EDITORS' COLUMN

Open Admissions at 50: The *JBW* Special Issue on Democracy and Basic Writing

> A policy of admissions that reaches out beyond traditional sources for its students, bringing in to a college campus young men and women from diverse classes, races, and cultural backgrounds who have attended good, poor, and mediocre schools, is certain to shake the assumptions and even the confidence of teachers who have been trained to serve a more uniform and prepared student population. For the English teacher, the shock and challenge of this diversity is experienced first through the written words and sentences of the new students, for here, spelled out in words, woven into syntax, is, the fact of inequity—in our schools and in the society that is served by these schools.
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> —Mina P. Shaughnessy, Editor's Introduction, *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 1, no. 1

Over the last fifty years, no public policy has garnered as much historical attention in the annals of rhetoric and composition as Open Admissions (OA). Associated chiefly with the student-led activism of the late 1960s at City College of New York (CCNY), this counterpoint to a selective admissions standard for college enrollment embodied the activist spirit of the Civil Rights Era. In the midst of a campus strike/occupation in the spring of 1969, student organizers at CCNY presented a list of five demands, among them "that the racial composition of the entering freshman class be racially reflective of the high school population" ("Five Demands"). Because Harlem's predominantly Black and Puerto Rican residents were underrepresented at CCNY—comprising a mere 9% of the student body – the university acted sooner than expected on a plan to implement a policy that would quickly ameliorate the results of a systemic problem with racial discrimination. Basic Writing, as we know it, began formulating its intellectual and political foundations within this social reality.

Because BW's disciplinary history is accented by Open Admissions, the scholarship that emerged from the teaching of writing in this specific place and time is part of a larger social history of the university where the contours

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of activism would be shaped by a burgeoning scholarly discourse. But we would be remiss to relegate our reflections to a context that obscures the popular discourses that are now being cataloged by an ever-increasing cadre of interdisciplinary historians of education. For example, with its emphasis on the educational lives and experiences of students historically underserved, projects such as the American Social History Project at City University of New York (CUNY) have worked to develop collections such as *CUNY Digital History Archive* (CDHA). With a growing collection of primary source materials from the Open Admissions era of the late twentieth century, the CDHA can be a resource for expanding not only our individual and collective inquiry about the nature, purpose, and consequences of Open Admissions, but also the very historical literacy that informs our understanding of what BW might have looked like half a century ago.

In his introduction to the eleven essays that make up *Microhistories of Composition*, Bruce McComiskey distills a rhetorical theory of social history that presents an ever-increasing context for the work of BW. In this formulation, historical perspective is formulated not by rejecting the universal grand narratives of conventional social history nor the "isolated cultural zeitgeist" of cultural history, but instead the dialogic relation between the two that is mediated by an analysis of the people, places, texts, and ideas heretofore considered too ephemeral for the construction of narrative (21). For instance, the political activism that surrounded Open Admissions, we learn from CDHA, was not exclusive to the CCNY campus. In a monograph written by professors Florence Tager and Zala Highsmith-Taylor, *Medgar Evers College: In Pursuit of a Community's Dream* (2008), we learn of the origins of Medgar Evers College in the midst of social and political unrest in the aftermath of the NYC United Federation of Teachers Strike of 1968 (6). In their book we learn about the experiment of having a community controlled public college in the predominantly African American Bedford-Stuyvesant section of central Brooklyn. Histories like this one detail the community and city-wide politics that led to the Board of Higher Education deciding to move central Brooklyn's Kingsborough Community College to the wealthy neighborhood of Manhattan Beach (12-13). Because of works such as this, local citizens like PTA activist Ella Sease speak from the archives in, for example, a letter to the Governor where she exclaims that "Central Brooklyn must have a college" (qtd. in Tager and Highsmith-Taylor 12). Moreover, our expansion of the scope and scale of a phrase like Open Admissions creates an avenue to understand how to read and reconstruct our disciplinary and political histories around methods that provide a "multidimensional" and "multiscopic"

analysis through the centering of sources, including yearbook photographs, narratives, political pamphlets and posters, community newspapers and leaflets (McComiskey 23).

