A Study of Progression: The History of Basic Writing at Montclair State University

Kelly Robin Adams

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Introduction
The State of Basic Writing

In May 1998 City University of New York’s Board of Trustees phased out remedial courses from its senior colleges, effectively requiring students who did not pass placement tests to enroll in one of CUNY’s community colleges. This action to close access to CUNY’s senior colleges is as dramatic as was CUNY’s call for Open Admissions in the late 1960s. CUNY has always played an important role in the history of basic writing, and so the decision to cut basic writing programs is of equal significance. CUNY is not alone in its mission to transfer all remedial coursework to the two year and community colleges; states such as Florida and Louisiana require those in need of remediation to spend their first years of higher education in community colleges and two-year institutions as well. Removing basic writing from state universities, in my opinion, relegates the education of already marginalized students to the margins. However, moving basic writing to the two year institution is only part of a larger debate about the status of basic writing and basic writers. CUNY’s decision underscores the increasing national crisis over the status of basic writing that includes state budget cuts and high-stakes testing. Resolutions to such problems have initiated talk about mainstreaming, outsourcing and marginalization, which as Donna Strickland has suggested, does not always have students’ needs in mind, and yet, as years pass continues to monopolize scholarly inquiry and debate (33).

I begin this study by stating, with Barbara Gleason, that I find the national debate over the future of basic writing startling and troubling. My primary concern is that the benefits for basic writing students will be lost. Although I am still troubled, I am no
longer startled and had I been savvier to the history of basic writing before learning of CUNY’s decision, I would have realized that Mina Shaughnessy, founder of the phrase basic writing, foresaw its demise as early as 1971. Mary Soliday, in *The Politics of Remediation* says that “Shaughnessy called for longitudinal research that would complicate the gatekeeping functions of writing programs. Because she understood that remedial programs are often used to solve institutional crises, Shaughnessy also believed that these programs could not function as ‘the’ avenue for access to a liberal arts education” (14). Shaughnessy was aware of the importance of basic writing in first-year programs and she was also aware of the politics that downplayed the work of such programs.

Shaughnessy published *Errors and Expectations: A Guide For the Teacher of Basic Writing* in 1977. This book was an analysis of her work as a freshman writing instructor and Director of City University Instructional Resource Center. Shaughnessy’s work attempted to understand the new population of students enrolling in college as a result of Open Admissions. Shaughnessy recognized that most professors were ill prepared to teach this new population of students. Shaughnessy challenged educators to critically examine the way writers were conceptualized and how college writing was taught. Instead of focusing her work on the remediation (a term that suggests a need for correction) of writers, Shaughnessy focused on how instructors, administrators and scholars could, through the study of error, find ways to adjust their teaching so all could reap the benefits of Open Admissions. Her work reflected the belief that educators did not know how to properly deal with basic writers who were struggling, as Deborah Mutnick says, to “untangle the syntactic and grammatical knots made in the effort to
write correctly" (186). In *Errors*, Shaughnessy offers suggestions for teachers on how to identify and reduce errors in handwriting, punctuation, syntax, common mistakes, spelling, vocabulary and idea development while validating the intelligence of such writers. And although Shaughnessy continued to write and support the work of basic writers throughout her career, she recognized, from the start, that programs to bring new populations of students into higher education would always be under siege and difficult to maintain (Soliday 97-104).

In the course of this research I have come to wonder if basic writing's demise should be mourned? I started to wonder if basic writing, because it marginalizes the already marginalized, should continue to exist? David Bartholomae suggested in his speech at the 1992 Fourth National Conference on Basic Writing (published in the 1993 *Journal of Basic Writing* special edition issue) that we should not continue to preserve "basic writing" because we have become used to it (20). He says that the basic courses are necessary, but also that "in the name of sympathy and empowerment we have once again produced the 'other' (...), confirming existing power and authority, reproducing the hierarchies we had meant to question and overthrow ... in the 70s" (18). Bartholomae's ultimate goal is to utilize Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone" theory to create a writing curriculum that will allow writing classes to become sites where differences are highlighted and are the subject of the curriculum (13). After reviewing work from the early 1980's and 1990's, I found that what I was learning about the history of basic writing (the problematic foundations and controversy over its existence), has been known by researchers for over thirty years (Adler-Kassner, Harrington, Mutnick, Gray-Rosendale, Bartholomae). What I had believed to be a "natural" approach to
identifying teaching writing to weak students, was in fact, testament to the problematic nature of the entire basic writing project. This, is why I find Robin Varnum’s sentiment, “we need to know where we have been in order to know who we are and where we are going,” as crucial to any consideration of the state of basic writing (34).

The Discourse of Basic Writing

It is my observation that what seems to be problematic then is the de-contextualization of the discourse of basic writing from the historical, social and political moments from which it emerged. Further, it is problematic how this de-contextualized discourse has informed, or perhaps misinformed, program directors, program policies and educators (Horner, Lu). In other words, although the field of basic writing has been studied and historicized (it has “a history”), how the historicization of basic writing and basic writing discourse has been created by and shaped by sociopolitical moments, and also influenced local programs, is not as well studied. Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu’s work *Representing the “Other”: Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing* address these questions directly. In the preface to their text, Horner and Lu explain how the discourse of basic writing as “new” has functioned as a discourse which canonized such figures as Mina Shaughnessy. It is their intention to look at the history of basic writing to understand the negotiations that created this “new” discourse and thus how it has functioned over the years. Their work “investigates the social and historical production, and effects of dominant discourse” in the field of basic writing (xv-xvi). This study will use Horner and Lu’s methodology, labeled by Linda Adler-Kassner as a “discourse of renegotiation shaped and reshaped by the context of its production and reception,” to analyze the discourse and program development of basic writing at
Montclair State University (32). The goal of this study is to look at how the development and movement of basic writing at a state institution interacts with the larger discourse of basic writing.

**Basic Writing at Montclair College**

I started teaching basic writing as a graduate student in English at Montclair State University. Prior to my graduate student experience I knew nothing about basic writing, about teaching basic writing or about basic writers. My graduate courses introduced me to basic writing and basic writing pedagogy. After a few semesters, I felt prepared to teach basic writing as my classes were informative and inspiring. What I remember most about my first few months of teaching was that I was not as horrified by the students’ writing as I thought the literature and scholars on basic writing suggested it would be (Elbow *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow “Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: A Utopian View,” Mutnick, Shaughnessy *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*). My courses, along with scholarship on basic writing made it seem like the work of a basic writing teacher would be extremely difficult and that my students would be completely unprepared for college level writing. But after I started teaching, I felt that the literature in my graduate courses exaggerated the difficulty of teaching basic writing. I remember, in particular, reading Deborah Mutnick’s account of her first semester teaching college writing. She recalls sitting in her small apartment in the East Village “perplexed” by the writing of her students, calling some “incomprehensible” and others “vapid” (Mutnick 184). My experience was quite different as I found everything my students wrote to be comprehensible. I felt frustrated, not by my students’ writing, but by the fact that their writing did not confuse me. I guess
I expected their writing, as Mutnick and Shaughnessy suggested, to be so much worse than I was seeing. So, what happened? Why was I not surprised or shocked by the writing of my students? Why did I not sit up at night wondering about the “vapid” writing of my students?

Like me, Bruce Homer and Min-Zhan Lu entered the field of composition when basic writing was “already institutionalized,” and, thus they first “confronted courses called ‘Basic Writing’ not as ‘new’ but as an established institutional fact” (Homer xv). In my experience at Montclair, I understood basic writing in the same manner; it was not “new” but rather an institutional fact about which I was learning. I knew nothing about basic writing, but it seemed to me that others around me did. To illustrate, my colleagues and instructors spoke of it as if it was a natural part of the program. There was no discussion of its emergence, no questioning of its function; it just was. And the literature we read, such as Shaughnessy and those who wrote about Shaughnessy and her work (including Homer and Lu) established basic writing’s roots; in other words, I was introduced to basic writing as having a history so I did not question its place at our institution. I assumed that all schools had basic writing programs and I assumed that the questions I had about basic writing were particular to me.

The importance of Homer and Lu’s work is that they “encountered Basic Writing as an object of study and field of research, with its canonical texts and figures” (Homer xv). I too was introduced to basic writing in my graduate courses “with its canonical texts and figures,” and, Basic Writing, to me, “was” an essential and definite part of higher education. Although basic writing was new to me, there was, as Horner and Lu reveal about their experiences, no feeling of “newness” about its presence at Montclair.
The missing link between my understanding of basic writing and what it meant to scholars is a result of my thinking of basic writing as David Bartholomae said in his speech at CCCC as “something naturally, inevitably, transparently there in the curriculum” (7). The consequences of seeing basic writing as “natural” exonerates those in the field from questioning basic writing’s origins, questioning why it exists in the present, and questioning how it functions in the present, including its role in training future teachers and making decisions about programs, program policies and students.

I believe that the institutionalization of basic writing is what created my belief that my student’s writing was not vapid. Where I am positioned historically means that I was not with Shaughnessy when she experienced “bad” writing, but instead, I entered graduate school in 2001 (thirty years later), and was advised by her texts (and others) as how to handle such students. Thus, I expected that my students’ writing wasn’t going to demonstrate mastery of academic writing and this expectation perhaps misinformed my understanding of their place at Montclair? When their writing proved to be better than I thought, I realized the significance of my experience for both local and national contexts as it directly concerns the way new teachers are trained, the way programs develop and situate their basic writers, and how basic writing programs, including first year writing programs, are administered. As a teacher it becomes important to think about the way we read our students’ writing: Are we reading them into the curriculum and into teaching pedagogies because we believe they should be there? Are we protecting students inside basic writing because we believe they belong in higher education? Do we, as educators, fully know why we believe they belong there? Are we looking carefully enough after students who are not prepared for college?
This study examines Montclair State’s basic writing programs through its evolution in course catalogs, interoffice exchanges, program evaluations and descriptions over a thirty year period to see how the social, political and historical climate influenced Montclair’s decisions, and thus how basic writing and the discourse that surrounds it was negotiated at this college. Scholarship in the discipline, such as “What’s It Worth and What’s It For?” (Rodby), “Basic Works and Material Acts” (Rodby and Fox), “Conflict and Struggle” (Lu), “From the Margins to the Mainstream” (Soliday) and “Basic Writing in One Community College” (Fitzgerald) all offer insight into basic writing’s position in the four year university, but do not construct a longitudinal study for which the discourse of basic writing program is examined locally. This study explores the use of basic writing discourse at Montclair State University and watches how, when and by whom the term is used and for what agenda. Tracing the concept “basic” at a local program reveals the theoretical shifts of the program and also sheds light on the political and social agenda throughout the history of the program. The strategic using/not using the term “basic” at Montclair’s may seem like an insignificant study, but it must be recognized that this points to the mercurial nature of both the concept of remediation and basic writing throughout this program’s history and therefore, sheds light on how the discourse of basic writing is used locally and therefore nationally.

Through the lens of Horner and Lu’s “renegotiation” I argue that the discourse of basic writing at Montclair State University as marked by these early distinct periods are also reflected in the national scene: 1968-1983 marks the period I designate as dominated by the discourse of defense; 1984-1999 as the discourse of nurturance, and 1999-2002 as the discourse of continued commitment. I define “renegotiation” as a way of looking at
and re-interpreting the history and the decisions made by the faculty to inform current practices. In looking at the history and the negotiations of the program, historical developments in the nation, historical policies and procedures in the English Department, in the Writing Studies program and between faculty, administrators and political agendas, I have found these three categories to generalize what I will call “discourse moments.” I label them “discourse moments” because I have grouped and demarcated these moments according to changes in the program with specific attention to shifts in thinking about and conceptualizing the structure of the program.

This study suggests that the negotiation of basic writing discourse and implementation of basic writing resulted in a “naturalness” of basic writing at Montclair University. I found that because Montclair’s faculty worked to defend, nurture and offer continued commitment to its students, there was no place in this particular discourse that contested the place of basic writing in the first-year writing program. This discovery allowed me to realize that Montclair, as an example of the four-year university, should, as it currently reconsider basic writing’s placement in the university, consider how in the future it might bring issues about basic writing to its teaching body. As this study demonstrates, a well-informed teaching staff may improve the education provided to its students and make for a stronger first-year writing program. It is my understanding that if educators are aware of the history and politics of policy-making, and how it influences the way they are asked to teach and educate their students, programs (by means of an informed teaching body) may improve the curricula they provide; teachers may teach differently and thus understand better the significance of student placement.
Basic Writing (1968-1983): The Discourse of Defense

The discourse of defense marks this period in Montclair’s history when the faculty at Montclair negotiate their recognition for the need to improve student writing in the midst of state mandated standards. The faculty work hard to defend basic writers against such impositions meanwhile working to provide an education that is concerned with their needs.

