

# LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: CALIFORNIA GRAPPLES WITH "REMEDiation"

**ABSTRACT:** *This article describes both past and more recent efforts by the California State University system to come to terms with "remediation" as defined by various legislative and system wide bodies. It then goes on to describe recently mandated collaborations between high school language arts faculty and CSU English faculty to reduce the need for remediation. By tracing the momentum within the CSU to reduce the number of underprepared students down to 10% of the entering first-year students by the year 2007, we show the ways in which the needs of basic writers have been defined and delineated by political bodies uninformed by recent scholarship in the field of basic writing. We then describe an ongoing outreach program that attempts to address the needs of basic writers at the high school level. By relying on a collaborative needs assessment of high school writers structured on Freirean principles of codifications of community situations by community leaders, in this case high school instructors, we document the ways in which high school professionals and university collaborators can work respectfully together to support each other in their professional efforts.*

While those of us in basic writing have been absorbed by the challenges posed to basic writing programs across the nation, through the downsizing of academic support programs, as in Georgia (Singer), or in the total dismantling of basic writing, as at CUNY (Gleason; Soliday, "Class Dismissed"; Wiener), a dialogue centered on the transfer of all responsibility for underprepared college students to the high school level has been going on at both national and state levels. With the passage of Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994 to authorize and fund the establishment of statewide standards for K-12, the nation moved ever closer toward a top-down curricular system, with content and performance standards stipulated for each grade level by each state's board of education. The perception, that the alignment of high school performance expectations with college admissions standards should

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be the top priority for statewide boards of education, has been repeated again and again in strategy briefs and reports (See, for example, "State-wide Remedial Education Policies" and "State Strategies that Support Successful Student Transitions from Secondary to Postsecondary Education."). By increasing the stakes tied to students' performances on standardized tests that administrators assume correlate with the classroom content delivered under their statewide standards documents, state legislators and boards of education hope to preempt the admission of underprepared students to colleges.

Given the renewed scrutiny that "remedial" writing programs have been experiencing, we want to document the ways in which basic writing is perceived and dealt with at the university level in California by examining various state documents. We follow the historical development of system-wide policies on remediation, examining the complexities and contradictions of a state-mandated higher education public university system and its desire to eliminate academic support programs for underprepared college students. We also look at recent partnership efforts between the high schools and the California State University system to reduce the need for remediation and then go on to problematize the assessment of student writing the state has proposed and suggest a more credible means of forming partnerships with local high schools in addressing students' writing competence. Finally, we describe a Freirean model of community collaboration among high school and university instructors that validates and builds on the knowledge and experience of high school instructors while drawing on the specialized training that composition/rhetoric specialists can bring to equitable partnerships with our high school colleagues.

## **The Deep Roots of EO665: 1960-1990**

It is CUNY, of course, which has made national headlines as the governor of New York and the mayor of New York City have attempted to do away with what they term "remedial" education, placing it instead in the community colleges. On the other side of the country, the *Los Angeles Times* has called these measures "draconian," yet the titles of two editorials it ran — "Cal State Is for College Work" (Sept. 9, 1999), and "College Is for the Prepared" (Nov. 22, 1999) — make rather clear the stance the *LA Times* is taking. While rightly arguing that the CUNY policy will punish students, especially minorities, for poor preparation in high school, these editorials reflect the general sentiment afloat in the state regarding remediation and the students who take remedial courses. According to the *LA Times*, CSU schools need higher academic standards for entering freshmen. CSU schools are not colleges of "last resort, and the system is right to demand more from students."<sup>1</sup>

The editorials favor what are seen as more reasonable measures being taken by the California State University system (CSU), embodied in Executive Order 665, or EO665, which was designed by the Board of Trustees in 1996 under former Chancellor Barry Munitz and went into effect in the fall of 1998 under the current chancellor, Charles Reed. On the surface this order simply requires entering freshmen to "take the CSU English Placement Test for placement in appropriate English programs/activities. . ." (EO665 Memo, p.2). But EO665 is not so benign as this simple requirement seems to signal. It places testing as the lead indicator of student success and it overlooks by and large the population the CSU is called on to serve through state mandate.

Unlike CUNY, both the CSU and the University of California are bound by the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education which remains in force. The Plan outlines the purview of the various segments of higher education in California and has been further refined by the document "The Master Plan Renewed" (1987).<sup>2</sup> The CSU is required to accept the upper one-third of high school graduates, whether or not they are proficient in English and/or math, as long as they have a 3.0 GPA and have completed their required high school courses for admission. Students, in fact, take no test for admission. If they submit SAT or ACT scores, these are used only to place them in the proper math or English classes; the tests do not determine if students will be accepted to the university. If students choose not to take either of these exams, then they must take the English Placement Test (EPT), instituted as a statewide requirement in 1977, which determines whether a student takes a credit-bearing course in writing or not. The EPT has a writing component which is heavily weighted in the overall score. Until Fall 1998 when EO665 went into effect, the requirement that students take the EPT when they are accepted at a CSU was somewhat loosely enforced, and in some cases students did not take the EPT until well into their freshman year. Some did not even complete their lower division writing requirement until "caught" by the computer (or an alert counselor) in their sophomore year. Putting off this requirement is no longer possible under EO665; students must begin their remedial work in their first semester and must complete it within one calendar year.

The California State University system has documentation on remediation issues from as long ago as 1964 when its Board of Trustees began to question whether or not remedial activities should be part of the CSU curriculum. By 1975, the Board had decided that if remediation were needed, "instruction in the CSU shall include provision for such basic skills and remedial improvement as are necessary to provide a quality education to students who are otherwise qualified to enroll in . . . degree programs," ("CSU Plan" 2). However, no credit would be given for these courses.

