EDITORS' COLUMN

Many instructors of basic writing these days seem to know what it means to work at cross purposes—with students, sometimes, but more generally with programs, departments, and institutions which operate in an ever-widening, increasingly public field of vision. Certainly it is possible to see the extended base of conversations around basic writing as a good thing—more people bringing the light of ideas to one of the most centrally defining aspects of access and equity in education today. Still, too many classrooms are not yet benefiting from this debate. Instead, many classrooms have become echo chambers for others' voices, including those of policy-makers and standards advocates not present there, who mark what instructors should be teaching, and what students need to learn. Amid the noise, instructors encounter their students—individuals with discursive talents and capacities often not accounted for in standards criteria or program objectives. They come with their own purposes for learning, and notions of success, too. Such capacities are discoverable when students are supported with confidence by teachers whose purposes they understand to be aligned with theirs, and who seek partnership with students in classrooms as shared, democratic spaces.

The Fall 2009 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* enters the debate around standards, equity, and access as it concerns basic writing students and classrooms. Each article shows how the perceived need for standards has impacted basic writing as an endeavor of access on campuses across the nation. Institutions' responses to the trends and pressures to support basic writers, *if they must*, outside of developmental courses and designations, have generated an impressive variety of models to benefit basic writers, while, at the same time, they partially, or wholly, eclipse the term. Thus we find this time of forced innovations is also one of self-scrutiny. Driving teachers' and program directors' reportage on these new programs are renewed reflections of the early days of Open Admissions, including examination of its foundational purposes. Instituting new programs in today's political and educational climate is complicated, as we acknowledge the possibility of narrowing students' learning in trying to balance mandates to remediate in "do more with less" fashion. As Stanford T. Goto pointed out in 2002 in this journal,[1] it is faulty to assume that models of access are always progressive, even when people who have taught basic writing for years have had a

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[1] Goto, Stanford T. "Basic Writing and Policy Reform: Why We Keep Talking Past Each Other." *Journal of Basic Writing* 21: 2 (2002): 4-20. Print.

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hand in conceiving them. We need to recognize when our schemes for success duplicate old problems of limited thinking, and strive for wider, more expansive, conceptualizations of student progress.

In the lead article, "Critical Pedagogy Is Too Big to Fail," Ira Shor demonstrates that classrooms are zones of standards reform which teachers impact in ways that both mirror and precede others' imposition of standards upon them. An eminent voice on the politics of the classroom, Shor responds to "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching" by Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow.[2] Shor presents his own approach to classroom negotiation and contract grading as a means for resisting the terms and relationships of a market economy wherein students become consumers, and teachers become suppliers of isolatable, knowledge-based, commodities. Traversing the borders of means and metaphor, contracts do more than clarify the rules for grading in order to ease students' dismay and confusion; they also function emblematically to redefine student agency: Who gets to determine the modes of evaluation? To what extent are the modes and criteria of grading negotiable? What mechanisms exist, if any, to urge improvements to the current system? When conceived democratically, contracts speak to matters of standards at the site of students' most immediate experience of access—the classroom—while at the same time constituting the classroom as a space of collaborative, critical engagement. Locating questions of standards at the base most commonly associated with teacher control, Shor proves that no measure of standards reform, when borne out in classrooms, is ever fully politically contained there.

The next article likewise leads us to consider standards beyond the classroom, with attention to the dominant terms used to speak about student progress and "success." In "Measuring Success in Summer Bridge Programs: Retention Efforts and Basic Writing," Matthew Kilian McCurrie goes beyond the usual reportage of numbers detailing this or that increase, slight or significant, in raising standards or retention rates. In the case of a summer bridge experience for students of low-income, non-majority, backgrounds at private, four-year, Columbia College Chicago, McCurrie shows that the terms left out of standards debates are often teachers' and students' ideas about success. On its first run, Columbia College Chicago's Summer Bridge Program emphasized many of the features typically included in transitional programs in developmental English. There was plenty of opportunity for students to explore affective issues related to their new academic course of

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[2] *College Composition and Communication* 61.2 (2009): 244-68. Print.

travel and to experience some reading and writing in personally relevant ways. But upon reflection, teachers felt that the program adhered too strictly to institutional emphasis on "making it" to first-year English, with pass rates for that course (roughly 50%) duly noted. Real innovation emerged as teachers considered the actual rigors of first-year English and writing in the other subject areas. The idea of transition, they believed, needed to include the understanding that students had not yet fully committed to college and were owed a clearer sense of what college demanded of them before they could make a true choice. Redefining success, teachers reconsidered students as agents, not enrollment numbers. Students too, when asked, defined success in holistic, life-relevant terms.

