

THESIS

THE REMEDIATION OPPORTUNITY:
WRITING ARTICULATION AND COLLEGIATE DISCOURSE

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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Each year, almost half of America's new freshmen begin their college careers with an unpleasant surprise: the need to enroll in remedial classes. These classes, for which students do not earn college credit, are the result of under preparedness for college coursework in writing, reading, and/or mathematics. For students who have been out of formal education for a time, the remedial classes may be expected; but for many who just graduated from high school, the classes are totally unexpected. And here begins the remediation debate of why are the high school graduates unprepared and why do they have to take a classes that are not college level when they were accepted for admission? Why do they have to take additional classes to earn a college degree? While the remedial requirement is often state-mandated, savvy institutions have come to view the remedial courses as opportunities to prepare their new students, within their classrooms, with the specific skills they want them to have as new freshmen. The goal of writing remediation courses should be to write effectively and to learn the discourse of the institution. Successful courses in writing remediation must have high expectations, qualified teachers, small class sizes, a limited number of remedial courses, and the philosophy of "every student a writer." Statistics show that students enrolled in remedial courses who successfully complete them have similar graduation rates as the students not required to enroll in remedial courses. Like it or not, remediation is an important aspect of

higher education in America, no matter how much it is disliked by institutions of higher education, policy makers, students, and parents for prolonging graduation and adding more requirements to a degree without college credit. Ultimately, writing should be integrated into the K-12 grade curriculum to adequately prepare students for college-level writing, with the curriculum articulated from kindergarten through postsecondary education. Until this becomes a reality, remedial courses should be embraced as the opportunity they present to institutions of higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The remediation¹ debate has been on going for decades, at “a cost of \$9 billion annually” (Ellmore). One side calls for the “remake” of remediation, with the belief that it will ultimately make students successful in their college careers. The opposing side feels the need for less-than-college-level coursework in subjects such as English, mathematics, and reading is a failure of secondary education and is not a problem that four-year colleges and universities should even address. “A 2004 study by the US Department of Education found that more than 40 percent of all students—and over 60 percent of community-college students—needed remediation” (Rose, “Introducing a Remedial Program”). In the middle are America’s college freshmen², often ill-prepared for college-level coursework, lacking the writing and mathematic skills required. However, it is unfair to set these students up for failure in their first year of college after being accepted for admission.

The Current State of Remediation

Some colleges have chosen to embrace the concept of writing remediation, even though it is state mandated³, through utilization of a variety of approaches. Success lies in small, rigorous classes where students are expected to succeed, learn about the writing process and develop effective writing skills while learning the discourse of higher education. Other

¹ Remediation often brings up negative connotations, but it remains the term commonly used in academic and legislative circles. When addressing a remediation issue with students, courses are often called “developmental” or “college preparatory” as opposed to remedial.

² For more information on the national remediation needs of new college freshmen, visit www.ACT.org, www.collegeboard.org, or “New Evidence on College Remediation” in the Sept/Oct 2006 *Journal of Higher Education*.

³ Remediation standards are determined by individual states with the use of national norms. The majority of students in need of remediation are unaware that they will be placed into such courses until informed by their postsecondary institution. Many students find out after high school graduation that they lack the necessary preparation to begin college courses in English, reading or mathematics; some look for another option, such as the Accuplacer or similar tool to reevaluate their placement, and others enroll in a remedial course with no questions and without an understanding of what the course placement actually means.

institutions have developed hybrid courses of writing remediation and freshmen experience, which provide students with the opportunity to develop their writing skills while learning how to succeed in college. New approaches integrate remedial writing courses with first-semester composition courses, which provide positive student interactions and role models for the remedial students. Remediation proponents call for professors to spend time teaching basic freshmen writing courses, instructing freshmen in the discourse of higher education. Whatever the approach, the goal should be the same: every student a writer.

Remediation often is disliked by the academy and viewed as a resource drain of both faculty time and monetary funds. According to Mike Rose⁴, “remedial courses and programs are typically treated in isolation from the core mission of the college or university, an institutional quarantine (“The Positive Purpose” 4). Those against writing remediation believe that if students do not have the necessary skills for postsecondary education they should not enter the academy, which would limit access to a significant portion of our nation’s young adults. After many colleges and universities became open admissions, the need for remediation increased as an entire segment of the population now had access to higher education that were not academically prepared for it. Remediation has played a role in the academy since its early days.

The history of American higher education is one of expansion: the sons of elite families, later the sons then the daughters of the middle class, the American and immigrant poor,

⁴ Mike Rose is a professor at the University of California Los Angeles and has been at the forefront of the nation’s remediation debate for more than 30 years. He has written numerous books and articles on how to make remediation programs successful and how to engage students in them.

veterans with less-than-privileged educations, the racially segregated. The remedial function, then, has served to democratize postsecondary education. (3)

Remediation is a necessary part of the academy and a key concept in the history of higher education; it continues to be a source of debate and additional study in Colorado and throughout the nation.

The need for remediation varies from institution to institution and serves a larger number of students at community colleges, open-admission, and moderately-selective colleges and universities, based on their student body and the mission of providing access to under-represented students⁵. When evaluating the need for remediation, other factors must also be considered, such as the percent of minority and first-generation students, family support and expectations, K-12 preparation, and “why” students are underprepared for college. “Writing matters for success in school and college, in the community and the workplace. Moreover, for under-represented, traditionally non-college-bound students, academic writing—especially the analytical writing this is key to college success—is a gatekeeper” (Marlink and Wahleithner 1).

Writing is an interdisciplinary skill, not isolated only to English departments. Writing skills are necessary in every course a student takes in higher education and in his or her professional life. It also plays a significant role in one’s personal life, with emails, text messages, and social media postings that occur on a daily or even hourly basis. The art of communication

⁵ The focus of this research is Colorado State University-Pueblo, a moderately selective regional institution with less than 5,000 students located in Pueblo, Colorado, with a minority population of almost 37%, a large number of first-generation students, and an Hispanic Serving Institution designation. Many entering freshmen require remedial coursework, often in more than one subject; transfer students also come to the University, often with years of remedial courses required by their community college for which they do not receive college credit, either at the community college or when transferring to a four-year college or university. I have experience at CSU-Pueblo as both a graduate teaching assistant in English Composition, a graduate student in English through a joint degree program with Colorado State University in Fort Collins, and as Director of Undergraduate Admissions, which contribute to a well-rounded view of remediation at CSU-Pueblo.

through the written word is essential for college students in their courses and in their professional futures, which is why English remediation and proper composition are critical.