In the 1980s a number of documents were produced concerning the educational quality of higher education by various committees and commissions created by the legislature and the governor. Some of these reports dealt solely with issues of remediation; others took up remedial issues only as one part of their reports. In 1982, for example, the "Statement on Competencies in English and Mathematics Expected of Entering Freshmen" opened with this sentence: "A substantial number of students who enter California colleges and universities are not prepared for college-level work. Deficiencies in basic skills, particularly in English and mathematics, prevail . . ." (2). This report set out the skills needed by entering freshmen in both writing and reading and cautioned that the minimum requirements for high school graduation and entrance to higher education were too low. At least four years of high school English were recommended, for example. The recommendations here ultimately had the effect of changing the minimum requirements for students who planned to enter California four-year colleges, although these changes did not alter the number of students who entered the CSU underprepared for writing.

One of the most carefully thought out and theoretically informed documents about the complexities of remediation, *Promises to Keep: Remedial Education in California's Public Colleges and Universities* (1983), was put together the following year by the California Postsecondary Education Commission.<sup>3</sup> The report begins by defining terms of reference (remedial, developmental, and compensatory, among them), and it states why the members of the commission chose the term remedial.<sup>4</sup> Looking at the issues of remediation historically, taking a quote from a 1912 issue of *English Journal* decrying poor writing skills and referring to the 1975 article in *Newsweek*, "Why Johnny Can't Write," the report asks whether remedial education should even be part of the academic enterprise of higher education.

The commission showed concern over the number of underprepared students nationwide who by 1983 had begun to enter higher education with low SAT scores and with the fact that exit exams in the California schools reflect less student preparedness than they do "local political realities" (*Promises* 4). *Promises To Keep* also recognized that remediation was not going away, but it hopefully stated that, "the four year segments should continue their efforts to maintain collegiate standards and to influence student preparation at the secondary level with the ultimate goal of reducing the need for remedial offerings" (102). While this last statement is echoed as well in later reports, prior to 1999 few funds were ever budgeted to pay either the college or secondary English faculty for programs which would provide for staff development activities. It has only been within the last year, with the latest incarnation of concern over remediation, that the chancellor has obtained funds for collaborative projects between the



CSU and the high schools. *Promises To Keep* also indicates that cooperative arrangements should be set up between two-year and four-year colleges so that the community colleges can provide "remedial activities in reading, writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language" (102), thus relieving the CSU and the UC systems of the burden of providing remedial classes in English and math.<sup>5</sup>

Following *Promises to Keep*, the higher education segments were required to come up with a concrete plan for reducing remediation by 1990. The Commission therefore put out a shorter, more performance-oriented report, the "CSU Plan to Reduce Remedial Activity, 1985 - 1990." This report suggested, for example, that one way cut back on remedial courses was to require that students take "but not to pass" the EPT as a *condition of admission* to any CSU school; however, the report writers also noted that "such a policy would clearly reduce the admissions pool well below the upper one-third of high school graduates called for in the Master Plan. CSU does not have the authority to make such a determination on its own" (1984, 19). In fact, the CSU cannot act unilaterally on any policy affecting admissions to its schools. The Master Plan stipulates that students in the upper 12.5% of their high school graduating classes are eligible for admission to the UC system; those in the upper 33.3% are eligible for the CSU; and anyone over the age of 18 is eligible for the community colleges, in effect making these colleges our open admissions schools in higher education.

In an attempt to cut back on remedial activities by the CSU system, the following initiatives were suggested by the "Plan":

- raise the number of courses students would be required to take in high school as prerequisites for entry into the CSU;
- carry out diagnostic testing in the high school to alert students to their deficiencies;
- improve pre-service teacher education;
- institute discussion between high school and university faculty regarding competencies required for admission to the CSU; and
- set up cooperative "arrangements" with the community colleges to teach remedial courses on their campuses.

The report projected that by 1990—just five years later—"88% of regularly admissible CSU first-time freshmen will demonstrate competence in writing on the EPT..." (32). Since in the 1983-84 school year nearly 52% of first time regularly admissible freshmen could not demonstrate competence on the EPT, a decline of those needing remediation to 12% in just five years would represent quite a significant reduction. However, the targets set were "modest" in the beginning (the

commission's term) from 1986 - 1988, but accelerated for the following years. Ironically, this follow-up report to *Promises to Keep* attempts to drastically reduce remediation within a period of five years, while *Promises* clearly states that remediation is "a problem of enormous magnitude and complexity in need of long-range solutions rather than short-term holding actions" (10). The five-year time line, however, had little noticeable effect on student preparedness. While the CSU universities worked to follow what the 1984 report recommended and the system and the state seemed to insist on, the recommendations were not strongly enforced. And other issues presented themselves.

## **Where EO665 Is Taking Us: 1994 to the Present**

What happened between 1984 and 1994? California went into a deep recession and severe cutbacks were made in classes and the faculty who taught them. By 1994, however, we were coming out of the hard monetary times, and we had a can-do Board of Trustees who were ready to respond to what they perceived as an educational crisis in California. Tests continued to show that students entering the CSU system were poorly prepared for writing and math, and those percentages had not changed much since 1984: 51% who entered the CSU had to take some sort of remedial course in writing. A report by the Academic Program Improvement Workgroup on Support for Underprepared Students ("API"), published in 1994, noted that "enrollment in remedial/developmental (including ESL) courses in the CSU continued to grow in the late 1980's [and] a reexamination of remedial enrollment in 1990-91 showed numbers still on the rise" (3).

This report, like *Promises to Keep*, was written by faculty who were knowledgeable about students who lacked the background they would need to perform successfully at the university. It defines the student who is "underprepared" as "one who requires additional academic work in order to be able to perform at a minimal level in university GE and discipline specific courses" ("API" 4), but it takes issue with such an easy definition: Does the problem for this underpreparedness reside in the student or in the university? If the student is underprepared, then actions, such as requiring remedial work or denying admission to students not ready for university work, are necessary. If, however, the university is underprepared, then remedies, such as providing "specialized courses aimed at expanding non-standard English competencies" and providing auxiliary services for the students need to be in place: "In such a formulation, the University would act as a community welcoming these individuals (who we say are admissible, anyway) and seeking ways to make them successful members of our community" ("API" 4). The API Faculty Workgroup reacts to the issues

around underprepared students both intellectually and sensitively. The reports that followed this one seem not to know what this group set out, or they chose to ignore many of its recommendations.