When I began research of the history of Montclair’s basic writing program, I was at first, hard pressed to find any material. I looked for a single comprehensive work to help me understand the origins and development of the program, but this did not happen easily. What I did find, with the generosity of Larry Schwartz, English Department Head, was a seemingly subtle moment that transformed the structure of the first-year writing program in the English Department, with effects lasting to this day. The moment of change was a result of events occurring outside the realm of the English Department: a state instituted test and the national open admission moment in higher education. Open Admissions followed the peaceful protests of racial segregation in the late 1950s, the rise of consciousness of social injustices in the late 1960s, and the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. President Johnson tried to alleviate the injustices within government accommodations by authorizing federal action against segregation in public institutions, and thus setting off a national trend to open admissions at state and city colleges and universities around the country. This led to a mass movement of liberalization of college admissions allowing students who were typically denied access to higher education into four year colleges. The largest effort came from the City University of New York, which assured admittance to every individual with a high school diploma (Shaughnessy 1). This
movement in higher education effected change within individual academic departments, including English Departments, and universities around the country as new students brought new challenges to education.

Around the time Open Admissions was implemented at CUNY, an education system not so far from Montclair’s doors, Montclair’s English Department offered the following composition courses: Composition and Literature I and II, Writing and Literary Analysis I and II. In addition to the courses listed the English department also offered English as a Second Language (English 312).

During this time, all students at Montclair were required to take six hours in composition and literature as a general education requirement. Students of “superior standing” were those who achieved a score of 600 or better on the College Entrance Achievement Test. These students were allowed to select courses reserved for English majors, including Writing and Literary Analysis I, II, Creative Writing, Journalism, Literature of Social Protest, among many others to substitute for the standard general education courses. English majors were instructed to take Writing and Literary Analysis I and II as their first year composition sequence but all other incoming freshmen had to take Composition and Literature I & II. This reveals that although there were no specific classes designated “remedial,” the College still separated those considered “superior” from the other freshmen. The description of Writing and Literary Analysis I, the course reserved for English majors and test-identified “superior students” reads: “more advanced writing assignments and more extensive literary coverage than required in Composition and Literature I. In Composition and Literature I and II a basis for expository writing is emphasized, along with readings from literary works from different periods and cultures,
and research paper and study of Western literature is emphasized in part two (MSC Undergraduate Catalogs 1971/2, 1972/3, 1973/5.)

What is interesting is that the classes required by those in superior standing are called Writing and Literary Analysis where as the other freshmen classes is called Composition and Literature. My interest in the distinguishing between the labels Writing and Composition; Literary Analysis and Literature is that it suggests the culture of remediation, where in efforts are made to track students along levels at the point of matriculation, existed at MSU prior to implementation of basic writing coursework. The phenomenon of remediation of differentiation within general education has been observed in universities across the nation as suggested by many in the field including, Mary Soliday’s “From the Margins to the Mainstream: Reconceiving Remediation,” and Barbara Gleason’s “Evaluating Writing Programs in Real Time: The Politics of Remediation.” It has been suggested by Soliday that remediation in four year universities was not new with the advent of “basic writing” but merely its significance rose in light of the Open Admissions moment. In particular, Soliday argues that over time the idea of remediation constitutes and reconstitutes itself as ‘new’ even when it is not new. She argues that this continual reinstitution prevents educators from making productive change. Similarly Harris argues that “the basic writing ‘frontier’ that Shaughnessy claimed to stumble upon was already quite developed, that even though the field of composition was not disciplined or professionalized in the same ways it is now, many teachers and writers had for some time been dealing with much the same sorts of issues” (425). To illustrate how this looked at Montclair, those in the Composition and Literature course (the class for the general population), appear to have engaged in literary analysis
just as those in the Writing and Literary Analysis course, but the actual word, analysis, was reserved for the advanced group. They were allowed, in other words, to announce the subject matter and requirements of the course they were taking (a show of competence) where as those in the Composition and Literature course did not hold this prestige and were required to practice such skills.

In the same manner, all students were required to study expository writing and write a research paper but, it is interesting how the word composition is associated with the lower level writing. In other words, and as Harris suggested by my reading of these course descriptions, a form of remediation did exist at Montclair prior to the existence of basic writing. Clearly it was believed that all students entering college at Montclair could write, but it is also clear that some were considered more advanced than others. And perhaps this was so. Perhaps some writers were stronger than others and that is why it is important to note that the distinction between Writing and Composition is made during the emergence of composition as a field of study, a field that developed out of the “recognized” need for writing instruction at the university level (Soliday 2002). I am not suggesting here the distinguishing between the two types of students was a fault, but rather I’d like to point to the fact that such recognition was made on the basis of competence: the good and the better. The importance of this distinction and the fact that, by my interpretation, remediation existed prior to the arrival of basic writing is one that reveals itself throughout the course of this study; this marks a change in the way remediation is conceptualized over time.

Interestingly, in 1973 the program labeled “Freshmen English” did not exist. Rather its presence develops slowly as emerging most markedly in the early 1990’s under
direction of Jim Nash. The difference between having a Freshmen English Program with faculty and supervisory structures, and an English Department with freshmen English courses is that a program announces the emergence of a field of study that concentrates on freshmen English courses. It is important to note that the concentration of a “Freshmen English” program at MSU as a distinction within the English department develops simultaneously with the re-emergence of attention in the field of composition studies in the early 1990s on the remediation of writers.

One other note of importance is the English as a Second Language courses. These courses were offered to prepare Non-English speaking students for other humanity courses. What is remarkable to note is that non-English Speaking students had the choice to take as many as four English classes; eventually these same students are required to pass a Language exam, take required language courses, and then take the Basic Writing and general education requirements, Composition I and II (MSC Undergraduate Catalog 1971/2, 1972/3). It is important to note the connection between the changes in the ESL sequence and that of the Basic Writing history as the two heavily influence one another’s. The rhetoric used in the 1973 description of these courses offer a sense of hope in the use of words such as “opportunity,” “preparation,” “facility,” and “progress.” This is not always so as time reveals changes in attitudes toward the institution’s view of these students and their educational needs.

In 1973, and in addition to the above listed courses, Special Communication Skills, is added to the department. The course is designed to help those with writing problems through use of “new motivational and audiovisual techniques” and is offered as an equivalent to the Composition and Literature class (MSC Undergraduate Catalog...
What is interesting to note is that this description is the first mention of students with “writing problems” in a MSC catalog. This course represents the first movement toward a concerted effort to offer remediation by the department, outside of the English as a Second Language sequence. And yet, the rhetoric of remediation here seems as positive as that used to describe the Non-English Speaking sequence. For example, the description reads “new motivational techniques” and suggests that the course is designed “to help” those with writing problems (MSC Undergraduate Catalog 1972/3). It is again important to note that the Special Communication course is offered before Montclair offers the course Basic Writing and around the time Mina Shaughnessy started to publish work on basic writers. The way that writers are being conceptualized at Montclair is significant as the discourse of basic writing begins to shape in the field simultaneously as similar language emerges in individual programs, as is evident at Montclair.

In the same year, 1973, another course aimed to address writers’ needs is under development. The course, The Writing Workshop, focuses on writing with the assistance of a tutorial in writing and research. The requirements suggest that the student will meet with a tutor as often as required and for as long as is necessary to bring his writing up to the standards of the communications requirement of the college (New Course Proposal/Writing Workshop). The communications requirement is part of the general education criteria. The concept of this course is interesting because upon completion of this course satisfies “the writing portion of the Communications requirements (New Course Proposal/Writing Workshop). It also states that “the course will not be bound by semester division, but will be allowed to continue as long as necessary for each student to achieve a satisfactory performance of the skills involved” (New Course Proposal/Writing
Workshop). The justification of the course reads “we need this device to give intensive
tutorial work to students with writing deficiencies (New Course Proposal/Writing
Workshop). The approach to this course resembles much of what we see happening now
in the field of Basic Writing with such models as Glau’s Stretch Model at Arizona State
University, Grego and Thompson’s Studio Model at University of South Carolina and
Peter Elbow’s Yogurt Model. The approach is similar to the above in that students and
their progress in the course determines the outcome of the course as opposed to university
implemented time restraints and outcomes based goals.

Specific objectives of the class include improving or addressing “clarity of thesis,
organization, diction, grammar (including spelling), use of logic, structural principals,
library research methods, bibliographic format and footnote style” (New Course
Proposal/Writing Workshop). It is unclear why Special Communications and Writing
Workshop were both offered. The description of the Special Communications course
was offered for those with “writing problems” but, and at the same time, the description
of the Writing Workshop course is offered to students with “writing deficiencies.” The
structure of the courses is different and the Special Communications course was offered
only in the summer to students who were assisted through the Educational Opportunity
Fund. What is clear is that by 1973, Montclair College was beginning to pay a lot of
attention to writers and communicators in need of remediation. And although the word
“remediation” was never used, words such as problems and deficiencies start to emerge.

After speaking with Drs. Larry Schwartz and Jim Nash, professors of English at
Montclair during this period in Montclair’s history, it appears these courses were
developed in order to help students reach individual potential. It is also important to note
that at this time campaigns in our nation, and abroad, were beginning to question America's literacy abilities. During this time, testing and its relationship to success in college is debated all over the country. In 1975, *Newsweek* published the well-known article "Why Johnny Can't Write" creating a "basic skills" frenzy in the nation. The *Newsweek* article said that America was in the middle of a writing crisis and that the public education system was to blame for neglecting basic skills in its curriculum. But, and it is important to note, that this "basic" buzz does not resonate with the call made by Shaughnessy. This call for basics is one for a return to and redefine basics. In this sense, basic meant a return to an understood set of standards or fundamental knowledge that was lost with the appearance of Open Admissions. This counters Shaughnessy's work as she was desperately trying to prove that there was not a crisis but more that students' writing skills were misunderstood.

In an article in the *New York Times* called "Colleges Place Greater Weight on Test Scores," it is noted by Edward B. Fiske that "despite the recent wave of criticism by consumer forces and others, standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test—along with grade-point averages and other statistical measures of academic performance—are apparently becoming more rather than less important in the college admissions process" (C1-C4). Although this is not directly about Open Admissions or Basic Skills testing Fiske's article points to the trend in higher education to rely on numbers to protect academic standards at the time during which state mandates were reinforcing and returning to conservatism. This moment in basic writing's history was both promising in its desire for equality in education (the introduction of the Writing Workshop), and depressing in its desire to preserve standards (return to fundamentals).
The MSC Undergraduate Catalog 1975/7 introduces the Writing Workshop. Although the Composition and Literature I course is still offered, the entry alters from previous years. We see interesting changes in the general education writing course descriptions, changes that suggest that college students, all college students, need help with their writing. The description reads similar to that of the Writing Workshop in that it says “instruction in basic writing skills and research, frequent writing assignments and a research paper” (MSC Undergraduate Catalog '75/7). The earlier description emphasized expository writing and literary analysis and did not include a research paper. In past entries the reading list was described as “literary works from different periods and cultures,” where as the new course description offers no mention of a reading list, but instead gives mention to skills and research (MSC Undergraduate Catalog '75/7). The course Composition and Literature II is renamed Introduction to Literature and reflects a single semester of what used to be the Composition and Literature sequence. The Writing and Literary Analysis, the series of “advanced writing,” is no longer offered. Instead English majors are required to take courses in genre writing such as poetry, autobiography, short story, the art of drama, along with a course from the linguistics department (MSC Undergraduate Catalog '75/7).

The significance of the changes made to the Composition and Literature courses is that the new descriptions reflect new thinking about the courses—thinking that seems to stress the importance of writing ability from a more technical point of view, as opposed to the exposition/literary analysis combination emphasized earlier. Prior to 1975, students were taking a sequence of courses in expository writing and literary analysis, where as, the changes in the 1973/5 catalog reflect focus on writing skills for an entire
semester and then literary analysis for the second semester. With these changes, students appear to be asked to separate writing skills from reflection and writing about literature by focusing on “instruction in basic writing skills”; basic skills that used to be reserved solely for the Writing Workshop. It seems that these changes reflect departmental and theoretical changes about how to improve the writing of students that may, in fact, be under-prepared for the college experience. It would be unfair not to mention that it was around this time in Montclair’s history that Mina Shaughnessy publishes *Errors and Expectations: A Guide For the Teacher of Basic Writing* (1977) and around the time Shaughnessy was writing *Errors*, conceptions of remedial writers and how students compose changed drastically and the field of basic writing develops territory in the academy. In, 1975, the *Journal of Basic Writing* began publication amidst new venues of research and discussion about basic writers, the term coined by Shaughnessy.

