

# Learning on the Job: Instructor Policy Literacy in the Basic Writing Course

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*ABSTRACT: As the cost of college tuition continues to soar, community colleges and state and local governments offer a wide range of access and opportunity programs to best serve low-income and academically underprepared students. In this article, I present a case study of two instructors, both of whom regularly teach Basic Writing courses at the community college, and examine how administrative and financial aid policies, as well as outreach and opportunity program protocol, affect classroom pedagogy and student experience. Ultimately, I argue that these two educators, one part-time and one full-time, successfully navigate the bureaucracy of a complex policy network only through repeated concrete interactions with students and over extended periods of time. Many instructors with lower levels of policy literacy, and especially those novice, part-time, and contingent instructors tasked with teaching in a web of policies, may struggle to best serve Basic Writing students at the community college in ways yet unaccounted for by the field.*

*KEYWORDS: Basic Writing; college access; community college; disparate impacts; financial aid; policy literacy*

In the spring of 2019, Enoch Jemmott, a student at Queens College (CUNY), published an op-ed titled “The Implicit Punishment of Daring to Go to College While Poor” with *The New York Times*, in response to his own experiences navigating college enrollment and aid applications. Jemmott’s piece, an articulate testimony to the experience of a low-income student attempting to navigate the bureaucracy of federal financial aid and college access programs, highlights the persistence of social and economic class as an obstacle in higher education for many Americans. Jemmott’s central claim is best summarized in his words: “I came to realize that, in every step along the way, we had to do more because we had less” (3). The simplicity and irony

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of this statement should strike us all as tragic. In all of the academic work I have read concerning access, efficacy, and economic support for low-income students, nothing resonated like these words. Nothing seemed to capture the frustration, absurdity, and humiliation embedded in the experiences of so many college aspirants at CUNY and nationwide.

When I first read Jemmott's testimony, I had just finished my own yearlong research study working with community college students and their Basic Writing instructors. I was preparing to defend my doctoral dissertation, a study focused primarily on examining the efficacy and transparency of aid and access programs for low-income students enrolled in Basic Writing courses. I sought to understand how low-income and first-generation students, specifically community college students enrolled in Basic Writing, experienced the implementation of financial aid and institutional or administrative programs and policies. My research findings were similar to Jemmott's personal experience. Students struggle to complete their aid applications and understand how financial aid policies impact their course selection and placement, which may lead to higher rates of attrition and a future of economic constraint.

These realities are compounded for students who place into pre-freshman coursework. There is a direct link between economic constraint, access to financial aid awards, and student attrition. According to Thomas Bailey of the Community College Research Center, "Only 44 percent of those referred to developmental reading completed their full sequence, and only 31 percent of those referred to developmental math completed theirs. Further, the more courses in the referred sequence, reflecting a greater skills deficiency, the more likely students were to fail to complete it" (2). While Basic Writing students persist at higher rates than those students enrolled in math or reading, only 68% of students who place into Basic Writing courses persist into standard first-year composition (1). With attrition rates so high, educators must consider the effect of policy infrastructure undergirding such courses and programs, as these tip the scale for students weighing the decision to persist based on time and cost.

The impact of such trends cannot be overstated. As student loan debt continues to soar, students who opt to pursue higher education at the community college, and their educators, will need to be hyperaware of the financial circumstances determining their educational and employment prospects.

For example, the student debt crisis brought on in part by the rising cost of tuition—an over 200% increase since 1980—reflects the average cost

per-credit hour increase across all colleges and universities (Newfield). The fact that cost-per credit hour pricing has continued to grow even for courses without matriculated credit *points* adds insult to injury for so many students who are already struggling. At the same time, programs that aim to resolve this problem of cost, programs like the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associates' Program (ASAP), are first to be targeted in periods of fiscal austerity (St. Amour).

To best meet the needs of our students, educators must critically recognize the shifting landscape of college admissions and enrollment policies and the ongoing evolution of Basic Writing and writing programs in general. While one might reasonably argue that this responsibility should fall first on the shoulders of administrators or policy makers rather than students and especially instructors, my argument here is that educators—especially those working at the nexus of such complex political, economic, and social contexts in community colleges—must possess a policy literacy to equitably and effectively facilitate in their roles as first-year and Basic Writing instructors. Such a task is not impossible, nor extraneous, as instructors with high levels of policy literacy are often able to teach with a more effective grasp of the material context of their students' lives.

