"Root and Branch": Resisting a Basic Writing Legacy System

Sean Molloy, Silvester Fonville, and Abdus Salam

ABSTRACT: Since the 1970s, legacy Basic Writing systems have survived despite growing resistance grounded in an increasing awareness of their troubling roots and harmful effects. In this article, two 2017 basic writing students and their teacher conduct a mixed-method "postmortem" examination of the now eliminated zero-credit course and writing test placement system at their university. They combine a local desegregation history, an assessment validity inquiry, and a case study of growing resistance to Basic Writing for over a decade, including their own resistance in 2017. Adapting the "root and branch" metaphor from Green v. County Board (1968), the authors analyze reforms from 2007 to 2017 that significantly trimmed the branches of a decades-old, legacy Basic Writing system—but did not root it out completely. Finally, the authors examine their own failed efforts to obtain college credit for the work they did together in 2017 and the complex ways that Basic Writing has harmed each of them.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; desegregation; civil rights; college writing; disparate impact; harm; root and branch; testing; writing assessment; writing placement

Sil and Abdus met on September 6, 2017—their very first day of college at William Paterson University ("WP"). That day, Abdus felt nervous and excited. He had no idea what to expect or whether he could succeed. Sil felt weird. He's not a social person and he didn't know anyone. It should have been a proud and happy day. Both had fought hard against long odds to earn their places here. But both had been enrolled into ENG 1080 Basic Writing, which at once cast a dark cloud over their entry to college. After admitting and recruiting them, WP had determined (based on a timed essay placement test) that Sil and Abdus were too "basic" to take WP's mainstream writing course—unlike 98% of their peers. WP labeled them as "basic writers" and placed them into a pass-fail, zero-credit, "basic" course that carried no college credit and awarded no letter grade. It would remain on their permanent

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college transcripts for all future potential graduate schools and employers to see. More subtly, Sil and Abdus understood that WP had already judged them as less capable than virtually all of their entering peers. Sean, a second-year assistant professor, taught both sections of Basic Writing offered that fall. He met Sil and Abdus on their first day of college.

A Local History, Validity Inquiry, and Case Study

In 2018, English faculty and WP administrators discontinued both writing placement tests and our Basic Writing course; WP began to place all incoming students into mainstream writing courses. Sil and Abdus were in the last group of students labeled as "basic writers" at our college and Sean was the last Basic Writing instructor here. In this article, we combine three methods (a local history, a disparate impact validity analysis, and a case study of our own Basic Writing experience) into a larger postmortem examination of Basic Writing at WP from start to finish.

Our mixed methods here respond to calls for ecological and polyvocal programmatic assessment studies of first-year writing programs and writing assessment systems (Wardle and Roozen; Lee, 643-44; Mislevy, 265-68; White, Elliot and Peckham, 32). We agree with Asao B. Inoue that an anti-racist programmatic assessment must recognize that "all ecologies are associated with political activities" and should refer "to the political (or power) relations between people" (81). We join the 2019 call by Mya Poe, Jessica Nastal, and Norbert Elliot for new college writing course frameworks based on the belief that *"an admitted student is a qualified student"* (italics in original).

We also affirm that "[h]istories of writing assessment are invaluable in the analysis of practices viewed as deterministically objective" (Banks et al., 380). Our local history jumps back to 1968 and recovers the story of

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the first desegregation program at our college—led by two English professors. We trace the decade of expanding desegregation that included new, full-credit, writing courses here from 1971 to 1978. Then we examine how the imposition of Basic Writing here in 1978-79 was openly understood at that time to be a conservative reaction to desegregation at the direction of a new WP President, Seymour Hyman. Hyman's plans were briefly delayed by vocal student and faculty opposition; but in 1979, WP implemented its first zero-credit, Basic Writing course/testing system. As such, we position the imposition of Basic Writing at WP within the myriad forms of overt and covert resistance to integration at all levels of American education.

In 1954, a unanimous Supreme Court recognized that feelings of inferiority inflicted on Black children could "affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone" (Brown, 347 U.S. 483, 494). Fourteen years later, the Court lost patience with Southern resistance to dismantling legacy apartheid school systems; it ordered Virginia educators to build a new "system in which racial discrimination would be eliminated root and branch" (Green, 391 U.S. 430, 438). We adapt the Court's 1968 "root and branch" metaphor here as we jump forward to analyze reform efforts between 2007 and 2017 at WP that cut back the branches of our legacy Basic Writing system— but did not root it out completely.

Following Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen's 2014 study of a placement system at another New Jersey university, we then conduct a disparate impact analysis of the 2017 system at WP that placed Abdus and Sil into Basic Writing.

Finally, we examine our actual experience in 2017 in this 38-year-old legacy system, including Sil and Abdus's placement into Basic Writing, our efforts to obtain college credit, and the actual work we did together in the course—all of which exposed both the inability of a timed test to measure the content of our course, and the harmful consequences of this Basic Writing test/course system on actual students. In doing so, we affirm that "validity inquiries are not bloodless undertakings; the cares and concerns of people" and "student and teacher voices" must be included (Inoue and Poe 119).

In conclusion, we consider how Basic Writing affected us and how our study may help to guide social justice writing teachers and administrators at other colleges as they resist and reform old legacy systems.

Our Positionality

Abdus grew up as the youngest of nine brothers and sisters in Kuna Shaleswar, a small village in northeast Bangladesh filled with mango, jackfruit, coconut, and betelnut trees—as well as big, brightly painted houses that held large families. As a boy, he crossed the Kushiara River in a small boat every day to go to his public school. He played cricket in the village's green, grassy fields. His family spoke only Bengali at home, but Abdus studied a little bit of English in all his school classes. In March of 2016, Abdus, his parents, brother, and sister emigrated to Paterson, New Jersey—seeking more opportunities and a better life.

Growing up, Sil was surrounded by a loving family in Atlantic City, New Jersey. They always pushed him toward the right path, but his friends almost pulled him into a dangerous life. Tourists view Atlantic City as a place to go and have fun on the boardwalk and beach. But they don't see the struggles. Sil's hometown is a place where kids' hopes get cut short again and again until all they feel is hate, where students strive to strengthen their talents but schools don't push them, and where violence and gangs are more looked up to than teachers. When Sil graduated from his high school in 2017, few of his friends went on to college. In 2017, only 80% of Atlantic City High School (ACHS) seniors graduated. Even worse, only 68% of African- American seniors graduated—15% lower than the NJ State average of 83%. Among ACHS graduates that year, only 37% were enrolled in any four-year college sixteen months after graduation (NJDOE "Summary Report," "Graduation Rates").