“Because writing assessment is fundamentally about supporting current theories of language and learning and improving literacy and instruction, it should involve the same kind of thinking we use every day as scholars and teachers. Unfortunately, it often doesn’t” (O’Neill et al. 59) and is, most often, an economic issue driven by assessment cost and instructor time.

“Remediation is an important, yet divisive, issue in which educators, administrators, taxpayers, policymakers and, most importantly, students all have a vested interest” (Bahr 178). Despite the necessity of remediation in higher education, many colleges and universities remain resistant to offering less-than college level coursework; however, the students are the ones who will pay the ultimate price of failure because of this approach:

The K-12 system considers every student who graduates and then enrolls in college a success . . . The higher education system considers every remedial student as a product of K-12 failure . . . left is the student, dogged by the shadows of two systems that refuse to take responsibility for the educational killing zone that lies between them. (Carey)

Given that many students enter postsecondary education unprepared, along with the fact that their future will ultimately reflect on the retention rates of the institution, it is time to integrate remediation into the college curriculum and the college culture to ensure that students leaving a remedial classroom are equipped with the skills necessary to succeed in higher education courses and to engage in the academic discourse community.

The Writing Remediation Opportunity

Among calls to reform remediation thinking, numerous composition programs have shifted their thinking and now view remedial writing courses as opportunities as opposed to challenges. It is this philosophy that leads to a successful remedial program in English writing as well as reading and mathematics. Remediation provides institutions of higher education with the opportunity to prepare their students with the skills necessary to succeed in their college-level courses, delivered by their own faculty members, while generating tuition dollars and FTE (full-time enrollments⁶). How could an institution ask for anything more?

⁶ FTE is the statistic used to measure enrollment in the state of Colorado. It is not student body headcount, but an indicator of how many students are enrolled in how many credit hours. Full-time enrollment for the FTE statistic equals 15 credit hours, which is somewhat contradictory to the policy of most institutions who consider full-time enrollment at 12 credit hours for financial aid purposes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Politics of Remediation

Remediation “remains today, a topic of considerable controversy” (Bahr 177) despised by many throughout the nation, including students placed into “developmental” courses as they begin their college careers; by the English, math, and reading departments responsible for teaching the courses and ensuring that students remediate the subjects; by college and university administrations who are forced to teach less than collegiate level classes; and by the policymakers and legislators who believe limited budgets are wasted on classes that should be unnecessary. “At the heart of this controversy lie vital policy questions concerning educational access, equity, and social mobility for a sizable segment of the population (177-8). One of the largest hindrances to remedial education programs is the “stigma association with remediation and this psychological burden could negatively affect outcomes and discourage additional student effort” (Bettinger and Long 739). Fortunately, some teachers and administrators have shifted their remediation paradigms and are using the classes to develop the necessary skills for students that will ensure success throughout their college careers and into their futures. Unfortunately, this approach fails to be widely embraced. However, institutions rethinking their approaches and programs are rewarded with positive outcomes and, in many cases, cost savings.

At the core of the remediation debate are two factors: cost and student achievement, or lack thereof. Cost becomes an issue for elected officials and college administrations, as students spend time in courses at the beginning of their college careers which do not earn them college credit. The students must also pay for the classes, either through financial aid awards or

from their own pockets. “Legislators complain that they are ‘paying twice’ for instruction in material that should have been learned earlier” (Rose, “Remediate”). Not to mention the time it takes for students to complete a full remedial sequence, especially at some community colleges. Depending upon students’ placement, it is possible for them to be subjected to a full two years’ worth of developmental education courses, the time it should take to complete an associate’s degree for transfer to a four-year institution. “Remediation may be harmful in that it increases the number of requirements and extends the time to degree, which may lower the likelihood of degree completion” (Bettinger and Long 739). Making remedial requirements more concise and meaningful only has a positive effect on students enrolled in the courses. Instead of requiring students to take a barrage of courses, which they only view as a hindrance to obtaining a degree or transferring, a limited number of courses, which are meaningful and contribute to their overall student skill development, equals a path to successful remediation while preventing student frustration. It also saves time and money.

Remediation policy often falls short on several levels and does not take into account a big picture approach. It “does not include historical analysis of the beliefs about cognition and instruction that inform curriculums . . . any policy research crafted with the aid of people who actually teach those classes . . . or much of a sense of the texture of students’ lives” (Rose, “Crossroads”). Students’ issues vary significantly from one student to the next. Many are dealing with the typical freshmen year challenges: being away from home for the first time; paying for college and working, often full-time; dealing with relationship issues; substance abuse; and others. Other students returning to higher education experience family and childcare issues, “terrible economic instability” (Rose) including job loss, supporting a family or

poverty; and the challenge of improving their educational status and creating a better life for themselves and their families. While a remedial class, or any college course, includes students at similar academic levels, the fabric of their lives varies significantly and may have a profound impact on their learning. “Profiles of students in remedial classes . . . are too often profiles of failure rather than of people with dynamic mental lives” (Rose).

Politicians from the President of the United States down to state legislators as well as university administrators want to increase access to postsecondary education, making it more accessible to first-generation and low income students. The theory behind this is providing opportunities will create better futures through education. While this could have a positive impact on our nation’s economy, the costs of education continue to increase as “cash-strapped states are cutting education budgets, leading colleges to limit enrollments and cut classes and student services” (Rose), which will only make success for these students more difficult if they do enter higher education. The reality of our 21st century education system is a “strictly economic one” (Rose) that wants to increase postsecondary enrollment to create a more educated population while withdrawing the support necessary to make the students successful. And remediation lies at the core.