In this article, I recall my meetings with two community college Basic Writing instructors, both of whom have come to possess a deep sense of policy literacy. I present two interwoven dialogues with educators at one suburban commuter community college in New York State from the fall of 2018. Together, we sought to create deeper knowledge concerning the social impact of commensuration, or “the transformation of different qualities [of instruction for basic writers] into a common metric,” through the complex network of policies and practices at the community college and related to the Basic Writing course (Espeland and Stevens). We conceived how this process of transformation dictates the methods by which class hours are processed at the community college and how this affects student experience. Credits commensurated as hours “count” for some offices (usually financial aid and for matriculation), while others “count” as credits for the registrar and for enrollment status. What emerged was the need for dialogue around policy and its confusions, the value instructors ascribe to policy in their work, and their own processes of acquiring a functional policy literacy.

Both participants emphasize that they developed their own individual sense of policy literacy mainly through direct and repeated contact with students and colleagues over extended periods of time. This was time spent teaching students, engaging with students outside of class, and working

alongside colleagues in the classroom and at administrative sites, signaling that while these policies and their implications are—presumably—available, their realities are best learned through firsthand experience. What results, unfortunately, is a scenario in which instructors with less policy literacy unintentionally play a part in putting their students at a disadvantage, lacking knowledge of relations among roll-out, influence, and impact, of administrative and economic policies around and within Basic Writing.

All told, I explore the extent to which experienced Basic Writing instructors consider policy literacy an important part of their work and validate *experience* as repeated and consistent contact with Basic Writing students and the Basic Writing program in order to realize what one participant calls “on-the-job training.” Necessarily, these questions manifest in an inquiry into how effectively these Basic Writing instructors may help their students to develop policy literacy, as well. I recommend that we invest in research on the effects of policy literacy on the experiences of Basic Writing instructors and students; encourage discussion of relevant policy within writing departments and especially in instructor dialogue pertaining to departmental protocol and assessment practices; and provide more support for adjunct and contingent faculty members who often do not have regular access to campus staff and offices that are sites for investigating policy contexts that undergird their Basic Writing courses.

### **THE NEED FOR POLICY LITERACY AMONG BASIC WRITING INSTRUCTORS**

While the policy landscape underlying the experiences of Basic Writing students at American community colleges continues to evolve, problems of access and equity persist. Over the past decade in particular, Basic Writing programs have undergone rapid and dramatic transformations. Co-requisite instructional models such as Peter Adams’ Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) have fundamentally changed the way educators conceptualize supplemental instruction for academically underprepared writers. By rolling pre-freshman credit hours together with credit-bearing course loads, these programs aim to address both the academic and economic needs of many struggling students (Adams et al.); however, what results is often a complex web of policy initiatives—including the unequal commensuration of credit hours and points—the unintended consequences of which can spell logistical and bureaucratic disaster for students and their families, many of whom may already see college itself as an alien landscape.

One might recognize the effects of these complexities by examining the persistence rates of students enrolled in first-year advisement programs (FYAP) aimed partly at clarifying such policies. In short, students who participate in FYAP persist at higher rates than their classmates who do not. The increase is even higher among students from minority backgrounds (Adil), particularly for Black men (Cody). This research is important, as it relays that the more access students have to trusted faculty and staff with relevant policy literacy, the more likely students are to persist and succeed in their coursework.

Consider how few students understand the details of the Basic Writing program and the policies relevant to them. In a previous study, I interviewed students about their own understandings of the relationship between financial aid policies and their Basic Writing courses. One student was wholly unaware of how Basic Writing courses exhausted her financial aid awards as well as the type of aid she had been awarded in general. Another admitted to never having taken a pre-college assessment test and was thus unaware of under what circumstances he was enrolled in Basic Writing in the first place, while yet another habitually dropped and re-enrolled in Basic Writing, unaware of how his academic standing was recorded and of how those false-starts were reflected in his aid award eligibility (Bruno).

Bureaucratic obfuscation at the community college is well-documented. Burton Clarke described it as a “cooling out,” wherein the administration, funding, and delegation of community college instruction often obfuscate the path toward matriculated, credit-bearing work, effectively building moats rather than drawbridges for disenfranchised students. Clarke’s ideas, first posited in the 1960s, have relevance today. In a study from 2019, Katharine M. Broton found that “a private grant program, which triggered a repackaging of students’ financial aid awards, *decreased* the educational degree aspirations and expectations of 2-year college students, on average” (79, author’s emphasis), largely substantiating and extending the points articulated by Clarke nearly 60 years earlier, namely that additional layers of bureaucracy, even when they are well-intentioned, have the potential to dissuade students from persisting.