"The Accelerated Learning Program: Throwing Open the Gates" details another innovative program (this one at the Community College of Baltimore County) meant to transition basic writers into the mainstream. Authors Peter Adams, Sarah Gearhart, Robert Miller, and Anne Roberts straddle the complexities of standards-sensitive innovation, while staying critical of measures that may negatively impact students' agency and integration in a community of learners. Employing the metaphor of the pipeline, with its negative connotations of "leakage" and unilateral transport (for a critique of this metaphor, see Goto [2002]), they problematize easy ways of measuring the effectiveness of basic writing programs by pass rates in first-year English. Upon examining the "pretty good" pass rate of basic writing students who later took first-year composition (81%), one of the authors, Adams, decided that there might be more to this story of student "progress." Following students from 1988 to 1992, he found that the pass rate did not account for the many students who passed basic writing but never attempted first-year composition. This in fact raised the total number of students who did not pass the course to two-thirds of the original BW cohort. On the heels of this discovery, faculty and administrators developed and piloted the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP), in which BW students could opt to enroll directly in first-year composition (ENGL 101) if they agreed to also enroll in basic writing (ENGL 052) in the same semester. This was not, however, just another form of moving students through the pipeline. The ENGL 052 groups are taught by the same instructor that students have for composition; these groups are limited to only eight students, all of whom are taking the same section of ENGL 101. ENGL 052 sessions meet directly after ENGL 101 sessions, and focus largely on students' concerns with the required work in that credited course. Students also gain a place of welcome in the college community, sitting beside non-ENGL 052-enrolled students in their ENGL 101 classes.

The results of this program so far are most promising. As it continues to run and inspire basic writing innovation across the country, we see that ALP is not the business of standards reform as usual.

Next, in "Writing Center Philosophy and the End of Basic Writing: Motivation at the Site of Remediation and Discovery," Heather M. Robinson weighs in on how the end of remediation at four-year colleges of the City University of New York in 1999 impacts students at four-year York College/ CUNY. As faculty director of the York College Writing Center, Robinson experiences the daily fallout of students looking for writing support as they voluntarily seek tutoring. And just as McCurrie and Adams and his co-authors complicate the apparent positives of the innovations they write about, so does Robinson: while students may be said to seek tutoring help voluntarily, many are chiefly responding to teachers' expectations for a standardized mode of expression, and/or have internalized such expectations from previous experiences of assessment. Questions around student motivation, whether external or intrinsic, become central in this article on the role of writing centers in the post-remediation age. Does the present moment occlude writing centers' more traditionally expansive mission to teach the student, not the writing, or are writing centers also capable of supporting students' efforts to define their own goals and expectations for learning? Robinson opens such questions by way of investigating students' stated purposes for coming to the writing center. She finds that, while students initially state they want help with grammar and sentence-level issues, their self-perceptions as writers mature the more often they visit. Help with grammar is the introduction to more meaningful moments as students define their own priorities for writing.

Finally, we come to Mike Rose's piece, "Standards, Teaching, Learning" as both a closing and an opening. One of today's most prominent and articulate advocates of broad educational opportunity, Rose marks the difference between *teaching* that is motivated chiefly by standards imposed by policy makers who seek, first and foremost, *excellence*, and the rich and problem-posing *learning* that happens when students' interests and talents are recognized, and *their* purposes for learning are taken into account. Rose's words perfectly capture the spirit of much of this Fall 2009 issue. As instructors, program directors, and basic writing spokespersons, our authors strive to re-engender Open Admissions' promise of access; this is evident not only in the programs and practices described here, but in the clarity these authors bring to assessing their results. Clearly, Rose is a partner to each of the authors in this issue, reminding them and us that the best innovation

will situate its gains in light of the meaning of education in a democratic society. Such a point makes it possible for the title of Rose's new book, from which "Standards, Teaching, Learning" is borrowed, to resonate: *Why School?* Rose's message is that it is time to recognize all learners as heirs to the promise of education in a great and expansive nation.

With this issue, we welcome Corey Frost to our editorial assistant team. Corey is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the Graduate Center, CUNY, and is currently a coordinator of the Brooklyn College Writing Across the Curriculum Program. We are grateful to have him aboard.

—**Hope Parisi** and **Rebecca Mlynarczyk**