On the side of the community college or university, remediation generates both course fees and enrollment numbers for institutions; the less selective colleges with the largest student body percentages in need of remediation have the largest remediation programs, which equal a significant source of funding. However, because remediation focuses on under-prepared students, the opposite of the students that administrators and admissions offices want to attract, they do not contribute to the “prestige” of the freshmen class (Carey). Dollar

figures and common sense should tell administrators, politicians, and academic departments that student achievement in remedial classes should be a priority, as it will contribute to greater student success and persistence in the future.

Meaningful Remediation

Remediation programs vary from campus to campus and state to state, as does the level of mandated policy. “The key thing here is how remediation is conceived and executed” (Rose, “The Positive Purpose”); the most successful programs embrace the philosophy of opportunity to teach and prepare students for their college careers. English writing classes teach the discourse of higher education, argument, and writing as a process, which “affirms the ability of the common person and guides instruction that goes beyond the acquisition of fundamental skills and routine toward an understanding of their meaning and application, the principles underlying them, and the broader habits of mind that incorporate them” (Rose). The success of remedial students and the foundation for obtaining a higher education may be found in this approach, coupled with the freedom of states and institutions to design remediation programs that meet their individual needs.

For many remedial teachers and classrooms, a self-fulfilling prophecy is created, “remediation as a social construct, as the product of perceptions and beliefs about literacy and learning” (Hull, et al.). Low expectations create low standards and coursework that does not challenge students or push them to succeed. High expectations create high standards and the foundation of success, both in remedial and lower-division courses. According to Mike Rose, “remedial courses and programs are typically treated in isolation from the core mission of the college or university, an institutional quarantine. But I see the remedial function as

interconnected with foundational concerns” (“The Positive Purpose”). Integrating developmental classes into academic departments and working in partnership with the professors, departments, and colleges themselves are key factors in the success of remediation. Overcoming the “quarantine” and embracing the classes as the opportunities they present for molding new freshmen into successful college students and future graduates are critical to the success of remedial programs.

Remedial courses generate FTE and income and should be given the same respect any other college course is given. “Professors . . . who spend no time with first-year students need to set new priorities. You can’t build advanced humanistic study on thin foundations of reading and writing. We need more full professors in freshmen classes” (Bauerlein). Professors teaching students in remedial classes would also increase the respect factor. The standards and expectations of remedial courses must be increased, as well as the approach used in remedial courses nationwide. “Rather than marginalize remediation, they should invest more intellectual resources in it, making it as effective as it can be. The notion of a second chance, of building safety nets into a flawed system, offers a robust idea of education and learning” (Rose, “Colleges Need to Re-Mediate”). While overhauling remediation is not an easy fix, the benefits outweigh the challenges, both for the students and the universities themselves.

As much as some professors, administrators and politicians want remediation to disappear, that is unrealistic. “Remedial programs are necessary if we want to educate a wide sweep of our citizenry. They serve as a corrective to the impersonal dispensary that lower-division education has become” (Rose, “The Positive Purpose”). Remediation is here to stay, and the challenge is to make it meaningful and to contribute to the institutional goals of student

retention and graduation, to embrace it as an opportunity to prepare freshmen to be successful in college courses, and to build the confidence of new students as they begin their college careers.

Current Trends in Remediation

According to the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, the belief that “the ability to write well is basic to student success in college and beyond. Students can become better writers when they have multiple opportunities to write in classes across the curriculum throughout their education—from elementary school through university” (2) which should be at the core of a writing remediation program. In addition, “two academic skill areas that are repeatedly identified as being centrally important to college success: reading and writing” (Conley 36), both of which are components of remediation programs throughout the nation. Thus, a successful writing remediation program provides students with an opportunity to develop their writing skills at a college-level, preparing them to enter a composition classroom as well as complete a collegiate writing project in any subject while educating students in the discourse of higher education and their institution.

Numerous practitioners and professors believe that significant professional development for teachers can play a key role in the development of a successful remedial program, giving them the skills to develop the necessary elements of remedial courses. This professional development must be on-going and in-depth throughout two or three years and “focused on learning and developing instructional approaches to help students improve their analytical

writing and critical reading” (Marlink and Wahleithner 1). This approach allows teachers to truly develop these skills, building on success with opportunities for follow-up to address challenges or additional questions as they are implementing this teaching approach. “These programs enable teachers to work with subject matter experts; read, write, and think together; learn new material; hear from others who have successfully integrated it into their classrooms, and try it themselves” (Ravitch and Rose “Taking Back”). Implementing meaningful, long-term professional development poses the same challenges of cost and time as remediation itself, making this approach to professional development unattainable for many institutions. However, if remediation is to become meaningful with lasting effects, the changes have to be made and teachers provided with the necessary professional development opportunities and support.

Another issue with remediation is that of insufficient preparation of students while in high school and throughout their K-12 education. This poses a significant challenge, given the constraints of all the federal and state legislation educators work under. According to *A Report from the National Center on Education and the Economy on the English Literacy Required of First Year Community College Students titled What Does It Really Mean to be College and Work Ready*, “the nation may have to learn to walk before it runs, which means that it is important, first, to enable our high school students to meet the current very low standards before we ratchet those standards up” (4). Greater preparedness of students for college and entering the workforce are benefits that will be gained by the nation; unfortunately, there are no quick fixes for elementary through high school and college students. The report continues, “Nothing in that stance, however, should prevent the high schools from providing the skills needed to do

the kinds of reading and writing now demanded by our community college for which no foundation is currently provided” (4). As previously stated, high expectations produce high standards; college professors cannot sell their students short, believing them to be incapable of writing or reading at a collegiate level. If this is the case, the students should not be accepted for admission in the first place. The report also recommends reading and writing assignments where there currently are none, along with the support necessary for the students to succeed. “The aim here must be not to raise the standards come what may, but to increase student success on more demanding tasks that are vital to their success in their chosen fields” (4). Thus, gradual increases in standards and expectations will promote lasting change, but these changes will be slow, and policymakers and administrations must understand this.

The quality of remedial courses must also be considered. Quantity does not equal quality; in many cases, the reverse seems to be true for remedial education. One or two courses, as opposed to one or two years’ worth of coursework produce more favorable results with regard to remediation for students. “22 states and systems of higher education have substantially reduced remedial coursework or even eliminated it” (Bahr 178). A solid foundation in a limited amount of time not viewed as a hindrance to students’ educational goals is more effective than drawing remediation out over years, as students are able to see progress toward their goal. This philosophy also shows students the value of an effective remedial program, which develops a culture of remediation within the institution, where it will be valued and serve a purpose of preparing students for college-level coursework. Unfortunately, this culture does not exist in many institutions and remediation becomes a barrier to student success and the institution itself.

