

Oral History of Postsecondary Access: Martha Maxwell, a Pioneer

By Martha E. Casazza and Laura Bauer

Conducted in 1999, this narrative is one component of an oral history research project developed to record the stories of individuals who have all played a role in what lies behind opening the doors to higher education. The presentation of the oral history in this publication includes historic background material from the literature to help the reader understand the context of the narrative. Due to the nature of the oral history, the original wording from conversations has been left unchanged.

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Truly a pioneer in the field of learning assistance and developmental education, Martha Maxwell has mentored hundreds, if not thousands, of professionals and students as well as authored a variety of reference shelf publications. Her career spanned 50 years. In her classic, Improving Student Learning Skills, she says there are seven persons named Martha Maxwell: counselor, teacher, academic advisor, reading/learning disabilities specialist, researcher, administrator, and perennial student.

Martha Maxwell: I think there are a few others. Cheerleader ought to be included. I would say that perennial student and cheerleader are the most apt descriptions. In our profession, we are dealing with students who come from backgrounds where success has not been part of their repertoire. They have not been encouraged; in fact, many of them have been discouraged in academia. So they feel they can't do it. Once you get them working, then I think you have to be a cheerleader and help them along that way.

Educational Background

I worked very hard in school. I did well in elementary and high school. I attended school at a time when high school students who wanted to attend selective colleges either took an extra year of high school or went to college preparatory schools.

Dr. Maxwell received her B.A. in Psychology in 1946, her M.A. in 1948, and a doctoral degree in 1960.

When I got to college, I began by majoring in music, then I shifted to English, then to half a dozen fields, and finally majored in psychology...left school for a couple of years, came back and graduated with a split major in economics and psychology.

I started college before World War II at the University of Maryland at a time when many freshmen dropped out of college; there were no academic support services. We did have one psychology professor who helped some students with vocational counseling, but there was no counseling either. After the war when ex-GIs came to college in great numbers, colleges started counseling centers, reading and study skills programs, and offered free tutoring ser-

vices. At first, these were just for ex-GIs, but later they were opened to all students.

One of the most significant new groups to attend college consisted of veterans returning from World War II. The GI Bill of Rights, written with the assumption that few would take advantage of it, inspired more than one million veterans to enroll in college by the Fall of 1946. This brought funding to colleges that, in turn, helped to create guidance centers, reading and study skills programs and tutoring services. Following the veterans came more women, more students with special needs, and more students from impoverished backgrounds. Support systems continued to grow and to become more comprehensive in order to meet the increasingly diverse needs of the new students. (M. Maxwell, personal interview, January 17-19, 1999.)

I remember not knowing what I wanted to do in college, so when I was a senior in college we had a unit in career planning. One of the things we read about was the role of the vocational counselor. I said, "Gee, that sounds like a great job. I don't know what I want to be. Maybe if I were a vocational counselor, I'd learn about a lot of fields and be able to make my mind up." I did eventually become a vocational counselor.

When I had been a freshman, I had gone in for vocational counseling myself. I only saw one person, and he tested me and said, "You are an overachiever." That kind of hurt. What he meant was that you were working harder than you should, and you are getting higher grades than you are capable of. I don't think people worry about that today, but in those days I felt sort of taken aback about it. For the next 8 years I refused to take any of the standardized tests. But I also took an interest test from him, and he said, "Your interests look like you should go into college teaching." So here is an overachiever going into college teaching.

Early Professional Life

My first job was in the counseling center at American University after I had trained to be a counselor at the University of Maryland's coun-

selling center. It was right after WWII, so most of the people we counseled were returning ex-GIs starting college. Many of them needed help in reading and study skills and how to study, and I had had some experience in that field. When I started at American University I was told, "Oh by the way, Martha, we want you to teach a reading course." I was not about to say no because it was a job that paid \$3000 a year for 12 months, and I needed it. So I ended up teaching a speed reading course to adults... I guess I got interested in how students learn because of the jobs I was thrust into; those were the jobs one got placed in those days. Both at American University and later on when I went back to Maryland, I worked in their developmental education program teaching classes... that got me more interested in problems that students who have difficulties bring to college.