The problem of underprepared students was placed squarely with the students in the 1995 report by the Committee on Educational Policy. The chair of that committee and a member of the CSU Board of Trustees, Ralph Pesqueira, a restaurant owner from San Diego, led a nearly one-person crusade against remediation. He headed another group of trustees which held meetings at several CSU schools to hear what students, teachers, and the general public thought about the basic skills crisis. From these meetings came a report in which some heavy-handed suggestions were made. While these proposed changes have not been implemented, primarily because of the constraints imposed on the CSU by the Master Plan, they provide some chilling portents for what might still be attempted by this board of trustees. For example, the Board had intended that by Fall 2001 all entering freshmen with few exceptions would possess what they call "basic skills," a term which they do not define and which may refer simply to placing commas and periods in the right place.<sup>6</sup> First time freshmen would submit results of a basic skills assessment before registration, and these results "may require enrollment in a basic skills course *before* registering for their first term" at a CSU campus ("Subcommittee," emphasis added, 5) a plan which would send students to community colleges prior to their enrolling in a CSU.

There was even talk of requiring students to take the ACT or SAT, so that these scores would be available for all students who applied to the CSU. Neither of these exams has a writing component, as does the system wide English Placement Test. Development of an "experimental competency-based admission program" ("Support" 8) in which students would be required to meet certain performance criteria by the time they graduate from high school is looming on the horizon, although it has not yet been implemented. The Stanford 9 exam, a standardized test developed by Harcourt Educational Measurement and adopted statewide to test students in grades 2 through 11, appears to be a means to put such criteria in place. This test is already being suggested as a way to give cash rewards for schools whose students are successful on the exam, to decide on merit pay for teachers, and to determine advancement of students to the next grade. Governor Gray Davis is even suggesting that he will award \$1000 college scholarships to students who score in the top brackets of the Stanford 9, the standardized test that assesses how well students have met grade-level standard, although the test has proved problematic in California due to a lack of alignment between the state curriculum and the content tested for on the exam.

For the follow-up report, published in July of 1995, the other requirements proposed by the committee appeared to administrators of university writing programs to set out expectations that could hardly be met. Here is one example: Until Fall 2001, the committee recommendation stipulated that students whose scores indicated that they must take remedial course work would be required to begin their remediation in their first term of enrollment "so that they will be able to perform at acceptable levels in General Education courses" ("Report" 10). However, after that date, incoming freshmen would not be admitted to the university "if they require remedial study" (10). It seems that the Board of Trustees was thinking along the same draconian lines as those responsible for CUNY's changes in remedial policy — their corporate version uses the phrase "expedite [students'] acquisition of basic skills" —, even if, in the end, they were prevented from enacting them because the proposal went against the Master Plan.<sup>7</sup> Sensibly, this proposal was transformed in the final version of EO665, so that the following statement has become the one which all CSU schools are required to follow: "[B]y fall 2001 key implementation components, e.g., standards, assessment, early intervention, will be in place leading to the expectation that by fall 2001 there will be a 10 percentage point decline in the number of regularly admitted new freshmen needing remediation . . . and that by fall 2007 no more than 10% of these students will require remediation" ("Precollegiate" 6). Those of us administering writing programs gave a collective sigh of relief. We had time to re-examine our programs and effect changes that might be needed.

First time freshmen are now required to take the English Placement Test (EPT) once they are accepted at a CSU school and to begin remediation in their first semester. Students cannot wait a semester or two, or even a year or two, before they begin their writing courses, which has happened in the past. This requirement is one that writing program administrators have no quarrel with, since we know that students should begin writing courses as soon as they enter the university. However, with 22 campuses forced to meet this goal in Fall 1998, we all had to scramble to find instructors. At Fullerton, for example, we went from 23 sections of Developmental Writing in Fall 1997 to 50 sections in Fall 1998. This hiring dilemma was especially acute in the greater Los Angeles area where six campuses needed far more instructors than they had ever hired previously, Fullerton among them, and we were often drawing from the same pool of adjuncts. These adjuncts had more teaching that fall than they could handle. Yet the *LA Times* editorial titled "College Is for the Prepared" implied that the focus on remedial education was "draining professors' time." In reality on our campus, Gerri McNenny was the only full time faculty member who taught one of those 50 sections at CSUF that semester. The

*Times* failed to note later that many of those instructors who were hired to meet the greater number of remedial sections of writing were quietly let go in the spring when the number of sections was reduced by over half.

Students must complete their remediation within one calendar year or they will be disenrolled from the university. Cal State Fullerton disenrolled 3% of the first-time freshmen who enrolled in Fall 1998 and had not completed their remediation by Fall 1999. This figure was 7% system wide. These figures indicate that 97% of those needing remediation at CSUF were successfully remediated under the one-year mandate. In fact, this percentage held true for our Developmental Writing Program prior to the institution of EO665. We continued to do well those things we had been doing well all along. Whether setting deadlines will ensure the reductions in remediation that the board is demanding over the next seven years remains to be seen, but several realities argue against the board's optimism. Right now California ranks about 10<sup>th</sup> from the bottom in per pupil expenditure; a nine million dollar influx of money for collaborative projects between high schools and CSU schools cannot quickly change years of low state expenditures on education. When one considers that California is probably one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse states in the country, that many of its students do not have the advantage of well-supported schools, that English classes range in size from 35 to 45 students, and that five such classes are assigned to teachers each day, how, then, will these mandated changes be effected? An ironic note here: our current chancellor, Charles Reed, whom the *LA Times* affectionately dubs the "Vince Lombardi of higher education," wants to continue to increase the numbers of students who enter CSU campuses in the next 10 years to accommodate the influx of students now arriving on campuses with Tidal Wave II. Also referred to as the "Baby Boom Echo" by the U.S. Department of Education, this surge in the school age population is predicted to add 428,000 students to California's public schools by 2009 (*LA Times* 8/20/00, 33). EO665 has Reed's blessing. Can he—and we—have both diversity and access at the same time, given the reduction in remedial programs proposed by the CSU trustees?