The differences between high school and college courses must also be considered. It cannot be assumed that college courses are “more difficult” or that they use “better teaching methods”, nor can the same assumptions be made regarding high school classes. It can only be assumed that the classes are different, as the settings are different and teaching approaches vary at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. “With an open mind, it is possible to see and appreciate what is valued at each level, what is expected of students, and how students are likely to respond to the demands at each level” (Conley 42). There is much that each set of teachers can learn from each other to benefit the students, perhaps even resulting in a cohesive writing curriculum across the educational spectrum. “This understanding is the necessary underpinning to the conversation about how high school and college courses differ” (42), but can become the building blocks for a cohesive kindergarten through college writing curriculum with the philosophy of “every student a writer.” Creating a seamless program, beginning with elementary school through postsecondary education would produce a nation of writers: people able to effectively communicate with written words in any situation.

While some trends in remedial education are changing and some institutions are remediating in more meaningful ways with a lower number of courses, higher standards and qualified teachers, remediation also suffers from the same institutional effects that many of the nation’s education programs do—a lack of innovation and sluggishness or refusal in adapting to change. Remediation must be viewed for what it really is: an opportunity for institutions of higher education to develop college-level reading, writing, and discourse skills in their new students, and a chance to prepare them to be successful college students and future graduates.

ARGUMENT

Components of a Successful Remediation Program

For many of the nation's college students, low confidence in their writing begins in the K-12 education system, yet community colleges and universities ultimately bear the responsibility for it, producing graduates who are unable to communicate via the written word, or, even worse, in students failing to graduate and earn a college degree. What is unfortunate is that the majority of these students write on a daily basis in the form of tweets, texts, face book posts, or through other social media or email updates, yet the students fail to realize this is a form of writing. Not only is this writing that they engage in and enjoy, it provides a critical opportunity for them to build their self-confidence in their ability as writers; it lays the foundation for successful collegiate level writing and the ability to communicate throughout their formal education and into their careers.

"Successful" writing must be redefined to include all of the writing a student engages in, including social media and communication with friends and family, and must focus on the writing process. A definition for writing would be effective communication through the written word in the appropriate language, whether formal or informal; for any reason or purpose in which thoughts, opinions, argument, analysis, information gathering, and reporting through a process of revision. The goal of any writing should be coherent communication for the intended audience. The writing process includes any type of appropriate pre-writing; drafts; editing and review, even if it is simply proofreading and making minor corrections; and final product as necessary to meet the purpose of the writing. Utilizing the appropriate writing process for each type of writing is critical; a student would not be expected to produce a draft and peer edits for

a face book post, yet the expectation that he proofreads and corrects errors before posting exists, while two or three drafts with numerous self, peer, and teacher edits are expected for a composition assignment.

Remediation Placement

A key component of a successful remediation experience for a student is correct placement. The “national dialogue about remediation needs to focus on discussion about placement and more careful assessment of student readiness for college-level work” (Giordano et al.). Before a student is enrolled in a remedial class, placement into a remedial or college-level composition class is usually based on several factors: a standardized test score like ACT or SAT⁷; a campus-based national assessment such as Accuplacer, which measures specific subject areas; an ACT or SAT Writing Test⁸ score; in-house self-directed assessments; a current student writing sample evaluated by the institution’s Composition Program; and student input into his or her placement.

Campus support for national test scores or institutional assessments include cost-effectiveness, the availability of test scores submitted through the admissions application

⁷ The ACT and SAT are standardized tests high school students take as part of the admissions application process for most four-year colleges and universities. The state of Colorado requires all juniors to take the ACT as part of their regular school day in late-April to promote college awareness as part of their high school education, as well as to measure student achievement. The ACT is curriculum-based and measures English, reading, mathematics and science while the SAT is skills based and measures mathematics, reading and writing abilities. While the tests are different in nature, they are both paper-and-pencil computer scored tests taken by more than one million high school students annually in the US. The scores for English, math and reading remediation are state mandates for the state of Colorado, based on national scores and data.

⁸ Both ACT and SAT offer specific “writing” tests in addition to the current subject tests, which supposedly judge a student’s writing ability. ACT offers a Writing Exam, a 60-minute hand-written persuasive letter to an authority figure that is meant to test students’ ability to write a college-level essay. The SAT Writing Test includes a combination of multiple-choice questions and the writing of a 25-minute essay. It must be noted that both writing tests use paper and pencil writing, when most high school students use a computer to write as part of their high school curriculums. Even for an accomplished writer, making the transition between writing by hand and on the computer is challenging without the added pressures of a timed, standardized test.

process, the comparison of students on a “national” level to other students, and not requiring students to take an additional assessment. The ACT and SAT are standardized tests high school students take for entrance into college, usually without any knowledge that their test performance will also affect their first year placement into English, reading, and mathematics courses. One standardized test, taken while in high school, not only determines if a student is granted admission, but the courses he or she will take during the first year in college.

Standardized tests are just that: standardized. They fail to take into account a student’s personal strengths and weaknesses when comparing him or her to the rest of the college-bound population. Opponents cite the use of a national test and the lack of student knowledge in the impact her scores will actually have on her college career and the use of a multiple-choice test to evaluate writing ability, even in the specific writing tests. Giordano discusses the “limits of standardized test scores . . . with a particular relevance for open-admission institutions” including the wide variance of test scores and the challenge of using the scores for accurate placement.

Those in favor of newer, evolving placement tools such as self-directed placements believe them to be a more accurate indicator of a student’s abilities at the present time, as national assessments were often taken months or years previously. These assessments also consider the student’s input, which accounts for motivation and work ethic, a significant factor in student achievement. Opponents cite the extra costs, both in staff time, monetary funds, and in administering an additional assessment when an institution already has a national assessment on file.