I recall the first university course I taught...an English course called "Reading Improvement." Of the twenty-six students who enrolled, four would be considered barely literate even by today's standards. Two were recent graduates of rural black high schools, one a student from Appalachia, and the other a first-generation college student of Lithuanian ancestry from a coal mining district in Pennsylvania... Individualizing instruction was a necessity, and each student had his or her own special assignments and goals. (Maxwell, 1979, p. 5)

One day I got called into the president of American University's office, and he said, "By the way, we need a reading program for our students; they are not reading well enough." And I asked, "If we set up a reading program, what are we going to use for material?" He said, 'Don't worry.' And he leaned over and pulled a stack of communist *Daily Workers* from his bookshelves and gave them to me. This was in the middle of the McCarthy era in Washington, DC, and faculty members were worried about having FBI agents in their classes to report them to Congress.

My thesis advisor who had been teaching the American University reading class said, "Don't worry, Martha." as he handed me some 3x5 slips of paper which were his class notes. "Just take these. You can teach the course from these." I don't remember the text I used, but it wasn't quite appropriate for my class, which ranged from a Navy captain down to two black students from the deep South who had not finished high school.

After the war, veterans flooded our colleges. Men from both rural and urban areas, who would not have considered going to college had it not been for the G.I. Bill, returned from service and

tried their luck at getting a college degree. In many colleges the federal government funded vocational guidance centers, which later became campus wide counseling centers. Many of the veterans needed help with basic reading, writing, math and study skills; programs, usually in counseling centers, were developed to help them. (Maxwell, 1979, p. 106)

The government gave ex-GIs back-to-school benefits if they went to high school or college or took any kind of training after they got out of the service. I don't think they expected so many to take advantage of it, but it really altered our colleges. One of the things it did was to force the development of counseling centers in large universities. They were veterans' counseling centers at first. And then of course many of these returning GIs needed very basic help in reading and study skills. So Reading and Study Skills programs were developed in colleges, and these eventually became learning centers. Students got many of the same things we are providing to students today. They had tutoring, skills courses, and lots of counseling. Maybe they even got a little better treatment than some of our developmental students today who are merely put into a course. At any rate, it paved the way for many students, who had not really considered going to college, to achieve satisfactorily and to take part in the community in ways that they had probably never dreamed about doing before going into the service.

The Educational Climate of the Sixties

In the 1960s the diverse voices that had been challenging the traditionalist approach to higher education became louder and clearer. The concept of open admissions challenged many of the earlier assumptions that had gradually been losing status over the years, and the surge of "grass-roots" colleges reflected the growing importance of educational diversity (Hall, 1974).

In 1968 I took a job at the University of California at Berkeley and set up a reading and study skills center in their counseling center. When I was at the University of Maryland, I had been a member of the "Women of the South" and was viewed as a conservative. At Berkeley, I was considered a faculty "yippie" because I got involved in protests. Anybody who really had anything to say out there got labeled a radical. It was an interesting environment with an extremely conservative faculty; yet, most of the teaching was done by graduate students. All the radicalism came through the graduate students not the faculty.

Tear gas was the method of choice for containing protests as violence escalated. One never knew when or where you'd find tear gas. One

morning someone opened the window in the reading lab and tear gas filled the room; we were next door to the Placement Office where military service groups were recruiting. You could walk across campus and get gassed in low places where tear gas clung. One day at high noon, the guard chased a group across Sprout Plaza and helicopters tear gassed staff and faculty going to lunch. Rioters firebombed the reading lab at a nearby community college, but we escaped fire damage. One morning someone found a crudely made pipe bomb on the inside stairway of our old wooden building. Fortunately, it failed to ignite; had it gone off our building would have been totally burned out.

The voices of change were perhaps louder and clearer than in earlier periods, but the tension also became more obvious. The debate over opening doors while maintaining standards entered the public domain with a roar. Not only were educators involved in the debate, but everyone seemed to have a opinion. College administrators often assumed the role of reformists defending their institutions against those who charged that standards were declining (Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

Some faculty members tried to support the students, and some became official observers to monitor the police and National Guard activities. Those who taught smaller classes met students in their homes. Faculty, too, got their share of attacks. Those with graying hair were considered pariahs, just a little better than folks in uniforms, and were treated with contempt. Anonymous letters and calls threatened dire consequences if you didn't comply with their wishes. The first time I got a threatening call, a gruff male voice said, "Quit your job or we'll kill you." I panicked and called the campus police. The cop who answered said, "Look, lady, you're the 12th one to complain this week."