### **EO665: The Rhetoric of Access with Diversity**

Throughout the reports generated by the state and/or the CSU over the past 40 years, one of the issues bound up with remediation deals with providing access for the students the CSU is required to serve under the Master Plan. EO665, the latest directive, does not exclude anyone who meets the basic requirements for admission. In fact,

the order reads as follows: any student who enrolls as a freshman and cannot show "requisite competence" in written English must take "appropriate remedial or developmental programs/activities during the first term of enrollment and each subsequent term" until competency has been demonstrated (EO665, 9). However, it does stipulate that time limits should be established, and students "who are not making adequate progress in developing foundational skills [should] consider enrolling in other educational institutions as appropriate" (9). As noted earlier, the limit is set at one year; by that time students must be ready for the credit-bearing course in writing or they will be disenrolled from the university. The *LA Times* front page headline regarding enforcement of this limit was titled, "Cal State Boots Students Weak in Basic Skills", and it quoted Chancellor Reed as saying that the CSU wants to be "firm and fair. . . . The message is that we mean business" (November 18, 1999 1).

However, this "business" is not neutral. It affects thousands of students who apply to the CSU. When the Master Plan was developed and went into effect in 1960, California had a fairly homogeneous population, the largest percentage being white, native English speakers, many of whom were able to afford a college education. By 1987, when the Master Plan was reviewed, that population had changed dramatically and the report takes note of this fact in its section titled "Toward Greater Equity." The commission stated that to achieve educational equity, the campuses should work toward increasing on campus the numbers of "minorities and women students." Their report also states that remediation "is essential to retention" (27), although the members of the commission are careful to specify that both the UC and the CSU must "establish and maintain clearly defined academic floors below which they shall not offer remedial courses and *they shall eventually phase-out [sic] remedial instruction*, other than that required for reentry students, as preparation of students by the public schools improves" (emphasis added, 28). Here again one finds a recurring theme from the 80s on: remediation can be tolerated but only for limited periods of time. When remediation is thought of simply as a term rather than as a population of students, limits for it are easy to set.

In 1987, when Mary Kay Crouch was administering the Developmental Writing Program at CSUF, many of the students who took the course were non-native speakers of English, primarily Vietnamese. Like many other campuses in the system, Fullerton has no ESL program, so students in need of language development, and perhaps needing to develop their writing skills as well, are funneled into the remedial course. As demographics began to change, more and more students—often the first in their families to attend a university—came from the large Mexican American population that lives in Orange County.<sup>8</sup> Similar situations existed at other CSU campuses, especially



at CSU Los Angeles and San Francisco State which serve large urban populations.

Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner point out in a recent article that "institutions across the nation expect to serve a new student body in not only race and ethnicity but also economic class, gender, sex, age, and educational or work experience" (43). This is certainly true of the CSU system and its stated policy which intends to "maximize access to a university education guaranteed by the Master Plan, and . . . promote excellence with diversity within the student body of the CSU" ("Brief" 2). However, their diversity is acceptable, it seems, only if they can turn themselves into what the university sees as the right kind of students, ones who need no real help beyond financial assistance once they are accepted. Lu and Horner argue that the theory and praxis which has developed from Basic Writing as an area of study "can provide insights on how to improve student retention, especially the retention of those students who have taken seriously our catalogued expectations of diversity . . ." (48).

Unfortunately, boards of trustees do not look at this research, and few if any who carry out research on Basic Writing are asked to sit on state commissions and committees which make decisions affecting the students who take Basic Writing courses. The CSU Board of Trustees has bought into the notion that the barbarians—these diverse students who represent "a source of great pride"—are at the gates when it says that providing courses in "precollegiate skills . . . threaten the university's ability to offer undergraduate instruction at a level that will prepare a competitive workforce and an enlightened citizenry" (emphasis added, "Item" 3). The Institute for Higher Education Policy, which published a report on college remediation in 1998, argues that remediation for three centuries has been and still is important to the enterprise of higher education and that it will continue to be so as colleges and universities educate more and more students who want to pursue college degrees. In fact, the report states flatly that remedial education "will continue to be a core function of higher education for the foreseeable future" (6). If this report is correct, then the university must look at all of the students, including those of different ethnicities, races, and economic levels, who meet its admissions requirements as the future competitive workforce and enlightened citizens it seeks to educate.

The report which the Board of Trustees's Subcommittee published makes the point that the CSU is committed to equity and diversity and describes the CSU as a system "open to students from all social and economic backgrounds, [which] enrolls the most culturally diverse student body of any senior college system in the nation, a student body that closely mirrors the diversity of California's population" ("Precollegiate," Attachment B, np). But while the Board of Trustees



takes pride in this, it is of two minds about the situation. On the one hand, it applauds diversity; on the other it wants to homogenize the population the CSU serves by greatly reducing the kinds of courses which will serve students who bring diversity to the campuses. One cannot argue that it is a good thing when nearly 50% of entering freshmen need remedial course work in English, especially when the students themselves are unhappy when placed in such courses. However, when faculty respond to the question of remediation by saying that they are concerned that they can "no longer conduct many undergraduate courses at a level that fully reflects collegiate expectations" ("Item," 3), one has to wonder if these professors are decrying a lack of student skills or the increasing numbers of students who look very different from the largely white male professorate. As Mary Soliday writes in a forthcoming essay, the university seems to have a "need to admit a new population of students without transforming the traditional college" ("Ideologies of Access"). Alexander Astin puts it less subtly: "If bright students enroll at our institution and take our classes, this reflects well on our own brightness. . . . [I]f our students are not so smart, then this reflects poorly on us" (3). In other words, the logic that drives the CSU report on remediation seems to dictate that we should only admit students who already know what we will teach them.

