

Diving In or Guarding the Tower: Mina Shaughnessy's Resistance and Capitulation to High-Stakes Writing Tests at City College

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ABSTRACT: Mina Shaughnessy continues to exert powerful influences over Basic Writing practices, discourses and pedagogy thirty-five years after her death: Basic Writing remains in some ways trapped by Shaughnessy's legacy in what Min-Zhan Lu labeled as essentialism, accommodationism and linguistic innocence. High-stakes writing tests, a troubling hallmark of basic writing programs since the late-1970s, figure into conversations involving Shaughnessy and her part in basic writing administration as today we continue to see their effects. This article explores how Shaughnessy shaped the rise of such tests at City College, and asks whether they also shaped her. Relying on archival sources, and using Shaughnessy's 1975 "Diving In" speech as a framing lens, I examine the diving-in pedagogy that was developed in the City College SEEK program where Shaughnessy taught from 1967 to 1970, and which formed the foundation for her open admissions basic writing program starting in September of 1970. Next I trace the roots of the first high-stakes writing test at City College and Shaughnessy's conflicted responses—from 1968 when Shaughnessy mocked traditional essay exams as "attic furniture," to November 20, 1972 when she embraced this high-stakes test as a valid measure of her basic writing program and the abilities of its students.

KEYWORDS: Basic Writing, high-stakes tests, washback, SEEK, diving in, guarding the tower.

I would not hesitate to guarantee [successful] results if we could but suspend our institutional neurosis about standards long enough to meet these students in all courses where they are rather than where we think they ought to be and proceed to give them a good education." (Shaughnessy, 1971 Report 17)

On a Sunday morning in San Francisco in December of 1975, Mina Shaughnessy electrified three hundred writing teachers with her sly, subversive speech (Maher 162-166). Mocking developmental education models that labeled adults as underdeveloped children, Shaughnessy traced instead

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a four-stage developmental scale for teachers, explained through the eyes of a hypothetical open admissions college writing teacher (“Diving In” 234).

Initially shocked by the “incompetence” he sees in his students’ writing, Shaughnessy’s teacher at first refuses to “radically lower the standards” of the past; he centers his emotional energies on “guarding the tower” from his own students, “the outsiders, those who do not seem to belong. . . .” (234-35). As a result, his classroom becomes “a peculiar and demoralizing contest for both student and teacher, since neither expects to win” (235). As the teacher’s “preconceptions of his students begin to give way here and there,” he evolves up to a “converting the natives” stage; there, he still sees his students as empty vessels and he teaches as a mere “mechanic of the sentence, the paragraph and the essay” (235-36). When he realizes that the rules of language have been arbitrarily constructed, Shaughnessy’s teacher enters her “sounding the depths” stage, where he begins to observe “not only his students and their writing but. . . himself as a writer and teacher” (236). He questions why his students, after years of standardized testing, have never been taught to doubt or discover (237). He learns that “teaching at the remedial level is not a matter of being simpler but of being more profound, of not only starting from ‘scratch’ but also determining where ‘scratch’ is” (238). At the highest stage, “diving in,” Shaughnessy’s teacher learns “to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (238).

In 1946, a 22-year-old Shaughnessy had moved to Manhattan—a graceful, aspiring actress from Lead, South Dakota with dreams of Broadway stardom (Emig 37-38; Maher 1, 29). Now, almost three decades later, Shaughnessy’s “Diving In” speech awed and deeply affected her audience (Bartholomae 67; Maher 165). Letters poured in asking her to give more talks and for copies of the speech; Edward Corbett pleaded to publish it (Maher 165-67). Shaughnessy had now become a rising star within the field that she herself had christened as “Basic Writing.”

Shaughnessy achieved astonishing success and amassed remarkable influence and power in only eleven years at CUNY. But after a painful, two-year battle with cancer, her career was cut tragically short. Shaughnessy’s friends and colleagues were overcome by grief; many grieve still. After her death in 1978, Shaughnessy left behind a remarkably complex legacy that still endures in powerful and conflicting forms thirty-five years later. Many scholars (perhaps most notably Jane Maher in her carefully researched 1997 biography) have defended Shaughnessy and her legacy; indeed, the sheer

weight of tributes led Jeanne Gunner in 1998 to theorize Shaughnessy as an iconic “ur-author” of the basic writing field. Gunner sees Shaughnessy’s legacy as having been built into a troubling origin myth that continues to exert “a controlling influence” on subsequent diverging discourses (28-30). Shaughnessy’s tremendously influential *Errors & Expectations: A Guide For the Teacher of Basic Writing* was published to widespread acclaim in 1977 (Harris 103). But criticism of *Errors* was muted until Min-Zhan Lu charged in 1991 that Shaughnessy had propagated “an essentialist view of language and a politics of linguistic innocence.”¹ After Lu, a series of scholars have criticized Shaughnessy for her formalism and accommodationism.

Yet both admirers and critics have recognized Shaughnessy’s deep, unresolved conflicts. Ira Shor finds a “duality” in her work, with “one leg in traditionalism and one in experimentalism” (1992 98). In his archival study, Bruce Horner observes Shaughnessy “walking a kind of tightrope” (26). Mary Soliday and Mark McBeth both view her as a pragmatic and often oppositional “intellectual bureaucrat” who worked with limited agency within a large, complex system (Soliday 96; McBeth 50). Still, even Soliday notes Shaughnessy’s “almost obsessive attention to grammar” (74). Lu recognizes a gap between the constructivist “pedagogical advice” in Shaughnessy’s diving-in speech and her essentialism in *Errors* (1991 28). Lu also lauds Shaughnessy’s commitment to both “the educational rights and capacity of Basic Writers,” and their right to choose “alignments among conflicting cultures” (1992 904). Ultimately, Lu sees Shaughnessy as promoting a politically naïve, essentialist view of language—a view that: 1) separates “language, thinking and living,” 2) seems to offer seductive “practical, effective cures,” 3) promotes a pedagogy of accommodation and acculturation, and 4) thus serves to empower the very “gatekeepers and converters” who Shaughnessy gently mocks in “Diving In.” (Lu 1992 891, 905, 907).

Maher, Horner, Soliday, and McBeth have examined Shaughnessy’s work as a SEEK coordinator and WPA at City College. But George Otte and Rebecca Mylnarczyk observe that Shaughnessy soon became far more powerful: by 1975, she was “an associate dean of the City University overseeing the development of assessment tests in writing, reading and mathematics” (10-11). And in terms of Shaughnessy’s material legacy, the use of writing tests as high-stakes assessments has been a troubling hallmark (perhaps the hallmark) of basic writing programs since the late-1970s. In applied linguistics and education theory, “washback” is the term used to describe the positive or negative “influence of testing on teaching and learning,” and “negative washback” refers to the unintended and sometimes even uncon-

scious ways that tests can harm instruction, instructors and students (Cheng and Curtis 3, 9-10). Since the 1950s, researchers have observed that tests can distort curriculum as teachers and learners “end up teaching and learning toward the test” (Cheng and Curtis 9; Hillocks 189). But the deeper impact of testing may be on teachers themselves. If Basic Writing has struggled for forty years to escape essentialism, obsession with grammar, linguistic innocence, seemingly practical “cures,” and the separation of “language, thinking and living”—then high-stakes writing tests are obvious culprits.

I began visiting CUNY archives to learn whether Shaughnessy used her success and influence to shape the rise of minimum-skills writing exam systems at CUNY and whether the rise of those same exam systems also shaped her. This essay is the first part of that larger story. I suggest here that Shaughnessy’s “diving in” and “guarding the tower” describe not just an aspirational evolution away from a pedagogy trapped by preconceptions, fear, and shallow, fixed expectations. They also define a central, unresolved internal conflict that raged within Shaughnessy herself. As she drifted away from the profound, critical, student-centered, diving-in pedagogy of City College’s remarkable SEEK program, Shaughnessy reshaped her basic writing program to become more and more focused on the mere mechanics of sentences and paragraphs—aligning her courses with the demands of the new high-stakes writing test and pressuring basic writing teachers to become the very converters and tower guards that Shaughnessy later mocked in “Diving In.”