Across New York's East River, students at Manhattan Community College (MCC) distributed *The People's Handbook*, a collection of editorials, cartoons, listings of free services around the city, as well as histories of the student movement at MCC. This populist account details the organization of MCC's Third World Coalition, a multiracial coalition of students who seized the MCC campus demanding reforms that included the institution of a "Third World Department" (*People's Handbook*). What might be considered ephemera in the social history of rhetorical education is center stage in a rhetorical history of the CUNY student movement. With no authors, the content speaks in one voice as an unsanctioned and yet institutionally-sponsored community publication. In contrast, the November 13th, 1970 issue of *Prometheus*, MCC's official student newspaper, featured a first-hand account of student activists, Gus Koutsoftas and Gail Mercer, who write about their arrest during a protest over free education. In striking detail, Koutsoftas and Mercer recount their own apprehension by the police along with fifty-six other student protesters and two faculty members, Professors Freidheim and Pearlstein (13). Known as the "BMCC 58," the defendants and the college administration appeared before a judge only after a series of postponements forced all the students and faculty involved to remain in the city throughout the summer of 1970 (13). Though the charges were eventually dropped, Koutsoftas and Mercer's account is a reminder that such ephemera in the form of "extra-curricular" student writing can reveal a political literacy that otherwise might not be visible in accounts of student writing. Accounts like these detail examples of students writing local history and understanding the politics of a local legal system that unfairly favored the prosecution.

Some fifty years later, stories like these can show us the previous limitations of a two-dimensional plane where public policies like Open Admissions and areas of scholarly inquiry such as BW are defined by a familiar story that takes place in a specific time and place. Instead, this special issue looks to round out that history by acknowledging the constellation of places and spaces that articulate(d) a historically literate accounting of BW theory, history, and pedagogy. What follows, in other words, is not a presentation of archival research related to Open Admissions as we know it in the story of BW in New York's municipal colleges. Instead, we offer a frame of reference from which we can read exemplary work in BW through the lens of an historical foundation that is constantly changing, a frame in

which our studies and pedagogies might account for the particularities of Open Admissions as intellectually and politically generative rather than as inconsequential and idiosyncratic.

Whether we view its legacy as a meaningful step forward or as a concession meant to calm the spirit of protest or quench the fire of advocacy, Open Admissions has provided the context upon which the theory, history, and pedagogy of BW has flourished into a bona fide research program within Writing Studies. This places BW in contested territory. As BW education faces growing political pressures in an age of austerity and a growing professional landscape hospitable to the study of writing in the U.S. community college, its ethos will now have to begin addressing the internal economic contradictions that have shaped BW's identity. The role of language and assimilation is but one of these concerns. Although BW's long road toward professionalization might seem to suggest some kind of post-political landscape, the anniversary of the Open Admissions strike at CCNY and the period of unprecedented enrollment that followed offers a reminder about the tenuousness of the social and political world in which our scholarship has always circulated. BW has weathered the changing political winds before: both veiled and explicit attacks on Open Admissions at the end of the last century, the consistent outsourcing of BW instruction to the U.S. community college, and the ongoing precariousness of those who teach the most vulnerable in our institutions.

Like every generation, perhaps, we're called to ask *what's so different now*? While it seems as though there have always been forces threatening the public's access to higher education, the rhetorical ground beneath our scholarly feet has shifted. The arguments about access to higher education are no longer about the reallocation of resources but about whether diversity has "an endpoint," as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court recently put it. That inequality could be cast teleologically – that is, as an empirical problem to be resolved – is not a controversial position in and of itself. What *has* changed is the looming threat that the end to the problem may be upon us sooner, not because we have been able to demonstrate a solution, but because its origin—institutionalized racial prejudice—is not recognized by the branch of government entrusted to protect the rights of citizens. In a climate fueled by the so-called culture wars, the righteous claims to bipartisanship work against the protection of civil/human rights, a threat that renders BW's history as potentially divisive because its origins are coterminous with the Black and Latinx campus movements of the period.

These social and political conditions help to create a space in which

fear is "an environment, rather than something localizable" (Virilio 11). In *The Administration of Fear* (2012), philosopher Paul Virilio outlines fear as a consequence of globalization. However, Virilio means neither fear as an emotion nor globalization as a doxa of political economy. For Virilio, we live in a society where terror, fear, and panic are environmental conditions that are endemic to globalization's ideological commitment to progress. In other words, as Virilio says, it is the "the cult of speed" that has necessitated an administration of the fear created in the wake of progress. In this configuration it is states and their agents that administer (through policy) the consequences of progress in which all political subjects must then feel their civil and human rights as alienable. At the risk of oversimplification, for instance, the professionalization of Writing Studies – and by extension Basic Writing – leaves in its wake a situation where the accumulation of knowledge (progress) conflicts with the economic interests (progress) of colleges and universities who have not invested in their workers. The fear, then, of chronic underemployment persists for Basic Writing teachers and is part of the condition for the production and consumption of new research.