At Berkeley we had three major movements. First, and probably the biggest, were the protests against the Vietnam War which was not at all popular among young people. There were also protests for the affirmative action movement and for the women's movement. Affirmative action and women sort of merged in that, when the affirmative action bill passed, they included women as well as minorities. None of these were greeted with much enthusiasm by the faculty, to say the least.

I was active in the women's movement because when I went to Berkeley as a visiting associate professor from Maryland, the dean promised, "We will review you for tenure when you get here." They kept saying that for 3 years and then reduced me to a lecturer. I helped organize the protest to Department of Health, Education &

Welfare on sexism and later was on the class action suit we filed. The lawsuit was eventually dismissed with prejudice against those of us who had filed it. After 3 years, the dean finally broke down and reviewed two of the women in education for tenure, myself and another woman, and two men. We all submitted our portfolios in the fall. The two men were validated by their committees in February and went ahead and got approved and got tenure, but the women's committees delayed until April. (My youngest granddaughter recently finished her senior thesis on the legal actions of the League of Academic Women, of which I was a member, against the University of California at Berkeley. She found that most of the women teaching at Berkeley today are still lecturers. Although only two percent of the full professors were women in 1970, today they represent four percent of that rank, not a great increase in 30 years (Maxwell email message, 2003).

By 1970, one half million students...one seventh of those enrolled in U.S. colleges...came from poverty backgrounds. Open-admissions policies were implemented in the large City University of New York (CUNY) system; this program lasted six years. Throughout the country, colleges instituted learning centers and tutorial programs—at first to aid the minority students, but later to serve others as well. (Maxwell, 1979, p. 11)

I gave up fighting for tenure and took a full time administrative job as Director of the Student Learning Center. The learning center at Berkeley started out as a reading and study skills unit under the counseling center. Its reason for being was their realization that the administration was planning to admit more minorities who would need more help. At that point they had money for the EOP (Equal Opportunity Program) that was matched ten to one by the Regents to support the minority program. Finally the Chancellor decided that was not the way to do it, and he said that each campus would finance the EOP program. By putting it under the campus, instead of getting all those matching funds, we were able to set up learning centers. That was not an easy thing to do because we had Chicano Studies and other ethnic studies departments who had their own ideas on tutors and tutoring. We applied for money and grants, and they would fight us. Then when we got the money, and grants would come in, they would say, "You owe us half the budget." So it was an ongoing struggle, but by and large many students were helped and it became a large center.

Providing Learning Assistance

In addition to the students already described, other populations started coming through the doors of higher education. Beginning with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with disabilities were granted easier access to college and also given assurances of academic assistance (Hardin, 1988). Continuing to 1990, with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, access for the disabled became a matter of course for all postsecondary institutions. Schools have been charged to provide "reasonable" accommodation, and the number of disabled students attending college has grown steadily from the 1970s, in part due to increased support provided by the elementary and secondary schools. By 1994, 75% of disabled adults had completed high school (Education Daily, 9/2/94), and 14, 994 seniors took special editions of the SAT designed for the disabled (Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

One group of students at Berkeley, although I had met them at other places as well, were LD (learning disabled) students, who had become juniors and seniors. What was fascinating about them was how they had managed to find interesting ways to compensate for their disabilities. Some of them would get their textbooks for fall courses at the beginning of the summer and read them before fall. Others would spend 20 hours on an assignment, and some of them would totally avoid writing anything. One man very ingeniously would scotch tape and paste his essays together, and he got caught because he was a graduate student in social work where he had to write up his own cases. Another one was a Forestry major, very bright kid, and he just had a terrible time with reading and spelling, but he hired the secretary in the Forestry Department to type his papers. (There were poor spellers on the Forestry faculty, so she was used to it.) This student had very good ideas; one of his ideas was on reforestation in Africa. The professor took it and actually applied it to a project in Africa. These students were not dumb at all, but they had difficulty expressing what they knew and could do in written papers. I have always admired LD students because they work so much harder than anybody else.

Along with giving students freedom of choice in their education, however, came risk and the subsequent "opportunity to fail" (Cross, 1983). This sometimes resulted in a "revolving door," a concept created to describe the process of opening the doors to college without providing the appropriate support systems to assist students to succeed, causing them to come in out of the open door. As students dropped out and stopped out more frequently, the debate regarding lowering standards became more heated, and was

often followed by a call to raise admission standards and essentially close the door of opportunity to thousands of new students (Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

Berkeley didn't really have a "revolving door," but it accepted a lot of students who were not qualified, and retention became a problem. Actually Berkeley was doing a better job than many state universities in terms of training and graduating minorities. It put a lot of effort into it, and did what it could to help the students.