1967 to 1969—Diving In as an Untenured Lecturer and SEEK Coordinator

In the spring of 1967, Shaughnessy was hired as an untenured lecturer in City College’s small, new “Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge” program (Volpe Apr. 1967). Before she even started work in September, Shaughnessy was promoted to be SEEK’s English Coordinator (Shaughnessy June 67). A year later, poet Adrienne Rich joined the SEEK faculty and the two women quickly became close friends. Conor Tomás Reed interprets Adrienne Rich’s 1971/2 poem “Diving into the Wreck” as a view “of Rich’s life and work in her SEEK classrooms, hidden in plain sight” (Rich 2013). In Rich’s poem, a diver descends into a deep, black ocean: “I came to explore the wreck./ The words are purposes./ The words are maps./ I came to see the damage that was done/ and the treasures that remain.” Perhaps Shaughnessy’s “Diving In” referred to her friend’s poem and their

years together as SEEK teachers. In any event, those SEEK years established Shaughnessy's reputation as a caring teacher and able administrator; and her SEEK experience became the foundation of her basic writing program (Skurnick 1978 11).

In the 1960s, CUNY four-year colleges only accepted applicants with academic (or "Regents") high school diplomas (Renfro and Armour-Garb). This was also true in practice for CUNY's two-year colleges (Gordon 91-92). By 1967, 58% of all New York City high school students were Black or Puerto Rican; but these students earned only 5.3% of the total academic diplomas awarded—disqualifying the vast majority of them from admission to any CUNY college (L. Berger 1968 1). In 1963, CUNY's new Chancellor Albert Bowker—coming from a University of California system that already afforded "open access" to its two-year colleges—began to search for ways to expand access at CUNY (Gordon 90, 93-95; Edelstein 1-2). In June of 1964, CUNY's first "College Discovery" program placed 230 students with mixed academic records into CUNY community colleges. The results were not encouraging. The one-year retention rate was 64% (148/230). Only 24% (36/148) of the remaining students had an acceptable average of C or higher. At the two year mark, only 11% (25/230) were expected to transfer to senior colleges (1966 CUNY Master Plan 25).

City College launched its Pre-Baccalaureate "Pre-Bac" Program in September of 1965 with 113 Black and Hispanic students recommended by counselors at nearby high schools (Special Committee Minutes; 1966 Master Plan 29; Ballard 2013). About two-thirds (75/113) were full-time students, carrying 17 to 18 hours of classwork, with an initial emphasis on English, mathematics and romance languages (Levy 1965). The Pre-Bac Program had been proposed by Allen B. Ballard, a young political scientist and historian, who himself had struggled with the isolation and frustrations of being one of the first two African-American undergraduates at Kenyon College (Ballard 1973 4-8; 2011 216-17; 2013). Ballard, joined by psychologist Leslie Berger and mathematician Bernard Sohmer, designed the new program; Berger became its first administrator (Volpe 1972 765; Saxon; Ballard 2011 219). The Pre-Bac program was holistically supportive and student-centered, integrating supportive yet challenging courses with financial support (including stipends), counseling and tutoring—all to "develop an attitude in the student that will enable him to find pleasure in educational accomplishment and that will provide him with a reasonable expectancy of achieving professional status after graduation" (L. Berger Dec. 1966 3). The program integrated supportive teaching into challenging courses by adding one or two clock

hours; students in these stretched courses were “expected to complete the college syllabus for the regular credit course” (L. Berger Dec. 1966 2-3; Ballard 2013).² Berger also questioned traditional teaching methods; he saw the program as “a challenging experiment in creative teaching” (Dec. 1966 3).

After one year, 72% (81/113) of the Pre-Bac students were still at City College. Just over half of these remaining students had an average of C or higher (L. Berger Dec. 1966 3). This success quickly captured Chancellor Bowker’s attention and support. The June 1966 CUNY Master Plan labeled the Pre-Bac Program “quite promising” (29). That same month, State Assembly members Percy Sutton and Shirley Chisholm secured a million dollar appropriation (Blumenthal; Schanberg; Edelstein 1). In a July 14th meeting, Bowker endorsed the City College Pre-Bac model and asked Brooklyn and Queens Colleges to start similar programs (L. Berger July 1966 1). On August 15, Bowker confirmed that the newly named SEEK Program was moving forward, now funded by \$1.4 million; eight hundred recruitment letters had already been sent to the community agencies that would nominate the new SEEK students (Bowker 1).

That same summer, seventeen year old Marvina White was desperate to attend college—but it seemed impossible. She had grown up in the Dyckman Houses project in the Inwood section of northern Manhattan where her working-class home life had been troubled. Since she was eleven, she had been responsible for cooking dinner, doing laundry, grocery shopping, and caring for her little brother. Neither of White’s parents had graduated from high school. Afraid that attending college would make it hard for her to find a husband, they discouraged White from applying and they refused to help to pay tuition. White had just earned a Regents diploma from Julia Richman High School but her grades were low. Seeking help at a local social service agency, she learned about the new SEEK program. White had often admired the towers of City College rising on the hilltop above St. Nicholas Avenue when she visited her aunt and cousins in East Harlem. “I loved seeing that school up on the hill so when I heard I might have a chance of getting in I filled out the application.” White was admitted in the summer of 1966 as one of City College’s first SEEK students (M. White).

In theory, incoming SEEK students were screened for potential college ability: but in Berger’s program, virtually all were found to have it. Of the 190 fall of 1966 City College SEEK students, 84% (159/190) were retained for at least two semesters (L. Berger 1968 83). The key was to dive in and meet the students where they were: “Teachers and counselors work very closely with each student on a personal and highly individualized basis” (L. Berger 1966

2). Marvin White's first college class was a summer literature and writing course taught by Barbara Christian, then a young doctoral student. White remembers that the course exposed her to many new authors, including Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Christian started with short lectures, but most of the class time was discussion. "There was no test at the end; just reading, writing and discussing. It felt heavenly. It was all I imagined college to be" (M. White). Christian was a "fantastic, loving teacher in the class, but also outside the classroom." She spent time with her students; she invited them to her home "to talk about ideas and literature; it was like a salon. When we were there so long that we got hungry, she made us dinner" (M. White).

White struggled during her first year, earning marginal grades. As a SEEK student, she faced hostility and condescension from some teachers and from some students admitted under the traditional standards. There was also arguing at home. And, she had never learned good studying skills. Betty Rawls, a doctoral student in psychology, became White's SEEK counselor. Rawls helped her "to understand what was getting in my way." When problems with White's parents made studying difficult, Christian and Rawls wrote a letter inviting them to come to Rawls' office and talk together. When problems at home worsened, and White found herself on probation, Rawls found her a place in a new SEEK dormitory at the Alamac Hotel (M. White).

Berger was soon promoted to be the University Dean in charge of CUNY's rapidly expanding SEEK Program and Ballard became the new City College SEEK Director (Berger 15 Oct. 1968; Ballard 1968). Ballard's version of diving-in recognized "the intrinsic worth of the students' own thoughts and writing, no matter how ungrammatically expressed" (1973 98). Substance always mattered: "the Black student brings with him both a creativity and a knowledge of the human condition unduplicable by white middle-class students" (1973 98). Echoing Berger, Ballard advised that "[e]very program should meet each student at his own level and lead him as far as possible academically without premature penalties or experiences of failure" (1973 98).

In its first four years, SEEK's experimental, student-centered pedagogy led to "almost constant revision" of the program (L. Berger 1969 46). Volpe recalled that "our SEEK English courses changed continually as we discovered more and more about the needs of the SEEK student and as we fought to extricate ourselves from the traditional approaches to the teaching of freshman composition" (Volpe 1972 769). For example, Shaughnessy traveled to the University of Iowa to study their long established writing workshop model in which "small groups of students [meet] weekly with an instructor, [discuss] the work submitted, and [offer] suggestions to each other on how to improve

it” (Wilbers 43, 97). Shaughnessy then created a similar workshop writing course in the SEEK program (Gross, 1969 at 2). She herself later remembered her teaching methods as closely aligned with this workshop model. She described a class of fifteen students who wrote essays in three drafts, offered each other peer review, worked with in-class tutors, and focused on issues of correctness only in the final draft—in order to finalize papers so they could be published together in a booklet that then became a text for the class to study together (Maher 210-11).