Sil almost joined the Navy and skipped college. But as an African American, he didn't feel comfortable serving under the current President. He also knew he wanted something better for himself.

Sean grew up in one of Brooklyn's working-class, outer-fringe, white neighborhoods in the 1960s and 70s. On Avenue L back then, racism was in the air and every child breathed it in. After working eighteen years as a lawyer, Sean started teaching college writing courses in 2003, including many sections that were labeled as "introductory" or "basic." Sean's 2016 PhD dissertation was a history that traced the connections between the racial desegregation at City College, City University of New York (CUNY) in the 1960s, and the birth of "Basic Writing" programs at CUNY in the 1970s ("Myopia"). He came to WP as a new Assistant Professor in 2016. On the first day of Sean's second year at WP, he met Sil and Abdus in our Basic Writing class.

1966 to 1972: Ending Racial Exclusion at WP

In 1966, two young professors joined the WP English Department. Phil Cioffari and Fort Manno were soon troubled that WP (then called Paterson State College) was an overwhelmingly white institution, with only about a few dozen Black students within a student body of 6,300 (Manno).

WP had been born in 1855 as a few teacher-training classes in the City of Paterson, a silk mill town about twelve miles west of Manhattan. Across the next century, WP had slowly grown into a general college and then into a college for teachers. In 1951, "Paterson State Teachers College" moved to a new hilltop campus about a mile northwest of Paterson's city limits (White). As Cioffari and Manno arrived in 1966, WP was just beginning to expand its degree programs to become a full liberal arts college.

Even though WP had deep roots in Paterson and sat on a hilltop just over a mile west of the diverse city, Manno and Cioffari saw that many of Paterson's high school seniors were being excluded from its namesake college. Determined to end this racial exclusion, the two young English professors proposed a new Society of Unlimited Learning (SOUL) scholarship, admissions, and supportive teaching pilot program. Cioffari and Manno also wanted to activate student and faculty to join together to reshape the campus culture. In October of 1967, they held a SOUL organizational meeting attended by over 100 students and faculty. In November, they organized a "Love-Rock" fundraiser concert on campus. In December, SOUL held a holiday craft sale (Cioffari, Manno). Cioffari asked national bands to play scholarship benefit concerts. The Doors said no, but Little Anthony and the Imperials ("Hurts So Bad") came and sold out 1100 seats (Cioffari). Cioffari and Manno also sought funding from the New Jersey Board of Higher Education; they eventually secured a $40,000 state grant (Manno).

With their funding secured, Cioffari and Manno visited churches and local organizations in Paterson to recruit Black applicants. In the spring of 1968, SOUL awarded twenty scholarships to incoming African American students: ten men and ten women (Cioffari; Manno; Hutton). The incoming SOUL students all attended a free, non-credit, residential summer program with bridge courses in math, writing, and African American history. They received free books. They took many of their first- and second-year courses as a single learning community with supportive instructors carefully selected by Cioffari and Manno from the tenure-track faculty. These teachers offered extra tutoring assistance as needed. Cioffari and Manno regularly checked in

with the teachers; they also advised the twenty SOUL students throughout their four-year college careers (Cioffari; Manno).

As a bottom-up, supportive, racial-justice program, SOUL provided financial, academic, and advisement support. SOUL viewed all students as individuals who were capable of college success from their first day at college. It tracked their success and offered individual support as needed. It avoided creating any stigmatizing structures or barriers to success. There were no placement tests or zero-credit courses. Recognizing that diversity made WP a stronger and better community, Cioffari and Manno measured the SOUL program's success on actual student success through course grades and graduation (Cioffari; Manno). These direct programmatic assessments were more valid than indirect metrics (like timed writing tests) and they also aligned student and program success—ensuring that the SOUL program would serve as a bridge rather than a barrier.[1]

Indeed, SOUL's founders could not easily have adopted any writing course barriers at WP—because such barriers did not then exist. In 1966, WP's mainstream required writing course was ENG 110 "Fundamentals of English," which trained students "in expository writing with due consideration to clarity, precision, and correctness." ENG 110 also focused on "unity, coherence and emphasis" as well as "library resources, choice and definition of subject, outlining, organization and authentication" (PSC, "1966-67" 73). From 1966 to 1970, WP also offered ENG 210 "Fundamentals of English," an "advanced course in written communication" with "an emphasis on literary form," and ENG 322 "Advanced Composition," a three-credit elective.[2] In this way, students could take three mainstream writing courses—all carrying three credits. None of these writing courses were labeled as sub-college, remedial, or basic. There were no placement tests.

After New Jersey passed a statewide "Educational Opportunity Act" in mid-1968, WP joined the state's new Educational Opportunity Fund scholarship/desegregation program, which took over for SOUL with EOP scholarships and support. SOUL did not recruit any additional incoming classes. Cioffari and Manno tracked their 1968 SOUL students through graduation in 1972. Shirley Chisholm accepted their invitation that year to be WP's commencement speaker (Cioffari). Ultimately, eleven of the twenty SOUL students completed their degrees (Hutton).

1971-1978: Supportive and Stretch Writing Courses With Full College Credit

From 1966 to 1979, WP more than doubled in size. For example, in just the three years between the fall of 1967 and 1970, WP's student body grew from 6,100 to nearly 9,000 students (Puccio; "Student Enrollment"). During the 1970s, EOP and other racial justice programs admitted more students of color; nonetheless, WP remained a largely white institution. A 1979 ethnic census of WP's 12,500 students showed that 90.3% of WP's undergraduate and 92.9% of its graduate students were white.[3]

During the 1970s, the English Department developed several new writing courses for this growing and changing student body. In 1971, the Department created four ESL stretch courses with full course credit.[4] In 1973, the English Department also created ENG 108 "Approaches to Reading and Writing" and ENG 109 "Patterns for Prose" (WPC, "1975-77" 121-22). In a 1977 *Beacon* interview, English Associate Professor and WPA Virgie Granger explained that the English Department had created these "developmental" writing courses in 1973 in response to a 1972 student survey. ENG 108 and 109 were popular, voluntary electives: so many students signed up for them that struggling writers often could not find places. Granger estimated that half of WP's students needed "a good course in critical reading and all students [needed] help with writing" (quoted in Phillips 5).

