

BASIC WRITING CLASS OF '93 FIVE YEARS LATER: HOW THE ACADEMIC PATHS OF BLACKS AND WHITES DIVERGED

ABSTRACT: *The results of this five-year longitudinal study of 61 basic writers suggest little correlation between the first-year course and overall success in college. The most startling finding, however, is the much lower long-term success rate for African-American basic writers who passed the basic writing course. The article suggests that reading, not writing, is a stronger determinant of college success for at-risk students and that institutions should strengthen first-year reading programs. Furthermore, at-risk African-American students may need stronger non-academic support.*

In "Basic Writing Reconsidered," Peter Dow Adams raises the question, "What percentage of our students *do* succeed in our basic writing programs?" (28). He also wonders "just how many students who take basic writing courses actually graduate or make it through English 101, for that matter" (25). Adams' article, published in 1993, prompted us to initiate a longitudinal study that year to explore this question and others. After all, at most colleges and universities, the tacit assumption which fuels the very existence of first-year basic writing programs is that underprepared students will not be able to succeed in regular college courses without first becoming proficient writers. Yet the results of our five-year longitudinal study show that, in the long run, success or failure in the first year basic writing course was not at all a predictor of future success or failure in other college classes.

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The most startling finding, however, was how much the academic paths of African Americans and whites diverged over the five years of the study. White students who did *not* pass the Developmental English class the first time still had a higher retention and success rate than African-Americans who *did* pass it the first time. While the literature raises questions about the efficacy of basic writing programs for the general population of underprepared college students, we wish to look also at its relevance for African American students.

Developmental Writing Programs: A Current Educational Controversy

Whether colleges and universities should be in the business of offering remedial programs is a current educational controversy. More than one million academically underprepared students are entering our nation's colleges and universities every year. According to *USA Today*, 13% of all college students took at least one remedial class during the 1992-93 academic year (Kelly 1D). Statistics tell that only about 3% of the students who begin college in remedial courses graduate in four years; in five years about 11%; and 34% in eight years. Students who enter college in regular classes, however, graduate at the rate of 39% in five years, so even when remedial students take courses for three additional years, some 5% fewer are graduating than those who were unconditionally admitted (Walker). Recent media attention has focused upon the high numbers of students in remedial classes, the low graduation rate, and the high cost to taxpayers.

As Carriuolo notes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Remediation—because it connotes time and money wasted in re-learning—has attracted unfriendly fire from legislatures, administrators, students and mainstream faculty members" (B2). Of the 28,751 freshmen entering Georgia's public colleges and universities in 1994, 43% required remediation. At our own school, a regional university in southeast Georgia with 14,000 students and an approximate 75% European American to 25% African American ratio, the percentages become somewhat higher: 52% of the entering freshmen were placed in developmental classes in 1995, and in 1996, the number was 45.3% (Salzer). According to Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust at the American Association for Higher Education, "States are paying the price—or sometimes three times the price—for the same learning and it never seems to take" (qtd. in Walker).

The underlying question at the heart of the debate seems to be the issue of whether underprepared students really are "college material" after all. If they need extra help, in the form of remedial courses,

just to be prepared for early college work, will they succeed in the long run? Is it worth it for millions of taxpayer dollars to be poured into these courses? The chairman of Georgia Board of Regents believes the state is spending "a lot of money correcting something that should have been done in high school" (Walker). Wolcott states, "... the central issue has always been whether our efforts on students' behalf at the beginning of their college careers make a difference in enabling them to cope afterward" (14).

A review of the empirical studies which attempt to measure the effectiveness of developmental writing classes yields mixed findings. A 1983 study by Palmer reports that "reading comprehension and writing mechanics skills do not improve as students [take] reading and writing courses" (27). Another study, completed in 1987 by Purvis and Watkins, found that although experimental students who were placed in basic writing courses did perform better *initially* than did the control group who entered regular classes, when the experimental students advanced beyond the courses for which developmental studies had specifically prepared them, the two groups showed virtually no difference in performance, and there was no significant difference between the two groups in persistence towards a degree.

And yet, Boylan and Bonham's 1990 study of developmental education at 116 two-year and four-year institutions, sponsored by the Exxon Education Foundation and conducted for the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State, appears to validate the effectiveness of developmental education programs. The researchers found that although it may take underprepared students longer to graduate, "those who participated in developmental programs were about as likely to persist and graduate as those students who were judged to be better prepared for college" (3). A longitudinal study quite different from Boylan and Bonham's but with similar findings was recently published by Marilyn Sternglass. Although her research is limited to 53 students who were enrolled in two levels of basic writing and one regular freshman English class that she taught at City College of the City University of New York, Sternglass believes that her descriptive study "allows educators to see that even the apparently most educationally disadvantaged students have the potential to achieve academic success if they are given the time and support they need to demonstrate their abilities" (299).