## **"Remediation": Where High School and College Standards Meet**

We turn now to the logical alternative to providing academic support to underprepared college students—that of preempting any such need by addressing students' academic preparation at the high school level. Indeed, the need to strengthen high school students' college readiness had been anticipated at the national and state levels many years prior to the imposition of Executive Order 665. As mentioned earlier, in 1994 the federal government passed Goals 2000: Educate America Act, a piece of legislation that formally called for state and local school districts to develop statewide standards for schools in a "top-down and bottom-up" effort by supporting school reform at the state and local levels through the use of federal grant money. (Bodell; *Goals 2000* 2). Part of the overall reform effort advocated in that document called for improved teacher education and collaboration between local school districts and colleges and universities to articulate performance expectations for students and to align curricula so that students arrived at institutions of higher education fully prepared to succeed. The results, the *Goals 2000* report issued four years later tells us, are promising: "schools and school systems are organizing themselves around teaching and learning to high expectations, and students are

beginning to meet these high standards" (2). Others, however, are less sanguine about the imposition of statewide standards.<sup>9</sup>

Coming at the issue of student achievement from another angle is the "Statewide Remedial Education Policies" report, issued in 1998 by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), "a nationwide association of chief executive officers serving statewide coordinating boards and governing boards of postsecondary education" (SHEEO). In that report, Edward Crowe, Senior Associate Director at the Arkansas Department of Higher Education and a member of the team conducting the nationwide study of remediation policies in the 50 states, recommends the establishment of K-16 partnerships as a more effective, systemic approach to addressing the needs of underprepared students. The conclusions reached by many states participating in the study are that K-16 partnerships are a key component in identifying and addressing students' needs, with universities and colleges working with local school districts to implement "comprehensive studies of remediation and its causes, formal partnership structures that run across education and higher education systems within [those] states [with K-16 partnership programs] and new policies to deal with remediation issues at all levels of the K-16 system." (Crowe 6).

In step with these moves toward statewide standardization and curricular alignment between the high schools and colleges, the CSU Committee on Educational Policy, in its report on "Precollegiate Skills Instruction," saw as a key component the need to strengthen the academic preparation of CSU first-year students through a number of initiatives, including the need to work together with the K-12 system to "intensify and expand CSU's work with elementary and secondary schools . . . to ensure that students arrive ready for college" ("Precollegiate Skills"). Here the CSU listed a number of strategies needed to achieve the goal of a decreased need for remediation. These include, among others, the following:

Develop assessment and intervention programs that would help determine the skill levels of high school students with the intent to identify the remedial and developmental needs of college-bound students early enough to address them while the students are still in high school. . . . Expand the use of CSU students as interns to provide assistance to skill instruction in middle and high schools. . . . [and] communicate CSU collegiate skill standards and expectations clearly and early to students, parents, schools, and communities." ( "Precollegiate Skills" )

With a new infusion of funds from the legislature, the CSU system is

now able to fund various initiatives to implement their plans for reducing remediation at the college level.

## **CSU's Solution to the Remediation Crisis**

In the fall of 1999, the California state legislature provided the CSU system with nine million dollars "to work collaboratively with selected California high schools that send the most students to CSU who need remediation in English or mathematics, or both" (Spence). The call for proposals to implement the CSU-High School Collaborative Academic Preparation Initiatives (CAPI) was sent out with the express purpose "of reducing the need for collegiate-level remediation and of assisting high school efforts to apply new content, performance, and graduation standards," California's newly adopted Content Standards. The intent of the initiative was laudable: "to clarify and bring into closer alignment CSU academic preparation standards and high school content and performance standards" (Spence). In effect, the state and the CSU system provided a funded mandate to extend the dialogue between public high schools and institutions of higher education for the purpose of meeting mutual goals.

With the call for proposals for the Collaborative Academic Preparations Initiative, we see a well-intentioned alignment of the various components surrounding college readiness—that of high school content standards, performance standards, and college entrance requirements. Through K-16 partnerships, both universities in the CSU system and the high schools hope to articulate and clarify for students, parents, and administrators alike the ways in which students can better prepare themselves to meet the challenges of college. What we must ask ourselves is whether the means for the assessment of college readiness truly measures students' achievement.

In the instructions given to applicants of the grant proposal, the assessment of the success of the CSU/High School Collaborative Initiative in "preparing students for college" is directly tied to students' success on the English Placement Test, the most heavily weighted part of which consists of a timed impromptu writing assessment instrument in which students are given 45 minutes to respond to a previously unknown topic. Moreover, in the evaluation component of the grant, CSU administration officials state that "Growth in writing skills [for students participating in the grant initiative] will be measured using services of the CSU/Diagnostic Writing Service," an online counterpart of the English Placement Test that duplicates the conditions of the EPT.

Even more revealing is the assessment of participating high school teachers and what they learned from the collaboration. The conditions

of the CSU/High School Collaborative Grant state that all participating teachers will be assessed by a combination of questionnaire and interview. All teachers who attend the "College Preparatory Institute" colloquium will complete a questionnaire focused on teachers' familiarity with the CSU/Diagnostic Writing Service. One or two teachers from each school will be randomly selected for follow-up, in-depth interviews about the teachers' curricular decision-making. At the end of the school year, the participating teachers will complete a second questionnaire focused on the extent to which they will use the CSUDWS in the future and what they learned from the EPT workshop. (Grant Proposal 5).

What is most striking in the layout of the grant, in the instructions given to each CSU campus, is the assumption that enriching the high school language arts environment and supporting teachers in the teaching of writing is synonymous with the assessment provided by the use of a single timed impromptu writing sample and the instructors' understanding of the demands of that instrument of assessment. For years, the use of the timed impromptu essay test as an accurate indicator of students' writing competence has been roundly challenged (Shor; Gleason; Soliday; Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers). As far back as 1977, Mina Shaughnessy challenged the adequacy of timed writing tests as placement instruments. The absence of an authentic rhetorical situation, along with the artificiality of responding to a prompt on a topic that may be of little interest or for which the student possesses little background knowledge, all conspire to create an awkwardness within the writer that many find hard to overcome. As Shaughnessy put it, "Without strategies for generating real thought, without an audience he cares to write for, the writer must eke out his first sentence by means of redundancy and digression, strategies that inevitably disengage him from his grammatical intuitions as well as his thought" (82).