The SOUL Program and the new 1970s writing courses were all bottom-up innovations that responded to students' needs with non-punitive and non-stigmatizing forms of writing instruction for WP's expanding and diversifying student body. This initial response to desegregation at WP built bridges to student success while preserving student dignity. These writing courses were based on student input, carried full college credit, fulfilled core requirements, and depended on voluntary registration with no placement tests.

1978-1979: Hyman Imposes the Zero-Credit Basic Skills CUNY Model

In early 1977, two developments set the stage for WP to replace its stretch, elective, and full-credit writing courses with a Basic Writing model. First, in January of 1977, WP announced the selection of a new college president, Seymour C. Hyman. A chemical engineering graduate of City College, Hyman came to WP from the City University of New York where he had served as the system's Deputy Chancellor (Farah and McManus). The first

"Basic Writing" course had been created at City College in 1969, less than four years after City launched its first desegregation program. Between 1970 and 1972, Mina Shaughnessy developed the first City College Basic Writing course into a tiered writing test and sub-college Basic Writing course system, which she then exported across the CUNY system and beyond (Molloy, "Myopia"). Basic Writing soon grew into a distinct national sub-field of composition and rhetoric. Shaughnessy's and CUNY's indirect influence continued to dominate Basic Writing programs and discourse for decades after her death (Gunner 1998; Ritter 2009, 29-31). While it is usually not possible to trace the direct influence of the City College Basic Writing model on colleges beyond CUNY, Hyman's arrival at WP forged a direct link.

The second development was that the New Jersey Department of Higher Education (NJDHE) set up a "Basic Skills Council" in March of 1977 "to design a basic skills test for the state college community." In October 1977, the NJDHE approved the actual "Basic Skills Testing Program." All state colleges were required to administer the test to incoming students starting in the fall of 1978. Colleges (and even departments) could set their own passing scores, but colleges were required to offer some form of "remedial" courses for students who did not meet their chosen cut-offs.[5] In the summer of 1978, WP administered the new NJ "basic skills" tests and about 40% of WP's incoming Fall 1978 students failed some part of it. This was not unusual that year. About 43% of all incoming New Jersey state and county college students failed some part of the new test based on a 65% hypothetical passing score (Olohan, "Skills Problem" 3).

Looking back now, the impact of the new 1978 NJ testing system is astounding. In 1977, New Jersey's incoming public college students could begin full-credit courses with dignity, pride, and excitement. In 1978— like Sil and Abdus almost forty years later—almost half of the incoming New Jersey public college students arrived to be told they were too "basic" to take entry-level college courses. (A few miles east across the Hudson River, CUNY also launched its system-wide, minimum skills placement testing program in the fall of 1978. Over half of its 22,000 incoming students failed one or more of those new "basic skills" tests [Molloy, "Myopia" 388].)

By contrast, entering students in New Jersey and New York City private colleges faced no similar mass shaming. (Of course, many of those colleges had already excluded most working class and students of color through admissions barriers.) That year, Sean graduated from a private Catholic high school in lower Manhattan. His working class, immigrant family knew nothing about American colleges. But his high school had marshalled all students

through PSAT and SAT tests. If Sean had entered a New Jersey or New York City public college that fall, he would have been required to take their new basic skills placement tests in writing, reading, and math. He might have been labeled "basic" and forced into "remedial" courses. But Sean entered a private college in Manhattan, and it had no placement tests. It did not label a single incoming student as basic. Instead, the college awarded Sean nine college credits for his high school AP test scores and also exempted him from taking any first-year writing class. Sean began college with his confidence intact—and almost a full semester's head start.

The NJDHE mandated the new tests. But it did not dictate whether the newly mandated "remedial courses" would carry college credit. In 1978, other nearby colleges (Montclair State, Stockton, Ramapo, and Jersey City State) all gave full college credit for their supportive English courses (Olohan, "Hyman Okays" 1). WP had created and offered introductory reading, writing and math courses—with full credit—for several years. The 1978 WP catalog listed the same writing courses as the 1975 catalog.[6] But in the summer of 1978, Hyman stripped all graduation credit from four existing courses: ENG 108, ENG 109, MATH 101, and MATH 105. Using the new NJDOE basic skills test scores, Hyman forced 40% of WP's incoming students into between one and four of the zero-credit courses.[7] As an additional new barrier, all these courses had to be completed before students completed their 43rd credit or they were subject to expulsion (Madaras 1).

Hyman faced strong faculty and student resistance (Olohan, "Basic Skills Policy Opposed" 1). Both the Math and English Departments objected. WPA Granger explained: "We've given credit. . . for three years—these are credited courses" (quoted in Olohan, "Skill Problem" 3). Although at least 75% of the students who failed the placement were white (they were at that time 90% of *all* WP undergraduates) some faculty and administrators immediately associated the new zero-credit courses with WP's students of color. Hyman himself repeatedly referenced "minority" students when he defended removal of course credit: "We are trying to give an opportunity to the minority students. These students will not be able to succeed in life if we've faked them out by giving them credit for these courses" (quoted in Olohan, "No Remedial Credits" 1).

Hyman's "student need" argument fooled few stakeholders in 1978; AFT Local 1996 President and WP Professor Irwin Nack responded that the "whole [Basic Skills] policy is just systemic class and race discrimination" (quoted in Olohan, "No Remedial Credits" 1). An October 31, 1999 *Beacon* editorial agreed with Nack that "the new Basic Skills policy is only a way

of ridding the college of minority students and offering the elite a proper education" (Madaras 1; "Editorial" 12). In early December, Hyman gave in to pressures to restore credit to the four courses—but only for one year (Olohan, "Hyman Okays" 1-2) and only after citing "inadequate" advisement as the reason (Olohan, "Board Approves" 2).