According to Volpe, the SEEK English courses were renamed “Basic English” in 1967 to avoid the “psychological blocks” caused by the “remedial English” label (Volpe 1972 769). (During the 1960s, the City College English Department sometimes used “basic” to describe mainstream, freshman-level English courses.³) In fact, the SEEK program did much more than change labels—most SEEK students tackled college-level work at once, either in mainstream courses or in SEEK “basic” stretched courses. In the fall of 1967, Shaughnessy placed 20% (35/175) of new SEEK students directly into the mainstream composition course (Ballard 1968 App II; L. Berger 1968 40). Shaughnessy placed the rest into a new three-semester SEEK English program: a two-semester “composition and literature” stretch course that covered “the work normally included in [the then mainstream] English 1” and a ten-hour, one-semester intensive “remedial” course (Ballard 1968 5). Shaughnessy retained the three-semester course structure in 1968-69 (L. Berger 1969 47). Her goals were: “first, to develop competence in the kinds of expository writing that most college courses require in term papers, research papers, and essay examinations; second, to develop an interest in literature as a way of exploring experience and as a pleasure in itself” (L. Berger, 1969 47).

SEEK’s basic English program successes were not measured artificially by writing test scores but by actual student success: retention, progress toward degree, and grades in mainstream courses. In 1968, Ballard reported that 83 SEEK students had taken the City College mainstream English 3 literature survey course and 77% (64/83) had earned at least a “C” (Ballard 1968 1). In Ballard’s view, the proof of Shaughnessy’s “competence is the success of our students in regular college English courses” (Ballard 1968 5). From September 1965 to June 1969, City College’s overall average SEEK student retention rates were: one semester (91.8%), two semesters (80.7%), three semesters (72.9%), four semesters (63%), five semesters (58.4%), six semesters (50.4%) and seven semesters (46.9%). Each of these rates was higher than comparable retention rates at any of the other six SEEK programs that were in operation across CUNY by 1969 (L. Berger, 1969 105). In April of 1972, the City College SEEK program

reported that 112 of the 557 Pre-Bac/SEEK students who entered City College by September of 1967 had graduated and 118 were still in attendance—a 41% retention/graduation rate. And 119 more SEEK students were expected to graduate in June of 1972, bringing the overall graduation rates for these early SEEK cohorts to about 40% (Frost).

As a SEEK coordinator, Shaughnessy focused teachers on the actual needs of SEEK students: “Whenever any of us turned away from these problems. . . , she would gently but forcibly bring us back to our students and their seemingly mundane world” (Kriegel 173). Soon after Shaughnessy arrived at City College, Marvin White asked for her advice about run-on sentences. “The thing about Mina is that she was so extremely kind and seemed so available” (M. White). After that, Shaughnessy often “sat with me and worked with me on my papers. She put into words precisely the way sentences worked and precisely how what I had written violated the conventions. She just talked to me about what I was able to do well and how I could understand and improve the things I wasn’t doing well.” White graduated in 1970; she credits her success to Christian, Rawls and Shaughnessy. “They taught me how to be a student—how to learn, how to study, how to sustain myself in what was then, very often, a hostile environment” (M. White).

In the fall of 1968, as Black and Hispanic students began to demand radical change, SEEK’s diving-in pedagogy was put to the test: teachers had to choose whether to support their students or to guard their tower. English professor Leonard Kriegel described Shaughnessy’s conflicted, yet supportive stance in 1968:

She had little patience with political rhetoric, but she had a great tolerance and an enormous feeling for the S.E.E.K. students. . . . For her, mastery of the art of communication was revolutionary. She was willing to ride with the minds and imaginations of her students. If they opted for revolution, they would have to create one.” (173)

In February of 1969, a Black and Puerto Rican student group issued five demands for reform.⁴ Many (but not all) of these protesters were SEEK students (Kriegel 190; Ballard 1973 68, 123-26; Holder). Marvin White was among them (M. White).

According to Ballard, the five-demands protesters were also “supported by a group of Black and Puerto Rican [SEEK] faculty” (1973 123). SEEK English instructor June Jordan wrote an essay in support of the protests: “Universities must admit the inequities of the civilization they boast” (28). Christian

and Toni Cade Bambara were among supportive faculty who met quietly off campus with the “Committee of Ten” student protest leaders (M. White). Audre Lorde brought protesters soup and blankets (De Veaux 106). Ballard gave pro-demand interviews to *The Tech News* (“SEEK;” Simms). On April 21, 1969, unnamed “members of the English Division of SEEK program” challenged President Gallagher’s responses to the five demands with a series of pointed, probing questions which were reprinted in *The Tech News* (23 Apr. 1969 2). Shaughnessy herself worked with an “Ad Hoc Committee on Admission Policy” that on May 2nd recommended an early version of “open admissions” (Report 1-5).

Amid this chaos, Shaughnessy’s star was rising within CUNY. In 1968, Ballard praised Shaughnessy as “a splendidly innovative supervisor” and called her English courses “the heart” of the SEEK program (Ballard 1968 5). In 1969, Ted Gross reported that Shaughnessy “has become an unofficial consultant to many administrators throughout the University on SEEK problems” (Gross, 1969 2). Gross later praised Shaughnessy as having “served in one of the most sensitive and difficult roles on this campus during the 1968-1969 riots” (Gross, 1973 1).

1964 to 1969—The Birth of the City College Writing Proficiency Exam

But, while the City College SEEK faculty was diving in to teach writing, the rest of the English Faculty was opting out. On May 23, 1968, the City College Faculty Council broadly reformed its curriculum and completely abolished any required mainstream first-year writing course.⁵ Instead, future students would be required to take and “pass a qualifying writing test before” they could graduate (Volpe, 1968 1). The idea for this new proficiency test had been hatched in English Department meetings in 1964 and 1965 when the English faculty successfully proposed cutting required composition courses from two semesters to one so that they could move from a four course to a three course teaching load.⁶

In 1968, English Chair Edmund Volpe asked for faculty comments on the Proficiency Exam. Perhaps realizing that the new exam would most deeply affect SEEK students, Shaughnessy offered the most extensive response. She proposed a day-long writing exam with a morning of reading, open lunchtime discussions, and an afternoon of writing open-book essays. Shaughnessy argued that students were unlikely in any event to do their best writing “under examination conditions.” She concluded that the “curricu-

lum change offers a grand excuse for housecleaning and I am hoping that the traditional kind of essay examination will go out along with some of the other attic furniture” (1968 1-2). These comments show Shaughnessy as an intellectual bureaucrat—a WPA with limited agency who is oppositional in a limited, careful, and diplomatic way. She mocks the new test instead of openly opposing it; she tries to undermine the exam’s minimum standards focus by making it a more collaborative learning experience.

Shaughnessy also added technical notes about rater variability and cited an article about the tendency of raters to grade using general impressions—an early nod toward holistic grading (1). She was already studying testing theory and employing the psychometric concept of reliability. In one sense, this new testing expertise would help Shaughnessy to shape future testing systems at City College and across CUNY. In another sense, the Proficiency Exam was already shaping her—sponsoring her literacy in this new direction away from SEEK’s diving-in pedagogy.

City College’s creation of a minimum-competency writing test in 1968 anticipated a much larger educational trend. Kathleen Yancey notes that “the holistically scored essay” was the dominant wave of college writing assessment from 1970 until 1986 (1999 131). Still, writing proficiency test requirements were rare in higher education before 1972.⁷ The nineteen-campus University of California did not implement mandated writing course exit tests (under Edward White’s guidance) until April or May of 1973 (E. White, 2001 315; Elliot 204-05).