During the years of 1977-1979 focus on Montclair faculty and the needs of their students, through faculty development in the teaching of writing, is encouraged by a group of professors at Montclair State College. In 1978, eight members of the graduate faculty in English (Dr. James Nash [project director], Drs. Rich, Benediktson, Khanna, Mickelson, Stuehler, Slocum, and Schwartz) at Montclair University proposed a pilot study to improve the teaching of English, including the teaching of writing. It was noted and affirmed by Dr. Nash that the proposal came in response to the work of Shaughnessy, among others, and their work on basic writing/writers (Nash). A grant called “A Pilot Program in the Teaching of Composition and Literature” including remedial writing was proposed to the Florence and John Schumann Fund (now called The Schumann Center
for Media and Democracy). On December 5, 1978 the board of trustees held a meeting to review the proposal. The rationale for the pilot study was

In the midst of the current and well publicized crisis over students’ basic language skills, MSU believes that there is much more to do than to just ‘go back to basics.’ They want to bring this new knowledge to the English teachers of New Jersey. After a pilot year, the College will be able to offer the new courses. *(Florence and John Schumann Foundation Annual Report 1979)*

The study included a year of faculty development and the launching of three pedagogical courses for the graduate program *Teaching Basic Writing, Teaching Composition* and *Teaching Literature*. Janet Mayes, a consultant who worked at CUNY with Mina Shaughnessy, was hired to run a faculty development seminar which included Professors Schwartz, Slocum, Rich and Nash. (An interesting side note: in the Summer Session of Basic Composition the students were using *Writing and Rewriting* a workbook by Janet Mayes published in 1981.) The faculty tried to get Shaughnessy, but at the time she was already dying of cancer. Clearly, the faculty was heavily influenced by the work of Shaughnessy and interested in improving the writing of its students. This therefore indicates that the faculty was also invested deeply in the ideology and framework of helping those underprepared for college, and invested deeply in preparing teachers to teach these students. What is also interesting is their recognition and rejection of the conservative elements of “back to basics” movement evolving around this same time. It is interesting in that it is their rejection of “back to basics” that acts as foundation for their theoretical framework.
It is at this point that Montclair's writing program changes dramatically. On March 18, 1977, under Chancellor Hollander, the Basic Skills resolution was passed by the New Jersey Board of Higher Education. The Basic Skills Council was created by the board, and eventually worked with Educational Testing Services (ETS) to create a standardized, multiple-choice style test called the NJ College Basic Skills Placement Test. The test measured skills in reading, writing, computation and elementary algebra and was used to determine placement within the respective academic fields of study (Furr et al 3). At the same time the Board of Higher Education also considered and passed, among others, the following policies: cut-off scores for determining skills deficiencies, eliminating credit toward graduation for remedial courses, and establishing minimum statewide admissions standards based on an Average Freshman Class Profile (Furr 3).

What this meant was that departments were no longer able to determine who was in need of remediation or for how long. The state mandated the tests and regulated the required classes to be taken by the students who did not receive satisfactory scores.

One of the most detrimental restrictions placed upon educators in NJ, after the passing of basic skills testing, was the denial of college credit for those who did not pass the Basic Skills test. Students were required to take courses in basic skills but the courses did not count for general education requirements toward graduation. In 1981 three professors from Montclair wrote a paper in protest called "The Politics of the Basic Skills Movement" in reaction to the strong conservative force working to reform higher education post Open Admissions. In summary, their complaint was that the Board of Higher Education "banned the awarding of college credit for basic skills work and that "consequently, freshmen identified as needing remediation will be asked to take and pay
for as many as 12 credits or four courses without having accumulated any credits toward graduation” (Furr 13-14). The authors argued that students were “penalized for the quality of education they received as high school and elementary school students, an education which the college officials said qualified them for admission (Furr 13-14).

Drs. Furr, Schwartz and Long argue “that basic skills testing is simply one small part of a nationwide political strategy to re-segregate higher education along class and race lines” (Furr, Schwartz and Long 2). They point out that Basic Skills testing attempts to retract the progress of Open Admissions and that such factors guarantee increase in student tuition and a decrease in loan funding which even Chancellor Hollander pointed out puts “unusual, extraordinary burden” on students (Furr, Schwartz and Long 10-2). Their paper points to the connection between Basic Skills testing in New Jersey, ETS and its relationship to the SAT, which they deem inherently racially biased. Their paper is significant in that it is the first mark of defense for basic writers and a definite mark in favor of Open Admissions ideology and basic writing discourse.

On February 25, 1981 the course Writing Workshop becomes Basic Freshman Composition. The description of the course on the proposal form reads

Instruction in basic writing skills and research, frequent writing assignments and a research paper. In addition to regular class meetings, students may be required to attend tutorial sessions over as long a period of time as necessary to raise students’ skills to College standards.

Satisfies the communications requirement in writing. 3 s.h. (New Course Proposal Form/Basic Freshman Composition)
Under the heading “justification of proposal” it reads “change required by the Department of Higher Education” (New Course Proposal Form/Basic Freshman Composition). There is no pretense in the description. Basic Freshman Composition becomes a prerequisite for Freshman Composition and Introduction to Literature. At this time the Basic Freshman course replaces the Writing Workshop and the Special Communications course.

What is ironic about the name change—Writing Workshop to Basic Freshman Composition—is that the principles behind the Writing Workshop reflects better my understanding of Shaughnessy’s mission for basic writing. The course Basic Freshman Composition reflects a testing agenda rather than Shaughnessy’s beliefs about basic writers. Although, the word “basic” in the new course title connotes “low in skill” with its association to testing, it therefore muddles two very different principles over students who are deemed basic; that of Shaughnessy (who the course title Basic Freshman Composition was borrowed from) and that of the New Jersey’s Department of Education. Fortunately, students enrolled in Basic Freshman Composition were given credit toward graduation for the course, though students were not given credit for the basic skills courses in Math and Reading. Giving college credit to the students was how the English Department exempted students from the most punishing aspect of the back to basics legislation. Nonetheless, under this new system remedial students were required to take Basic Composition as well as the two courses in the Composition and Literature series. In contrast, previously students taking the Writing Workshop only had to take one additional course to satisfy the communication requirement, where as students taking Basic still have to take two general education courses. Another thing to mention is that
students were also bound by semester division in the new course, which required those who did not pass the course to take it more than once and pay for it more than once. The impact of these changes made receiving a college education, for certain individuals, a lot harder than in previous years.

Soliday says, "I view Basic Writing’s ‘birth’ as a radical challenge to institutional differentiation, a challenge that dissipated by 1974" (71). Soliday uses the term differentiation to describe the moment resulting from actions in the mid 1960s, when due to unprecedented growth, institutions began to differentiate: to "protect the selectivity of the upper tiers and stabilize a job market that could not be flooded with college graduates in a period of recession" (71). In other words, differentiation guaranteed that the desirable class of students filled the halls of higher education, while the undesirable enrolled in community colleges and joined the blue collar work force. Soliday argues that basic writing for a short period challenged differentiation because it offered the undesirable a chance to learn the skills necessary to join the "upper tiers," but as Soliday pointed out this "dissipated by 1974." Ironically enough, it is true that an era marked by its strides toward social justice appears outwardly to be more so than it was truly. In other words, just as progress was made to have higher education work to democratize education the "Why Johnny Can’t Write" ideology began to work as a stimulus against such programs. I believe, like Soliday, that when the effects of Open Admissions began to influence institutions other than CUNY, a momentary break of differentiation came with it: schools allowed the marginalized to enter their institutions. But, soon after differentiation regains momentum as schools, including Montclair, began to take on the challenge of denying education to those deemed undesirable with barriers such as state mandated testing.
When Soliday says, that “Basic Writing’s ‘birth’ [is] a radical challenge to institutional differentiation, a challenge that dissipated by 1974” she means that it is the first time that selectivity is disrupted and a balance between students—the desirable and undesirable—erupts (71).

At Montclair, the course Special Communications and the Writing Workshop challenged differentiation because they allow students traditionally unprepared for college level writing a chance to work through difficulties and yet maintain the same academic standing as their peers. These courses also challenged differentiation because they offered students tutorial help, prepared them for future courses without additional financial responsibilities or extra coursework and without requiring them to take extra time to complete mandatory courses. The introduction of the courses, Special Communications and the Writing Workshop reveal a moment when Montclair disrupted the path of differentiation and rejected selectivity of the upper tiers. I see this as rejection of selectivity of the upper tiers and as disrupting the path of differentiation because in offering college level coursework without extra burden of cost and time these students had the potential to succeed at the same rate and to the same level as their peers. By making the act of receiving an education equal for those who do not seem to have the “basic skills” necessary to survive college Montclair participated in a social and political move to democratize education. For Montclair, differentiation as Soliday describes it restored itself in 1981 under the guise of Basic Skills testing. With the introduction of basic skills testing, MSU returns to an approach to writing instruction that protects the selectivity of the upper tiers. The passing of the NJ Basic Skills testing was the end of
the true effects of Open Admissions. Soliday argues that the effects of Open Admissions fizzled by 1974 amidst the media pleas for back to basics and fears of a literacy crisis.

I want to return to discussion about this particular “discourse moment” of basic writing as shaped throughout the years of (1968-1983) as the discourse of defense. The title of this discourse moment—defense—is created out of the renegotiation of Montclair’s history through the lens of the current state of basic writing. This study looks at the negotiations made from 1968 to 1983 between and amongst the desire for equality in education and the return to standards made by the faculty at Montclair. I demarcate this moment as the discourse of defense because of my analysis of the faculty’s commitment to basic writers in context of a standards driven nation. In looking at this moment now, it appears that the faculty was driven by the ideology of equality while fighting the stronghold of standards placed upon them after the passing of Basic Skills testing. This negotiation was made as the Montclair State requirements and courses, at the institutional level, worked to protect the “tiers,” and as the ideology of basic writing discourse persisted regardless of the nation’s neglect of such education. By seeing this as a moment of defense, in relation to the other discourse moments, that of nurturance and continued commitment, it is clear that this sets the foundation for Montclair’s views of its basic writers. It becomes clear by looking at the history and the negotiations made, that students were and are at the center of the faculty’s attention even while they negotiate between the state and the ideology of Open Admission.
Basic Writing (1984-1999): The Discourse of Nurturance

During this time, the faculty at Montclair, post-negotiating the stat- mandated testing, nurture the students by providing an education that is impartial to their development. The department concerns itself with pedagogical improvements for the basic writing population, basic writing program improvements and pedagogical improvements (including training workshops). What the faculty once fought for—writing support for those in need—is, during this time, carefully watched over and considered as it develops.

After the passing of Basic Skills testing it appears that Montclair’s program remained unaltered through 1984 despite a minor name change from The Writing Workshop to Basic Freshman Composition. However, by 1985 the Basic Freshmen Composition course no longer fulfills the general education requirement and the course must be retaken if a student does not pass it the first time. This is a monumental change when it comes to the price of education. But, what is important is that in the catalog it appears only as an italicized addition to the description; therefore, it seems insignificant. However, the significance is rooted in the fact that the two courses developed out of two very different ideals. Not only do the two courses appear different in the catalog, the way they affect the education of Montclair’s students is of significance as well.

There is no mention of Basic Skills testing in the 1982-1984 catalog descriptions of Basic Freshman Composition, but a test is required, and is apparently normalized and a natural part of the curriculum. This, I suggest is part of the reason why the history needs to be considered. The other reason being that the seemingly insignificant changes made to the department contribute, most certainly, to the “naturalness” of testing and placement in the Basic Writing program at Montclair. In addition, I believe there is a “naturalness”
to Basic Writing's not satisfying the general education requirement. It appeared to me, when I entered the program, that basic writing was meant as prep work before "the real" college work. I am not suggesting that the course is not needed, but rather, I want to point to the fact that I did not see the relationship for what it was: I did not see how my belief that basic writing was prep work was in any way a product of the "naturalness" of basic writing in the program. In fact, I was unaware of what or why I was doing what I was doing. As Bartholomae would suggest, basic writing, to me was a natural part of first-year writing.

In the 1982/4 catalog Basic Freshman Composition, Special Communications, Freshman Composition and Introduction to Literature appear. By 1984/86 the Special Communication Skills course is no longer listed, but the other courses remain the same through 1988. In 1987/8 Jim Nash addressed the format of the Basic Skills Post Test. This is the first mention of the test by the department (in writing) since the passing of Basic Freshman Composition in 1981. It was noted that:

Most Basic Composition faculty strongly disagree with the use of the New Jersey State College Basic Skills Placement Test at the end of the Basic Composition courses as a measure of students' progress. Nevertheless, I think the best thing to do now is to cooperate with the state's directives while working hard to discredit and abolish the test in its present form. (Administration of Basic Skills Post Test 1).

Nash, during his time as Freshman English Coordinator, fought constantly against the burdens placed upon students entering the freshman writing sequence at Montclair. In November of 1988 in the Composition Chronicle Dr. Nash writes "Post-Testing for Basic
Composition in New Jersey: How a placement test suddenly became a post-test.” In this essay, he points out how NJCBST is used as an official assessment “not of students but of programs” (6). The test was used to evaluate basic writing students at the end of their semester to determine whether or not they were prepared to move on to the next part of their composition sequence. He argues that the Basic Skills test places students into basic courses by means of cut off scores and then tests programs’ abilities to remedy the problem. Nash points out that the outcomes assessment criteria do not match that of a semester’s worth of basic composition (Post-Testing 7). A similar argument to that of Schwartz, Furr and Long made in 1981 when the Basic Skills test was originally implemented. This test was viewed by Nash as a detriment to the program as it required the faculty and administration to redeem basic writing students marked incompetent, after they were admitted to college, in a semester of course work. This seemed unfair as it was the previous education of the students that did not prepare them for college writing, not the Basic Composition course of which they were enrolled.