Overall, the various placement tools achieve mixed results. The most accurate placement includes a national assessment partnered with a current self-directed assessment or writing sample. The national assessment provides a baseline placement while a current writing sample is a powerful tool for composition instructors, as they do not have to wait for the first drafts to see the strengths and weaknesses of their students. Within the first week, instructors have information on their classes' writing abilities, providing knowledge of where to focus attention during the semester which provides more individualized class instruction. Student input also significantly affects placement, which can have the largest impact on success or failure. "Students' beliefs in their abilities and their faith that their work will lead to success can affect the quality of the work they produce. Through a self-fulfilling prophecy, many students who believe that they will fail do not put forth the effort required to succeed" (Blythe 12). A more engaged student equals a more successful student.

Class Size and Students

The remedial classes themselves also have an effect on the students enrolled, both in class size and peer group. The students must have high expectations, which set the stage for a positive, productive remedial class. However, "negative effects of increased class size are most profound for at-risk students who are underprepared, low income, and/or first-generation" (Giordano et al.); thus, class size must be small to create a successful remedial experience. Research has shown that "students in smaller classes are more likely to participate in conferences and peer review and see these elements as an important part of the writing process and to view the writing process as one that involves multiple drafts with changes based on feedback and evolving ideas" (Giordano et al.).

Individual professor to student relationships as well as peer to peer interactions contribute to success, especially in remedial classes, and students will experience increased learning from both their peers and instructor. "Grouping lower-ability students in remedial courses may produce negative peer effects" (Bettinger and Long 739). Positive peer pressure also has a positive effect on student writing as good writers lead by example, making their colleagues better through the same high expectations and peer interactions. Two of the significant challenges of remedial courses are this lack of student example and striving to meet high standards. The Colorado Community Colleges are utilizing an innovative approach which combines their Composition I course with the writing remediation class immediately proceeding composition; both classes meet in the same classroom completing the same writing assignments, with the remedial students spending additional time with the instructor at the end of class. This approach sets the Comp I students up as peer mentors and classroom leaders, while providing the remedial students with high standards and positive peer role models required to succeed with both groups building their self-confidence as writers. This type of positive experience serves as the opportunity a remedial class can provide for its students and the institution itself.

Other positive peer examples are possible through student mentors or writing assistants, either as part of the class or in writing centers, through interactions with students in the same or more advanced composition classes, or within on-line student communities or social networking groups. Any peer-to-peer interactions can prove beneficial to students in remedial writing classes when conducted in a positive, respectful manner with a focus on student development.

Limited Remedial Classes

The number of courses required for completion of a remedial sequence to move into college-level composition courses also contributes to the success of students. Referring to the time and monetary costs, students do not want to spend years in remedial classes before they can begin even taking college-level courses. “Remediation may be harmful in that it increases the number of requirements and extends the time to degree, which may lower the likelihood of degree completion” (Bettinger and Long 739). Therefore, no more than two courses, which engage students and provide an opportunity to develop necessary college-level skills, are key to engaging students in a meaningful and successful remediation program.

For remediation to serve as an opportunity, students must buy-in to the programs and see the benefits to them; a remedial program cannot be viewed as a hindrance to graduation or transfer to a four-year institution. If students are able to see a relatively quick end to the remedial courses and the benefits of college preparation, skill development, and positive results, they will be more likely to be successful in the courses and in their college careers. “There also can be a stigma associated with remediation, and this psychological burden could negatively affect outcomes and discourage additional student effort” (739). If a college or university embraces remediation and markets the classes correctly to the students, they will create a culture of opportunity for all students, even those required to take remedial courses. Colleges with a culture of quarantine for their remedial sequence create an “I am not good enough” atmosphere for these students, which contribute to their lack of completion of both the remedial classes and ultimately, their degrees.

Thus, a successful writing remediation program must include an accurate placement process, small class sizes, a positive peer group or example, and a limited number of remedial courses before qualifying for college-level composition courses. The institutional culture also plays a critical role in turning remediation into an opportunity, both for its students, its teachers and professors, and the institution itself.

Long Term Benefits to Remedial Students

Are students enrolled in remedial classes ultimately successful in their college careers remains one of the main questions with regard to remedial education. Generally, yes. “Remedial English students who attain college-level English competency exhibit relative odds of terminal credentials (i.e. associate degrees) and odds of transfer with a credential that are comparable to students who achieve college-level English skills without remediation” (Bahr 190). Thus, despite the extra time required to complete remedial courses, students are able to achieve the same success as their colleagues who meet college-level requirements upon entry. Granted, this success is also a reflection of the remedial class itself, but a strong remedial program produces successful results. These students “experience rates of credential completion . . . that are comparable, or slightly superior, to those of students who attain college-level competency in math and English skill without remediation” (195). Thus, the students who complete remedial courses may be even more successful in earning a college degree, as they have been informed by the institution itself what is expected for a student with regard to collegiate-level writing and discourse, as opposed to students using their K-12 educations as a base.

Success in remediation also tells college and university administrators and professors not to underestimate students who enter college with an underprepared designation. “Even students who are sorely underprepared for college coursework, even in multiple skills areas, may succeed and achieve well beyond what one would predict based on their initial course placements” (200). Thus, remediation is not an indicator of ultimate failure. This evidence reinforces the importance of quality remedial programs and the opportunity they present to institutions and their students. According to Mike Rose, to achieve success, “remedial programs set high standards, are focused on inquiry and problem-solving in a substantial curriculum, use a pedagogy that is supportive and interactive, draw on a variety of techniques and approaches, are in line with students’ goals, and provide credit for course work” (“Colleges Need to Re-Mediate”). These elements, while relatively simple, must be the basis of a remedial program.

The benefits of a successful remediation program are numerous for students, who develop the skills that prepare them for collegiate-level coursework and receive the opportunity of an advanced education. “The key point is that remediation occurs in many ways, on many levels, involving most of us at some time or another” (Rose). This is important to students entering college immediately after high school graduation, but even more so for students who served in the military or have been out of the education system for a time. “The notion of a second chance, of building safety nets into a flawed system, offers a robust idea of education and learning: that we live in a system that acknowledges that people change, retool, grow, and need to return to old mistakes, or just to what is past and forgotten” (Rose) reflects not only the American education system but also that of America itself.