Within our own discipline of composition and rhetoric, there is also controversy as to whether we should be tracking at-risk students into basic writing courses. In 1992, the National Council of Teachers of English approved a resolution "to support curricula, programs, and practices that avoid tracking, a system which limits students' intellectual, linguistic and/or social development." And in response to the article, "Remediation as Social Construct," Peter Elbow bluntly asks

authors Glynda Hull et al., "What justification do you see, really, for remedial classes at the college level . . . ?" (588).

At the 1992 Fourth National Basic Writing Conference in College Park, Maryland, a number of speakers debated the mainstreaming issue, and the following spring, the *Journal of Basic Writing* published the plenaries. The keynote speaker, David Bartholomae, questions whether it is the profession or the students who are best served by basic writing programs, programs which operate by maintaining a distinction between "normal and abnormal" writers (8) and work to standardize student voices (12). In the second article, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Peter Dow Adams presents data from an informal study he conducted at his institution which suggest that the disadvantages of basic writing classes may outweigh the advantages (33). Jerrie Cobb Scott explores factors which she believes contribute to a "recycling of deficit pedagogy" in many basic writing programs: a narrow definition of literacy as simply the ability to read and write, a definition which results in skills and drills pedagogies.

Karen Greenberg, however, argues that most basic writing classes provide students with an opportunity to succeed academically, an opportunity they would not have if they were mainstreamed. To support her contention, Greenberg cites average pass rates of basic writing students at her institution as ranging between 80% and 93% as well as a 36% graduation rate of basic writers within five years and a 55% rate within eight years (69). And, at the "relatively open-admissions" General College of the University of Minnesota, Terry Collins reports that 100% of the students who complete the Basic Writing sequence successfully transfer into the University's degree-granting colleges and students who postpone or do not take the Basic Writing sequence "drop out at elevated rates" (97). Ira Shor contends, however, that the percentages Greenberg and Collins cite mean almost nothing unless there is substantiating proof that "these students could not have graduated without BW" (96). Shor argues that basic writing programs not only waste students' time and money but also serve to maintain the social and racial inequities in our society (106), and he "wants to see hard evidence that BW courses shelter more than they shunt" (96). Harvey Wiener also notes the paucity of "reliable inquiry and research on the impact of remedial programming" and calls for more empirical research on the effects of basic writing (1998, 100).

Background of Our Study

The conflicting reports about the validity of tracking students into basic writing classes provided the impetus for us to examine our own program. During the 1993 fall quarter, we decided to follow the aca-

demic progress of the 61 students who had been placed in the two basic reading/writing classes we were teaching. We formulated our principal research question as "What happens to our developmental writers after they leave Developmental English?" Among our related questions were the following: 1. How many of these students will graduate and in how long a time period? 2. Are there correlations between the attrition rate and students' first quarter writing abilities?

To address these questions, we followed the academic progress of our students through personal interviews, interviews with their subsequent English instructors, a classification scheme based on three possible levels of academic success, analyses of student writing, and analyses of academic transcripts.

The Subjects

As experienced teachers, we recognized that the students enrolled in our classes for the 1993 fall quarter were quite representative of developmental students at our university. Virtually all of our subjects were recent high school graduates; two-thirds were African American; and SAT Verbal scores ranged from a low of 220 to a high of 410 with a mean score of 350. Questionnaires revealed that most were first-generation college students who entered our classes highly motivated to get out of remedial classes, get going on regular college courses, graduate, and get a "well-paying job." Few of the students had ever read a whole book, and their writing backgrounds were often limited to high school research papers, which they told us they could copy from reference books and get by.

The Class

The subjects of this study were in a team-taught developmental reading/writing class in which a modification of the Bartholomae/Petrosky *Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts* model was used. The students read a book approximately every two weeks and kept a reader response journal. They also wrote personal experience essays, an autobiography of about 1500 words, summaries of articles about the subject of the course, "Growth and Change in Adolescence," several essay exams about the books they were reading, and, finally, a documented opinion paper.

At our institution, students must earn a C in the developmental course before they are eligible to take the state mandated exit exams which they must pass before they can enroll in regular college classes.