City College implemented its new Proficiency Exam in November of 1969. Despite Shaughnessy’s hopes, it was very much a traditional kind of essay exam. Within three hours, students were required to write two 300-word essays in response to two out of three offered prompts. (Danzig, 1969; Danzig, 1973). It may be useful to pause and note that this birth of high-stakes writing tests at City College had absolutely nothing to do with student needs. To the contrary, the Proficiency Exam was conceived by English professors in 1965, approved by them in 1968, and designed and implemented by them in 1969—all based on the central assumption that students would otherwise successfully graduate from City College without meeting the faculty’s minimum standards for correct writing. The sole purpose of the new exam was to guard this departmental standard of correctness while simultaneously abdicating responsibility to teach it. In supporting the new Proficiency Exam, Volpe explained that the “responsibility for writing competence has been transferred, to the student, where it should be” (Volpe, 1968 1).

Shaughnessy was right to view such writing tests as “attic furniture” in 1968. Timed theme tests designed to produce formulaic five-paragraph essays were then at least a century old. According to Sharon Crowley, written entrance exams were introduced at some American colleges as early as the 1830s when rising college enrollments made oral exams impractical (64). A theme placement exam was in place at Harvard in 1873 or 1874 (Connors 184-85; Crowley 66). These timed theme exams were designed based on quill technology—predating widespread adoption of manual typewriters, pencils or even fountain pens (Yancey 2009). Of course, the tests have become ever more antiquated since 1968. Over thirty years ago, process writing models became broadly accepted within the field and personal computers began to make word processing programs widely available. Over twenty years ago, graphical interface word processing programs and editing tools became ubiquitous and the internet began to revolutionize how we construct knowledge. Over ten years ago, the explosion of complex and powerful Web 2.0 multi-modal publishing platforms and social networks redefined our understanding of composition, collaboration, audience, literacy, and rhetoric. Yet the tests endure.

1970 to 1971—Diving In as an Assistant Professor and Assistant Chair of English

In September of 1970, CUNY implemented its controversial and historic “open admissions” policy, which had been approved by the Board of Trustees only ten months earlier in the wake of the City College protests. Access was dramatically expanded: CUNY admitted 34,592 students, 77% more than the 19,559 it had admitted one year earlier. More tellingly, in 1970, CUNY admitted 54% of all New York City High School graduates; in 1969, it had admitted only 29% of them (CUNY Data Book Fall 1970 1).

As a City College lecturer with no PhD and almost no academic publications, Shaughnessy normally would have had little hope for a tenure track appointment. But in the chaos of open admissions, normal faculty politics were temporarily suspended. In December of 1969, Shaughnessy was promoted to assistant professor. She was now 46 years old, having spent a decade as a part-time and full-time lecturer, and having spent the decade before that as a writer, editor and researcher (Volpe 1969; Gross 1969; Volpe 1970; Maher at 116). The new English Chair Ted Gross noted that Shaughnessy’s abilities had already “won her recognition, unusual for one of lecturer rank, throughout the college” (1969 3). Even for a promotion endorsement, Gross’s personal

admiration was remarkable: “A woman of rare and keen intelligence, poetic sensibilities, and humane warmth, she is an extraordinary teacher and a fine human being who has won the unstinting admiration of her students, her SEEK staff, and her colleagues in this Department” (1969 2).

By October of 1970—only two months into the first semester of open admissions—Gross was convinced that Shaughnessy had already built the finest program of its kind within City University “and perhaps in any university in the country” (Gross 1970). As such, Gross named Shaughnessy as “an Assistant Chairman in charge of all composition work in the English Department” (Gross 1970). Shaughnessy now administered all City College composition courses and all writing placement tests for incoming students (Shaughnessy 1970). She quickly expanded her program and asserted her authority over it. Enrollment more than doubled, from 402 SEEK students in basic English courses in the spring of 1970 to about 1,000 open admissions and SEEK students in basic writing courses in the fall of 1970 (Shaughnessy 1970 2). Shaughnessy’s Fall 1971 Basic Writing Report began with an organization chart that positioned her as the “Basic Writing Program Director” at the top of a substantial administrative pyramid. She was now also overseeing a Writing Center with a seven person staff, 11 teachers and 40 student tutors (1971 Report). She reported that 81 faculty members (including 33 tenure track faculty) were now teaching 3,231 students in 150 sections of basic writing courses (1971 Report 1, 6, 7). In October of 1971, Shaughnessy was awarded tenure (Gross, 1971).

Sitting on a hilltop above Harlem, City College was by far the oldest college in the CUNY system. Within its dark granite towers, neatly edged in cut white limestone, resided a cherished self-image of academic prestige and traditional standards. This self-image was now under assault; the defenders of prestige and standards rushed to guard their towers: both open admissions and open admissions students came at once under intense, unrelenting, internal and external attacks. Alice Chandler, a City College literature professor throughout the 1960s and early 1970s who went on to become the President of SUNY New Paltz, remembers many angry debates, all centered on standards: “People wanted open admissions to go away. . . they wanted basic writing to go away. . . they wanted underprepared students to go away. That’s not my opinion, I mean that’s documented. . . .” (Chandler 2012). Chandler remembers Geoffrey Wagner as the most conservative English faculty member. In his rambling, sexist, and racist 1976 polemic, *The End of Education*, Wagner attacked basic writing courses because they taught “more about injustices of society. . . than the use of

punctuation” (143). More broadly, Wagner argued that high dropout rates proved that underprepared students could not be taught to meet City College’s traditional standards. But he also asserted that these standards had been relaxed during Open Admissions to “almost-total forgiveness” (130-31). To Wagner, open admissions students were damned if they failed; City College was damned if they succeeded.

Since about 1967, Shaughnessy had asked SEEK instructors to complete narrative mid-term reports for each student (Shaughnessy Oct. 1971). In fall 1970, she continued the practice; reports for 56 sections of basic writing survive. Forty-four of the listed Fall 1970 sections are “English 1” classes, previously labeled within SEEK as remedial or preparatory. Most instructors (including Shaughnessy) included some formalist notes in their comments. But many entries ranged far beyond surface mechanics. Soliday finds these reports to be “crammed with stories about students’ lives, observations about language learning, and descriptions of coursework. . . .” (93). A rich source, they show a large group of teachers with differing approaches all diving in to meet the needs of each student, engaging with their ideas, and pushing them to become better writers. Kenneth Craven was among the most creative commenters; his English 1 class report includes many short quotes of excellent student writing (Craven, 1970 Reports). Adrienne Rich’s report reflects the depth and breadth of her English 1 writing class. She notes that one student needs “to write a lot more, loosen up, broaden out. I feel these neat, dutiful papers got her thru high school English but her work lacks conviction. Her short story, however, looks more promising.” Rich commends an ESL student who “grapples with zest” with English and who “uses language for thinking and exploring.” She wishes another student “could get more in touch with his imagination in writing” (Rich, 1970 Reports).

In a March 1971 English Department newsletter, Shaughnessy complains that the “standards over which so many now stand guard” create institutional expectations that remedial writing teachers should immediately solve grammar and usage problems (6). “For this reason, teachers feel under pressure to do a quick job of producing correct writing since the ability of producing correct writing is often unconsciously accepted as proof of educability, a kind of proof sought after by most critics and some well-wishers of open admissions” (5). Writing teachers, Shaughnessy tells her colleagues, sense that the priorities should be different. Completely distinguishing writing from mechanics, Shaughnessy worries that students and teachers can be “caught up in a Catch-22 dilemma—a student can use up so much energy mastering the mechanics of standard English that he misses the

chance to learn how to write, but if he doesn't master the mechanics he may not have a chance to write" (5). This formalism squanders the enthusiasm of new students who "stimulated by the advance to college, by the exposure to new ideas and by a new awareness of themselves, . . . find they must stop to work out the A, B, C's of correctness" (5). Writing teachers are aware, she adds, "that real growth in writing begins when a student sees a connection between himself and the words he puts on paper," but they are tempted to focus on the constantly demanded correctness, becoming sidetracked until it is all they do, "which means almost inevitably the neglect, at a crucial point, of the deeper and ultimately more important resources the students bring into the classroom" (5).