Similarly, Ira Shor, in his *JBW* article “Illegal Literacy,” describes some of the same absurdity, as both he and one student were “baffled at the unfriendly registration process—the closed courses, limited choices, numerous steps, complex financial aid, rising tuition, and frequently changing requirements” (101). While Shor’s article was written over two decades ago, many of the same oppressive institutional practices persist at public colleges across

America. Clarke's work implies a responsibility of the institution to broker clear relationships between students and policy, while Shor's argument is one of political consciousness marking the detriments of bureaucracy for the most vulnerable students. Both Clark's institutional standpoint and Shor's critical consciousness resonate clearly with the current discussion of the financial and bureaucratic elements of disruption implicit in Basic Writing programs today.

More recently, the push to abolish Basic Writing programs across the country has equally altered student expectations for pre-freshman writing. This type of systematic restructuring of the writing program is still underwritten by a rhetoric of "excellence" and "standards" (Lamos 389). Regardless of the intent or efficacies of these changes, the simple act of revising or restructuring writing programs makes for more logistical obstacles, at least temporarily, as instructors (and students) must sort out policies and their applications in their academic and professional lives. What results is a period in which many instructors are confused about the relevant policies themselves. Until and unless they witness the impacts of these policies through the experience of their students, instructors may be unaware of how the rush to implement change harms their courses, their curricula, and most of all their students.

The educational sociologist Kevin Doherty asserts that the community college functions largely as a "contradiction," a dissonance that manifests in the space between the intended goals of the college and the actual institutional rollout of said programs and policies. While educators' primary focus lies in the pedagogical and curricular decisions relevant to such endeavors, they are often beholden to the constraints of fiscal and administrative policy design. This means that classrooms are impacted, that students are affected. One might extend Doherty's analysis to the more specific field of Basic Writing and recognize that, given the general, albeit unintended, propensity of policy design and the restructuring of writing programs to obscure the path toward persistence, many policy maneuvers may actually be having the unintended effect of cooling out students by way of obfuscation.

This study recognizes that, early in their careers and without the advantage of sustained contact with students, colleagues, and the policies that govern their college experiences, many educators do not possess the necessary *policy literacy* (Lo Bianco) to responsibly engage with these issues. Here is the problem: educators who teach Basic Writing courses are often unprepared for and unaware of the complex political and financial contexts that shape their teaching. The Basic Writing classroom draws a sort of under-

current, one that subtly dictates the moves of both students and instructors. This influence, largely overlooked, has deep implications for connection, confidence, and rapport. Students may think that their instructors understand these contexts and come to feel abandoned or frustrated once they realize that instructors do not.

Those instructors who do possess a functional policy literacy may communicate a greater sense of ease and belonging for burdened students, while sharing policy knowledge may translate to those students making more informed decisions about their academic careers, something that can save them time and money while clearly articulating the path toward graduation. Given that over half of “dependent students with family incomes below \$30,000 in 2011–12 started at a community college” (Chen et al.), and that 60% of all community college students enroll in pre-college coursework (Bailey), the likelihood of Basic Writing instructors working with students from extreme economic disadvantage is high. All of this amounts to circumstances in which a high level of instructor policy literacy is critical in the Basic Writing course.

Thus, the role of Basic Writing instructors is really twofold: First, they must navigate the pedagogical and curricular moves of effective teaching with academically underprepared students, and second, they must broker the political, administrative and financial bureaucracies of the community college. The latter of these imposed responsibilities requires not only policy literacy but also an empathy for the material conditions governing many of our students’ lived experiences.

These issues are exacerbated by the increasingly complex labor politics of community colleges. According to the American Federation of Teachers, 53% of all courses at community colleges are taught by part-time faculty (“Reversing Course”) and 65% of all developmental courses are taught by part-time faculty (Shults). Because the majority of educators who teach Basic Writing at community colleges are adjunct and contingent faculty, one cannot reasonably expect them to have the time or resources for investigating the many policies and practices pertaining to their courses. Adjunct and contingent faculty members are widely recognized not only as overworked and underpaid, but also as geographically isolated on the college campus, often without regular available office space, places to interact with colleagues and students, and little interaction with the important administrative offices and staff that undergird the Basic Writing experience. In this light, our underinvestment in the adjunct and contingent faculty that teach such a significant proportion of our most vulnerable students in Basic Writing

courses at community colleges begins to appear as the most obvious, but easily remedied, problem in policy literacy.

There is also a more general and legitimate argument to be made that instructors should *not* possess this knowledge, that they should float above the political and economic contexts, seek to make learning relevant and meaningful for students, and engage with students solely in view of their academics. Over the years, I have heard a few colleagues bemoan the “extra” responsibilities implicit in teaching Basic Writing courses, not that they require more pedagogical attention, but rather that Basic Writing courses come with the additional labor of the instructor serving as both financial aid counselor and academic advisor. But critically informed educators, those of us who maintain that education in setting is necessarily a political action, are aware that the material contexts and lived experiences of students have an important impact on academic performance and must be part of our purview. Thus, educators must strive to dismantle the systems of oppression that have historically disenfranchised so many students from underrepresented demographics. In this regard, a *critical* literacy for both students and instructors must be a part of a functioning policy literacy. Nor is it enough to anticipate how these policies and systems operate. Educators must also question *why* they operate, the ways in which they do, and advocate for students by holding policy authors and relevant actors accountable for equitable academics.