Hyman persisted. In the fall of 1979, WP did strip credit from the four mandatory "remedial" courses (WPC, "Volume VII" 6). The English courses were also altered in the 1979 Catalog, directly adopting CUNY's Basic Reading/Basic Writing model:

> **ENG/RLA 107 Basic Reading 3 credits** This basic reading and writing course is designed to develop the student's reading vocabulary, comprehension skills, and study skills. The course will also stress flexible reading approaches applicable to various materials including the student's college texts. *Credits for this basic skills course are not applied toward degree requirements.*

> **ENG/RLA 108 Basic Writing 3 credits** The basic writing course is designed to emphasize the standard English sentence and the extension of a group of sentences into an organized unit. *Credits for this basic skills course are not applied toward degree requirements.* (WPC, "Volume IX" 60).

The English Department administered the new "Basic Writing" courses, offering around ten to twenty sections each semester (Rosen). Newly hired English tenure track faculty taught most of these course sections as the bulk of their 4/4 teaching load (Manno). Hyman led WPU for eight years until 1985; he retired to Florida and died in 2006 ("Paid Death Notice"). Governor Christie Whitman eliminated both the NJ Board of Higher Education and its mandatory placement testing system in 1994 (Elliot 210). But the basic skills system Hyman and the NJBHE created at WP long survived them.[8] The WP English Department administered and taught Basic Writing courses for 38 years, until we met in our Basic Writing section in September 2017.

2007 to 2017: Growing Resistance to Basic Writing

Between 2001 and 2019, WP has had only two WPAs. They developed a first-year mainstream writing course pedagogy that focused on process, revision, and peer workshops. It was increasingly clear to them that the basic skills pedagogy in our Basic Writing courses (which still included a

high-stakes exit exam) did not align with their writing pedagogy—which led to their repeated efforts to reform or abolish Basic Writing.

For example, in 2007, our WPA and the administrator of the Basic Reading course jointly proposed that WP rethink, combine, or eliminate both courses (Marshall and Mongillo). But by 2007, the roots of the Basic Writing system had burrowed deeply into our institutional culture. Among its subtle harms were its impact on the teachers who had been required to teach and administer it for almost three decades. English faculty had taught thousands of students placed by the tests into Basic Writing courses; year after year, these teachers did their best to help students become better, stronger writers in those courses. English faculty had eventually redesigned the ETS placement tests into a local timed essay test and English faculty had graded them. The Basic Writing system had become part of English and English had become part of Basic Writing. In this way, any attack on Basic Writing also had become an attack on the English Department, its first-year writing program, and all the writing teachers who had taught the course. A powerful lore of "student need" also developed over time; concerned educators came to believe that students with low placement test scores could not succeed without the zero-credit Basic Writing course. These entrenched systemic influences made efforts to abolish Basic Writing—to eliminate it both root and branch—much harder.

Even so, opposition to Basic Writing grew stronger. In 2012, the English Chair (and former WPA) published a book in which he argued that "the project of Basic Writing" evidences both an institutional and American cultural inability "to fully and completely face the consequences of racism.... I am suggesting that it takes hard work not to see this" (Marshall 60). When efforts to abolish Basic Writing again failed in 2010-11, the English Department created a new layer of directed self-placement. In this new DSP system, all incoming students who failed to meet a cut-off score on the SAT Critical Reading test were required to take the in-house timed essay placement test. English faculty readers tentatively placed students with weaker test responses into the Basic Writing course.[9] The faculty then tried to contact all those students to consult about an option to opt out of Basic Writing. Students placed into Basic Writing could instead take and pass a free summer writing course. They could also simply request to transfer to mainstream writing courses. But students were required to affirmatively opt-out: if they missed email or telephone notices, or were accepted late in the summer, they stayed in Basic Writing. Our WPA knew that "there were always a certain number of students who fell through the cracks" (Weaver, "Interview").

The DSP reform cut back the branches of Basic Writing in two important ways. First, it gave real opt-out opportunities and many students took them. But English faculty who reviewed the tests also began to place fewer students into Basic Writing in the first place. As reflected in Table 1, the number of actual Basic Writing students fell from 208 in 13 sections in 2008-09 (before the opt-out system), to 96 students in six sections in 2011-12, to only eleven in a single section in 2016-17. WP's populations of incoming

Table 1. Total WPU Basic Writing Sections and Students 2006-2018 (Drawn from Registration Records).

Acad. Year (Sep-Aug)	BW Sections	BW Students
2007-8	11	178
2008-9	13	208
2009-10	10	131
2010-11	8	143
2011-12	6	96
2012-13	7	81
2013-14	3	38
2014-15	2	17
2015-16	2	15
2016-17	1	11
2017-18	2	28

students did not change over these eight years—except that WP became more accessible and inclusive. In 2008, WP accepted 60.6% of its fall applicants; in 2016, WP accepted 75.9%; in 2017, 92.5%; in 2018, 93.5% (WPU, "Fact Book 2012-2013" Table 1.1, "Fact Book 2018-19" Table 1.1). But the English faculty test readers informally recalibrated their readings to judge far fewer students as "needing" Basic Writing in the first place.

For example, in 2016, English placement test readers tentatively placed only 32 students into Basic Writing. Only nine actually consulted with English faculty and eight of those opted out. Over the summer, a total of 21 opted out with or without any summer course. Only two students affirmatively opted in, one with an English consult and one without. Nine either didn't respond, were accepted too late in the summer for consults, or otherwise fell through the cracks; they were all placed into Basic Writing. In sum, the recalibrated placements and the DSP options together enabled 99% of incoming WP students to avoid the zero-credit Basic Writing course.

But of the 11 students who actually ended up in the single Fall 2016 Basic Writing section, nine had simply fallen through the cracks in the system.[10]

Spring and Summer 2017: Abdus and Sil are Placed into Basic Writing

In March 2017, Sean asked to teach the Fall 2017 Basic Writing sections. He also approached the WPA and English Chair and proposed that he would teach them with exactly the same syllabus as his Fall 2017 mainstream writing sections, using a writing-about-writing model with four units: process theory, social constructivism, rhetoric, and digital composing/publishing. If the Basic Writing course students succeeded, WP would transfer them into Sean's mainstream writing section; they would receive letter grades and course credit. Basic Writing would disappear from their permanent college transcripts. Both the Chair and WPA agreed; Sean planned his mainstream and Basic Writing classes with the same assignments and deadlines.