Other CUNY writing teachers agreed that direct grammar instruction was both ineffective and outdated. In 1972, Rich argued that students must be able to trust that their writing is being read by a collaborator, "as opposed to a grading machine out to get me for mistakes in spelling and grammar" (269). Donald McQuade recalls now that after he began teaching writing at CUNY in 1970, he quickly developed a pedagogical emphasis on writing process: "we knew we shouldn't waste time teaching grammar because that's not a skill: it's information, it's a form of manners. And the whole notion of teaching writing by privileging grammar seemed to all of us misguided. So we didn't subscribe to that. . . .we thought that was wasted effort" (McQuade 2013). In 1976, McQuade labeled a "Back to Basics" approach by some English teachers as defensive, elitist, and an abandonment of "the integrity of their professional commitments" (8). A 1977 *New York Times* article that featured Shaughnessy, Bruffee, and other CUNY writing teachers, noted that all their approaches reflected the "solidly documented" rule that "it is virtually useless to teach the rules of grammar in isolation from writing" (Fiske 51).

1970 to 1972—Diving In Across CUNY as Shaughnessy Grew More Powerful

In the early 1970s, other forms of diving-in were developing across CUNY as writing teachers—many newly hired to serve the surge of open admissions students—developed new ways to teach writing. In 1970, Robert Lyons brought a new writing pedagogy to Queens College from Rutgers that centered on close, serious readings of non-literary texts (McQuade 2013). That same year, Andre Lorde introduced a "remedial writing through creative writing" course at John Jay College (Lorde, quoted in Rich 1979 60). Kenneth Bruffee developed his radical, student-centered, collaborative

learning pedagogy at Brooklyn College (Bruffee 1972a, 1972b, 1988).⁸ (In 1972, Bruffee even chastised Peter Elbow for being insufficiently committed to collaborative, student-centered learning communities [Bruffee 1972b 458, 464].)

In about 1971, Shaughnessy invited other CUNY WPAs and writing teachers to begin to meet and talk (McQuade 2013). The group soon began to hold regular monthly meetings on Saturday mornings, where they discussed reading assignments such as Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bruffee 1988, 5-7). McQuade now remembers those years as "the most exquisitely engaging teaching time in my entire life, because you could talk about what wasn't working, openly and candidly." Shaughnessy quickly became the WPA group's informal leader. At academic conferences, she assigned her colleagues to attend different sessions so they could cover everything and then confer (McQuade 2013). McQuade recalls: "There was no question who was in charge of our lives, intellectually. It was Mina. . . . She was like an orchestra leader. But she was also the soloist. She was an extraordinary human being, an immensely powerful woman and dynamic presence in our intellectual lives. . . . Everything gravitated around Mina."

Asserting her growing agency and authority, in the fall of 1971 Shaughnessy effectively overruled City College's 1968 decision to abolish required mainstream composition; she also positioned her basic writing English 3 as a new *de facto* mainstream composition course. In the previous fall (in alignment with administration expectations) Shaughnessy had placed about 45% of incoming students (1,000 out of 2,200) into basic writing courses (Shaughnessy, 1970; Skurnick 1978 12). Now, Shaughnessy placed 2,900 students—94% of all incoming students—into basic writing courses (1971 Report 2). The fall of 1970 and 1971 student populations were not essentially different.⁹ Shaughnessy simply recalibrated the placement process. The immediate impact on the English Department was profound. In 1969, only 32% of all City College English Courses were writing courses. By January of 1972, 50% were writing classes—all administered by Shaughnessy. Soon after, 70% would be writing classes (Gross 1972 at 1; 1980 at 9).

Shaughnessy's placements also overloaded the registration system. Due to lack of classroom space, all fall of 1971 English 3 placements were postponed at least one semester (1971 Report 2). (Placements into English 1 and 2 were mandatory; placements directly into English 3 were only recommendations [CCNY Bulletin 1971-1972 84].) Gross scrambled to find ways to compromise, especially as the English Department was facing budget cuts and layoffs of seven faculty positions (Gross, 1972). But Shaughnessy was undaunted: "I am

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persuaded that our high enrollment in Basic Writing courses is an accurate reflection of student needs” (Shaughnessy “Mid-Term Spring Report 1972” [1972 Report] 3). Moreover, she reported that she had double checked the efficiency of her fall of 1971 placements and found them to be 87 to 90% accurate (1971 Report 6). Having tripled the size of her program with these new placements, Shaughnessy then demanded more resources, regardless of budget cuts. She complained about increased class sizes and poor room assignments (1971 Report 14-15). In a January 1972 newsletter, Shaughnessy complained again:

Certainly the greatest peril we face at City is the limitations not of our students but of our budget. . . .At City College, the number of students in basic writing classes has tripled since last fall without any commensurate increase in classroom space. . . .In three semesters, under grossly inadequate conditions, we have begun to see how open admissions might be made to work. The decision of whether it will be allowed to work now rests with those who have the power to set public priorities. (7-8)

Shaughnessy reduced her English 3 placements slightly for new students in the spring of 1972. Still, she placed 82% of new spring freshmen into basic writing courses. And she argued that pressure to reduce basic writing placements, as well as the college’s failure to provide adequate resources, both represented “a decline in the standards of the college and a disadvantage for our average and above-average students, who would be required in all other senior colleges to take a semester of writing” (1972 Report 1, 3). Shaughnessy also argued openly that mandatory composition courses should be formally restored (1972 Report 4). In the fall of 1972, Shaughnessy’s lieutenant, Blanche Skurnick, placed 98% of incoming City College students (2,120 out of 2,165) into basic writing courses (Skurnick 1973 1). Skurnick would continue to place “no fewer than 90% of each entering class. . . .into basic writing” for the next five years (Skurnick 1978 13).

If basic courses had meant mainstream freshman courses in the 1960s, and SEEK basic English courses meant stretch versions of mainstream courses, Shaughnessy’s 45% placement rate in 1970 had changed the practical meaning of her new “basic writing” to be closer to “remedial” or “preparatory”. But her expanded placements starting in 1971 restored some of the old meaning: now virtually all City College freshmen would be placed into basic writing courses.¹⁰

In any event, Shaughnessy was no longer a mere intellectual bureaucrat. Her 1971 writing course placements effectively overruled the decision of her department and City College to abolish freshman composition—and no one at City College overruled her.

1971 to 1972—Shaughnessy’s Growing Conflicts about Guarding the Tower

Shaughnessy’s de facto revival of mandatory composition could have meant the demise of the Proficiency Exam. This high-stakes writing test, after all, had only been created as a necessary substitute for writing instructor judgment because mandatory composition courses had been eliminated. In 1972, the Proficiency Exam was not yet established as a fixed, unchangeable metric. Similar tests were still rare in other college systems. Indeed, Chandler (who was the Proficiency Exam coordinator in 1972) even suggested that the exam might be eliminated in 1973 once “the last of the students who entered college when no writing was required have been graduated” (Chandler July 1972 5). Chandler also noted that whatever “we finally decide to do about the Proficiency Examination, a better system of checks and balances on students progressing through Basic Writing 1, 2, and 3 is probably needed and is, I believe, being created” (Chandler Jan. 1972 2). Nonetheless, the traditionally trained Chandler also endorsed the exam as “a valuable gauge of the success of the Basic Writing Program and a useful contribution to the educational process at [City College] because of the emphasis it places on clear and correct writing. . . .” (Chandler Jan. 1972 2).

In 1968, Shaughnessy had hoped to clean out the “attic furniture” of traditional writing tests. But now, she did not try to eliminate the Proficiency Exam when she had the chance. Conflicted, she instead began an elaborate dance—trying to hold the test at a safe arm’s distance. She accepted it as a “check on the efficacy of [her] program” (Volpe 1972 771). Yet, Shaughnessy called the exam “a far from ideal measure, requiring that students produce essays on topics they have had no time to prepare for. . . .” She admitted only that it “offers some indication of their control of formal English and their ability to organize a short discussion on an assigned topic” (1971 Report 10).

In another compromise, Shaughnessy required all students who completed the basic writing sequence to sit for the Proficiency Exam; but she did not require them to pass. “Since the exam certifies a proficiency level

for graduation, it is not expected that all students will pass it at the end of English 3” (1971 Report 10). In fact, as many as half of the English 3 students simply refused to take the Proficiency Exam at all and Shaughnessy did not enforce her own requirement (Chandler, Jan. 1972 at 2-3; Meyersohn).