On May 8, 1988 Dr. Nash addressed the English Department faculty regarding a change in the exit standards for Basic Composition. It is noted by Nash that “the standards are based on a statement by Mina Shaughnessy” (Exit Standards for Basic Composition 1). The statement from Mina Shaughnessy was taken from Shaughnessy’s 1980 article from the Journal of Basic Writing called “Statement on Criteria for Writing Proficiency” (Exit Standards for Basic Composition 1). The standards were to be implemented at the semester’s Basic Composition portfolio review. The Portfolio Review was used to “determine which Basic Composition Students are ready to go on to Freshman Composition and which should receive grades of No Credit or F (both of which
would necessitate their repeating Basic Composition). Both the exit standards and the portfolio review allowed professors at Montclair to comply with the “state directives while working hard to discredit and abolish the test in its present form.” In addition to the Portfolio Review, the department also administered the Sentence Sense and Reading Comprehension sections of the Basic Skills Test during the final examination period (Administration of the Basic Skills Post Test 1-2). The initial test influenced how students were placed into courses and then the post-test evaluated student success in Basic Composition. This test also influenced the course material and standards of basic writing for basic writing students. Making decisions about this test meant constituting what basic writing meant at Montclair.

As of 1988, the courses remain the same, but changes occur to grading policies.

On June 20, 1988 Dr. James Nash issued the following memo:

Available grades for Basic Composition: A/B/C/F/NC; No D grade

NC to be given only to hardworking, significantly improving students who do not yet meet Basic Composition exit standards. NC not to be given to students who do not complete the course work. (Grading Policy Change for Basic Composition 1)

The rationale for an NC grade is that “despite hard work, (some students) are not ready to proceed to Freshman Composition after one semester of Basic Composition” (Grading Policy Change for Basic Composition 1). The NC grade offered a way for instructors to recommend students retake the Basic Course without giving them a failing grade such as a D or F. The intentions of the NC grade are positive (in the sense that it was implemented as a tool for keeping students from being penalized for being unprepared for
the college level writing class), but, and due to the structure of the Basic Freshman Composition course, the NC grade, while better than an F, still creates difficulty for financially strapped students. The NC grade was designed to protect students from inappropriately receiving a D or an F, but receiving an NC grade does not completely benefit the students who receive the NC. Although their writing has the potential to improve, their bank accounts will drain as they pay for the course twice. In the course the Writing Workshop students were allowed to remain in tutoring until deemed prepared to move on to Freshman Composition, paying just once. Another major difference is that students in the Writing Workshop continued to work with the same tutor where as retaking the course Basic Freshman Composition (due to an NC) may mean starting over with a new teacher who does not know a students’ work. So, in this moment, the ideology of the basic writing movement— providing equal opportunities for success for all students—is negotiated between what the department wanted for its students and what had been previously established by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education.

From my view, despite the impositions handed down in previous years, the department continued to side on the favor of the students.

September 18, 1989 Dr. Nash sent information on the Freshman English program for the Visiting Committee to Alyce Miller, Chair of the English Department. Under Faculty Development it was noted that development sessions were now a regular part of the Freshmen program and that topics such as “teaching argumentation, teaching the research paper, responding to student’s writing, and dealing with students who have limited English language proficiency” were covered regularly (1989 Visiting Committee Report 5). In that same year a departmental teaching resource was made “available to
composition faculty: a library of textbooks and pedagogical books, a collection of composition journals, and a file of sample syllabi and assignments” in addition, A Freshman English Program Booklet was “assembled to provide information and suggestions to faculty regarding the three freshman courses. There was also a booklet being prepared for use of the graduate assistants (1989 Visiting Committee Report 6).

The report mentioned “the emergence of Composition Studies as a legitimate academic field” (1989 Visiting Committee Report 7). There was a request for an associate coordinator to the Freshman Coordinator with a degree in Composition and Rhetoric. It was noted that “Basic Composition is the fastest growing segment of the Freshmen Writing Program, as increasing numbers of under prepared native and non-native speakers of English enter Montclair State College each year” (1989 Particular Comments and Recommendations 5).

The preceding requests are of great importance when considering how the program was shaped during this time. It is no secret that as the field of Composition Studies grounds itself as an academic study, so does it legitimize the work accomplished by faculty in the department. At this time the field concerns itself with questions of who to teach, what to teach and how to teach, just as the department at Montclair is juggling with issues of who should be in basic courses, what should be taught in the courses (and what should not be taught in the courses) and how to teach the students. I want to suggest here that because concern was over who, what and how to teach basic writing both in the field and in the program at Montclair. The Visiting Committee Report for 1990 covered much of the same issues as the 1989 report, but it also includes the rewards of the Schumann Grant, advances in the Writing Across the Curriculum program, needs for
former Basic Composition students and ESOL students in the Introduction to Literature course, considerations for an ESOL Literature course, assessment and tracking of the exit standards of Freshman classes, basic skills testing, basic skills retesting and backlog of student placement in Freshman courses (it was noted that each semester students inappropriately register for Freshman English courses: students take Basic Composition, but should be in ESOL courses; disregard ESOL advice on course selection. The suggestion: there should be a computerized program that denies access to students unable to take particular classes based on prerequisites). The Needs section of the 1990 report stresses the need for computers in writing instruction as well as improvement of the Writing Workshop, observations of tutors (1990 Visiting Committee Report 7). There was a request for a half-time administrator with a recent degree in Composition and Rhetoric as well as a request for faculty “of energetic instructors dedicated to the teaching of composition” (1990 Visiting Committee Report 8-9). It also addressed the needs of adjuncts and graduate students, stating that better treatment and pay affects the students Montclair attracts at the graduate level and it was noted that these students work with the Basic Composition and Freshman Comp students (1990 Visiting Committee Report 9).

I take the time to list such requests because it is such requests that confirm that the faculty at Montclair are concerned with issues that are similar to those in the field. Because it is true too, that by 1990 the fields of both Composition Studies and Basic Writing are established and have a set of canonical figures and research. At Montclair it is apparent that faculty are concerned with not only improving the program but also with the status of the field. In 1987 Theresa Enos edits A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers therefore establishing an introduction for newcomers to the field of basic
writing and composition studies, and simultaneously grounds a permanency of basic writing literature and scholarship. It is also around this time that Patricia Bizzell publishes “What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?” (1986); Terry Dean publishes “Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers” (1989); Linda Brodkey publishes “On the Subjects of Class and Gender in ‘Literacy Letters’” (1989); Lisa Delpit publishes “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Others People’s Children” (1988); Harvey Kail and John Trimbur write “The Politics of Peer Tutoring” (1987); Toby Fulwiler publishes “The Argument for Writing Across the Curriculum” (1986); and Charles Moran and Cynthia Selfe begin their work on technology, computers and writing. It is important to note such scholarship because work on Basic Writers, multicultural classrooms, technology in the writing classroom, writing across the curriculum and issues of race, class and gender also emerge at Montclair. I suggest here that this is not coincidental but rather that the scholarship in the fields of basic writing and composition studies was of great importance and influence to the faculty at Montclair. Thus, Montclair, in its approach to teaching basic writing in this period is reflective of a similar national mood. I also believe that as the relationship between the program and field coexist so does the view of the naturalness of basic writing.

In 1997 the state mandate for basic skills testing is dropped, but the University replaces it with its own test called the Montclair State University Basic Skills Placement Test (1998-2000 Undergraduate Catalog 2). This change is significant because although the state no longer required basic skills testing, Montclair took it upon itself to continue the testing. What is more, though the title of the test changes, the actual test does not:
students literally take the same old formerly required state test from this date forward. What is most important to note is the fact that Basic Skills Testing was a placement device administered originally by the state to unify standards in New Jersey. Jim Nash says that the faculty “was delighted when the post-test was dropped, but although we had objected to the pre-test in the beginning, experience showed that it did a pretty good job of placing students. That’s why it was kept.” He also says that “the university allowed the department to set the actual scores that were used for placement. And it never required the department to use the post-test as an exit standard. The department agreed to GIVE the post-test, but not actually use it to decide whether students could go on to Freshman Composition.” The use of the post-test by the faculty is interesting because it was used to help them better understand the writers entering their program, which was not the original intention of the test. The purpose behind the test was to segregate underprepared students from the prepared students but as it is used by Montclair it is clear that students’ placement into their writing courses was very important.

It is for reasons such as this that I see this era at Montclair University as the discourse of nurturing. It is during this time that the faculty of Montclair spends the most time trying to shape the program at Montclair into something that they feel establishes a strong network of communication, education and practice in the teaching of writing, including that of basic writing. It is during this time that Montclair establishes a Freshman Writing Program, which is simultaneous with over a decade of groundwork in composition and basic writing scholarship. In other words, there is now such a thing as Freshman Writing Program within the department. As mentioned earlier this is important because it shows a distinct dedication to educating first year writing students at Montclair. The scholarship
during this time concerned itself with electronic writing technologies, writing across the curriculum, process centered pedagogy; race, class, ethnicity in the classroom, and the use of writing centers. The field is established so is the department’s work, and so now the program focuses on the improvement of issues of basic writing: the courses, the teaching, and the administration. This is clearly the feeling at Montclair as it requests pilot studies and initiative to make change to grading and curriculum development; it no longer works to protect or defend itself against the standards imposed by the Department of Higher Education, but instead, focused on the education of its students.

I claim this era as nurturing because it is at this time that faculty makes difficult decisions about how to address the writing needs of remedial students. With multiple theories developing in the basic writing field during the 80s and 90s the issues become how best to teach basic writing, not whether to teach it at all. The renegotiation of this moment in Montclair’s history as the discourse of nurturing is labeled so in recognition of the difficult decisions made by faculty to nurture its students as it was developing itself and placement in the institution. I use nurturing because the decisions made were at times difficult, such as implementation of the NC grade but it seems, just as one nurtures another, this difficulty comes with best practice and the students in mind. In other words, and as suggested earlier, as the field develops the educators have to work our how to implement new practices. Montclair sees itself, in a way as “bringing up” these students and they see themselves as the place to do this; Montclair’s faculty sees itself as a positive environment that cares for the development of the students. By doing so, it concentrates heavily on the success and failures of its program while it simultaneously thinks of new ways to improve the curriculum for the students.
The missing link between my understanding of basic writing and what it meant to scholars is a result of my thinking of basic writing as David Bartholomae said in his speech at CCCC as “something naturally, inevitably, transparently there in the curriculum” (7). The consequences of seeing basic writing as “natural” exonerates those in the field from questioning basic writing’s origins, questioning why it exists in the present, and questioning how it functions in the present, including its role in training future teachers and making decisions about programs, program policies and students.

I believe that the institutionalization of basic writing is what created my belief that my student’s writing was not vapid. Where I am positioned historically means that I was not with Shaughnessy when she experienced “bad” writing, but instead, I entered graduate school in 2001 (thirty years later), and was advised by her texts (and others) as how to handle such students. Thus, I expected that my students’ writing wasn’t going to demonstrate mastery of academic writing and this expectation perhaps misinformed my understanding of their place at Montclair? When their writing proved to be better than I thought, I realized the significance of my experience for both local and national contexts as it directly concerns the way new teachers are trained, the way programs develop and situate their basic writers, and how basic writing programs, including first year writing programs, are administered. As a teacher it becomes important to think about the way we read our students’ writing: Are we reading them into the curriculum and into teaching pedagogies because we believe they should be there? Are we protecting students inside basic writing because we believe they belong in higher education? Do we, as educators, fully know why we believe they belong there? Are we looking carefully enough after students who are not prepared for college?
This study examines Montclair State’s basic writing programs through its evolution in course catalogs, interoffice exchanges, program evaluations and descriptions over a thirty year period to see how the social, political and historical climate influenced Montclair’s decisions, and thus how basic writing and the discourse that surrounds it was negotiated at this college. Scholarship in the discipline, such as “What’s It Worth and What’s It For?” (Rodby), “Basic Works and Material Acts” (Rodby and Fox), “Conflict and Struggle” (Lu), “From the Margins to the Mainstream” (Soliday) and “Basic Writing in One Community College” (Fitzgerald) all offer insight into basic writing’s position in the four year university, but do not construct a longitudinal study for which the discourse of basic writing program is examined locally. This study explores the use of basic writing discourse at Montclair State University and watches how, when and by whom the term is used and for what agenda. Tracing the concept “basic” at a local program reveals the theoretical shifts of the program and also sheds light on the political and social agenda throughout the history of the program. The strategic using/not using the term “basic” at Montclair’s may seem like an insignificant study, but it must be recognized that this points to the mercurial nature of both the concept of remediation and basic writing throughout this program’s history and therefore, sheds light on how the discourse of basic writing is used locally and therefore nationally.