Berkeley had a strong learning center. It was a well coordinated program that involved everything from placement to financial aid. They identified those who would need help early and nurtured the students when they got admitted. In the 1960s, they would just bring them in and send them a letter saying, "You are a special admit." This didn't mean anything to the student, so when they were asked to come in and get help, they refused. But when the program began to organize and get the students who needed help in early, it was much more effective. I still personally believe that, if you tell students they need help or if you think they know they need help, they will volunteer. But that is not the way it works. Most likely, they will run to the other end of campus before they will seek help.

Every four-year college graduated or retained a higher proportion of its lower-achieving students than any community college did. To be sure, the selective colleges did not have to deal with the massive numbers of open-admission students, but there may be other reasons for the difference in graduation/retention rates. Perhaps the underprepared students who entered senior colleges were more highly motivated than those who entered junior colleges, or perhaps the expectations of the faculty in four-year colleges that students will complete college made a difference (Maxwell, 1979, p. 15).

A lot of southern states mandated testing and remedial courses, but there are always problems with forcing students into a program. There is really no one way, one best way, to deal with underprepared students. From a faculty point of view, if you can assign them to a course and get them out of your office you are fine. That is cheap and quick, but it doesn't assure success.

Two current indicators of the gradual professionalization of college tutoring programs are the increasing number of tutor training programs and the appearance of manuals and ma-

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terials for tutor training. Surveys suggest that more than half the college tutoring programs offer some form of training for their tutors (Roueche & Snow, 1977; Woolley, 1976). As of 2003, the level of professionalization has grown rapidly as there are at least two professional associations, the College Reading and Learning Association and the National Association for Developmental Education, that have developed standards for the training of tutors and also offer formal certification based on these standards.

The importance of mentoring is often overlooked. The successful minority programs are those in which the counselors are mentors, and they have peer mentors as well. They can tell the students to go to SI (Supplemental Instruction), explain what it will do for them, and make sure they get there. Without that, weaker students still feel that "I don't want to be bothered; I can make it on my own." Students can certainly make good mentors if they are trained; they need support. It is not something that comes naturally. I know of open admission colleges where they use everybody from the janitors to the faculty, anybody that really shows an interest, in mentoring students. I think that's a good idea because then at least you have people who are interested and motivated. It is very hard to get college faculty to volunteer for any program for any extended period of time. That is true of mentoring; it is true of training tutors or being in learning centers. They just sort of fizzle out. You need motivated people, and they need support and training.

The Link to High School Preparation

I think we are really in a state of flux now because, after all, we have dumped (to use the term advisedly) billions of dollars into helping disadvantaged students to pull up their educational achievement. They are not on a par yet, but they are getting closer to the traditional students. There is still room for improvement, but compared to what they were 20 years ago many of them can compete successfully in today's programs. And we also have better high school preparation for many students. So although we have pulled up a lot of students, we are also getting a lot more who need help. The proportion of high school graduates who want to come to college is larger than we have ever seen. In some areas today, it is hitting close to 75%; groups are predicting it will be 80% in 5 years. It is as if everybody will be going to college, and there are more opportunities because you have even the armed services giving college courses as a recruiting tool.

The "chain of blame" is a metaphor for the discourse taking place in the educational community. It describes how "universities blame the high schools, the high schools blame the middle schools, and the middle schools blame the elementary schools for poor (student) preparation." (Ponessa as cited in Hoyt & Sorensen, 2001, p. 31)

I would like to tell potential students, "Look, if you are going to college, take college prep." For the third of the freshmen who are required to take our courses, most have not had the regular college prep program. I don't think you can bring them up to par in 1 semester or with a course or two. They need the rigorous courses that train them to think and reason. We are kidding ourselves if we think we can help them quickly get up to par when they haven't had 3 or 4 years of this back when they could learn it more readily. Besides, you have the attitudinal problems when they are in college and have gotten by without having had these courses.

The students who need help today are students in the bottom 20%, a lot of students from ESL backgrounds where English is not spoken at home, refugees, and others who need developmental education.