By accepting the exam with reservations, Shaughnessy allowed City College to gather information about how basic writing students fared on it. But she carefully lowered expectations as much as possible, warning that passing rates would likely drop over time as more students with low placement test scores worked through the basic writing sequence (1971 Report 10). “A student who begins in English 1 and moves after two semesters to English 3, for example, is seldom at the same level of skill as the student initially placed in English 3. The gaps in preparation, in other words, are greater than the time we have to close them” (1971 Report 16).

Then, in July of 1972, Chandler reported surprising good news: a group of mostly basic writing students had just done slightly better than a group of pre-open admissions seniors on the Proficiency Exam—a potential symbolic victory (1). With these flattering results, would Shaughnessy now fully embrace the exam?

No. She wrote back to Chandler:

[T]he Proficiency Exam. . . still has many of the shortcomings of in-class examinations, especially for students with hang-ups about exams (that is, almost all “remedial” students). It is not unusual, for example, to have a student who performs well on writing assignments in class fall down in this kind of examination, where the stakes are much higher. This exam tests the ability of students to write under pressure; it does not test their “over-all” ability and should not therefore, be the basis on which we evaluate the whole achievement of a student or of the Basic Writing Program. (Aug. 1972 2)

In short, Shaughnessy attacked the Proficiency exam as both unreliable and invalid—in part *because* it was a high-stakes test. Marilyn Maiz was Shaughnessy’s assistant and close friend from 1971 to 1978. Looking back now, Maiz believes that Shaughnessy’s August 1972 memo to Chandler reflected what Shaughnessy basically believed about the Proficiency Exam (Maiz 2013). Chandler agrees now that Shaughnessy was right about the many weaknesses of the exam, but she also reads Shaughnessy’s stance as a political one in which Shaughnessy was protecting her program and her students from the external interference created by this exam (Chandler 2012).

In her 1971 Report, Shaughnessy also urges against adopting any fixed minimal standards for basic writing students. Foreshadowing her “Diving In” speech, Shaughnessy argues for flexible standards for students who have “worked steadily. . . shown significant improvement, and may even at times have produced writing that, in its quality of insight and imagination, is superior to that which more easily meets the traditional ‘standard.’ Can we, in short, penalize the student who has kept his end of the bargain and who has succeeded in terms of his own baseline?” (17). The answer, Shaughnessy suggests, depends on whether City College views remediation as solely the responsibility of her program, in which case an English 3 student “who cannot deliver a sample of writing that meets the old standard is out.” Instead of this minimum standards approach, she urges City College to see remediation as a collective responsibility and a process that continues beyond basic writing courses—in which case that same student should be allowed to continue his studies despite failing to meet a fixed minimum standard,

knowing that, with sweat, the gap between the absolute standard and his performance will narrow and finally close.

This is the way every SEEK student I know has grown—by plugging, by patiently re-making habits, returning again and again to fundamentals but expanding each time the area of mastery, by reaching plateaus that look like standstills and having setbacks that look like failures—but moving, always in the direction of mastery until, finally, there is a sense of an undergirding and a feeling of control.

So confident am I of the capacity of poorly educated students to make this gain that I would not hesitate to guarantee such results if we could but suspend our institutional neurosis about standards long enough to meet these students in all courses where they are rather than where we think they ought to be and proceed to give them a good education. (17)

Shaughnessy’s argument here closely anticipates her “Diving-In” speech four years later. Shaughnessy’s politics and her pedagogy in the 1971 Report were still centered on diving in to meet students where they were, to recognize the insights and imagination in their work, and to embrace the messy, recursive writing and learning process in which deep successes can seem to be surface failures.

But by late 1971, there were also signs that institutional neuroses were affecting Shaughnessy and her basic writing program. From 1967 to early 1971, the SEEK and basic writing instructors had compiled brief narrative

mid-term reports describing the progress of each student (Shaughnessy Oct. 1971). However, as McBeth has observed, Shaughnessy revised the mid-term reports in October of 1971. She replaced the SEEK program narrative reports with a 23-question form that required teachers to first assess each student's abilities as poor, fair, good, or excellent in ten different categories of surface error.¹¹ This none-too-subtle administrative push towards an emphasis on formalism corresponded with the skills that were now important on the Proficiency Exam. Shaughnessy instituted new departmental mid-term exams as well (Maiz 2012). While she apologized to her basic writing teachers that “[f]inal exams don't seem to make much sense in writing courses,” Shaughnessy nonetheless required timed departmental final exams in English 1 and 2. She continued to use the Proficiency Exam as a final exam in English 3. These tests were medium-stakes exercises: each teacher could give them “whatever weight they wish” (Shaughnessy Dec. 1971). (And it appears that many English 3 teachers gave the Proficiency Exam very little weight, since up to half of their students refused to take it.)

In the fall of 1970, Shaughnessy had used a one-semester basic writing course structure. She had placed about one-third of incoming students into English 1, “Diagnosis of individual writing problems, introduction to grammatical features of Standard English, introduction to description, narration and analysis.” She had also urged about one-tenth to take English 40, an elective writing workshop course (Shaughnessy Sep. 1970 1-2; CCNY Catalog 1970-71 82-83). In the fall of 1971, Shaughnessy eliminated English 40; she extended SEEK's three-semester course structure to all new students and placed 94% of them into those courses. But the two-semester SEEK college-level stretch course was now replaced by a more formalist sequence: English 1, “The Sentence and Paragraph” focused largely on sentence-level mechanics. English 2, “The Paragraph and Short Essay,” focused largely on paragraph level development and clarity. Only English 3, “Academic Forms,” now focused on producing college-level term papers and book reviews—as well as answering essay exam questions (1971 Report 3-5).

Shaughnessy also abandoned her 1969 plan to create a writers' workshop basic writing course modeled on Iowa's example. Instead she converted the workshop space into a writing center available to help all students (1971 Report 12). The Writing Center added a substantial element to Shaughnessy's new program. She and others promoted it as an important innovation. However, by late 1971, Shaughnessy began to impose a highly formalist pedagogy on the Center, using a sixteen-page set of instructional “modules” for the center. Only the final module, on reducing repetition, moved beyond sentence-level

correctness.¹² Shaughnessy promoted these sentence mechanics modules as being “equal [to] a regular course in first semester English” (1971 Report 11).

All these changes pulled Shaughnessy’s program away from the student-centered, creative, flexible, holistically supportive model of the 1960s SEEK program. In increasing alignment with the new Proficiency Exam, Shaughnessy was reshaping her basic writing program toward a top-down, minimum skills pedagogy that served instead to mollify institutional neuroses about traditional standards. Basic writing was moving from diving in, and toward converting the natives and guarding the tower.

November 20, 1972—Shaughnessy’s Validation of the Proficiency Exam

In January of 1972, Shaughnessy worried that critical “soothsayers within and outside the college. . . continue to invent statistics to fit their cataclysms” (Jan. 1972 at 7). Nine months later, Dan Berger, a young researcher in the City College Office of Research and Testing, published just such a cataclysmic report. Employing “multiple regression analyses,” Berger concluded that English 1 in 1970 had: 1) not improved students’ subsequent grades in any way and, 2) had not made students more likely to stay in college (D. Berger 1, 5, 8-9).

To understand the pressure on Shaughnessy to defend her program, simply imagine the Berger Report in the hands of her conservative colleague Jeffrey Wagner. And, although Berger’s data was thin, his findings also directly attacked Shaughnessy’s reputation as an able WPA whose program helped students stay in college and succeed in mainstream courses. It was especially grating to her that Berger found a Freshman College Skills class to be more valuable than her basic writing course (Maiz 2012; D. Berger 8). So Shaughnessy carefully assembled a response (Maiz 2013). With help from statisticians, she challenged Berger’s methods and conclusions. But she had no numbers showing actual student success—no hard evidence to counter to Berger’s gloomy multiple regression analyses (Shaughnessy Jan. 1972 7). Even if Shaughnessy could have assembled proof of direct success, amid the growing institutional neurosis about standards, conservative critics like Wagner would counter that grades had been watered down and teacher assessments could no longer be trusted.