Through the lens of Horner and Lu’s “renegotiation” I argue that the discourse of basic writing at Montclair State University as marked by these early distinct periods are also reflected in the national scene: 1968-1983 marks the period I designate as dominated by the discourse of defense; 1984-1999 as the discourse of nurturance, and 1999-2002 as the discourse of continued commitment. I define “renegotiation” as a way of looking at
and re-interpreting the history and the decisions made by the faculty to inform current practices. In looking at the history and the negotiations of the program, historical developments in the nation, historical policies and procedures in the English Department, in the Writing Studies program and between faculty, administrators and political agendas, I have found these three categories to generalize what I will call "discourse moments." I label them "discourse moments" because I have grouped and demarcated these moments according to changes in the program with specific attention to shifts in thinking about and conceptualizing the structure of the program.

This study suggests that the negotiation of basic writing discourse and implementation of basic writing resulted in a "naturalness" of basic writing at Montclair University. I found that because Montclair's faculty worked to defend, nurture and offer continued commitment to its students, there was no place in this particular discourse that contested the place of basic writing in the first-year writing program. This discovery allowed me to realize that Montclair, as an example of the four-year university, should, as it currently reconsiders basic writing's placement in the university, consider how in the future it might bring issues about basic writing to its teaching body. As this study demonstrates, a well-informed teaching staff may improve the education provided to its students and make for a stronger first-year writing program. It is my understanding that if educators are aware of the history and politics of policy-making, and how it influences the way they are asked to teach and educate their students, programs (by means of an informed teaching body) may improve the curricula they provide; teachers may teach differently and thus understand better the significance of student placement.
Basic Writing (1968-1983): The Discourse of Defense

The discourse of defense marks this period in Montclair’s history when the faculty at Montclair negotiate their recognition for the need to improve student writing in the midst of state mandated standards. The faculty work hard to defend basic writers against such impositions meanwhile working to provide an education that is concerned with their needs.

When I began research of the history of Montclair’s basic writing program, I was at first, hard pressed to find any material. I looked for a single comprehensive work to help me understand the origins and development of the program, but this did not happen easily. What I did find, with the generosity of Larry Schwartz, English Department Head, was a seemingly subtle moment that transformed the structure of the first-year writing program in the English Department, with effects lasting to this day. The moment of change was a result of events occurring outside the realm of the English Department: a state instituted test and the national open admission moment in higher education. Open Admissions followed the peaceful protests of racial segregation in the late 1950s, the rise of consciousness of social injustices in the late 1960s, and the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. President Johnson tried to alleviate the injustices within government accommodations by authorizing federal action against segregation in public institutions, and thus setting off a national trend to open admissions at state and city colleges and universities around the country. This led to a mass movement of liberalization of college admissions allowing students who were typically denied access to higher education into four year colleges. The largest effort came from the City University of New York, which assured admittance to every individual with a high school diploma (Shaughnessy 1). This
movement in higher education effected change within individual academic departments, including English Departments, and universities around the country as new students brought new challenges to education.

Around the time Open Admissions was implemented at CUNY, an education system not so far from Montclair's doors, Montclair's English Department offered the following composition courses: Composition and Literature I and II, Writing and Literary Analysis I and II. In addition to the courses listed the English department also offered English as a Second Language (English 312).

During this time, all students at Montclair were required to take six hours in composition and literature as a general education requirement. Students of "superior standing" were those who achieved a score of 600 or better on the College Entrance Achievement Test. These students were allowed to select courses reserved for English majors, including Writing and Literary Analysis I, II, Creative Writing, Journalism, Literature of Social Protest, among many others to substitute for the standard general education courses. English majors were instructed to take Writing and Literary Analysis I and II as their first year composition sequence but all other incoming freshmen had to take Composition and Literature I & II. This reveals that although there were no specific classes designated "remedial," the College still separated those considered "superior" from the other freshmen. The description of Writing and Literary Analysis I, the course reserved for English majors and test-identified "superior students" reads: "more advanced writing assignments and more extensive literary coverage than required in Composition and Literature I. In Composition and Literature I and II a basis for expository writing is emphasized, along with readings from literary works from different periods and cultures,
and research paper and study of Western literature is emphasized in part two (MSC Undergraduate Catalogs 1971/2, 1972/3, 1973/5.)

What is interesting is that the classes required by those in superior standing are called Writing and Literary Analysis where as the other freshmen classes is called Composition and Literature. My interest in the distinguishing between the labels Writing and Composition; Literary Analysis and Literature is that it suggests the culture of remediation, where in efforts are made to track students along levels at the point of matriculation, existed at MSU prior to implementation of basic writing coursework. The phenomenon of remediation of differentiation within general education has been observed in universities across the nation as suggested by many in the field including, Mary Soliday’s “From the Margins to the Mainstream: Reconceiving Remediation,” and Barbara Gleason’s “Evaluating Writing Programs in Real Time: The Politics of Remediation.” It has been suggested by Soliday that remediation in four year universities was not new with the advent of “basic writing” but merely its significance rose in light of the Open Admissions moment. In particular, Soliday argues that over time the idea of remediation constitutes and reconstitutes itself as ‘new’ even when it is not new. She argues that this continual reinstitution prevents educators from making productive change. Similarly Harris argues that “the basic writing ‘frontier’ that Shaughnessy claimed to stumble upon was already quite developed, that even though the field of composition was not disciplined or professionalized in the same ways it is now, many teachers and writers had for some time been dealing with much the same sorts of issues” (425). To illustrate how this looked at Montclair, those in the Composition and Literature course (the class for the general population), appear to have engaged in literary analysis
just as those in the Writing and Literary Analysis course, but the actual word, *analysis*,
was reserved for the advanced group. They were allowed, in other words, *to announce*
the subject matter and requirements of the course they were taking (a show of
competence) where as those in the Composition and Literature course did not hold this
prestige and were required *to practice* such skills.

In the same manner, all students were required to study expository writing and
write a research paper but, it is interesting how the word composition is associated with
the lower level writing. In other words, and as Harris suggested by my reading of these
course descriptions, a form of remediation did exist at Montclair prior to the existence of
basic writing. Clearly it was believed that all students entering college at Montclair could
write, but it is also clear that some were considered more advanced than others. And
perhaps this was so. Perhaps some writers were stronger than others and that is why it is
important to note that the distinction between Writing and Composition is made during
the emergence of composition as a field of study, a field that developed out of the
"recognized" need for writing instruction at the university level (Soliday 2002). I am not
suggesting here the distinguishing between the two types of students was a fault, but
rather I'd like to point to the fact that such recognition was made on the basis of
competence: the good and the better. The importance of this distinction and the fact that,
by my interpretation, remediation existed prior to the arrival of basic writing is one that
reveals itself throughout the course of this study; this marks a change in the way
remediation is conceptualized over time.

Interestingly, in 1973 the program labeled “Freshmen English” did not exist.
Rather its presence develops slowly as emerging most markedly in the early 1990’s under
direction of Jim Nash. The difference between having a Freshmen English Program with faculty and supervisory structures, and an English Department with freshmen English courses is that a program announces the emergence of a field of study that concentrates on freshmen English courses. It is important to note that the concentration of a “Freshmen English” program at MSU as a distinction within the English department develops simultaneously with the re-emergence of attention in the field of composition studies in the early 1990s on the remediation of writers.

One other note of importance is the English as a Second Language courses. These courses were offered to prepare Non-English speaking students for other humanity courses. What is remarkable to note is that non-English Speaking students had the choice to take as many as four English classes; eventually these same students are required to pass a Language exam, take required language courses, and then take the Basic Writing and general education requirements, Composition I and II (MSC Undergraduate Catalog 1971/2, 1972/3). It is important to note the connection between the changes in the ESL sequence and that of the Basic Writing history as the two heavily influence one another’s. The rhetoric used in the 1973 description of these courses offer a sense of hope in the use of words such as “opportunity,” “preparation,” “facility,” and “progress.” This is not always so as time reveals changes in attitudes toward the institution’s view of these students and their educational needs.

In 1973, and in addition to the above listed courses, Special Communication Skills, is added to the department. The course is designed to help those with writing problems through use of “new motivational and audiovisual techniques” and is offered as an equivalent to the Composition and Literature class (MSC Undergraduate Catalog
What is interesting to note is that this description is the first mention of students with "writing problems" in a MSC catalog. This course represents the first movement toward a concerted effort to offer remediation by the department, outside of the English as a Second Language sequence. And yet, the rhetoric of remediation here seems as positive as that used to describe the Non-English Speaking sequence. For example, the description reads "new motivational techniques" and suggests that the course is designed "to help" those with writing problems (MSC Undergraduate Catalog 1972/3). It is again important to note that the Special Communication course is offered before Montclair offers the course Basic Writing and around the time Mina Shaughnessy started to publish work on basic writers. The way that writers are being conceptualized at Montclair is significant as the discourse of basic writing begins to shape in the field simultaneously as similar language emerges in individual programs, as is evident at Montclair.

In the same year, 1973, another course aimed to address writers' needs is under development. The course, The Writing Workshop, focuses on writing with the assistance of a tutorial in writing and research. The requirements suggest that the student will meet with a tutor as often as required and for as long as is necessary to bring his writing up to the standards of the communications requirement of the college (New Course Proposal/Writing Workshop). The communications requirement is part of the general education criteria. The concept of this course is interesting because upon completion of this course satisfies "the writing portion of the Communications requirements (New Course Proposal/Writing Workshop). It also states that "the course will not be bound by semester division, but will be allowed to continue as long as necessary for each student to achieve a satisfactory performance of the skills involved" (New Course Proposal/Writing
Workshop). The justification of the course reads “we need this device to give intensive
tutorial work to students with writing deficiencies (New Course Proposal/Writing
Workshop). The approach to this course resembles much of what we see happening now
in the field of Basic Writing with such models as Glau’s Stretch Model at Arizona State
University, Grego and Thompson’s Studio Model at University of South Carolina and
Peter Elbow’s Yogurt Model. The approach is similar to the above in that students and
their progress in the course determines the outcome of the course as opposed to university
implemented time restraints and outcomes based goals.

Specific objectives of the class include improving or addressing “clarity of thesis,
organization, diction, grammar (including spelling), use of logic, structural principals,
library research methods, bibliographic format and footnote style” (New Course
Proposal/Writing Workshop). It is unclear why Special Communications and Writing
Workshop were both offered. The description of the Special Communications course
was offered for those with “writing problems” but, and at the same time, the description
of the Writing Workshop course is offered to students with “writing deficiencies.” The
structure of the courses is different and the Special Communications course was offered
only in the summer to students who were assisted through the Educational Opportunity
Fund. What is clear is that by 1973, Montclair College was beginning to pay a lot of
attention to writers and communicators in need of remediation. And although the word
“remediation” was never used, words such as problems and deficiencies start to emerge.

After speaking with Drs. Larry Schwartz and Jim Nash, professors of English at
Montclair during this period in Montclair’s history, it appears these courses were
developed in order to help students reach individual potential. It is also important to note

that at this time campaigns in our nation, and abroad, were beginning to question America’s literacy abilities. During this time, testing and its relationship to success in college is debated all over the country. In 1975, *Newsweek* published the well-known article “Why Johnny Can’t Write” creating a “basic skills” frenzy in the nation. The *Newsweek* article said that America was in the middle of a writing crisis and that the public education system was to blame for neglecting basic skills in its curriculum. But, and it is important to note, that this “basic” buzz does not resonate with the call made by Shaughnessy. This call for basics is one for a return to and redefine basics. In this sense, basic meant a return to an understood set of standards or fundamental knowledge that was lost with the appearance of Open Admissions. This counters Shaughnessy’s work as she was desperately trying to prove that there was not a crisis but more that students’ writing skills were misunderstood.

In an article in the *New York Times* called “Colleges Place Greater Weight on Test Scores,” it is noted by Edward B. Fiske that “despite the recent wave of criticism by consumer forces and others, standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test—along with grade-point averages and other statistical measures of academic performance—are apparently becoming more rather than less important in the college admissions process” (C1-C4). Although this is not directly about Open Admissions or Basic Skills testing Fiske’s article points to the trend in higher education to rely on numbers to protect academic standards at the time during which state mandates were reinforcing and returning to conservatism. This moment in basic writing’s history was both promising in its desire for equality in education (the introduction of the Writing Workshop), and depressing in its desire to preserve standards (return to fundamentals).
The *MSC Undergraduate Catalog 1975/7* introduces the Writing Workshop.

Although the Composition and Literature I course is still offered, the entry alters from previous years. We see interesting changes in the general education writing course descriptions, changes that suggest that college students, all college students, need help with their writing. The description reads similar to that of the Writing Workshop in that it says “instruction in basic writing skills and research, frequent writing assignments and a research paper” (*MSC Undergraduate Catalog '75/7*). The earlier description emphasized expository writing and literary analysis and did not include a research paper.