We share Virilio's observations, here, not because we necessarily share his conclusions about progress, but because understanding terror, fear, and panic as environmental can suggest ways of reflecting on our disciplinary past that moves beyond a 50th anniversary retrospective on Open Admissions as either ceremonial speech or the kind of critical discourse Hannah Arendt might have called an "impotent truth." However simplistic it might be, we think that the administration of fear in Basic Writing – which includes the manufacturing, legislating, and commodification of crisis – can be confronted with a classic remedy: courage. For example, a vulgar reading of Aristotle's mediation on courage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* reveals a sense in which courage is equated to knowledge by virtue of the particularities that inform someone's actions. In his analysis of the courage of a professional soldier, for example, this courage is one that comes from experience. Because their "experience makes them especially able in attack and defense, because they are proficient in their weapons" and because they are familiar with "the many false alarms that seem to arise in war," professional soldiers appear courageous. In reality, Aristotle claims, these professional soldiers were cowards when compared to the ill-trained citizen soldiers of the period who would presumably prefer to die by standing fast rather than running away from the fear of death as professional soldiers would do. What is helpful, here, is the distinction that is made by how we use our knowledge in relation to particularities. Situating the many stories of BW within an always changing

social and political context can provide us with something of a blueprint for how writing—once again—might change the nature of the university.

The legacy of the Open Admissions era in New York City is often provided as a basis for considering the social and political origins of an intellectual movement that coincided with the campus movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Much of our knowledge from this period is indebted to the excellent historical work by BW scholars and has paved the way for scholarship that recognizes the relationship between public discontent and political activism. What we are starting to see is the potential for archival work to show us instances in which local citizens used writing to speak truth to power in a way that we have not yet fully appreciated in our theories, histories, and pedagogies. Our fellow citizens—BW students, their teachers, and conspiring staff members—speak to us from these spaces with advice about the character that can sustain a social movement, one that can make us courageous in the administered society. They provide the ethos, as it were, from which we might read one another's work and consider the implications by assuming the necessary and appropriate danger.

As we noted in the Call For Proposals for this special issue:

> These histories rightly position a critical inquiry of remediation within the context of the social movements driving educational reform in New York. They chronicle the transition of literacy from a set of discrete, abstract, and apolitical skills to what Deborah Brant has characterized as skills that function as "an engine of profit and competitive advantage in the twentieth century. . . raw material[s] in the mass production of information" (Brandt). They, in effect, render literacy a public good—and therefore a resource—subject to state intervention and regulation. That this transition was codified in the shift from selective admissions to *Open* Admissions offers a chance to evaluate the historical, empirical, and theoretical trajectory of Basic Writing in the 21st century.
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> Complicating this transition, of course, is the maturity of BW from an exercise in gatekeeping to one of formal academic study. Mina Shaughnessy's well known developmental stages for teachers of basic writing characterize this transition aptly—"guarding the tower"; "converting the natives"; "sounding the depths"; and "diving in" (Shaughnessy). To understand the legacy of Open Admissions, then, is to unpack the competing versions

of what Open Admissions means to the public and what it means to an ever-increasing cadre of specialists in BW. Bruce Horner began this conversation in 1996 by considering the ways in which the institutionalization of BW courses has played into the public discourses of Open Admissions and higher education. For Horner, these seemingly competitive discourses worked together to naturalize the omission of the "concrete material, political, institutional, and social historical inequalities" that frame the lived experiences of students and teachers of Basic Writing. Because its social history narrates a hard fought battle for the legitimization of BW's "institutional place," these inequalities remain obscured.

Similarly, Steve Lamos shows how the field's origins at CUNY can be understood as a poetics of entrenched racial difference, or "racialization," where Basic Writing bears an almost metonymic relationship to race. For Lamos, this process renders remediation an exclusively minority enterprise in the popular and scholarly imagination (Lamos 26). In addition, George Otte and Rebecca Mylnarczyk's historical overview of the field in their *Basic Writing* (2010) reminds scholars that Open Admissions as a "movement" is affirmed in the stories of the social and political "volatility" of the 1960s. These social histories of Basic Writing reveal an emerging tension at the end of the twentieth century, one that ushers in the transition of literacy as a good to be subsidized and regulated by the state to a practice and/or competency duly regulated by a profession.