And so, in a direct reversal of her position only two months earlier, Shaughnessy publically embraced the Proficiency Exam. In her November 20, 1972 memorandum to the “Open Admissions Working Committee,”

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Shaughnessy writes that “[t]hus the Proficiency Examination, concluding the Basic Writing sequenc[e], simultaneously ‘tests’ the student’s ability to write as he completes this sequence and the success of the Basic Writing instruction he has received” (4).¹³ Shaughnessy goes so far as to claim that the Proficiency Exam produces “advanced” writing: “This examination is composed, administered and read by members of the English Department. . . who will presumably judge as competent only the kinds of writing which they would find acceptable in their own advanced courses” (4).

Shaughnessy had been experimenting with objective tests as placement tools. The bulk of incoming Fall 1971 incoming students had been placed into writing courses based on two 20-minute placement essays; all 4,000 essays were read by a group of 20 English teachers (1971 Report 5). For Spring 1971 freshmen, Shaughnessy tried several objective tests to try to lighten this reading load (1971 Report 6). A surviving 1971 nine-page, multiple-choice placement test includes these categories: subject-verb, run-on sentences, pronouns, verb forms, parallel construction, logical connectives, vocabulary and paragraphs (English Department 1971). As of Fall 1972, Shaughnessy planned to place two-thirds of incoming students solely by objective test scores, reducing the placement reading load to 1,000 essays; she hoped to increase placement by objective tests in the future (1972 Report 2-3). Now, in her response to the Berger Report, Shaughnessy also validated objective tests as a writing course *exit* assessment:

We test the student’s grasp of standard grammatical concepts initially in the objective grammar test given to entering students as part of the placement exam. A semester later, if the student has been placed into English 1, his understanding of the principles of agreement, punctuation, verb form, and spelling will determine whether or not he will go on to English 2. Thus at one point in our sequence, we use those aspects of writing that lend themselves to objective testing as a primary evaluative tool. (5-6)

Shaughnessy’s validation of multiple choice tests as the “primary” exit assessment for English 1 courses was a remarkable shift from the complex, sophisticated, narrative-form teacher assessments she had used in SEEK courses and her basic writing English 1 courses until the spring of 1971.

Yet, even as she validates these tests in this memo, Shaughnessy’s deep conflicts burst to the surface. She recognizes that “we have discovered that the weakness of traditional approaches to writing is that they concern

the written word rather than the process of writing.” She asserts that “we cannot divorce the writer from his text.” And she adds that an “[e]valuation of writing courses will serve no purpose unless it helps us to create better writers. . . .whatever evaluations are made should address themselves to the writing process itself” (5). Remarkably, Shaughnessy espouses a complex writing process pedagogy as a central requirement for writing assessment, while at the same time she argues for the validity of a timed, prompted writing exam—the very same exam which she had rejected as invalid, unreliable and harmful only two months earlier. By comparison, Lyons and McQuade resisted proficiency exams at Queens College (McQuade 2013). McQuade notes now of writing process “Well, that’s what we thought we should teach, rather than teaching the five paragraph theme or some other restrictive, formulaic method like that.”¹⁴

Despite her sharp, internal conflicts, Shaughnessy had now publically redefined her entire program as measurable by this single timed-essay test: writer and process utterly divorced from product. Shaughnessy’s reversal soon would have profound effects for her program. The Proficiency Exam—conceived, designed and implemented by the English Department with the sole purpose of guarding the granite and limestone towers of City College—would now be the capstone event of the three-semester basic writing sequence; Shaughnessy had fully authorized administrators to use these exam results to judge both her program and its individual students.

1973 to Now—“An Endless Corridor of Remedial Anterooms”

In *Errors*, Shaughnessy warned that colleges “must be prepared to make more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation” to unprepared students, leading them “into an endless corridor of remedial anterooms” (293). Yet in the fall of 1978, CUNY would implement a massive, system-wide, high-stakes, basic-skills testing system. For the last thirty-five years at CUNY, writing exam cut-scores have governed course placement, advancement, retention and (since 2000) admission for just over 1,400,000 first-time CUNY freshmen. Somewhere close to half of these students have been labeled as basic writers and placed into tens of thousands of basic writing course sequences where they have been required to pass more high-stakes timed writing exams or fail and repeat each course.¹⁵

A few months after she reversed her stance on the Proficiency Exam, Shaughnessy gave an address at the CCCCs convention in New Orleans, entitled “Open Admissions and The Disadvantaged Teacher.” There she said:

In how many countless and unconscious ways do we capitulate to the demand for numbers? . . .

In how many ways has the need for numbers driven us to violate the very language itself, ripping it from the web of discourse in order to count the things that can be caught in the net of numbers? How many young men and women have turned from the wellsprings of their own experiences and ideas to fill in the blanks of our more modest expectations? All in the name of accountability! (402)

In this speech, Shaughnessy's internal conflicts again surface painfully. She denounces being forced to "teach to quick pay-offs that can be translated into numbers so that the ranking and winnowing of human talent can go on apace." She concludes: "We cannot teach under such constraints; our students cannot learn" (402).

But what were "the countless and unconscious" capitulations Shaughnessy sensed in herself in early 1973? Did they include: Her validation of the Proficiency Exam a few months earlier? Her new departmental basic writing course mid-term and final exams? Her new mid-term teacher reports that required cataloguing surface error weaknesses for each student? Her formalist Writing Center modules? Her new sentence/paragraph/essay three-semester course sequence? Her validation of multiple-choice tests as the primary exit assessment tools for English 1? In a larger sense, were all these capitulations also evidence of the internalized, negative washback effects of the exams themselves? As Shaughnessy shaped writing tests at City College, were they also shaping her?

In *Uptaught*, Ken Macrorie writes that, as a beginning writing teacher in a college course with an exit exam where his students produced "dead" writing, he had been unable to see that the institution was causing students to produce this dead language because he was already "developing a protective blindness" (11). In his 2001 study of primary and secondary writing pedagogy in five states, George Hillocks found that mandated writing assessments deeply affect "rhetorical stance, instructional mode, and writing process" among teachers (190). Even long-time testing advocate Edward White recently recognized that "the unintended consequences [of "rising junior" writing exams] have been unfortunate to some and devastating to others" (2005 at 31). In a 1991 case study of mandated testing (including decontextualized grammar tests) of primary school students in Arizona, Mary Lee Smith found that a mandated testing system made teachers feel "anxiety, shame, loss of esteem and

alienation”(8). As they focused on narrow test preparation, these experiences became “incorporated into the teachers’ identities and subsequent definitions of teaching” (8). As the tests “de-skilled” teaching, and as critical thinking was “sifted out of the curriculum” (11), Smith found that teachers became unable to “adapt, create or diverge” because they increasingly perceived the received curriculum as beyond “criticism or revision” (10).

Shaughnessy’s conflicts between diving in and guarding the tower may feel familiar to many basic writing teachers today. In some sense, we are torn between diving in and guarding the tower in every paper comment we make, every student conference we hold, every lesson plan and syllabus we craft, and every rubric or assessment we accept, reject, or endure. Even as we know that guarding the tower will hurt our students, we are constantly pressured and shaped by institutional neuroses that can be hard for us to see, in part because so much of the politics that governs our teaching is invisible to us—concealed within hidden transcripts and buried beneath moth-eaten myths about student needs and capacities.