In past entries the reading list was described as “literary works from different periods and cultures,” whereas the new course description offers no mention of a reading list, but instead gives mention to skills and research (*MSC Undergraduate Catalog '75/7*).

The course Composition and Literature II is renamed Introduction to Literature and reflects a single semester of what used to be the Composition and Literature sequence. The Writing and Literary Analysis, the series of “advanced writing,” is no longer offered. Instead English majors are required to take courses in genre writing such as poetry, autobiography, short story, the art of drama, along with a course from the linguistics department (*MSC Undergraduate Catalog '75/7*).

The significance of the changes made to the Composition and Literature courses is that the new descriptions reflect new thinking about the courses—thinking that seems to stress the importance of writing ability from a more technical point of view, as opposed to the exposition/literary analysis combination emphasized earlier. Prior to 1975, students were taking a sequence of courses in expository writing and literary analysis, whereas the changes in the 1973/5 catalog reflect focus on writing skills for an entire
semester and then literary analysis for the second semester. With these changes, students appear to be asked to separate writing skills from reflection and writing about literature by focusing on “instruction in basic writing skills”; basic skills that used to be reserved solely for the Writing Workshop. It seems that these changes reflect departmental and theoretical changes about how to improve the writing of students that may, in fact, be under-prepared for the college experience. It would be unfair not to mention that it was around this time in Montclair’s history that Mina Shaughnessy publishes *Errors and Expectations: A Guide For the Teacher of Basic Writing* (1977) and around the time Shaughnessy was writing *Errors*, conceptions of remedial writers and how students compose changed drastically and the field of basic writing develops territory in the academy. In, 1975, the *Journal of Basic Writing* began publication amidst new venues of research and discussion about basic writers, the term coined by Shaughnessy.

During the years of 1977-1979 focus on Montclair faculty and the needs of their students, through faculty development in the teaching of writing, is encouraged by a group of professors at Montclair State College. In 1978, eight members of the graduate faculty in English (Dr. James Nash [project director], Drs. Rich, Benediktson, Khanna, Mickelson, Stuehler, Slocum, and Schwartz) at Montclair University proposed a pilot study to improve the teaching of English, including the teaching of writing. It was noted and affirmed by Dr. Nash that the proposal came in response to the work of Shaughnessy, among others, and their work on basic writing/writers (Nash). A grant called “A Pilot Program in the Teaching of Composition and Literature” including remedial writing was proposed to the Florence and John Schumann Fund (now called The Schumann Center
for Media and Democracy). On December 5, 1978 the board of trustees held a meeting to review the proposal. The rationale for the pilot study was

In the midst of the current and well publicized crisis over students’ basic language skills, MSU believes that there is much more to do than to just ‘go back to basics.’ They want to bring this new knowledge to the English teachers of New Jersey. After a pilot year, the College will be able to offer the new courses. (Florence and John Schumann Foundation Annual Report 1979)

The study included a year of faculty development and the launching of three pedagogical courses for the graduate program *Teaching Basic Writing, Teaching Composition* and *Teaching Literature*. Janet Mayes, a consultant who worked at CUNY with Mina Shaughnessy, was hired to run a faculty development seminar which included Professors Schwartz, Slocum, Rich and Nash. (An interesting side note: in the Summer Session of Basic Composition the students were using *Writing and Rewriting* a workbook by Janet Mayes published in 1981.) The faculty tried to get Shaughnessy, but at the time she was already dying of cancer. Clearly, the faculty was heavily influenced by the work of Shaughnessy and interested in improving the writing of its students. This therefore indicates that the faculty was also invested deeply in the ideology and framework of helping those underprepared for college, and invested deeply in preparing teachers to teach these students. What is also interesting is their recognition and rejection of the conservative elements of “back to basics” movement evolving around this same time. It is interesting in that it is their rejection of “back to basics” that acts as foundation for their theoretical framework.
It is at this point that Montclair’s writing program changes dramatically. On March 18, 1977, under Chancellor Hollander, the Basic Skills resolution was passed by the New Jersey Board of Higher Education. The Basic Skills Council was created by the board, and eventually worked with Educational Testing Services (ETS) to create a standardized, multiple-choice style test called the NJ College Basic Skills Placement Test. The test measured skills in reading, writing, computation and elementary algebra and was used to determine placement within the respective academic fields of study (Furr et al 3). At the same time the Board of Higher Education also considered and passed, among others, the following policies: cut-off scores for determining skills deficiencies, eliminating credit toward graduation for remedial courses, and establishing minimum statewide admissions standards based on an Average Freshman Class Profile (Furr 3).

What this meant was that departments were no longer able to determine who was in need of remediation or for how long. The state mandated the tests and regulated the required classes to be taken by the students who did not receive satisfactory scores.

One of the most detrimental restrictions placed upon educators in NJ, after the passing of basic skills testing, was the denial of college credit for those who did not pass the Basic Skills test. Students were required to take courses in basic skills but the courses did not count for general education requirements toward graduation. In 1981 three professors from Montclair wrote a paper in protest called “The Politics of the Basic Skills Movement” in reaction to the strong conservative force working to reform higher education post Open Admissions. In summary, their complaint was that the Board of Higher Education “banned the awarding of college credit for basic skills work and that “consequently, freshmen identified as needing remediation will be asked to take and pay
for as many as 12 credits or four courses without having accumulated any credits toward graduation” (Furr 13-14). The authors argued that students were “penalized for the quality of education they received as high school and elementary school students, an education which the college officials said qualified them for admission (Furr 13-14).

Drs. Furr, Schwartz and Long argue “that basic skills testing is simply one small part of a nationwide political strategy to re-segregate higher education along class and race lines” (Furr, Schwartz and Long 2). They point out that Basic Skills testing attempts to retract the progress of Open Admissions and that such factors guarantee increase in student tuition and a decrease in loan funding which even Chancellor Hollander pointed out puts “unusual, extraordinary burden” on students (Furr, Schwartz and Long 10-2). Their paper points to the connection between Basic Skills testing in New Jersey, ETS and its relationship to the SAT, which they deem inherently racially biased. Their paper is significant in that it is the first mark of defense for basic writers and a definite mark in favor of Open Admissions ideology and basic writing discourse.

On February 25, 1981 the course Writing Workshop becomes Basic Freshman Composition. The description of the course on the proposal form reads

Instruction in basic writing skills and research, frequent writing assignments and a research paper. In addition to regular class meetings, students may be required to attend tutorial sessions over as long a period of time as necessary to raise students’ skills to College standards.

Satisfies the communications requirement in writing. 3 s.h. (New Course Proposal Form/Basic Freshman Composition)
Under the heading “justification of proposal” it reads “change required by the Department of Higher Education” (New Course Proposal Form/Basic Freshman Composition). There is no pretense in the description. Basic Freshman Composition becomes a prerequisite for Freshman Composition and Introduction to Literature. At this time the Basic Freshman course replaces the Writing Workshop and the Special Communications course.

What is ironic about the name change—Writing Workshop to Basic Freshman Composition—is that the principles behind the Writing Workshop reflects better my understanding of Shaughnessy’s mission for basic writing. The course Basic Freshman Composition reflects a testing agenda rather than Shaughnessy’s beliefs about basic writers. Although, the word “basic” in the new course title connotes “low in skill” with its association to testing, it therefore muddles two very different principles over students who are deemed basic; that of Shaughnessy (who the course title Basic Freshman Composition was borrowed from) and that of the New Jersey’s Department of Education. Fortunately, students enrolled in Basic Freshman Composition were given credit toward graduation for the course, though students were not given credit for the basic skills courses in Math and Reading. Giving college credit to the students was how the English Department exempted students from the most punishing aspect of the back to basics legislation. Nonetheless, under this new system remedial students were required to take Basic Composition as well as the two courses in the Composition and Literature series. In contrast, previously students taking the Writing Workshop only had to take one additional course to satisfy the communication requirement, where as students taking Basic still have to take two general education courses. Another thing to mention is that
students were also bound by semester division in the new course, which required those who did not pass the course to take it more than once and pay for it more than once. The impact of these changes made receiving a college education, for certain individuals, a lot harder than in previous years.

Soliday says, "I view Basic Writing's 'birth' as a radical challenge to institutional differentiation, a challenge that dissipated by 1974" (71). Soliday uses the term differentiation to describe the moment resulting from actions in the mid 1960s, when due to unprecedented growth, institutions began to differentiate: to "protect the selectivity of the upper tiers and stabilize a job market that could not be flooded with college graduates in a period of recession" (71). In other words, differentiation guaranteed that the desirable class of students filled the halls of higher education, while the undesirable enrolled in community colleges and joined the blue collar work force. Soliday argues that basic writing for a short period challenged differentiation because it offered the undesirable a chance to learn the skills necessary to join the "upper tiers," but as Soliday pointed out this "dissipated by 1974." Ironically enough, it is true that an era marked by its strides toward social justice appears outwardly to be more so than it was truly. In other words, just as progress was made to have higher education work to democratize education the "Why Johnny Can't Write" ideology began to work as a stimulus against such programs. I believe, like Soliday, that when the effects of Open Admissions began to influence institutions other than CUNY, a momentary break of differentiation came with it: schools allowed the marginalized to enter their institutions. But, soon after differentiation regains momentum as schools, including Montclair, began to take on the challenge of denying education to those deemed undesirable with barriers such as state mandated testing.
When Soliday says, that “Basic Writing’s ‘birth’ [is] a radical challenge to institutional differentiation, a challenge that dissipated by 1974” she means that it is the first time that selectivity is disrupted and a balance between students—the desirable and undesirable—erupts (71).

At Montclair, the course Special Communications and the Writing Workshop challenged differentiation because they allow students traditionally unprepared for college level writing a chance to work through difficulties and yet maintain the same academic standing as their peers. These courses also challenged differentiation because they offered students tutorial help, prepared them for future courses without additional financial responsibilities or extra coursework and without requiring them to take extra time to complete mandatory courses. The introduction of the courses, Special Communications and the Writing Workshop reveal a moment when Montclair disrupted the path of differentiation and rejected selectivity of the upper tiers. I see this as rejection of selectivity of the upper tiers and as disrupting the path of differentiation because in offering college level coursework without extra burden of cost and time these students had the potential to succeed at the same rate and to the same level as their peers. By making the act of receiving an education equal for those who do not seem to have the “basic skills” necessary to survive college Montclair participated in a social and political move to democratize education. For Montclair, differentiation as Soliday describes it restored itself in 1981 under the guise of Basic Skills testing. With the introduction of basic skills testing, MSU returns to an approach to writing instruction that protects the selectivity of the upper tiers. The passing of the NJ Basic Skills testing was the end of
the true effects of Open Admissions. Soliday argues that the effects of Open Admissions fizzled by 1974 amidst the media pleas for back to basics and fears of a literacy crisis.

I want to return to discussion about this particular "discourse moment" of basic writing as shaped throughout the years of (1968-1983) as the discourse of defense. The title of this discourse moment—defense—is created out of the renegotiation of Montclair's history through the lens of the current state of basic writing. This study looks at the negotiations made from 1968 to 1983 between and amongst the desire for equality in education and the return to standards made by the faculty at Montclair. I demarcate this moment as the discourse of defense because of my analysis of the faculty's commitment to basic writers in context of a standards driven nation. In looking at this moment now, it appears that the faculty was driven by the ideology of equality while fighting the stronghold of standards placed upon them after the passing of Basic Skills testing. This negotiation was made as the Montclair State requirements and courses, at the institutional level, worked to protect the "tiers," and as the ideology of basic writing discourse persisted regardless of the nation's neglect of such education. By seeing this as a moment of defense, in relation to the other discourse moments, that of nurturance and continued commitment, it is clear that this sets the foundation for Montclair's views of its basic writers. It becomes clear by looking at the history and the negotiations made, that students were and are at the center of the faculty's attention even while they negotiate between the state and the ideology of Open Admission.
Basic Writing (1984-1999): The Discourse of Nurturance

During this time, the faculty at Montclair, post-negotiating the stat- mandated testing, nurture the students by providing an education that is impartial to their development.

The department concerns itself with pedagogical improvements for the basic writing population, basic writing program improvements and pedagogical improvements (including training workshops). What the faculty once fought for—writing support for those in need—is, during this time, carefully watched over and considered as it develops.

After the passing of Basic Skills testing it appears that Montclair’s program remained unaltered through 1984 despite a minor name change from The Writing Workshop to Basic Freshman Composition. However, by 1985 the Basic Freshmen Composition course no longer fulfills the general education requirement and the course must be retaken if a student does not pass it the first time. This is a monumental change when it comes to the price of education. But, what is important is that in the catalog it appears only as an italicized addition to the description; therefore, it seems insignificant.

However, the significance is rooted in the fact that the two courses developed out of two very different ideals. Not only do the two courses appear different in the catalog, the way they affect the education of Montclair’s students is of significance as well.