Another factor that comes into play in the staging of the timed writing test is the degree to which the test mirrors a student's sense of ease in participating in a typically middle-class Western pursuit, advancing his or her point of view authoritatively. As Tom Fox points out, "These [placement] exams test both writing ability in a timed-test context and the degree of comfort and authority that students feel in such circumstances. This second fact may be the reason for the higher representation of socially marginalized students in basic writing programs" (73). If students have been schooled in environments that fail to emphasize that sense of authority and voice, as is often the case in working class and lower income schools (Anyon) or in different cultural contexts, then student performance in timed writing situations may fail to measure up to the tacit expectations of test readers.

The most compelling criticism of a heavy reliance on the timed

impromptu writing test as the measure of writing competence comes from nationally recognized authorities on writing assessment, the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Committee on Assessment. In 1994, the committee released a position statement articulating the professional stance of the CCCC on this issue. In addition to acknowledging the social and contextualized nature of language usage along with the importance of authentic rhetorical situations in writing assessment, the CCCC Committee on Assessment also noted the limitations of a single timed writing evaluation instrument by asserting the following:

... any individual's writing "ability" is a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts, and individual ability fluctuates unevenly among these varieties. Consequently, one piece of writing—even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions—can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions [such as admission and placement]. Ideally, such literacy must be assessed by more than one piece of writing, in more than one genre, written on different occasions, for different audiences, and evaluated by multiple readers. This realization has led many institutions and programs across the country to use portfolio assessment. ("Writing Assessment")

While portfolio placement may not be a viable option for placement in the CSU, due to the costly and time-consuming process, many universities have moved to portfolios as a valid means of placement, including the University of Arizona, Miami University of Ohio, and others (Borrowman; Sommers, Black, Daiker, and Stygall; Yancey and Weiser).

More to the point, we were concerned with the impact that an emphasis on timed impromptu writing tests would have in the classroom, on the curriculum and on the energy spent preparing for them. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson notes that no matter how process-centered the writing class may be, if students must do well on a timed writing test, "producing a single piece of writing with no chance for revisions, then a pedagogy emphasizing a few narrow forms of argumentation and surface correctness prevails" (Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers 448). By limiting course content, she argues, the test, along with the practice of teaching to the test, hardly encourages students to make a commitment to literacy as a lifestyle that in the final analysis is what truly prepares them for college. With these considerations in mind, knowing the research and scholarship surrounding the timed impromptu writing test, we set out to structure equitable and informed partnerships with our local high schools.

## **Establishing Equitable Partnerships**

High school/university partnerships hold enormous potential, yet the dialogue that exists at present between many high schools and local universities is often vague at best, at worst condescending and disparaging of the efforts that high school English teachers make in preparing students for college writing. Too often universities fail to work equitably with high schools, and the potential dialogue between the two levels of education breaks down at a number of points. Universities often fail to communicate the expectations for writing proficiency and critical thinking which vary from institution to institution. At the same time, high school English instructors rarely receive any feedback about which students succeed at the college level. While they are generally well prepared to teach literature, many teachers have not received any concentrated preparation for the teaching of writing. Nor is there always a clear correlation drawn between the work a student does in high school English classes and the success he or she experiences in college-level writing courses and on placement tests. To those outside the educational system, the most visible sign of the gaps in teachers' and students' understandings of expectations for writing competence are evident in the placement results. In the CSU system, the most recent statistic shows that 47% of all eligible students ranking in the top two-thirds of all high school students place into what is commonly referred to as "remedial writing" after taking the English Placement Test ("CSU Remediation").

Given the parameters of the CAPI Grant, in which every measure of success is tied to the results of a controversial placement instrument and in a situation in which a top-down relationship has traditionally existed between universities and high schools, we decided to do our best to work around these conditions. We set out to prioritize those issues that we felt were most conducive to overall gains in writing competence and literacy and in establishing equitable relationships with the participating teachers at the four high schools that had chosen to work with us on this project. We both believe that any successful collaboration between universities and high schools must recognize and materially validate the professional status and expertise of high school teachers while at the same time making available to them our own expertise in Composition and Rhetoric. For these reasons, we chose a Freirean model as the basis for the framework of our joint efforts, which emphasized the high school community's role in problem identification, problem solving, and collective action. We felt strongly that in order to have any positive impact on students' writing and teachers' knowledge of writing instruction, teachers had to have a major role in articulating what their students' needs were and in determin-

ing how to address those needs.

One of us, Gerri McNenny, was first introduced to the principles of Paulo Freire's work, not through the reading of his theoretical works, but through the implementation of those principles while working in the Peace Corps. The essence of Freire's approach to community work, it seemed at that time, emphasized the need to rely on the people living in the midst of a situation to codify and problematize that situation for themselves. Their ability to "name the world," so central to Freire's approach to community work, was the single most important factor in their sense of empowerment and their ability to act in that particular context.

As we set out to design a high school/ university partnership, we saw these same conditions as necessary to the success of any joint venture. Despite the complexities of Freire's theoretical framework, we still believed that a Freirean model of community work would be the most appropriate approach. As Denis Goulet notes in his introduction to *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire clearly understood the adaptive nature of the liberatory pedagogy he sought to interject into the communities that he and his fellow cultural workers lived in:

Paulo Freire's central message is that one can know only to the extent that one "problematizes" the natural, cultural and historical reality in which s/he is immersed. Problematizing is the antithesis of the technocrat's "problem-solving" stance. In the latter approach, an expert takes some distance from reality, analyzes it into component parts, devises means for resolving difficulties in the most efficient way, and then dictates a strategy or policy. Such problem-solving, according to Freire, distorts the totality of human experience by reducing it to those dimensions which are amenable to treatment as mere difficulties to be solved. But to "problematize" in his sense is to associate an entire populace to the task of codifying total reality into symbols which can generate critical consciousness and empower them to alter their relations with nature and social forces. (ix)

This reflective group exercise is achieved only if participants experience their roles in the dialogue as pivotal to the transformation of their situation. By doing so, community members, in this case high school professionals with ample experience and education, "become transforming agents of their social reality. Only thus do people become subjects, instead of objects, of their own history" (Goulet ix).

