarily always the best practice in all scenarios. In a future that is dominated by actor-networks that seek to eliminate remediation, the expertise of developmental educators and the needs of students from historically marginalized communities are too easily erased if courses dedicated to these interests are eliminated. Without the input of administrator-teacher-scholars with expertise in basic writing, the extra-disciplinary forces presented above—the popular media, state legislatures, and non-profit organizations—rather than disciplinary experts will shape the future of basic writing in the United States.

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