The exit exams are alternate versions of the placement tests that put them in the basic writing course in the first place: an English basic skills test and an impromptu timed essay. Exit essays are anonymously evaluated by two English faculty other than their own instructors. If students are successful in each of these three challenges, they are eligible to enroll in Freshman English I. Those who are not successful at the end of the first quarter may take as many as three more quarters of these developmental classes before they are excluded from the university. Placement and exit criteria for all remedial courses in Georgia are mandated by the University System Board of Regents.

Results

After five years in college, most of our students have not done well in college *overall*, suggesting that their performance in the Developmental English course was not a predictor of future success: for example, some students who did not pass the developmental writing course the first time have had successful academic careers whereas some students who passed the developmental writing course on their first attempt did not perform well in subsequent courses. Probably the most startling finding, however, is that, of those students who were *not* successfully remediated in one quarter, white students have more than twice the success rate in subsequent college courses as black students who *did* pass the course. Although it is impossible to predict what any of these students' experiences would have been without the Developmental English course, the fact that "successful" remediation resulted in a much lower success rate for African American students than for white students caused us to make a closer examination of the academic progress of both groups of students.

Five years after matriculation, 19 of the students (31%) have graduated, and 4 more of these high risk students are making steady progress toward a 1999 graduation date. These percentages compare favorably with our institution's average 35% graduation rate for all students. When we looked below the surface of these figures, however, we found disturbing discrepancies: 57% of the white students have graduated but only 22.5% of the black students.¹ Moreover, the 61 students' overall academic progress did not correlate with their verbal SAT scores nor with their ability to pass the developmental writing class.

When students' progress is assessed according to race, a distinct difference in academic histories can be seen. Although a handful of African-American students have had uneventful educations over five years, the majority of records display "P's", "S's", "E's" and "D's",

which stand for Probation, Suspension, Exclusion and Dismissal. While certainly not free of "P's", "S's", "E's" and "D's", the academic progress of white students has been smoother. A few had an occasional probation or suspension or exclusion, but none were dismissed from the university for academic reasons.

Table 1
Comparison of Blacks' and Whites' 5-Year Academic Histories and Success with Basic Writing Course

TOTAL STUDENTS WHO PASSED BW 1st TIME	TOTAL STUDENTS WHO DID NOT PASS BW 1st TIME
Whites: 68%	Whites: 32%
Blacks: 56%	Blacks: 44%
FIVE YEARS LATER: WHITE STUDENTS	FIVE YEARS LATER: WHITE STUDENTS
Successful: 53%	Successful: 43%
Rocky History: 13%	Rocky History: 29%
Gone: 34%	Gone: 28%
FIVE YEARS LATER: BLACK STUDENTS	FIVE YEARS LATER: BLACK STUDENTS
Successful: 18 %	Successful: 6%
Rocky History: 18%	Rocky History: 23%
Gone: 64%	Gone: 71%

To discover whether we could find any relation between academic success and the students' first quarter writing abilities, we compared their academic success rates over the five year period with their ability to pass the Developmental English class. In Table 1, we used a simple classification scheme to collapse the four-year academic histories of both African Americans and whites. "Successful" refers to students whose academic histories show no probations, dismissals, suspensions, or exclusions; "rocky" refers to students who are still currently enrolled but who have been on probation, dismissal, suspension or exclusion; and "gone" refers to those who are no longer enrolled. The academic histories of both races are compared with their first quarter writing abilities as measured by their success in exiting remedial English at the end of the first quarter. About three times as many whites (53%) have had "successful" academic histories as blacks (18%). Further, of those students who exited and were therefore theoretically ready for regular courses, about twice as many blacks (64%) as whites (34%) are no longer enrolled at the university.

Low Success Rates for African-Americans

According to a recent national study, African-American college freshmen are placed in remedial English courses at over twice the rate of white students, yet they comprise only six percent of the graduating population (Gray). Astin reports college attrition rates for African-American students at 49.5% and Cortina reports the rate at 73.4% (qtd. in Fidler and Godwin 35). Referring specifically to the Georgia system, Presley writes "Developmental English courses . . . apparently pose the most difficulty for minority students. Black students do not exit the developmental English classes in as high a percentage as other students do. And, once in a regular English class, a lower percentage of black students pass than the passing percentage of other students" (51).

In 1993, the year we began our study, 48% of the 828 entering black students at our university were placed in Developmental English classes. At the end of four quarters, 15% of the black students were dismissed from the university for failure to exit Developmental English. In contrast, 22% of entering white freshmen had to take Developmental English classes, and at the end of four quarters, fewer than 1% was dismissed from the university for inability to pass the course. To explore possible causes for the disparity between the percentages of black and white students for whom Developmental English barred the gates to higher education is certainly beyond the scope of this study, but a cursory review of the retention literature suggests a number of possibilities.