Value of Remediation to Institutions

“With persistent concerns about the abilities of high school graduates, higher education must find ways to address the needs of underprepared students” (Bettinger and Long 761), and developing a successful remedial program benefits an institution as well as prepares underprepared students. Since colleges and universities opened their doors, and classrooms, to more students, remediation has been a part of higher education in America. Most institutions have come to realize that “remediation is an important part of higher education, and it plays a very significant role in attempting to address the needs of the thousands of underprepared students who enter postsecondary institutions each year” (Bettinger and Long 761). The exception to remedial programs is a small number of ivy-league and highly selective institutions. As much as some politicians, institutions, departments, and professors want there to be no need for the existence of remediation, the reality is that this is not possible as long as higher education seeks to be more inclusive and to provide educational opportunities for those who would normally not receive them. Remediation is becoming even more of a necessity in the 21st century American educational system, which is why it must be embraced as an opportunity and used to prepare students for college at the beginning of their collegiate careers.

The interdisciplinary skill required for successful writing helps students develop critical thinking, analysis, and reading comprehension skills in addition to honing their writing skills; all are essential to success in college. Thus, a writing remediation class or classes not only develop a student’s writing, but, when taught utilizing a big picture approach, will enhance other skills critical to college success. The task of writing is challenging, for some students more than

others, but “researchers have found that writing can develop higher-order thinking skills . . .

The very difficulty of writing is its virtue: it requires that students move beyond rote learning and simple reproducing of information, facts, dates, and formulae” (Peterson). Thus, a student who has developed successful writing skills will be prepared to succeed across a college curriculum.

Benefits for institutions, in addition to well-prepared students, include higher retention rates and, ultimately, graduation rates. Providing students with an opportunity to develop the necessary skills to be successful college students will only increase the student success in all of their courses and in ultimately earning a college degree, even if graduation is not attained in the traditional four years, it is still better than not graduating. “Students in remediation are less likely to drop out and more likely to complete a degree in six years” (Bettinger and Long 757-8). If graduation rates improve, colleges and universities will have opportunities for various grants and federal funding programs, additional financial aid monies and scholarship programs, and even additional state funding. “Serving more students and improving academic outcomes while saving resources in the bargain sounds like the ultimate better mousetrap for higher education. And with the economic crisis . . . more colleges will undoubtedly look to those kinds of innovative solutions” (Rose, “Introducing a Remedial Program”). An effective remedial program could determine the ultimate success or failure of an institution in the 21st century’s very competitive higher education market.

Aligning K-12 and College Curriculums

When considering the institutional value of remediation, the current high school curriculum and skills of graduating students must be considered. Mike Rose points to the “someone else” blamed by both sides of remedial education,

The K-12 system considers every student who graduates and then enrolls in college as a success—anything that happens afterward is someone else’s problem. The higher education system considers every remedial student as a product of K-12 failure, and therefore someone else’s problem. The only “someone else” left is the student, dogged by the shadows of two systems that refuse to take responsibility for the educational killing zone that lies between them. (“Introducing a Remedial Program”)

This concept of “someone else” must be eliminated; K-12 with a focus on high schools and postsecondary institutions must begin to align their standards and to articulate their reading, writing and mathematics standards. Postsecondary institutions must provide support to K-12 as well as consider the requirements of their teacher education programs. This would not eliminate the need for remedial classes for new college freshmen, but it would help to close the gap for many of the students entering college immediately after high school graduation.

“According to the Nation’s Report Card, in 2007 . . . only 1 percent of all 12th graders nationwide could write a sophisticated, well-organized essay. Other research has shown that 70 to 75 percent of students in grades four through 12 write poorly” (Tyre). This indicates that two things must change: writing must become a focus of K-12 education to develop the foundation and philosophy of “every student a writer” and students must be able to graduate high school with the ability to write at the pre-collegiate or workforce ready level. According to Colorado’s

Postsecondary and Workforce Ready (PWR) Standards, these are one in the same. “It’s important for students to have something to show for their 12 years in education. They ought to be able to read critically and write well enough to be successful after high school in college and the workplace” (O’Donnell-Allen). Basically, a graduating high school senior needs to be able to write coherently for the occasion, whether it be an essay with critical thinking or analysis, a professional email or letter, or anything in between. As one graduate student in “Linda’s Blog” writes “basic writers . . . can’t necessarily be defined as those who make a lot of sentence-level mistakes. Instead, these writers consistently have problems using ‘insider’ language to establish authority.” This should not, however, create the expectation that a student is ready to walk into a college-level composition class and construct an essay without any instruction on the expectations and goals of the writing project, nor does it mean that the elements of the writing process, especially those of peer and instructor review, may be eliminated. Just as a student entering the workforce should be expected to be able to compose a basic email, price quote or job scope with no guidance from his superior or peers. These basic writing skills should be present when students graduate from high school, having been developed since kindergarten. What a college student or employee must learn is the “language” of their institution; the specific discourse required to be a successful writer in the current context.

Instead of preparing students for collegiate discourse and college-level writing, some high school writing programs teach the five-paragraph essay as the answer to any writing project they receive. According to first-year college student Trinh Nguyen, “do not write a five paragraph essay. Not all paragraphs have to be the same size. Topic sentences don’t always

have to be at the beginning of each paragraph.’ These words from my professor . . . completely shocked me on my first day of College Writing” (Smith). Thus, students are being forced to unlearn what they have been taught in their K-12 grade educations and equal a disadvantage when entering college. It is critical for high school and college curriculums to align themselves to the same teaching philosophies and writing goals so that every high school graduate is prepared for college-level writing, which means that they enter college with the required basic writing skills and the need to learn the discourse of their subject and institution.

The continuation of this philosophy means that remediation, or the principals of the remediation course, are integrated into the high school curriculum for juniors and seniors so they develop the necessary skills before they graduate, which will benefit the students and the collegiate institutions, as well as potential employers. Partnerships between school districts, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities are critical to achieving this goal, as are those between legislators, school boards, college and university administrations, and local communities to make these goals a reality. High school and college composition teachers have to communicate with each other to align standards and address deficiencies. They must be empowered to make the necessary changes as they see to best meet the needs of their students, with the support and the redistribution of resources to make the changes happen. It is expected that these writing curriculums would vary between school districts, as they would make the changes needed to address the challenges faced by their students.