There is no mention of Basic Skills testing in the 1982-1984 catalog descriptions of Basic Freshman Composition, but a test is required, and is apparently normalized and a natural part of the curriculum. This, I suggest is part of the reason why the history needs to be considered. The other reason being that the seemingly insignificant changes made to the department contribute, most certainly, to the “naturalness” of testing and placement in the Basic Writing program at Montclair. In addition, I believe there is a “naturalness”
to Basic Writing’s not satisfying the general education requirement. It appeared to me, when I entered the program, that basic writing was meant as prep work before “the real” college work. I am not suggesting that the course is not needed, but rather, I want to point to the fact that I did not see the relationship for what it was: I did not see how my belief that basic writing was prep work was in any way a product of the “naturalness” of basic writing in the program. In fact, I was unaware of what or why I was doing what I was doing. As Bartholomae would suggest, basic writing, to me was a natural part of first-year writing.

In the 1982/4 catalog Basic Freshman Composition, Special Communications, Freshman Composition and Introduction to Literature appear. By 1984/86 the Special Communication Skills course is no longer listed, but the other courses remain the same through 1988. In 1987/8 Jim Nash addressed the format of the Basic Skills Post Test. This is the first mention of the test by the department (in writing) since the passing of Basic Freshman Composition in 1981. It was noted that:

Most Basic Composition faculty strongly disagree with the use of the New Jersey State College Basic Skills Placement Test at the end of the Basic Composition courses as a measure of students’ progress. Nevertheless, I think the best thing to do now is to cooperate with the state’s directives while working hard to discredit and abolish the test in its present form.

(Administration of Basic Skills Post Test 1).

Nash, during his time as Freshman English Coordinator, fought constantly against the burdens placed upon students entering the freshman writing sequence at Montclair. In November of 1988 in the Composition Chronicle Dr. Nash writes “Post-Testing for Basic
Composition in New Jersey: How a placement test suddenly became a post-test.” In this
essay, he points out how NJCBST is used as an official assessment “not of students but of
programs” (6). The test was used to evaluate basic writing students at the end of their
semester to determine whether or not they were prepared to move on to the next part of
their composition sequence. He argues that the Basic Skills test places students into basic
courses by means of cut off scores and then tests programs’ abilities to remedy the
problem. Nash points out that the outcomes assessment criteria do not match that of a
semester’s worth of basic composition (Post-Testing 7). A similar argument to that of
Schwartz, Furr and Long made in 1981 when the Basic Skills test was originally
implemented. This test was viewed by Nash as a detriment to the program as it required
the faculty and administration to redeem basic writing students marked incompetent, after
they were admitted to college, in a semester of course work. This seemed unfair as it was
the previous education of the students that did not prepare them for college writing, not
the Basic Composition course of which they were enrolled.

On May 8, 1988 Dr. Nash addressed the English Department faculty regarding a
change in the exit standards for Basic Composition. It is noted by Nash that “the
standards are based on a statement by Mina Shaughnessy” (Exit Standards for Basic
Composition 1). The statement from Mina Shaughnessy was taken from Shaughnessy’s
1980 article from the Journal of Basic Writing called “Statement on Criteria for Writing
Proficiency” (Exit Standards for Basic Composition 1). The standards were to be
implemented at the semester’s Basic Composition portfolio review. The Portfolio
Review was used to “determine which Basic Composition Students are ready to go on to
Freshman Composition and which should receive grades of No Credit or F (both of which
would necessitate their repeating Basic Composition). Both the exit standards and the portfolio review allowed professors at Montclair to comply with the “state directives while working hard to discredit and abolish the test in its present form.” In addition to the Portfolio Review, the department also administered the Sentence Sense and Reading Comprehension sections of the Basic Skills Test during the final examination period (Administration of the Basic Skills Post Test 1-2). The initial test influenced how students were placed into courses and then the post-test evaluated student success in Basic Composition. This test also influenced the course material and standards of basic writing for basic writing students. Making decisions about this test meant constituting what basic writing meant at Montclair.

As of 1988, the courses remain the same, but changes occur to grading policies.

On June 20, 1988 Dr. James Nash issued the following memo:

Available grades for Basic Composition: A/B/C/F/NC; No D grade

NC to be given only to hardworking, significantly improving students who do not yet meet Basic Composition exit standards. NC not to be given to students who do not complete the course work. (Grading Policy Change for Basic Composition 1)

The rationale for an NC grade is that “despite hard work, (some students) are not ready to proceed to Freshman Composition after one semester of Basic Composition” (Grading Policy Change for Basic Composition 1). The NC grade offered a way for instructors to recommend students retake the Basic Course without giving them a failing grade such as a D or F. The intentions of the NC grade are positive (in the sense that it was implemented as a tool for keeping students from being penalized for being unprepared for
the college level writing class), but, and due to the structure of the Basic Freshman Composition course, the NC grade, while better than an F, still creates difficulty for financially strapped students. The NC grade was designed to protect students from inappropriately receiving a D or an F, but receiving an NC grade does not completely benefit the students who receive the NC. Although their writing has the potential to improve, their bank accounts will drain as they pay for the course twice. In the course the Writing Workshop students were allowed to remain in tutoring until deemed prepared to move on to Freshman Composition, paying just once. Another major difference is that students in the Writing Workshop continued to work with the same tutor where as retaking the course Basic Freshman Composition (due to an NC) may mean starting over with a new teacher who does not know a students’ work. So, in this moment, the ideology of the basic writing movement— providing equal opportunities for success for all students—is negotiated between what the department wanted for its students and what had been previously established by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education. From my view, despite the impositions handed down in previous years, the department continued to side on the favor of the students.

September 18, 1989 Dr. Nash sent information on the Freshman English program for the Visiting Committee to Alyce Miller, Chair of the English Department. Under Faculty Development it was noted that development sessions were now a regular part of the Freshmen program and that topics such as “teaching argumentation, teaching the research paper, responding to student’s writing, and dealing with students who have limited English language proficiency” were covered regularly (1989 Visiting Committee Report 5). In that same year a departmental teaching resource was made “available to
Finally, I want to address the discourse of continued commitment. In reference to the other two discourse moments, this era reflects the continued commitment of Montclair faculty to its basic writing students. This relationship was established in the era of defense, when faculty protected students against state regulations and followed through with the era of nurturance, by overseeing its development.

After implementation of Basic Freshman Composition, minor changes occur in Montclair’s English Department. The implementation of Basic Skills testing altered the experience of those placed in Basic Freshmen Composition as well as students enrolled in the English as a Second Language sequence. It is noted in the 2002-2004 Montclair State University handbook that

Those who achieve a score which indicates a need for ESL instruction will enroll in ESL courses prior to *Basic Reading Skills* (READ 053), *Introduction to Writing* (ENWR 100) or *College Writing I: Intellectual Prose* (ENWR 105) and will be exempted from their *Introduction to Writing* (ENWR 100) or *College Writing I: Intellectual Prose* (ENWR 105) requirement until the necessary ESL courses are completed. (...)

The ESL courses are given by the Linguistics Department. (15)

In the 2002-2004 catalog there are fifteen ESL courses offered to students with “limited English proficiency” (159). The courses range in topic from Intensive ESL I, Academic Listening and Speaking, to Research Paper Writing for Advanced Second Language Learners. Placement into the courses is determined by scores on an ESL examination.
Although such courses may be helpful to students, the additional coursework yet again is a burden to these students who may now have to take an entire semester worth of extra credits. These students must now take the required ESL courses, the basic coursework and then the required general education courses. Some students may place into College Writing I, but this is seldom the case. What happens frequently is that students do not take the ESL testing at all perhaps, to avoid additional costs in time and money. Although this paper does not cover patterns of student enrollment during changes in the curriculum, it is important however to mention that the changes in the ESL sequence most certainly developed in response to the cries for standards that affected the English Department and the rest of the university; and therefore may appear participate in gatekeeping practices that discriminate along the lines of race, class and gender. It must be remembered that at one time ESL courses were offered by the English Department. Students were allowed, prior to 1984 to select the Non-English Speaking language classes as preparation for the general humanities requirement of six hours in composition-literature (*MSC Undergraduate Catalog 1972-84*). However, it is important to address the fact that the reason why students are required to take ESL classes to begin with is so that students will succeed in the Freshman Composition series. But, and at the same time, the requirements of ESL courses make it very difficult to earn a four year degree in four years. This is especially true for incoming immigrant families to Northern New Jersey who most certainly influence the changes and restructuring of the ESL program and the basic composition program as well (Isaacs).

The other writing courses remain the same through 2000. In March 2000 Emily Isaacs, Coordinator of Freshman English, and Cheryl Butler prepared a Report for the
Visiting Committee. This report consisted of a program description, a detailed description of program administration, freshman course descriptions, services offered to students through the English department, program changes over the past five years and list of needs wanted by the English Department.

The Report’s description of the Basic Composition read as follows:

Basic Composition is required of all students who receive less than 160 on the University’s Basic Skills Test in English. This course, which does carry credit toward graduation, is designed to bring students up to beginning college-level writing proficiency by the end of the semester. (2000 Visiting Committee Report 2)

The report also speaks of the NC grade and its significance in the course. What is most interesting about this particular report is that it is aware of and gives credit to the significance of the basic skills test and the issue of credits toward graduation. The significance of testing and credits in earlier decades was more a congratulatory win against outside forces, but its placement here is quite different. Now that the fields of basic writing and composition have established themselves so has the political environment within these fields. It becomes a political act to label and structure writing programs in particular ways as is evident here. The faculty is aware of such political stances in the field and have used the language in the course description to list and label their values. In a way, the history of the course is recalled in the description of the course itself. On November 15, 2000 a request was submitted by Emily Isaacs to change Basic Composition to Introduction to Writing. The request was received and approved on February 12, 2001. The following was given as a reason for the change “This new course
title and description is in keeping with current beliefs about teaching basic skills level composition” (Proposal for Course Alteration/Introduction to Writing 1).

The new course description following the change in course title reads as follows:

A writing-intensive workshop that stresses the development of thinking and writing abilities through frequent writing assignments. Emphasis is on the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revising, using peer and teacher critique, editing and proofreading. Evaluation is partly based on a portfolio of revised writing. While this course may be taken as an elective, it is required for those students whose score on the MSU placement test indicates the need for intensive writing instruction before taking ENGL 105. This course does not satisfy a General Education Requirement. (Proposal for Course Alteration/Introduction to Writing 2)

Again, and in addition to the test placement and general education requirements, it is clear that theories and discourse of basic writing as it is established in the field, also influences the establishment of a curriculum for basic writing at Montclair State University. The questions asked and posed in the previous decades about the significance of peer tutoring, portfolio review, process centered pedagogy and the movement away from basic discourse are all negotiated here in the structuring and curriculum of basic writing at this local institution. In other words, what was once groundbreaking or progressive thinking in the fields of composition has become expected and codified. The same issues that were once addressed by Schwartz and Nash are now revisited and revived here, years later.
In the 2002-2004 MSU catalog changes were made to the Basic Writing course, the Freshman Composition course and the Introduction to Literature course. Basic Composition changed to Introduction to Writing, Freshman Composition changed to College Writing I: Intellectual Prose, and Introduction to Literature changed to College Writing II: Writing and Literary Study. Although the name and description of Basic Composition/Introduction to Writing reflect thinking that sounds similar to the Writing Workshop of years past, its structure still resembles Basic Freshman Composition post-Basic Skills testing. The mission of Introduction to Writing is also similar to Jim Nash’s mission for Basic Writing with its focus on peer editing, portfolio review and process writing. The course description for Basic Writing under Nash’s direction did not outwardly announce these particulars but his mission in Visiting Reports and memos is quite clear.

What is interesting about the course Introduction to Writing is that it is described as a workshop and yet, the structure of the course never changed. Throughout its history, Basic Composition—under various names—was always labeled a workshop/ tutorial. What is disappointing is that the description is once again overcast by the package of restrictions: testing and semester division. Or, perhaps the test and semester division is insignificant to the work accomplished in the course itself? It must be remembered that testing and semester division were huge barriers when little was known about basic writers, but after thirty years of scholarship and practice it seems that the test may not be as much of a barrier as once seemed? Perhaps expert knowledge should be considered here. Scholars now argue over the need for placement into basic writing courses. I want to argue here that the current directors take this test for granted and do not take issue with
it, and perhaps this is sound policy. However, it must be remembered that the institutionalization of basic composition erases important questions about access and student enrollment to the point where the policies effectively exclude some students from successful completion of higher education degrees are no longer questioned.