Fidler and Godwin, referring to several studies which describe high college attrition rates for African Americans, state that "colleges and universities have historically structured their curricula, student services, and campus environment based on a white middle class norm" (35.) Jones bluntly says, "In its insistence on hierarchy, racism situates basic writing programs as Jim-Crow way stations for minority students, for the thousands of Black and Latino students who fill basic writing classes across the nation" (73).

A study of African-Americans in the academy found that "only five percent of all college faculty are African-American" (Gray 3A). Hillard sees the paucity of African American faculty as a big problem for blacks who enter the university. They are taught primarily by white instructors, who may not only have negative attitudes towards black language patterns but who "are ill-prepared to teach students who are unlike themselves" (qtd. in Harrold 17). In *The Agony of Education*, Feagin, Vera and Imani agree, stating that "the intellectual discourse at traditionally white colleges and universities is for the most part parochial and restricted by subtle or overt Eurocentric interests and biases" (114). Hopkins believes that one reason African-American males in particular have difficulty within the educational system is because teachers have low expectations when they should "be committed to this population, show compassion and understanding and be confident that these students can learn" (112). Wallace and Bell cite a number of other studies which suggest causes for the low retention rates of black students at predominantly white institutions: being a first-generation student; having a low socio-economic status; experiencing a lack of comfortable social context; lacking prerequisite courses, and having difficulty with core courses (308). African-American students' feelings of invisibility and marginalization on white campuses may undermine their scholastic ability and determination to succeed, add Feagin, Vera and Imani: "The lack of human recognition the students detect in some white peers, teachers, advisers, police, and other campus personnel is serious, for it teaches major lessons about neglect, exclusion, or self-worthlessness" (133). And, despite the fact that linguists and literacy scholars have been urging educators for the past thirty years to accept African American Vernacular English as a legitimate linguistic variety, the national Ebonics debate in December, 1996, and January, 1997, revealed how widely and deeply the negative attitudes toward permitting its use in the classroom prevail.

Focusing on the Wrong Problems

When we set up our tracking study, the focal point of our interest was our students' emerging writing ability. Our assumption, shared

by most academics, was that students' writing skill would be a key determinant of their long-range academic success or failure. The belief that students must be proficient writers before they can tackle the rest of their college work has long been accepted in the academy and is the foundation around which most colleges and universities build their curricula: hence, the ubiquitous first year basic writing course.

However, after five years of following our students, we have to question our original assumptions about the role of writing skill as the primary determinant of college success. In fact, most of the successfully "remediated" students in our study began to falter as soon as they began courses in history, psychology, sociology or other subjects which were heavily reading-based. We looked specifically at our students' success over five years with the regular college courses, the ones which are more reading-based than writing-based. We calculated the percentages of reading-based or math-based courses our students had passed.² The result is a percentage of reading-based college courses passed with a C or better. We considered the students who had passed 80% or more of these courses to be "Above Average" in overall college success; those who had passed from 70 to 80% to be "Average" and those who had passed from 0 to 69% to be "Below Average." Neither the white students nor the African-American students have performed exceptionally well, if we consider that over one quarter of the whites and nearly three quarters of the blacks have been classified as "Below Average."

Yet we saw the same discrepancy revealed in our Table 1: 67% of African-Americans were "Below Average," compared to 27.3% of whites, and that only 18% of African-Americans were "Above Average," compared to 59% of whites. Again, the fact that African-Americans who had been "remediated" foundered at a much higher rate than whites suggests that we may need to re-examine assumptions behind first year programs designed to help at-risk students succeed in college.

Increasing Emphasis on Reading Skills

Virtually all institutions of higher learning consider basic writing and freshman composition courses to be service courses which *must* be offered in the first year to prepare students for later college work. But perhaps institutions need to pay closer attention to the reading skills of their at-risk students. As mentioned above, many students in our study revealed that before the Fall of 1993, when they entered our course, they had never read an entire book. Although we assigned more books for them to read than they had ever read before, eight weeks of reading was undoubtedly not enough to prepare them well

for college reading, as evidenced by the low success rates with reading-based courses. Though writing and reading skills are frequently interactive, in a typical institutional scenario, the two are often distanced from one another and treated as separate skills.