When considering the alignment of curriculums from high school to college, the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school must also be considered. In Colorado, students have a variety of opportunities to earn college credit in both national and state

programs⁹. However, these programs do not include credit for remedial courses or even the opportunity to enroll in them, which develops or continues to reinforce the negative culture of remedial courses on the part of high school students before they have even entered college. Politicians and some college administrators continue to despise remedial courses and believe that the approach of eliminating funding for these courses for high school students will magically eliminate the need for remediation. Students who want to earn college credit while in high school are only eligible to do so by taking college-level courses; remedial courses are not eligible for funding or high school credit. Unfortunately, even if students want to earn college credit in a subject where they need remediation, they are unable to do so as they are forced to wait to enroll in the course until actually enrolling in college. Instead of helping students get a jump start on their college careers, they are penalized, even while still in high school, for their need for remediation.

Articulation from community colleges to four-year colleges or universities is also relevant. Colorado has aligned general education courses between community colleges and four-year universities with a state mandated agreement since 2007. While the gt Pathways¹⁰ courses align “more than 500 lower-division general education courses in 20 subject areas”

⁹ National programs include Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and CLEP (College Level Examination Program). State programs in Colorado include Concurrent Enrollment, which began in fall 2012 and fifth-year subject area endorsements, as well as institution specific programs where students take dual-enrollment courses such as CSU-Pueblo’s Senior to Sophomore and the University of Colorado’s CU Gold programs. All of the programs provide opportunities for students to earn college credit while in high school through a variety of approaches such as coursework and national examinations, course enrollment at a college campus, or enrollment at a student’s high school.

¹⁰ gt Pathways is the name of the state-mandated transfer program in Colorado between the Colorado community colleges and the state’s four-year colleges and universities. All gt Pathways community college courses have a common course numbering system and curriculum. Colorado continues to mandate transfer policies with a total of 18 major-specific statewide transfer articulation agreements in place, which mandate two years of community college coursework followed by two years of coursework at a four-year college or university to complete a degree in selected majors. The two-years at the community college do not allow time for remediation.

according to the *Colorado Department of Higher Education's* website, remedial courses are omitted from these general education courses as they are not college-level¹¹. So, while Composition I and II are transferable from a Colorado community college to a four-year university, the years of remediation required to enter a composition course are not. This contributes to all of the arguments against remediation, wasted time and money for students, lack of progress toward graduation, being buried in non-college level courses, and remedial courses that take as long as an associate's degree should. While this is changing in Colorado for writing as well as mathematics with remedial requirements reduced to no more than two courses, the need for articulation of curriculum still exists. What if a student chooses to take a remedial writing course at their local community college the summer before enrolling at a four-year university; will they be prepared for that composition course? If curriculums were aligned from high school through college, this would not be a question.

Foundations of Writing Remediation

An essential component of effectively teaching writing is an instructor who writes herself. The ethos developed by a teacher who spends time writing as her students are writing and sharing daily writing prompts cannot be gained in any other way. Writing is a complex, interdisciplinary process, and it is not possible to teach writing without participating in writing activities as an instructor. "The best writing teachers are writers themselves. Why? Because we know the writing process inside out, we can support our students' work in authentic ways" (O'Donnell-Allen).

¹¹ Remedial course credit hours count toward financial aid eligibility but the credits earned do not count for graduation requirements or cumulative GPA.

Students who are fortunate enough to be taught to write by a writer herself, grow “to see themselves as writers, too . . . they learn that writing is hard, joyful, worthwhile work that is meant to be shared with others” (O’Donnell-Allen). This is critical in capitalizing on the opportunity that writing remediation presents: developing strong academic writers requires a teacher who is a writer to make every student a writer. A writer does not have to be a published author, although this is desirable, but a person who engages in writing a variety of genres who can successfully communicate via the written word. Understanding and having experienced the writing process are necessary components of the effective teaching of writing, as does the ability to communicate with students about their writing to improve it.

In formal education from kindergarten through postsecondary years, writing is the cornerstone for success. It is a critical element across the curriculum and throughout a student’s career. “Research has shown that thinking, speaking, and reading comprehension are interconnected and reinforced through good writing instruction” (Tyre) which is why writing remediation equals the foundation for success in college and is one of the most important courses taught by an institution, as are composition courses which continue to develop and focus these skills on a collegiate level.

This foundation of successful writing must include several components: writing must be learned throughout a student’s education and practiced across genres and subject areas; it must include the rhetorical triangle elements of audience, purpose, and occasion; writing is a process that is continually building on previous experience, evolving and changing; and critical thinking, reading comprehension, analysis, and evaluation are critical elements to the interdisciplinary subject of writing. “Teacher and researcher James Moffett described the new

consensus about effective composition pedagogy this way: ‘Writing has to be learned in school very much the same way that it is practiced out of school’” (qtd. in Peterson). Ideally, these components would be present beginning in kindergarten for all students and developed throughout their K-12 educations and into college. The complexity of writing requires years to build and begins with language development that occurs at a young age and throughout a student’s early education. The processes of learning to read and write are dependent upon each other. Research has shown that “children use ‘print to represent their ideas and to interact with other people’ when they scribble; draw and label pictures; and create, act out, or retell stories” (Dyson 4). In addition to this basic foundation, students need to practice their writing with “frequent, supportive practice. Evidence show that writing performance improves when a student writes often and across content areas. Writing also impacts reading comprehension” (2), which strengthens the ties between writing and reading.

The foundation of writing is the interaction between the elements of the rhetorical triangle: audience, purpose, and occasion, and each element must be considered by the writer. Who is the intended audience? What is the purpose of the writing? Why is the writing being done? Reflection on these three elements is a critical pre-writing component and will help students define their writing and refine it throughout the process. “This means that the writer has a reason to write, an intended audience, and control of subject and form” (qtd. in Peterson).