With these rather high ideals in mind, we collaborated with high school participants to design a needs assessment questionnaire to identify and codify site-specific issues and to initiate a dialogue among



ourselves for the purpose of improving and encouraging students' reading and writing. We invited high school teachers who wished to participate in the collaborative project to come talk about their perceptions of students' impediments to improved writing and literacy and to identify strategies for addressing their needs. We also asked high school professionals to identify for themselves what they believed would be appropriate roles for university collaborators to play in working with high school instructors. We attempted to leave the dialogue as open-ended as possible.

As we met to identify and discuss key issues, what really impressed us was the incisiveness of our high school colleagues' observations. In their responses to the needs assessment, they identified key impediments to student progress and preparation for college level writing. They determined what kinds of collaboration and intervention would work best for them in their contexts, and they let us know exactly what they needed from us as university colleagues to help them improve student writing.

Among the hurdles they face, high school teachers noted class size as the foremost, with 38-40 students per class, with five sections per day, for a total of 200 students contacted each day. As a result, teachers have no time to talk individually with students about their writing. Moreover, assuming that each essay can be read and commented on in a fifteen- to twenty-minute period, if a teacher assigns one essay assignment to her classes, that two- to three-page assignment will take each teacher from fifty to sixty-six hours to grade. This work is in addition to a full week of planning classes and teaching five sections per day. Thus, high school English teachers have significant demands placed on them for work hours outside the classroom.

Participating teachers also noted a decrease in the amount of time junior high schools devote to language arts, along with a lack of specialized training to deal with developmentally delayed students and their writing. Instructors also face an increase in the number of requirements in the curriculum that have in turn reduced the time for writing instruction. A new speech component has been added to the high school curriculum, to meet the mandates of the California Content Standards document, and that requirement also cuts into time for writing. A wide range of skill levels in any given class, along with limited staff development planning and utilization and a lack of print literacy as a lifestyle for students, were all identified as impediments.

With all of these difficulties, teachers still assign and respond to quite a lot of writing. Honors seniors write nine essays a semester at one school. Freshmen write four essays per semester, with the number of essays varying for each level. District and state standards require that students write narrative, descriptive, expository, and persuasive essays, which include autobiographical incident, biographical incident,

comparison/contrast, cause and effect, division analysis, process analysis, and example. Teachers thus noted the extraordinary curricular demands to organically integrate these genres into the school year.

Perhaps most interesting to us were the activities that high school teachers identified as being potentially beneficial and appropriate for our project. They requested presentations of college-level expectations for writing, more information about the content of the Developmental Writing course at Cal State Fullerton, statistics on how their seniors do on the EPT, more information about what kinds of questions are asked on the English Placement Test, and samples of prompts and syllabi. Nearly all indicated a desire to continue meeting together at symposia in which high school and university professionals could discuss issues of articulation to college for an increasingly complex student community. With a large population of working class students holding 20- to 40-hour a week jobs and with a large percentage of the students coming from homes in which English is not their first language, the student community that both the university and high school instructors confront continues to create some interesting challenges. As we discussed these issues, we all agreed that working together to understand those challenges is something we should have done long ago.

The types of support that teachers determined would be most appropriate in working with them in the classroom range from in-class workshops for college prep students on timed impromptu writing tests to teacher workshops that include instruction on what the EPT consists of, its rating systems, and its criteria for success on the placement instruments. They indicated that students need more practice and feedback for the timed impromptu essay, along with strategies for time management and composing in a timed writing situation. Developing a common language to discuss writing and a greater ease with a timed writing situation were also high on the list.

For both of us as co-coordinators of the project, what mattered most was the level of investment that a needs assessment engendered among our high school colleagues. By asking them to identify the issues that we need to deal with together, along with what they see as appropriate site-specific strategies for supporting them with their writing instruction, we were able to elicit a plan that we could come back to. Since the administration of the questionnaire, we have proposed a teacher-researcher collaboration between university and high school participants. Through the teacher-researcher project, we will work with teachers to identify authentic research questions and appropriate research methodologies for studying and evaluating our collective efforts to improve students' writing. By generating research methods suitable to the rhythms of their teaching and writing and by meeting together to share our findings from the various classroom research projects we have launched, we hope to build on the dialogue that will

enable all of us to study the classroom context together, designing action research agendas that enable teachers to own the research process in ways that a top-down research agenda disallows (Bisplinghoff; Ray). What is most essential is that our high school colleagues experience their participation in this project as fellow professionals, fully capable of determining what strategies and interventions will work for them. Regardless of what changes we make collectively in the project plan, we know that their participation will help to shape a project that we hope makes a difference for them and their students.

## **Coda**

Looking historically at the CSU's attempts to grapple with what it views as the "problem" of remediation, we see that the solutions proposed during each cycle of concern have rarely varied. The major impetus toward real change in the number of students requiring remediation, working at increasing literacy skills throughout the entire educational system in California, has come about because at the moment, at least, the state is in the best financial situation it has enjoyed for several decades, even as its ranking in the nation's schooling systems places it in the lowest 25% (Baron). Money is available for collaborative projects, and the state finds that it can pay to reduce class size in ninth grade English to twenty students per class, thus enabling teachers to work more effectively in developing literacy skills. Money is also available for tutors from the university to work in the schools in several outreach programs. Teacher education programs are being funded by the state legislature to strengthen their academic content. The Collaborative Academic Preparation Initiatives project we are working on was impossible six or seven years ago when CSU schools had to operate under tight budgetary constraints.

One wonders, however, what this most recent infusion of money will bring. With classes in the high schools from the sophomore to the senior level still averaging 35 to 40 students each, what impact will an occasional tutor or improved teacher training have in the long run? Teachers still struggle with forty to sixty hours of grading per week after assigning a simple two or three page assignment. We must also recognize that the mission of the high schools varies from that of the university. To assume otherwise would be to appropriate the prerogative of the high schools to work within their communities and respond to their needs.