In the spring of 2017, time flowed like the current of a river for Abdus. He graduated high school. WP accepted his application and sent a recruiting package of brochures that encouraged him to visit the campus. Abdus decided to attend WP. Then another WP mailing advised him to come and take a placement test. All this was new to him; Abdus didn't understand that he might have to take up to three non-credit classes based on the test scores.

Sil was planning to attend a private four-year college when he was accepted to WP on August 1, 2017. Everything felt last minute and rushed and put Sil under a lot of pressure. He wasn't able to tour campus until the 10th of August. After being recruited on the WP tour, Sil changed his mind and enrolled at WP. A week later, he paid a $125 enrollment fee and a $150 housing fee. When he took his placement test on August 17, 2017, Sil did not understand its importance. He would have dug deeper and reviewed his essay more carefully if he had realized it could place him into Basic Writing.[11]

Having overestimated the number of the Fall 2017 incoming class acceptances, WP sent out a wave of August acceptances. These students (including Sil) were admitted too late for any summer courses or DSP consults. So, more students than in the previous three years slipped through the cracks into Basic Writing.

In early September, the English Department realized that it had not proposed Sean's course credit idea to college administrators for approval. The Chair emailed the Dean in early September and proposed simply moving all the Basic Writing students over to mainstream sections at once. Our Dean

was supportive: she promptly responded that she was initiating discussions within administration, financial aid, and the registrar regarding possible means to meet the needs of our students. In the meantime, the students remained in Basic Writing.

September 2017: Stay or Transfer?

In the first week of classes, Sean told the Basic Writing students they could still ask our WPA to transfer to a mainstream class. Most did not understand that the three credits listed for the class were not real credits that counted toward core requirements or graduation, or that the pass/fail grade would almost certainly not be transferable to another college. Many were slowly learning that 98% of their peers had not been placed into Basic Writing. Some were realizing that they were also placed into "basic reading" or "basic math" classes that also carried zero-credit.

The smart, sophisticated choice for all these students was to leave. Sean knew that the timed essay test scores was an incompetent tool to predict success in WP writing classes.[12] Even though he was seeking approval for course credit, Sean knew that he might fail. If the students did comparable work in a mainstream section, they would certainly earn college credit, satisfy a core requirement and earn letter grades. Moreover, if any student's work didn't earn the minimum "C" mainstream course grade, they would receive a non-punitive "N" grade that did not affect their GPA. If they struggled in the mainstream course, they could also drop it until mid-semester without academic penalty. In sum, the Basic Writing students literally had nothing to lose, and a good deal to gain, by jumping at once to a mainstream writing class.

As a new immigrant, Abdus understood that life in America is a constant struggle for survival. Everyone must battle here for food, shelter, and a life with dignity. While he was a full-time student, Abdus also worked a full-time job at a donut shop to help support his aging, immigrant parents. Still, the first week of college was a completely new and strange experience. When Sean told the students that the credit from this class would not apply to their degrees, they were all surprised and disheartened. Sil, Abdus, and everyone had thought it was a three-credit course.[13] Sean offered Abdus hope when he said they could jump to a writing class with credit and Sean would help them do it. But any transfer also raised a nightmare of failure because WP had told Abdus he was not ready. Abdus was too afraid to jump into another class. Many of his classmates were afraid too.

Sil was more confident; he already believed he was a pretty good writer. But, like any writing teacher starting a new semester, Sean tried to make all the students comfortable and excited about the course. In the very first class, Sil began to build friendships with other students. Some were his dorm-mates too and they all decided to stay in Basic Writing together.

In these ways, the 38-year old Basic Writing system powerfully pressed us all to accept our assigned roles—both making it scary to leave and comfortable to stay. A couple of students did transfer, and a couple more dropped out. But almost all stayed together in Basic Writing.

Table 2. Disparate Impact Analysis of WPU Fall 2017 BW Final Placements of Full-Time, First-Time, First-Year Students (Total FTFTFY populations drawn from WPU 2017 Data Book Table 1.6).

Category	All Students	Number Finally Placed into Basic Writing	% of Total FTFTFY in BW Course
Total Students	1311	27	2.06%
Total Men	659	19	2.88%
Total Women	652	8	1.23%
White Men	224	1	0.45%
White Women	191	1	0.52%
Hispanic Men (all races)	231	1	0.43%
Hispanic Women (all races)	263	3	1.14%
African American Men	117	9	7.69%
African American Women	135	3	2.22%
Asian Men	57	8	14.03%
Asian Women	42	1	2.38%

A Dramatically Disparate Impact

When the Basic Writing classes first met, it was obvious that most students were Brown and Black men like Sil and Abdus. Timed essay tests have long been recognized as incompetent and harmful assessment tools founded on troubling monolingual and exclusionary assumptions about language resources.[14] But increasingly, critiques of these writing assessments have also focused on their consequences to actual students (White, Elliot, and Peckham 22). In 2019, Toth, Nastal, Hassel, and Giordano argue that this ethical turn in writing assessment necessitates critical interrogation "even for assessments that appear on the surface to be neutrally 'meritocratic'" because these systems may enact "a 'color-blind racist' assessment paradigm that continues to reproduce structures of social inequality."

Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen recently offered a model of such a critical interrogation in their disparate impact study of Basic Writing course placement tests at "Brick" university in New Jersey. Brick found that its timed-essay placement test did have a clear adverse impact on students of color. The test placed 10% of white students, 15% of Asian students, 22% of Native American students, 28% of Hispanic students and 48% of African American students into a "remedial" Basic Writing course rather than into mainstream writing (598). After conducting a three-step analysis of impacts, goals, and available alternatives, Brick elected to mainstream all writing students, and it "adopted the proposition that any admitted student was qualified to begin credit-bearing coursework" (603).

In Fall 2017, WP ultimately placed 27 full-time, first-time, first-year students into Basic Writing.[15] Two were white. Twenty-six were students of color. Twenty were men; eight were women. Fifteen were multilingual. Thirteen were immigrants. Table 2 breaks down the placement odds for different ethnic/racial/gender groups among the first-year students.