I also want to mention that the title change of Basic Composition to Introduction to Writing is Montclair’s first deliberate step away from the discourse of “basic” since the passing of NJ Basic Skills testing and the creation of MSU’s basic writing course in 1981. This is not incidental as those in field of basic writing are questioning the validity of such a title as well (Mc Nenney, Stygall, Harrington, Adler-Kassner, Bartholomae). For Montclair, Emily Isaacs says that she “proposed changing the title from Basic Writing to Introduction to Writing because [she] thought basic had become stigmatizing. Students were used to the term and, [she] suspected, saw it as a label for remedial.” She also suspected that “teachers might have a similar, negative, impression” so although she “knew that ‘introduction’ would soon take on stigma,” she thought it suggested “a standard, ‘introduction’ course, as in any discipline.” She also goes on to say

Along with the name change came a course description change to show that the course was essentially the same as 105 in format—the only difference being that students were not as strong writers. My thinking about how to teach remedial students is that they need a rich intellectual environment in which to experience a strong process writing pedagogy—just what College Writing students need. (Isaacs)
So it is clear that this move away from basic discourse at Montclair was a deliberate move away from what it came to mean not just in the field, but at the school as well, as suggested here by Isaacs. Basic Writing scholarship questions not only the validity of such courses, but also how these courses are constructed within institutional ideologies of access and exclusion (Fox, Soliday). Jim Nash said recently, “this questioning takes different forms. One from the conservative view (as at CUNY) that basic writing instruction is necessary but should be done elsewhere. Another form entirely is the view that there should be no basic writing courses and writers should be mainstreamed. So, we are again, brought to the current status of basic writing: a time when basic writing in four year institutions is questioned and debated (Shor 2001; Bartholomae 1993). In this moment, basic writing discourse is centered around whether or not basic writing should maintain itself as a field, as a program of study, and as a course for incoming freshmen. During this time, faculty at Montclair continue to support its basic writers and the basic writing program, with attention to scholarship in the field. I consider this moment the discourse of Continued Commitment due to the fact that basic writing politics and student needs are negotiated, but student needs are at the forefront of faculty’s concerns. It is clear that faculty are still committed to their students as is evident in changing course titles—from Basic Writing to Introduction to Writing—there are some in the field that argue the term basic has a derogatory effect on its students. As the faculty negotiates the curricula and status of its students, it does so while implementing improvements solely on its students’ behalf. During this time the faculty decides how to best educate its student amongst the pressures of mainstreaming and self-directed approaches to basic writing curricula. The focus for the faculty at Montclair is not on mainstreaming, but instead the
focus is on the influx of second language speakers and issues of race and class at the university (Isaacs). A discourse of continued commitment is created in the renegotiation of MSU’s history (when looked at in context of basic writing in both the field and at MSU) that Montclair’s English faculty favor a continued commitment to their students and their education, over the questioning of the validity of the course. Of course, I can not account for private discussions or thoughts here, but rather only what is outwardly apparent in course offerings and justification for course material and focus.

I am oversimplifying the work of BW here. How does basic writing discourse and the actions of local programs influence one another?
Conclusions

This work started with my confession that the national debate over the future of basic writing startled me. I was startled because I was unaware of the history of basic writing at the four year university at which I was teaching. My concern for the debate itself was the impetus to revisit the history of basic writing at Montclair State University so as to unearth the "naturalness" of its basic writing program. By looking at Montclair State University’s course catalogs, interoffice exchanges, program evaluations and descriptions, and by looking at the sociopolitical and historical environment at Montclair, as well as that of basic writing, I was able to provide an outline of the basic writing discourse as it was negotiated throughout this program’s history. It was important for me to contextualize Montclair’s development along with the historical circumstances of basic writing as a field, as I believe it was the discourse of the basic writing movement as negotiated by the faculty at Montclair that helped perpetuate the feeling of "naturalness" I felt as I entered the program, and therefore led to my fear of basic writing’s demise.

In this study I paid specific attention to the “discourse of renegotiation” to analyze the discourse of basic writing as it has functioned at Montclair State University. Through the lens of “renegotiation” I argue that the network of political, social and historical influences over basic writing discourse at Montclair University can be categorized as: the discourse of defense, the discourse of nurturance, and the discourse of continued commitment. In looking at negotiations made throughout the history of the program, historical developments in the nation, historical policies and procedures in the English Department, in the Writing Studies program and between faculty, administrators and political agendas, I have found these three categories to generalize discourse moments in
the program’s history. The results of such a study prove that the negotiation of basic writing discourse and implementation of basic writing at Montclair resulted in a “naturalness” of basic writing within this institution. In other words, because Montclair’s faculty worked to defend, nurture and offer continued commitment to its students, there was no place in the discourse of basic writing at the university that contested its existence or questioned its presence. I argue in this paper that this feeling of naturalness is dangerous because along with the feeling of naturalness, comes unquestioned acceptance.

Through my experience as a new teacher and graduate student of composition studies, I was able by means of studying basic writing literature and by teaching basic writing courses, to feel that what I was doing was commonplace. I assumed throughout my time as a teacher and student that basic writing as it existed at Montclair existed similarly in other institutions in the nation. I did not question its existence in the first-year writing program at Montclair nor did I question its implementation at Montclair. The problems with such indisputable acceptance is that educators (faculty, instructors, adjuncts, teaching assistants and graduate students) become participants in a system that they may or may not support. Or, become participants in a system of which they do not understand. This is problematic because it is a lack of knowledge about the past that causes departments and programs to repeat their past. It is also problematic because what is taught by teachers employed by the department and what is expected from or for the program may be at odds. In other words, the practices and theoretical principles of the teacher may not gel with the principles that underscore the program and vice versa. Or, the teacher, because she does not know the significance of the composition course, and the politics behind such a course, does not know the role (and its significance) she plays...
in the education of her students, as was seen in my case. As Jeff Smith has said we may involuntarily be acting as gatekeepers, when we would not otherwise intend to be. He says in “Students’ Goals Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics, “so the question is not, shall there be gatekeeping? The question is: Will that someone include us—will we, through the teaching practices we adopt and advocate, work to make the gatekeeping rational and fair—or will we cede that task to those powerful interests that are all too happy to keep on doing it, all too happy for the chance to keep remaking the world in their own image?” (319). Smith looks at how educators act as gatekeepers when they ignore student need to advocate critical theory pedagogy. He says this negates students reasons for wanting to enter college which is at times synonymous with economic ends. I am not looking at teacher intention in the classroom but rather how educators unwillingly participate in gatekeeping activities when they are not knowledgeable in program administration and when they do not know the past of the program.

The significance of this study is to prove that writing program policies are choices not naturally occurring entities in four-year universities. This is a realization necessary for students of composition, for basic writing teachers, and for all educators teaching in first-year writing programs. Program policies, including policies that exclude basic writing from their first-year writing programs, are necessary information. Across the nation, for the most part, first-year writing courses, whether they are basic courses or not, are taught by graduate students. These graduate students go through training programs that emphasize composition theory and the teaching of writing, but do very little to highlight study of program administration. Although this study does not look at or address teacher training or teaching assistant training of graduate students, it does
however, look at how the lack of this particular knowledge complicated how I read my
students’ work and their place in the university. My goal is not to evaluate the
negotiations of the faculty, nor do I want to suggest that basic writing should have been
contested by the department, faculty or students, but rather I want to point to the
importance of studying their negotiations and decisions to see how renegotiation, or
reseeing these historical choices and changes can help programs understand where they
have been in order to see where they are going. David Bartholomae suggests that it must
be understood when basic writing is being preserved simply to constitute the field and the
work of basic writing instructors; it is my opinion that preservation does not happen only
to protect jobs and the field, but also develops out of true commitment to the work of
basic writing instruction. It is my suggestion that as teachers, even in our continued
commitment to our students, we need to constantly negotiate and renegotiate they way we
conceptualize the work we do for our students as well as the work we do for
administration in the field.

What is next for Montclair?

Prior to the decision made in 1998 by CUNY’s administration, instructors at
CUNY questioned the role of remediation and the service it provided its students. Mary
Soliday and Barbara Gleason, professors at City College, implemented a pilot study
called the Enrichment Approach at City College. Their dissatisfaction with placement
testing of incoming freshmen prompted such an experiment. They recognized that a
singular test is not a good determinant of a student’s writing abilities. All students were
mainstreamed into freshman composition, without the use of test scores to determine
writing “level”. Similarly, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson at the University of South Carolina created their version of mainstreaming, known as the Studio Model, in response to the Commission on Higher Education’s decision to eliminate college credit from basic writing. Grego and Thompson were alarmed that faculty members were not consulted about the decision of the Commission, and were unnerved by the way political and institutional decisions shaped their program. Their Studio Model enrolls all first year students into freshman composition and uses portfolios to determine student needs, such as tutoring. Students who were mainstreamed into “regular” freshmen English were thus able to avoid additional course work and additional tuition (for the extra courses); but, still received help—remediation—from tutors and conferences with faculty.

Similarly, and happening around the same time, is Peter Elbow’s Yogurt Model. The Yogurt Model also encourages the mainstreaming of all first year students, but allows them to take as much time as necessary to complete the first year writing class. Elbow distinguishes his program from the others as its focus is competence or outcomes-based. “Students trickle in and out, completing writing assignments faster or slower, perhaps taking longer than the fourteen week semester depending on their skills, abilities and effort” (Elbow 89). These three examples are only a sampling from basic writing program terrain. William Lacklicker points out that there are five models from which basic writing programs develop their programs: the prerequisite model, the stretch model, the studio model, the self-directed placement model and the intensive model (par. 8). Currently, the system from which most first year programs in the country operate is by testing, identifying, and then placing. This is a system that some educators, including Ira Shor, see simply as a method of tracking. And although Mina Shaughnessy’s intention of
working with basic writers was not to stratify and track, this was the system she championed. Shaughnessy, responding to the political, social and historical moment tried to provide an education of equality to the students benefiting from Open Admissions. She wanted to offer a fair education to those who appeared incompetent to others. But, it seems that her original intentions have been used, supported, elaborated upon, as well as misused, mistreated and misunderstood; and, are central to the discourse of basic writing. So, why does this matter now? What is the significance of basic writing? What is the significance of basic writing administration? How are these questions relevant to Montclair? Why is CUNY’s decision, if it is as at all, significant to Montclair University?

These are questions that need to be asked locally and nationally. Currently at Montclair, Director of First-Year Writing, Emily Isaacs, has stated that she, along with Bob Whitney, former coordinator of Freshman Composition, might re-think how basic composition is approached at Montclair. She stated that she has recently considered the self-placement method currently used at Seton Hall. She notes that the ideal method would be to have every student enroll in College Writing I, and then, in the first two weeks of school, have faculty assess students on writing written in process, and to then move weak students out of 105 and into 100. This would be much better than a one-stop quickie de-contextualized writing test from a tattered old extinct state test! However, I’ve never felt we had the infrastructure or size to implement this approach. Our faculty are not strong and consistent enough in their assessment of writing to do this assessment, and moving students out of classes and creating new ones is a logistical impossibility when you’re dealing with these numbers.(Isaacs)
She also notes that for the most part she is satisfied with the program as it is and that she believes Basic Writing, at Montclair should continue to be offered to students at Montclair. I agree with Isaacs in that I feel that the students I taught at Montclair did in fact need the extra practice as was offered to them in their basic class, but like Isaacs, I also feel that ridding Montclair of the outdated test is an issue that should be taken care of sooner rather than later. But as Isaacs has said, this issue is complex. There has been consideration of using the new SAT writing section as a replacement test. Isaacs says that she sees the test as positive because the readers are (at least) trained, but she sees it as problematic because “it valorizes a test that will then be ‘taught to’ in public schools; by endorsing the SAT writing test we would, in effect, be part of that destruction of good writing instruction in high schools. Of course, MSU Admissions had already decided to require the test; whether we use it as placement is a secondary issue” (Isaacs). Such considerations are important and a good sign for the future. Whether or not change is implemented is irrelevant, what is important is that questions are raised and considered, and that such questions are put forward for consideration to faculty (full and part-time), instructors, adjuncts and graduate students.

It is my suggestion that as Montclair considers questions of placement it should also consider how it might bring such issues about basic writing to its teaching body so as to invite learning opportunities, and therefore create a well-informed teaching staff. If all educators are aware of the history and politics of policy-making in first-year writing programs, and how it influences the way they are asked to teach and educate their students, programs (by means of an informed teaching body) may improve the curricula they provide, teachers may teach differently and teachers may understand better the
significance of placement into their courses. It is my experience that new Teaching Assistants, because of their rapid initiation into the teaching of writing, struggle with the curricula. Another factor is that they are, for the most part, students of literature, creative writing, and in some schools, students from various other departments, including history and political science. These graduate students have little knowledge about teaching writing and are at times, offered very little help about what to teach in the classroom. If they had a better understanding, and better training on writing program administration and the purposes it serves, they may better understand the role they can play in the classroom and in policy making. As for graduate students of composition, they feel they know the most and are the best prepared to teach writing, and for the most part, they probably are, but I believe they see their role as existing in the classroom only, they do not see how or why they may influence what is taught, who is taught and how writing is taught. I believe that understanding the history of composition and of basic writing, would improve how teachers “read” their students at each institution, according to individual programs and their policies. As for faculty and administrators, I believe that it is their job to initiate us into the field as I believe a well-informed body of educators may create a better education for the students.
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