The Proficiency Exam of City College was promulgated in November of 1969 by the English Department to guard the towers of City College as waves of new students (many of them Black and Hispanic) threatened its traditional standards. At first, Shaughnessy mocked this test as useless “attic furniture.” As a SEEK teacher, she imported the Iowa workshop model to SEEK writing classes; she taught multiple-draft, process writing; she even “was willing to ride with the minds and imaginations of her students [when] they opted for revolution.” From 1968 to November of 1972, grounded in SEEK’s diving-in pedagogy and surrounded by a community of open admissions writing teachers who were also diving in across CUNY, Shaughnessy resisted the City College Proficiency Exam in various ways. Yet, as she grew powerful—and while the Proficiency Exam was still weak—she did not fight to eliminate it. Perhaps she was confident of her power to control the Proficiency Exam for her own ends. Perhaps she unconsciously capitulated to the neurosis about standards that was swirling around her. (She called it “our institutional neurosis.”) Perhaps she did not foresee how testing systems would soon grow powerful, marginalize and exclude students, narrow and distort writing instruction, and change teachers as well as teaching. In any event, Shaughnessy chose to dance with this devil, holding it at arm’s length as she stepped gracefully forward and backward, moving to the complex music of institutional politics in the chaos of open admissions. And once Shaughnessy began this dance, she would find herself drawn ever deeper into the welcoming arms of her seductive partner.

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Notes

1. (1991 37). As Joseph Harris has noted, John Rouse sharply criticized *Errors* in 1979 for (among other things) promoting the teaching of grammar although Shaughnessy knew “it has no support whatever in research evidence” (Rouse 3; Harris 102-04). I also read Peter Elbow as gently criticizing Shaughnessy in 1981: “[l]earning grammar. . . takes energy away from working on your writing, and worse yet, the process of learning grammar interferes with writing...” (169). Elbow then recommends *Errors* as a readable study and analysis of common grammatical mistakes (172).
2. Although not limited to English classes, Berger's 1966 course model anticipated core concepts of the 1992 Arizona State writing course stretch-model (Glau 79-80).
3. In 1968, Assistant Professor James Ruoff described the proposed mainstream English One elective as a “basic writing course,” which he distinguished from the English 5 “remedial” writing course (Ruoff). City College English Department Minutes in 1967-68 also refer to mainstream composition courses as part of a “basic literature” sequence. The February 9, 1967 Minutes expressed unanimous support for a “basic literature sequence” that included “the principles of composition.” The April 4, 1968 Minutes discussed a new English 1 composition course that would “be an introduction to literature,” including “basic elements... such as symbolism, irony, point of view, etc.”

4. According to *The Tech News*, the demands were: 1. A separate school of Black and Puerto Rican Studies. 2. A separate orientation program for Black and Puerto Rican students. 3. A voice for SEEK students in the setting of all guidelines for the SEEK program, including the hiring and firing of personnel. 4. That the racial composition of all entering classes reflect the Black and Puerto Rican population of the New York City high schools. 5. That Black and Puerto Rican history and Spanish language be a requirement for all education majors (Watson).

5. Although these reforms later would be seen as concessions to student demands (Kriegel 198-99), *The Tech News* reported them as top-down revisions based on CUNY's Master Plan—all with almost no student input (“Curriculum Revisions: Students Disregarded”).

6. In 1964, worried that students' writing skills might suffer because they were teaching fewer writing courses, several faculty urged creating a more rigorous final exam for the new composition course “to ensure that no student be graduated from City College who cannot write correctly.” (Minutes, 3 Oct. 1964 at 2; attached Ad Hoc Committee Report at 1). The Composition Committee then proposed using an objective grammar test portion of the final exam as a new kind of high-stakes test—any student scoring less than 60% on this part of the final would automatically fail. (Minutes, 18 Mar. 1965). Soon after, an unnamed professor first proposed a high-stakes, college-wide, writing proficiency test graduation requirement (Minutes, 1 Apr. 1965 2).

7. The University of Georgia was the first college system to implement proficiency tests on a large scale, imposing minimum skills proficiency reading and writing tests for sophomores across its thirty-three campuses starting in 1972 (E. White 2005, 31; Ridenour 338, 343). The University of Georgia example demonstrates the seductive power of such testing systems. They quickly “affected instruction and curricula throughout the university system” (Rideneur 333). After trial testing in 1971, tests were at first implemented piecemeal; but the institution then developed a single coordinated program (Pounds 327). Soon, the University of Georgia created additional basic skills tests that it used as freshman placement and course exit tests (Rideneur 332). By 1978, Georgia had abandoned its open admissions policy and was using the minimum skills tests as admissions tests (Rideneur 334).

8. A broader history of these remarkable, early 1970s CUNY diving-in teach-

ing models would be valuable, including the work of Harvey Wiener at LaGuardia Community College, John Brereton at Queensborough Community College, Richard Sterling at Lehman College, and many others (Bruffee 1988 4; McQuade 2013). The most unstinting opponents of old teaching methods and grammar-centric formalism were perhaps critical scholars; Ira Shor began teaching at the then two-year College of Staten Island in 1971 as part of a student-centered, “collectivist” basic writing program led by Teresa O’Connor (Shor 1972, 1974, 2013).

9. In fall 1970, City College “admitted 2440 first-time freshmen, of whom 37% had [high school] averages under 80%; in 1971, 2878 first-time freshmen, of whom 53% had averages under 80%; and in 1972, 1924 first-time freshmen, of whom 49% had averages under 80%” (Faculty Senate News 1). These figures (and Shaughnessy’s placement figures above) roughly match CUNY Data Books for 1971 and 1972, but they exclude freshman admitted under special programs—mostly SEEK students, of which there were 751 admitted to City College in the fall of 1970, 363 in the fall of 1971, and 355 in the fall of 1972 (Fall 1970 CUNY Data Book 9-10; Fall 1971 CUNY Data Book 12; Fall 1972 CUNY Data Book 13).

10. Six years later, despite her efforts, Shaughnessy recognized that the meaning of “basic” tended “to get translated into ‘remedial’ when the chips are down” (“Basic Writing” 177). The label “basic writer” would quickly become subject to powerful institutional politics. Joseph Trimmer noted in 1987 that 900 colleges defined “basic writer” in 700 different ways (4).

11. (Shaughnessy, Oct. 71 and attached form: “Mid Term Report, Term Ending Jan. 1972.”) The categories were: subject-verb agreement, verb forms, intra-sentence punctuation (commas, quotations, apostrophes, etc.), inter-sentence punctuation (fragments, splices, comma faults), pronoun reference and case, adjective and adverb forms, possessives, spelling, syntax in simple sentences, and complex sentences, including subordinating constructions.

12. (“1971 Report” 11-14, App. D). Modules 100 to 119 covered parts of speech: subjects, adjectives, conjunctions, etc. Modules 200-212 covered only verbs and verb tenses. Modules 300-303 covered subject-verb agreement. Modules 400-402 covered punctuation. Modules 500-503 covered spelling. Modules 600-605 covered sentence mechanics. Appendix D was recovered by Mark McBeth from Shaughnessy’s office files at City College. Page fifteen is missing.

The Appendix was a draft, with some modules in the sequences left blank.

13. Although Blanche Skurnick and Marilyn Maiz were listed as co-authors of the 20 Nov. 1972 memo, Maiz remembers that she had no part in drafting it and Shaughnessy was the principal drafter. Maiz recognizes now that the document was produced on Shaughnessy's typewriter (Maiz 2013).

14. By comparison, Chandler remembers that the City College literature faculty knew nothing about the newly emerging theories of writing process: "Traditionally, unlike Mina, who comes in sort of, by a side path, we're trained. We imitated our faculty, who imitated their faculty, who . . . back in the 13th Century in Oxford were doing the same thing—which was that we [were] looking for a superb final product. We [didn't] care how you got there" (Chandler 2012). White recalled a similar situation in California in 1972. English department chairs there collectively embraced new mainstream writing course exit tests in part because they were all literature professors who understood nothing yet about writing process, in "the days before composition studies" (White, 2001 310, 315).

15. First time freshman totals are compiled from the CUNY Office of Institutional Research Data Books and Admissions Reports. I have found only limited CUNY writing test pass rate information. In the fall of 1978, 54% of CUNY's 32,300 first-time freshmen were placed into basic writing classes after they failed the placement exam (Lederman, 25 June 80, Table One). From 1991 to 1997, over 62% of all CUNY fall-semester, first-time freshmen failed the writing test (CUNY Data Books 1991-1997). Many transfer students have also been subject to these testing systems. Until 2010, all CUNY rising juniors were also required to pass additional high-stakes writing proficiency exams.

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