While this sample was small, the results were striking. All men were more than twice as likely as women (2.88/1.23%) to be assigned into Basic Writing. Black men were over fifteen times more likely than white men (7.69/0.45%)—so it is obvious to Sil that color was being targeted. The fact that Asian men were over twenty-eight times more likely than white men (14.03/0.45%) to be assigned to Basic Writing tells Abdus that this system also targeted bilingual students and immigrants.

September and October 2017: Equal Work for Unequal Credit

The third part of our study here is a case study of our Basic Writing semester together. The first assignment Sean gave was to watch and respond to a video in which Anthropologist Michael Wesch described how one can be "knowledge-able" instead of "knowledgeable." Abdus was excited that Wesch focused on adapting to changes of modern technology and the complexities of linking to and using digital sources. Sil found that the group work produced enlightening conversations among his classmates and the professor. The class made him feel comfortable, seeming like a small family. It was nice meeting people from different backgrounds.

Sean also told the students in the first week that he was asking for a way for them to earn college credit by doing the same work as students in the regular classes. Abdus, Sil, and most of their fellow students started working hard for this Basic Writing class. In early October, Sean saw that 24 of 28 students were attending almost all class sessions. (Eight would end the semester with perfect attendance.) The Basic Writing students were completing the same assignments, and most were producing comparable work to Sean's mainstream writing class students. The class studied Peter Elbow (1973), Donald Murray (1972) and Sondra Perl (2015). Abdus and others learned why most of them were afraid of English writing. Most of the time they worried too much about how their essays were going to look when they were finished, and they wanted to fix every mistake from the beginning. When they did this, their brains stopped, and they felt as if they could not write. Elbow suggested a process that used writing to grow and rethink ideas: "Make the process of writing into atomic fission, setting off a chain reaction, putting things into a pot to percolate, getting words to take-on a life of their own" (Elbow 25). Abdus started writing anything he had in his mind without worrying about making mistakes.

Although the entire Basic Writing class itself was very interesting and challenging for Sil, he began to notice that he was doing just as much work—possibly more—than other students he spoke with from the regular writing classes. It was not fair he was doing as much work but not receiving a letter grade or any credit. Some students began to feel the class was a waste of their time. Why work hard for a class with no credit? And, as the semester progressed, being called a basic writer started to take its toll on Sil. He felt deeply disrespected. Sil was not basic. He was not dumb. He could write as well as other students.

Abdus began to see himself as a "basic writer." Responding to Sondra Perl's 2015 oral history encouraged him because she proved that students labeled as basic writers "did have and do have composing processes, and they're [as] rich and as full as ours" (Perl; Salam, "Process"). Perl gave him confidence to write without any fear. Perl also explained about counterproductive loops where students became trapped into "editing at a surface level" and "would get worn down." Abdus used to get stuck in those unproductive loops—but now he learned how to keep writing without worrying about making mistakes.

We Write to the Deans

In mid-September, we still did not know if the students would be able to earn real credit for our class. Some students proposed writing a letter to the deans. Students in both Basic Writing sections worked together on the letter over four weeks, dividing research, drafting, revision, editing, proofreading and citation checking. (Abdus revised the letter's MLA citations and workshopped the draft at our Writing Center.) They sent a draft to the English Chair who approved it and joined in their request. They then sent the final version to the deans. In their letter, the students explained how they were already doing college-level work:

> We have the same. . . essay drafts, readings, group discussions, group class notes, freewriting, prewriting, reading responses, journals, collaborative reading annotations, peer review, class presentations, independent research projects, movie essays, and websites portfolios.... In only five weeks, we have produced about thirty-five pages of writing. We have learned about process theory from Peter Elbow, Sondra Perl and Donald Murray. We formed thesis questions, practiced revising, and cut out fat to make our work more powerful. We are now learning about rhetoric by reading Laura Carroll. ("Successful" 1)

Observing that WP's goal was for students to graduate in four years, the students quoted WP's published core values: "We judge our effectiveness, progress and success in terms of how well we provide a platform for [students'] personal, intellectual and professional development, enabling them to transform their lives and become civically engaged" (WPU "Mission"). But Basic Writing conflicted with those values: "We get no credit for this class. In addition, some of us are required to take noncredit math and reading classes."

The students explained how being placed into basic courses made them feel insecure and unable to succeed, even as the basic courses cost extra "money that's hard to get" and pushed them further from earning their degrees.

The students also noted "that many universities have eliminated their noncredit writing classes." In particular, they cited "all twenty-three campuses in the California State University [which had] eliminated all non-credit writing classes two months ago….(CSU)" (2). They quoted Tierney and Garcia's findings that students "who start in remedial coursework often do not complete a baccalaureate degree, citing extra courses, time, and money as reasons contributing to noncompletion" (Tierney and Garcia; "Successful" 1).

November and December 2017: Research Projects, Movies, and Websites

As in Sean's mainstream writing sections, the Basic Writing students designed, conducted, and reported on their own individual independent research studies. They composed three-minute movie essays and published them to YouTube; they built website portfolios. Being a donut shop employee, Abdus saw that most of his customers choose unhealthy, sugary drinks. He conducted an experiment to see if providing health information in the form of survey questions at the point of purchase would persuade them to choose healthier options. Fifty customers took his survey. Thirty switched to ask for bottled water, ten wanted juice, and ten still chose soda. In summary, 80% opted to switch to a healthier drink after taking the survey (Salam, "Sugary Drinks"). Abdus then made a YouTube movie version of his experiment asking viewers to take the same survey and think about healthy drink choices (Salam, "Bitter Truth").

Growing up in Atlantic City, Sil had seen some of his closest friends become part of a violent life that would affect them forever. He decided to do case-study interviews with four young men about their experiences in gang life (Fonville, "Negative Influences"). Three agreed to video record the interviews for a movie essay to warn kids about joining gangs. All three had family members already in gangs. Friends had recruited them. It felt like they had no choice. They knew they could have made better decisions but now maybe it was already too late. Sil made a YouTube movie from the interviews so that their voices could be heard by young people, parents, and public officials (Fonville, "Gang Life").