The process of writing involves pre-writing, drafting, revising, and proofing with the length and complexity of each varying depending upon the writing project itself. This process can be used from elementary school through college freshman composition and into the most complex

and lengthy writing projects. Third graders refer to their drafts as a “sloppy copy” and professional writers have editors for the revising and proofing stages. Most writers, even students, also learn the adage that “papers are never done, only due.” Students continuously build upon feedback from peers and instructors, as well as their continual research, formal and informal education, and life experiences, and must learn to include these elements in their writing processes.

Essentially, “writing is thinking” (Peterson). Students learn a variety of skills such as critical thinking, reading comprehension, analysis, and evaluation through writing; “researchers have found that writing can develop higher-order thinking skills” (qtd. in Peterson). Not only do students develop the ability to think critically, analyze, and evaluate, as well as comprehend what they are reading, they also learn how to express their ideas and conclusions through written words in every subject area they study. “Every teacher who interacts with children has a responsibility for the student’s development in writing as it applies to their subject area” (qtd. in Peterson). Thus, the responsibility of teaching writing is not just the job of the writing or English teacher, but the job of the entire school and educational system, which requires a significant pedagogical shift on the part of most educators, both in K-12 and in higher education. High school students must also be taught the value and necessity of effective writing in college and that it reaches all of their subject areas:

Almost all grades in college are based on a student’s writing, both papers and exams.

College students are likely to write in all subject areas.

Almost all writing in college involves critical thinking.

College writing is very often linked to reading that is lengthy and challenging.

Students are expected to plan, revise, and carefully proofread their work. (Smith)

If students realize the importance of writing for their success in college, perhaps they will embrace the value of being strong writers. “If more American students are to move along this challenging, exciting route that will allow them to claim ‘I am a writer,’ educators and the nation at large will need to come to share the National Writing Project’s insistence that writing matters” (Peterson).

While these changes are long-term solutions and will take time, the majority of students would be prepared for college-level courses as freshmen and ready to enter the collegiate academic discourse with all of the skills, not just writing, to successfully earn a college degree, or they would only need one remedial course to do so. This would not eliminate the need for remediation, as there will continue to be students entering college with time between high school graduation, as well as some students who need extra instruction to be fully prepared for college, allowing institutions to develop the opportunity of remediation.

CONCLUSION

While remediation remains a contentious issue for many administrators, politicians, faculty members, students, and parents, the reality is that remediation is a part of higher education in America and always will be. The elimination of remediation could “effectively end the American experiment with mass postsecondary education” (Cloud). It does, however, present a unique opportunity for institutions of higher education to form the foundation for many of its students’ college careers by developing the skills the institution believes to be critical to the success of these students, who are taught by their faculty members while generating tuition revenue and enrollment numbers. Remedial courses provide a gateway into college for students who have been out of the educational system for a time. They also provide the opportunities to develop partnerships with local school districts to align writing standards between high schools and colleges, which will likely lead to additional benefits for both institutions like college professors speaking in high school classrooms; greater matriculation of seniors; increased recognition of the college or university for the high school students, parents, and staff; and perhaps even scholarship and other support opportunities.

“The evidence . . . supports the conclusion that remediation is efficacious even for those students who face the greatest academic deficiencies as well as those who face multiple deficiencies” (Bahr 201). Writing remediation is an opportunity for institutions of higher education and it produces positive results for students with at-risk designations of inadequate high school preparation, minority, first-generation, poverty, lack of family support, full-time employment, and others, both in continued enrollment after the first semester of college

through graduation, which is the ultimate, and often only, indicator of success in college.

However, the at-risk students are those who merit additional discussion.

Why do some students perform better in their formal educations than other students? What are the differences between the at-risk students and the higher-achieving ones? What makes the difference in educational achievement? While these are complex questions with a wide variety of answers, some common factors exist. At-risk students are often those from impoverished neighborhoods where a low value is placed on education, which may be viewed as the law or free child care as opposed to an opportunity for a child's future. Without a parent or adult role model's example, children view education as a burden instead of a possibility. Even without an example, encouragement is critical to success in school.

Education must be a partnership between the school and staff, the parents or role models, and the community to be successful. Parents must be active in their children's education, ensuring they complete their homework, attend school on time and every day, and make school a priority for the student and family. Schools must set high expectations for student achievement which hold both students and families responsible while providing the support necessary for success. The differences between high achieving students and lower-achieving ones are family and school support and expectations. A culture of success must be created where all students are expected to meet high expectations and educational benchmarks; this vision must be shared and reinforced both at school and at home. Adequate resources must be provided for students and schools, including basic materials like pencils, books, and other supplies. Another critical component in educational achievement that remains

elusive is student motivation and the desire to overcome current circumstances or to be more successful than a student's parents or family.

Remediation has become a part of the current American educational system. Certain factors in remedial courses are critical to success, including high expectations, a limited number of remedial courses taught by professors, small class sizes with peer groups that represent the student population that teach students the discourse of higher education and focus on writing. Overall, remediation is found "to have a positive impact on educational outcomes . . . it plays a very significant role in attempting to address the needs of the thousands of underprepared students who enter postsecondary institutions each year" (Bettinger and Long 761).

Unfortunately, this utopian view of the American educational system, with enough monetary and other resources to go around where every student is provided with a good education, no longer works. Resources and the best teachers and administrators gravitate to better schools, as do students with families who place a higher value on education; this places lower-achieving schools at a continual disadvantage.

As long as schools are driven by finance and by standardized test scores, the good schools will get better and the bad ones will get worse; America itself supports this culture. Middle to upper class families maintains their status through good educations for their children, including college attendance. Lower-class families, for the most part, lack opportunities for good educations, which prevents their children from moving up in society. While access to higher education for all students has become a national focus, the reality of attaining this goal is far-reaching for impoverished, minority, or first-generation students. The importance of remediation in "preserving the accessibility of postsecondary education, maintaining equity of

opportunity, and upholding the promise of social mobility in the United States” (Bahr 200) is critical to these classes of students. While they may begin college, barriers and challenges often prevent them from earning a degree. Remediation is one such obstacle. Educating students about the real benefit and value of a college education, as well as the discourse required to be successful in education and society, are the real opportunities of a remedial writing course. Not only are students being educated in the collegiate discourse necessary, they should also learn the discourse of society and of overcoming obstacles that middle and upper class students already know—this is the real remediation opportunity.

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