College professors usually blame high school and elementary school teachers for the sad state of student writing, rarely acknowledging that public school teachers are trained in college English departments. Articulation between high schools and college programs, although never strong, has weakened in the past decade. Realizing this and the futility of finger pointing, some universities are making greater efforts to provide effective in-service training to elementary and secondary school teachers. (Maxwell, 1979, p. 240)

I think the thing that has changed the least is that there is still a big gap between high school and college for many students. The courses, the demands, and the expectations of college instructors are quite different from high school faculty. I don't think that students realize it, and I don't think the high school faculty realizes it. And I'm afraid a lot of developmental reading teachers don't realize it. What the reading students need in college is more than a general high school reading course they took before. It is not general reading; it is specific reading that you need to succeed in college. You need to be able to handle difficult academic material in different fields. I think that it's costly and unnecessary to hire a specially trained teacher to work individu-

ally with college students. Much of what we need to do with developmental students is tutoring, mentoring, and demonstrating skills in the courses. It takes much better if a student is in a class in sociology and is learning how to read sociology than just reading whatever.

It is almost as if there is a great wall between high school and college people. The college people don't go down and talk to the high school folks unless they happen to get a grant or have a special program that lasts 6 months; these never endure. There is a bar in terms of high school people chatting with college instructors to really explore these ideas, getting them out on the table and talking about what to do about it. There are places where learning specialists at the college level go down to high schools and work with the students to get them ready. That's the kind of preparation we should have more of, but it's not on most people's list of tasks to do this week.

Concerns with the rigor and quality of our educational system have given rise to the standards movement and various intervention strategies. In many places legislation has been proposed to require report cards on schools (Sandham, 1998). States are establishing higher standards for high school graduation, increasing admission requirements at senior colleges and universities, structuring open admissions programs, and using testing and evaluation to assess educational outcomes (Hoyt & Sorensen, 2001).

I would like to see prep schools develop that can help students improve academically. Somebody has to say sooner or later to high schools, "Look you have got to do a better job because these students, whether you like it or not, are going to go to college." In other countries, where they have greater problems with articulation, they do have opportunities for adults or any students who haven't mastered their high school courses to go back for a college prep year. We do it for the service personnel, and those programs have been successful. It seems to me that it makes more sense than taking a reading course if you are weak in reading or a reading and a math course because you need to have some content to broaden your background; it could be incorporated at the high school level. Back in the old days, in the 30s when I went to high school, there were students who wanted to go to college and knew they would have trouble. So they stayed on in high school and took a postgraduate year. They managed to do well when they got to college, but they needed that extra year.

The University of Minnesota established a separate General College in response to the state legislature's mandate that the university accept all state high school graduates. (During the 1930s, public school graduates who felt unprepared for state college took a postgraduate year in high school or, if their families were wealthier, enrolled in a private preparatory school for a year or more before entering college. (Maxwell, 1979, p. 9)

Looking at the Future

I think it (relegating developmental education to 2-year colleges) is inevitable as we get more students in college because, with very few exceptions, 4-year college budgets are not growing. They have increased every year since WWII, and the public is saying, no more. Since 2-year college budgets are easier to increase, that puts the 4-year college in a position where it has to be more selective about students: They can't take everybody. And I think that will exacerbate the problem of underprepared students going to a 4-year college and help them to begin to shift more to 2-year schools. I think it will hit the 2-year schools too; they will probably become more selective.

I am still working on the idea that students should not be segregated in developmental courses, that programs, like learning centers, ought to be open to any student. Despite the evidence, people still feel that they need to be put off in a cave someplace. I do see some change in that, though we still have a way to go. That is what I would like to see in the future. I think in general we are a little better at looking at realistic parts of what we are doing with the exception of the fact that a lot of people don't realize that developmental students have a hang up about being called "developmental" students. It's a pejorative term. It's not, particularly for the people that work with them. They should be happy that we are doing all these good things for them. But if they are rejecting the idea, it's going to be very hard to work with them. We need to get away from the negative feeling of being branded developmental. Developmental has so many negative connotations; it's been adopted by lots of different fields, so it has become a synonym for "remedial." I wish we could get rid of those terms we have inherited. "learning assistance" still hasn't got contaminated.

I still think we have to learn to avoid compartmentalizing people and stay open to the fact that they can improve. Not only do we need to give them a chance and the support to improve, we need to help them really believe that they can. That must be conveyed, so they have some hope.

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NADE News: The Chairperson Is Not The Committee

By Patricia J. Newell, NADE President

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