For example, at our institution, students find it easier to exit the first-quarter developmental reading course than the first-quarter developmental writing course because exiting is based on their ability to pass a standardized multiple-choice reading test at the end of the quarter. The majority do pass the first time. But this assessment tool may not be providing a valid measure of the reading skills students will need in higher level courses. Chase, Gibson and Carson point out that "reading differs significantly across academic disciplines in college in terms of number of assigned pages, text characteristics and function and student perception of the role of text" (14). They closely examined the reading requirements for four college courses—American History, Political Science, Biology and English—and found that in American History, for example, students were required to read eighty pages per week. In Political Science, thirty-four pages per week were required, and in Biology, thirty pages of text, five pages of lab manual, and ten pages of study guide were required every week (11). But it was not just the amount of material which was challenging, it was the nature of how that material needed to be processed. The authors write,

In these university courses, reading was a vehicle for gathering information and ideas which would then be transformed through analysis and synthesis into written exams, essays and other application activities, such as labs. Even in the Political Science course, where exams were multiple choice, questions were designed to require the student to make critical judgments and synthesize material from texts and lectures (12).

Underprepared students may be more challenged by reading tasks than writing tasks in their later courses because at our institution, and, we suspect, a number of others, the majority of professors in non-English disciplines do not emphasize writing in their courses, nor do they make writing projects the primary component of the course grade. If they require papers, they tend to be less critical of them than an English teacher might be. Thus, if basic writers finish their required English courses, they will probably never again do as much writing as they did in those early courses. But reading is a task they will face on a daily basis for virtually every course they will take for the duration of their academic careers. Our data suggest that success in college depends more on reading ability and all that it implies—speed, comprehension, and critical thinking—than on writing skills. Institutions should consider strengthening first-year reading programs as paral-

lels to first-year writing programs.

Institutions which serve at-risk students should develop Reading Centers, along with Writing Centers, to offer students support and assistance with their college reading assignments throughout their college years. Robert and Thomson describe how the Student Learning Center at the University of California at Berkeley offers study groups for different subjects which are led by experienced students: "The leader acts as a facilitator by encouraging active discussion and helping students understand lecture and reading material" (10).

Other Risk Factors For Minorities

Of course, literacy skills may be just one of several factors contributing to the high attrition rate of African-American students. Tinto points out in *Leaving College* that cultural, financial and psychological considerations may also play a role in attrition. Simmons cites degree of maturity, family support, motivation, expectations, and social skills as elements which may influence African-American students' success or failure in college. Furthermore, the emotional and cultural disenfranchisement which blacks experience on white campuses may escalate the drop-out rate. Robert and Thomson write that "it is difficult for minority students to escape the suspicion that they really don't deserve to be at the university and wouldn't be there if they didn't get special (read 'unfair') advantages and a lot of special help" (6). As Tinto states, "... the ability of students to meet academic standards is related not only to academic skills . . . but also to positive academic self-concept" (73).

African-Americans May Need More Institutional Support

Colleges and universities must become more aware of the obstacles which African-American students face as they embark upon their college careers. Black students, writes Tinto, "are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have experienced inferior schooling prior to college" (73). Robert and Thomson note that minority students at Berkeley "come from families with far less experience with higher education and far fewer resources to support the education of their daughters and sons" (6). They suggest that colleges and universities must work actively to retain these high-risk students by creating support programs which help them to adjust not only to the functional aspects of college life, but to the white college culture.

Although our institution does offer study skills courses, minority tutoring, a Learning Resources Center and a summer enrichment program for incoming minorities, Robert and Thomson point out that

It has been a common finding that academic support programs which require the student to initiate the contact are particularly unsuccessful with at-risk and minority students . . . Seeking academic assistance becomes discrediting, and many students of color may simply choose not to do so Students confided that they had initially denied to themselves and others that they were struggling academically and often delayed seeking assistance until too late in the semester to recover (6).

We have also noticed that our minority students are reluctant to seek extra help.

When we started our study, it had not occurred to us that racial polarization would emerge as an issue. We simply wanted to learn how our high risk students fared academically after they left our developmental classes. Near the end of the second year into our study, however, we began to notice distinct differences between the academic progress of our black and our white students, and with each subsequent year, those differences became more evident. We began researching the literature and were dismayed to discover that what we were witnessing at our own institution was a national trend. We now realize how easy it can be for this problem to go unrecognized.

Notes

1. Tables detailing the academic progress of the 61 students in the study, both individually and as groups, are available on request. Contact the authors care of the Department of Writing and Linguistics, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA 30460.

2. We excluded physical education courses, study skills courses, grammar and mechanics courses, lower division health, music, theater, or Regents review courses (which help students pass the state-mandated writing and reading exams). We also did not include the required freshman writing sequence.

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