As Mina Shaughnessy's introduction to the first issue of *The Journal of Basic Writing* indicates, the exigence for this journal's founding was rooted in the changes that Open Admissions brought to CUNY campuses specifically, and as such, the Open Admissions movement at CUNY has received substantial scholarly attention in BW. While recognizing that CUNY's role in the professionalization of BW is critical to understanding our disciplinary history, the authors in this special issue encourage us to reorient our perspective and see the legacy of Open Admissions from a new historical perspective and from an analysis of the contemporary issues that the BW community faces in local settings. Annie S. Mendenhall's contribution to this special issue, "'Admission to One. . . Admission to All': The (End of the) Radical Dream of Open Admissions in the Post-Desegregation South," highlights the impact of Open Admissions policies alongside desegregation efforts in the South beginning in the 1960s. Mendenhall analyzes the rhetorical function

of OA policies during the merger of Tennessee State University (an HBCU) and the University of Tennessee (an HWCU) in 1979 to highlight the extent to which the rhetoric of desegregation that accompanied OA was utilized to racialize standards for writing. This led to an increase in remedial courses and a significant loss in innovative programming intended to foster equitable access. Mendenhall's discussion of external forces that impact basic writing programs is echoed in Joyce Olewski Inman's essay, "Open Admissions, Resilience, and Basic Writing Ecologies: A New Cultural Narrative," which takes an ecological systems view of change. Inman analyzes a corpus of articles from *JBW* through the lens of resilience theory and identifies four dominant themes: growth, adaptation, release, and reorganization. For Inman, a successful approach to BW acknowledges the influence of external stakeholders and recognizes the need to adapt to the inevitably changing landscape for our work. In "Valuing Embodied Epistemology to Counter Neoliberal Programmatic Reform at the Two-Year College," Alison Cardinal, Kirsten Higgins, and Anthony Warknke argue that the changes implemented through broad-scale developmental education reforms can unwittingly move BW programs farther away from the equity-minded values of the OA movement that those same reforms may seek to support. The authors advocate for an approach to placement that emphasizes students' embodied experiences and the unique needs of local contexts and caution us to adopt a critical gaze toward developmental reforms that fail to acknowledge the specific needs of individual students, instructors, and institutions. With a similar focus on embodied experiences, Tom McNamara's contribution, "Access and Exclusion: Chinese Undergraduates and Basic Writing in the Global University," utilizes a case-study method to highlight the lived experience of multilingual international students from China whose placement in BW contributed to a self-identity that reinforced a status as "outsider" in comparison to their monolingual classmates. McNamara concludes with recommendations for assessment, assignment design, and program advocacy that resist deficit models of instruction. Taken together, these essays highlight the deep influence that the OA movement had on inspiring access-oriented work in composition studies but also take a critical eye to policies and practices that, while often intended to support access, can inhibit inclusivity.

In closing, when the idea for this special issue came to us, the world was different. While our intention had been to mark an important anniversary in the history of Basic Writing, we had no idea that we would be embarking on several years that would change our frame of reference for what follows in these pages. We would be remiss to forget that our personal and collective

acts of reflection are marked by our weariness from: all a global pandemic brings, a relentless culture war that overturned *Roe v. Wade,* and the menacing statements against Affirmative Action made by sitting members of the U.S. Supreme Court at the time of this writing. Indeed, one of the enduring legacies of the Open Admissions movement is the realization that public policies governing literacy instruction cannot easily be untangled from the social, economic, and political constraints that have contributed to higher education's inaccessibility. In their own way, the articles in this special issue ask how we might recenter the sociopolitical and economic contexts in our own acts of reflection.

We want to assert that the value of this special issue lies not so much in a ceremonial remembrance or solemnity of Open Admissions but in engaging its memory with a historical literacy that resists ascribing to and forecasting an automatically benign future for BW. Each one of these articles presents us with an opportunity to see how the political and intellectual contexts of Open Admissions and BW inform one another such that we are challenged to imagine a future that honors the moral imperative to increase access to higher education. In that spirit, we hope that you enjoy reading these excellent contributions.

—**Jack Morales and Lynn Reid**, Guest Editors,
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