November and December 2017: The Challenge Test Offer

In late November, we heard back from the deans about our requests for course credit. They could not agree to it because of a technical barrier. Our accreditation rules would not allow WP to transfer students at the semester's end from a zero-credit course to one with credit. We could not give letter grades or course credits to students (like Sil and Abdus) who earned them. We could not erase "Basic Writing" from their permanent transcripts. The deans offered the only possible relief that was available within the constraints of our Basic Writing system—which, ironically, was a timed essay "challenge" test. Those who passed the test (as well as completing mainstream-level work in the Basic Writing course) would receive three credits and would skip the mainstream class. But those credits would come with no grade; they likely would not transfer to another college. For Sil and his classmates, the challenge test offered far too little. The letter grade they had earned was important. They had worked hard in our course and had earned it. Some students now saw the Basic Writing class as a waste of hard work and a setback in life.

Abdus was the only student from either section who took the challenge test and he passed it. But then Abdus realized (like everyone else) that the "A" grade he had earned was too important; he withdrew the challenge test score and took mainstream writing (with Sean and Sil again) on top of a full course load in the spring.

Resisting Basic Writing "Root and Branch"

So, what did we learn from the history of the Basic Writing system at our college and from our experience together in 2017? First, whatever conscious or unconscious racism motivated the creation of the Basic Writing system in 1978 and 1979—all that was long gone by 2017. For at least ten years before Abdus and Sil were admitted here, many English faculty and college administrators had questioned Basic Writing, called for its abolition, and/or sought ways to shrink and reform it. In 2017, every faculty member and dean we contacted tried to support and empower the students who had been placed into Basic Writing. But legacy systems sink deep roots; they exert enduring power over the educators and students pulled into them. Eventually, we forget how and why they were created. Decades later, because they are so hard to uproot completely, they continue to distort education and "reproduce structures of social inequality" (Toth, Nastal, Hassel, and Giordano).

As we write now, Abdus and Sil have finished three successful years at WP and will soon graduate. Like most of their Basic Writing classmates, they

took mainstream writing in the spring of 2018 and passed. Over the last five semesters, they have completed more writing courses, including our mandatory "writing about literature" course. Their self-confidence has grown as they have built college credits, selected majors (Sil in psychology and Abdus in computer information technology), and compiled strong GPAs. But the harms of WP's basic skills system followed them after the class ended. Sil was also required to take a zero-credit algebra class. In order to catch up with the six credits he lost in those "basic" courses, he paid for summer school courses and worked fewer hours one summer, a substantial extra financial burden for his family. Recently, Abdus applied to become a substitute teacher. In order to prove he has sixty college credits, he had to send his official transcript to a board of education, and he was disheartened to see clearly written on the first page that he had taken a pass/fail Basic Writing class in his first year here. Abdus realized that Basic Writing is literally on his permanent record. He got the substitute teaching job; but he wonders if he will be rejected from other jobs for his whole career because he was labeled as a "basic" writer here.

What guidance can other social justice writing teachers, scholars and program administrators draw from our experience here at WP? How can we reimagine writing course systems to ensure that we completely root out the assumptions and effects of our troubling legacies? We think our Basic Writing experience argues for five conclusions. First, we agree with Poe, Nastal, and Elliot that all incoming college students "deserve the dignity of credit-bearing coursework."[16] Rebecca Mlynarczyk taught and administered "non-credit basic and ESL writing classes for almost forty years" within the CUNY system and she served as JBW's co-editor. But Mlynarczyk now squarely joins a growing chorus of voices of those who recognize "a racial element" to the exclusionary cycle of testing, labeling, and tracking at the heart of Basic Writing, which leads her to call for the elimination of all "standalone, prerequisite [basic writing] courses" (Mlynarczyk). College systems like the California State University System and the City University of New York are already embracing that goal; but zero credit writing course tracks remain embedded in many two-year colleges. We believe such courses must be completely rooted out.

Second, we know that individual student, teacher, and administrator voices often carry limited weight within large, complex college systems. Sometimes the best we can do is to fight for partial reforms. Resistance to Basic Writing here at WP from 2007-2017 greatly reduced the number of teachers and students who were trapped into it. Looking back now, it is clear that severely cutting back the branches of this poisonous tree also weakened its

roots. As fewer and fewer students were placed into Basic Writing, it became easier to see that we did not need it at all.

Third, wherever legacy systems survive that continue to label students as less able than their peers, we urge careful study and awareness of their history, operation, validity, and harmful effects. Our DSP system could not eliminate the harms of Basic Writing here because no sophisticated student should have chosen our stigmatized, zero-credit course. Indeed, when students both fully appreciated the consequences of taking Basic Writing and really understood in advance that they could opt out (unlike both Sil and Abdus) almost all chose to do so. In effect, our DSP option largely trapped the students with the least sophistication about college systems, and/or the most damaged self-esteem, and/or simply those who were accepted at the last minute and had no time to question their course placements.

We did not study the impact of mainstreaming here and we do not argue that it is the only solution.[17] Other forms of summer programs, learning communities, holistic support, DSP systems, stretch courses (with full credit), and student support can replace old Basic Writing and Basic Skills models with far fewer harms and stigmas. These courses and programs have been valuable bridges to success since the 1960s. Indeed, since 1968 here at WP, the SOUL Program and then our EOF Program have offered summer bridge programs, counseling, and holistic support. From 1971 to 1978, WP developed fully credited stretch courses and an informal DSP writing course elective course system— until mass placement tests and zero-credit, basic-skills writing, reading, and math courses were imposed here in 1978-79.

Fourth, we learned that old legacy systems can harm us in both obvious and subtle ways, even as we resist them. Three years later, Sean can see how his request for college credit for only *some* students (and only *after* they proved they had already earned it) actually reinforced the Basic Writing system's premise that some students do not deserve the dignity of trying to earn college credit from day one. And even as Sean advised the Basic Writing students that they could jump to mainstream courses back in September of 2017, he also reinforced the doubts already implanted by our testing system that maybe they were more "basic" than almost all their peers. Old systems survive by slowly, quietly shaping us. They make us doubt ourselves. They numb us to attacks on dignity. They seduce us to believe the lies of incompetent and biased assessment tools. They provoke fears that lead us to disregard the complex and often amazing capabilities of students who have overcome unjust systematic barriers to reach college.

