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Review

Greene, Nicole Pepinster, and Patricia J. McAlexander, eds. *Basic Writing in America: The History of Nine College Programs.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2008. 260 pages.

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A recent thread on the WPA listserv asks for a book that would present the stories of WPAs and their programs. *Basic Writing in America: The History of Nine College Programs,* edited by Nicole Pepinster Greene and Patricia J. McAlexander, fulfills this request. Readers will find a microscopic examination of nine basic writing programs at public and state-related universities, spanning the United States from New York to California and many points in between. WPAs and others, writing as participant observers, provide details of the day-to-day and year-to-year operations and events that allow these programs to function and, in some cases, to thrive well into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Readers will discover, however, that not all of these stories lead to satisfying endings. Despite the hard work of WPAs, faculty, and staff, basic writing programs remain subject to the scrutiny of outside stakeholders, often with no knowledge of or interest in the needs of students who are best served by open enrollment to public universities. Such stakeholders usually include state legislators and university administrators who eliminate funding, raise admissions standards, and otherwise implement measures designed to reduce the need for "remediation" at the college level. As the authors of *Basic Writing in America* suggest, a crucial factor in the survival or demise of basic writing remains who defines and selects the terms to describe the ways in which basic writing functions in the university.

Terms like "remedial" and "developmental," far from being neutral descriptors, carry heavy and problematic rhetorical associations that can alter the material realities of students' access to higher education. Programs rise and fall as definitions shift and change over time. Indeed, the reintroduction of the term "remediation" often leads to diminished access to uni-

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versity education for students who are variously defined as "at-risk," "non-traditional," and "diverse." The end of basic writing programs, as several of the authors show, most severely impacts working-class and poor students, who often identify as students of color, and who are extended many fewer opportunities to continue post-secondary education.

Location plays a significant role in how and why basic writing programs come into existence and then suffer retrenchment and elimination. Nonetheless, as the authors of *Basic Writing in America* clearly demonstrate, many of the issues surrounding the demise of basic writing programs in four-year public universities derive from global concerns. Many of these stories share the same trajectory. Programs are founded at workers' colleges in the 1930s, or to support the needs of returning veterans after World War II. Some programs come into existence or grow stronger with the advent of the civil rights movement and federal desegregation orders. However, as recession grips the country and as universities attempt to boost their national ratings by admitting a more elite student population, basic writing programs become easy targets for elimination.

In the interest of full disclosure, I need to state that the stories of my previous and current institutional homes (University of Cincinnati's Center for Access and Transition and a City University of New York community college, respectively) are documented in *Basic Writing in America,* although the events described in the book had already transpired long before I was hired. George Otte tells the story of basic writing at the City University of New York, poignantly rehearsing Mina Shaughnessy's contributions to the education of open admissions students at City College and her contributions to the field, at CUNY and beyond. In the wake of Shaughnessy's death, the fortunes of basic writing rose and fell, following the trajectory described above. As Otte writes of City College: "Both the sunrise and the sunset were brilliant, but the sun has not set where it once rose" (44).

Similarly, Michelle Gibson and Deborah T. Meem present their story of the prolonged demise of the University of Cincinnati's (UC) University College and its basic writing program. Unlike City College's senior college status, University College was a two-year, degree-granting, open-access college on the main campus of the university. After University College was dissolved and many of its faculty reassigned throughout the UC system, the Center for Access and Transition (CAT) was created in its place. The CAT, as Gibson and Meem emphasize, is not a degree-granting Center, but a developmental program designed to move students through remediation in a year's time. After successfully completing remediation, students would be eligible to transfer to one of UC's bachelor's degree-granting colleges. Gibson and Meem suggest that, "one of the (unstated) purposes of the CAT is

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to 'weed out' those students incapable of transferring to baccalaureate colleges" (64).

The pattern described by Otte and Gibson and Meem is repeated elsewhere in *Basic Writing in America.* Nicole Pepinster Greene writes that the University of Louisiana at Lafayette

> has adopted a new mission that no longer supports a BW program. Having begun its history as a racially segregated institution that denied admission on the basis of race, now as a result of its selective admissions policy, ULL in effect limits admission on the basis of class. Poorly prepared students, who are usually from low-performing schools in economically marginalized neighborhoods, are not admitted. (95)

The difficulties of contingent faculty who teach the majority of basic writing courses at many institutions are also addressed throughout *Basic Writing in America.* Mark Wiley notes that at California State University at Long Beach, "the multiple sections of basic writing courses continue to be taught overwhelmingly by part-time lecturers. With little power and several consecutive years of bad budgets, they have not protested, and are not likely to protest" (118). As dwindling budgetary resources play an ever-growing role the distribution of resources in public universities, basic writing once again receives short shrift.

Nonetheless, as Greene and McAlexander describe in their very helpful introduction, not all of the news is bad. Basic writing, coming of age alongside composition studies, has generated new pedagogy and provides fertile ground for teacher-research. Such research is presented throughout the histories of *Basic Writing in America* and was, as Otte reiterates, strongly encouraged by Mina Shaughnessy in the 1970s as a means of experimenting with and evolving innovations in the field. Contemporary examples of innovation include Karen Uehling's (a founding chair of the Conference on Basic Writing) work with redesigning the basic writing program at Boise State University in Idaho and Mindy Wright's description of the ever-evolving first-year writing program at the Ohio State University.

Yet Wright's reference to "stricter" admissions standards enacted at Ohio State in the late 1990's (216–217) points to the stories not included in *Basic Writing in America.* Greene and McAlexander state the book's purpose is "recovering stories of programs that have been threatened, diminished, or eliminated." As universities raised their admissions requirements and dropped basic writing programs, conditions for educational equity also changed. A generation ago, students from a wide variety of backgrounds had access to the material resources of large state universities. In a section

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of the introduction subtitled "Basic Writing Programs Today," Greene and McAlexander suggest that such students now frequently enroll at community colleges or other non-baccalaureate-granting institutions (14–16).

By comparison, such institutions are frequently underfunded and under-resourced and, as several recent studies by educational foundations have noted, often enroll a majority of students from underrepresented populations. Since community colleges are increasingly the present and the future of basic writing, this omission gives an incomplete picture of the complex contexts of basic writing programs today. Stories by teachers and administrators of color are missing as well, an omission that Greene and McAlexander note in the introduction (8). The absence of such stories is particularly unfortunate, since *Basic Writing in America* emphasizes the links between basic writing programs and civil rights initiatives.

Even with these omissions, however, *Basic Writing in America* would still serve as a helpful book for graduate students and new WPAs who may be encountering basic writing for the first time in their careers. Besides the detailed introduction, the chapters include extensive lists of Works Cited, interviews with teachers and administrators, and archival research. Readers gain a sense of the stakeholders involved in creating and sustaining basic writing programs, as well as an idea of how and why course goals and program goals change over time.

Indeed, this catalog of histories reminds us that the significant work of composition studies takes place both inside and outside of classrooms and faculty offices and meeting spaces. As Greene and McAlexander and these nine histories demonstrate, the minutiae of WPA work for basic writing goes hand-in-hand with passionate engagement with the field. The cover of *Basic Writing in America* features an archival photograph of a 1995 student rally to preserve remedial education at California State University at Fullerton. The late Mary Kay Crouch, who served for more than twenty years as the coordinator of developmental writing at CSU-Fullerton, spoke at this rally as a means of persuading hearts and minds beyond the corridors of the university. Her work exemplifies an embodied commitment to basic writing.

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