## Notes

1. These editorials reflect, as well, the push for tougher standards and more testing, two issues that make the news regularly. On September 9, 1999, a *Times*' editorial stated almost gleefully that if students cannot meet proficiency standard of EO665 by the end of their first year then "... it's back to community college to finish remedial work." Of course, these students didn't come *from* a community college which the *Times* suggests sending them back to. In a November 22, 1999 editorial, the paper—again rather gleefully—noted that "school officials announced that they were kicking out 5% of last year's freshman class" who did not pass remedial English and/or math courses. Colleges and taxpayers, it said, should not be paying for "earlier educational failures." Here is the get-tough policy that plays so well among those who write about education today and that ignores the reality of poor schools with even poorer funding. It is no wonder, as stated further on in this essay, that the *Times* is so enamored of the former football star Charles Reed who now sits in the CSU chancellor's office, who is promising reforms.

2. The Master Plan was set up to stem "intersegmental competition" among the public universities and community colleges (MPR, 3). The mission of the University of California was established as offering, for example, professional education through the doctoral degree, while the CSU was to take as its purview "professional education, including teacher education, through the master's degree" (MPR, 11) Community colleges offer vocational as well as academic instruction and "provide remedial instruction for students inadequately prepared for postsecondary education" (MPR, 10).

3. Much of the research cited in the report comes from developmental education studies. Interestingly, although Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* is listed in the References at the end of the report, no internal citation to her work can be found. Still, the report takes a realistic and reasonable look at remediation.

4. The report's writers base their choice of "remedial" and "remediation" on the work of K. Patricia Cross, who distinguishes the terms in this way:

If the purpose of the program is to overcome *academic deficiencies*, I would term the program remedial, in the standard dictionary sense in which remediation is concerned with correcting weaknesses. If, however, the purpose of the program is to develop the diverse talents of students, whether academic or not, I would term the program developmental. Its mission is

to give attention to the fullest possible development of talent and to develop strengths as well as to correct weaknesses (31).

In the 1990s, commissions and members of the BOT who wrote about remediation seemed not to know that *Promises to Keep* had defined terms and provided an explanation for its choice. The "Report of the Subcommittee on Remedial Education, Executive Summary" (July, 1995) uses developmental and remedial interchangeably, often writing these words as "remedial/developmental." A June 1994 report on underprepared students in fact indicated that the system had no working definition of these words ("API" 3). The term developmental has been used in reports since 1994 to describe students who are non-native speakers of English and have trouble with written communication, although this term has not actually been defined in the reports.

5. The math department at Cal State Fullerton hired a local community college to teach its remedial courses (that is, until the dean of the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics realized that over \$40,000 annually was going to the local college instead of to his school), as did other CSU schools. Many CSUs placed the remedial English courses in basic skills departments or hired community college instructors to teach these courses, and paid the teachers lower, community college wages, although others, including CSUF, retained control of its Developmental Writing courses and continue to teach them through the English Department.

6. Many terms which the BOT uses are not well defined. The Committee on Educational Policy uses other terms in its report which are also not well defined, terms like "remedial/developmental," "precollegiate skills," and "basic skills." For example, precollegiate skills is defined in this way: "the term . . . means attainment of the understanding and knowledge that enable students to handle the demands of beginning university study" (1996, 3). This is a non-definition if ever there was one.

7. Here is a case of business running education the way business runs itself. Under the heading "Implementation" in the 1995 report, the BOT states that the five-year phase-in plan is crucial. "This will enable all students in the 'pipeline' ample time to develop the required skills in English and mathematics" (12). The board believed that five years would be ample time to make the secondary schools aware of the changes in CSU policy and to give the CSU schools time to assist secondary schools in developing "new tools for learning basic skills." The sentiment seems to be that if five years works to change the assembly line for Ford Motor Company, for example, it can certainly work for educational reform.

8. Thomas Saenz of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund notes that "Cal State is a prime avenue for Latinos to get a bachelor's degree." (Quoted in the *Times*, Nov. 18, 1999)

9. The debates surrounding statewide standards for schools have been developing apace with state and local efforts, and many valid objections to state-imposed curricula have been posed, including criticisms involving the wide ranging authority of the state to shape culture (Sizer 73), to determine the sequence of learning, in the sciences, for instance (Nathan 54), to dictate a laundry list of facts and skills (Nash 47) and to require excessive quantities of knowledge, as in Massachusetts' fourth-grade requirement that all students be responsible for world history to A.D. 500 and U.S. history up to 1865 (Nash 46). Others note the propensity of standards to set up the state as a central authority which is then empowered to dictate and require certain ways of knowing and thereby suppress teacher innovation and democratic education (Meier 6; Sizer 73). Still others note the ways in which standardized tests cannot begin to measure the richness of an individual's intelligence, an argument amply supported in Peter Sacks' *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do to Change It*. One of the more useful critiques comes from Bob Chase, president of the National Education Association, an organization representing 2.4 million teachers across the nation. Chase concedes that standards can indeed be effective in promoting student learning, but only if certain conditions are met: "First of all, the standards must reflect the wisdom of parents and classroom teachers. Second, the curricula we teach must be aligned with the new standards. Third, teachers must be provided the professional development they need to incorporate the new standards into their teaching practice. Fourth, we must insist that no single high-stakes test can measure the academic progress of any student—that multiple indicators must be employed." (41). Chase's criteria receive support from educators in other areas, especially his insistence on multiple indicators of student achievement (CCCC Position on Assessment). What is most striking is his final condition, that of validity in assessment: "It is intellectually and morally dishonest to raise the bar for all students to a level that is currently being reached by only a relatively few" (41), a mindset akin to the character's belief in the film *Field of Dreams*: "If we set high standards, students will magically achieve" (41-42). All of these criticisms come into play when discussions about alignment of student achievement with statewide standards and college-level expectations begin.

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