Fifth, so long as college writing programs and teachers define their work by searching out and measuring student deficits—by finding ways to argue that some incoming college students (like Sil and Abdus) are more "basic," less able, less likely to succeed, and less valued than others, colleges will fall short of their missions to fight for racial and social justice. The poisoned trees planted four or five decades ago will not be fully rooted out. In the end, partial fixes always leave something broken. Students like Abdus and Sil still fall through the cracks. Poe, Nastal, and Elliot advise that colleges ask a simple, key question: "What brings students most dignity?" Old and deeply rooted systems that disregard this key question continue to poison us all, even when we fight to trim them back. Reduced harm is still harm. Reduced indignity is still indignity. In the end, we must oppose, rethink, and reimagine these biased old legacy systems until the day sometime soon when they are all "eliminated root and branch."[18]

Acknowledgment

Notes

1. These direct student success metrics were a simple version of the same programmatic assessment model adopted by SEEK, The City University of New York's hugely successful, affirmative-action admissions, and supportive teaching program beginning in 1965 (Molloy, "Human Beings"). However, at CUNY these direct assessments were gradually replaced by high-stakes writing placement, course-exit, and certification tests as CUNY developed its Basic Writing Program from 1969 to 1978. The tests quickly developed into powerful barriers to success (Molloy, "Myopia.")

2. (PSC "1966-67" 73; "1968-69" 85-87; "1969-1971" 64, 97-98). All three 1966 writing courses survive at WP today. ENG 110/1100 (with a number of title and description changes) has remained WP's mainstream required FYW course. ENG 210 was renamed "Writing and Literature" in 1969. It survives today as a required writing about literature course,

ENG 1500 "Experiences in Literature." ENG 322 continues today as ENG 3300 "Critical Writing" (Manno).

3. WP does not publish ethnic census data prior to 2001. But a surviving 1979 WP ethnic census listed 10,324 total undergraduate students, as follows: white 9,326 (90.3%), African American 669 (6.5%), Hispanic 263 (2.5%), Asian 57 (0.5%), and Native American 9 (0.09%). WP also reported 2231 graduate students, as follows: white 2072 (92.9%), African American 90 (4.0%), Hispanic 62, (2.8%) and Native American 1 (0.0%) (WPC, "Enrollment" 6, 13).

4. These four new "English as a Second Language" courses each carried three credits. (WPC, "1971-73" 82). The 100-level ESL courses satisfied the mainstream ENG 110 writing requirement (49). The 200-level ESL courses satisfied WP's humanities course core requirement (49-50). ENG 101-02 and 201-02 were both structured as non-punitive "stretch" courses that gave multilingual students more time to fulfill core writing course requirements while also earning full course credit.

5. (Chabra, "Basic skills approved" 1; Olohan, "Skills Problem" 3. For an overview of the development of the New Jersey Basic Skills Placement Test system in partnership with ETS, see Elliot, 209-12.

6. In addition to ENG 108 "Approaches to Reading and Writing" and ENG 109 "Patterns for Prose," the English Department continued to offer four ESL courses with credit. The Math department continued to offer Math 101 "College Arithmetic" and Math 105 "Preparatory Algebra," both also with credit (WPC, "Catalog 1978-79-80" 166).

7. Students who failed the "reading comprehension section" were required to take both ENG 108 and ENG 109. Students who passed the reading test but failed the timed essay section were required to take ENG 109 only. Students with low math scores were required to take Math 101. If their major required algebra, they were also required to take Math 105 (Madaras 1).

8. Basic Reading soon moved to the Education Department where it became BRI 1090 "Basic Reading Instruction." The two basic math classes were eventually combined into one zero-credit course, MATH 1060, which was renamed in 2019 as WPS 1060 "Foundations of Math."

9. Our methods here were limited to the data and methods we described to the WP IRB. We could not examine records of the actual placement test scores or any individual student directory data. We did not attempt to divide students into any sub-groups or evaluate their subsequent success in this study.

10. Beyond the 2016 and 2017 students, we do not know how many students affirmatively opted into Basic Writing. The experience of those two groups suggest it was very few.

11. Our WPA recalls that Sil's experience was a very common one. Over the years, WPA Chris Weaver talked to many students when their Basic Writing teachers suggested transferring them to mainstream writing sections. "The orientation day in the summer when they had taken multiple placement tests had been exhausting, and their hearts and minds were not fully committed by the time they produced their writing sample. If they had only known how much was at stake for the placement tests, they would have taken them more seriously" (Weaver, "Placement").

12. Lacking "construct validity," the timed test could not possibly measure how WP writing teachers (who stress robust revision and writing process) would judge students' body of writing over the semester (Poe, Nastal, and Elliot; Isaacs and Molloy). More broadly, the test also lacked "use validity" because it could not predict the additional complex realities of success and failure in any three-month college writing course, where tenacity, finances, emotions, competing commitments, trauma, and the "roles of schools and teachers" play huge, but often unacknowledged roles in actual success and failure (Inoue, "Theorizing Failure" 333-35; Berger 383). In addition, as discussed below, the entire DSP process also lacked consequential validity.

13. The credit was hard to figure out because WP had always listed Basic Writing as a 3.0 credit course. As the WP website obliquely warned: "Note: Credits for this basic skills course are not applicable toward degree requirements. Credits: 3.0" ("Degree Requirements").

14. (Huot; Mlynarczyk; Isaacs and Molloy; Molloy "Myopia") Mlynarcyzk weaves together the increasingly critical body of recent scholarship finding that structural racism has infected Basic Writing systems in various ways, including work by Nelson Flores, Tom Fox, Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Karen Pitt, Jonathan Rosa, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Nicole Stanford, and John Trimbur.

15. The 28th student was a sophomore who was required to take Basic Writing by his business college adviser.

16. The combined ideas that 1) timing writing exams are incompetent placement tools, 2) writing classes should focus on students' abilities rather than deficits, and 3) all college writing courses should carry credit are not new. For example, see Adler-Kassner (2008) at 13 and her sources dating to 1991.

17. For the past several years, WP has developed new summer bridge programs, first-year student success courses, orientation events, and increased forms of support to increase retention and encourage student success for all students. Those efforts were beyond the scope of our study here.

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