As writing programs across the country find themselves in a near constant state of flux, the impacts and effects of policies relevant to Basic Writing grow more cryptic. If educators develop their sense of literacy solely through classroom contact, without seeking closer access to centers of policy activity where its workings can be more fully recognized and where instructors can intervene, policy changes will still rewrite the rules underneath them, only to further disenfranchise the same student demographics such programs purport to address. This is not an argument for stasis, but rather an analysis of how, when, and where instructors develop the policy literacy necessary to make meaningful contributions to the full range of students’ lived experiences.

### **POLICY LITERACY IN A BASIC WRITING CONTEXT**

The term “policy literacy,” coined by Joseph Lo Bianco, generally refers to the “kind of literacy that literacy educators and researchers need to deploy to participate in and understand the ‘policy moment’” (213). Lo

Bianco originally theorized this term in the context of language policy, specifically as a way to seek inclusion of language needs and interests at a national level, but much of this theory has application in discussions of higher education policy, as the political infrastructure of public higher education and community colleges functions similarly to the bureaucracy of national policy decisions, albeit scaled back significantly. Lo Bianco's central idea is that "The policy process is the main vehicle in democratic societies for establishing authorised intervention and determining resource allocation" (213). Put another way, policy literacy allows relevant actors access to the means by which their fields and professions are governed. In the case of educators at community colleges, policy literacy grants access to the political, administrative, and financial structures that underly their institutions and directly impact their students—which works to ensure the persistence and retention of Basic Writing students.

Current research reports that the overwhelming majority of low-income and first-generation students possess a startling low level of policy literacy, as is evidenced by the "[loan] borrowing behavior" of first-generation college students (Furquim et al. 70). Many, in fact, are unaware of how their financial aid is processed or applied to their student accounts or what form their aid takes. This could mean that many students are not adequately preparing to enter repayment on student loans, while others may be unaware of the minimum requirements to maintain status or matriculation in grants or scholarship and fellowship awards.

Policy literacy, in this sense, might also be understood as a type of "institutional literacy," a wealth of knowledge pertinent to the "rules of the game," most of which is inherited, and passed down through social networks. As Stephanie Merz describes it, institutional literacy is

situated *in relation* to the larger institution, as *part of* the larger institution, or as a *manifestation* of the larger institution. The classroom is an important location to do this work—it is a local manifestation of institutional values. When we ask students to engage in literate practices in the classroom level, those practices are in fact related to larger institutional values. Institutional literacy is a means to explore those relationships. It does not entail simply knowing how to read and write at the university, but institutional literacy makes visible those connections between the macro and the micro, the local and the global, the classroom and the university. Institutional literacy is a method to engage students with their individual experiences

as they are related to larger institutional structures. (142, author's emphasis)

Whereas institutional literacy prioritizes the networks and relationships necessary for effectively navigating the institution, policy literacy, by contrast, emphasizes educators' understandings of the bureaucratic infrastructures that undergird the institution as a whole.

For first-generation students, a population disproportionately represented in Basic Writing, this literacy is only distributed on the campus itself, primarily through a narrow field of relations and interactions students are free to take on. In most cases, students' primary relationships in the community college form among their instructors. In this regard, many students benefit from meaningful interactions with people "specifically, high-status, non-kin, agents who occupy relatively high positions" in and around the university, "who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" to shepherd them through the first-year writing course and bridge toward the social capital of the institution (Stanton-Salazar 2). Given the dialogic and often biographical nature of first-year writing courses, Basic Writing instructors may adopt this role by cultivating the exchange of policy-related questions and information. As part of a critical praxis, Basic Writing instructors can only engage this work if they possess the requisite policy literacy themselves.

Policy literacy "requires that academics and teachers of literacy become more immersed in the operations of policy." It asks that agents "elevate literacy measures to prominence beyond education frameworks" (Lo Bianco 226) and recognize the significance of their practice in the context of the administrative and bureaucratic operations of the college as an institution. This call addresses that instructors—and especially Basic Writing instructors—may ultimately be capable of a general redistribution of embodied cultural capital as policy literacy—those tools, skills, and experiences necessary for best navigating experiences and advising students at the public two-year college. This sentiment may best be summarized by the Austrian economist, Fritz Machlup, who argued that "improvements of capacity, as a rule, result from the acquisition of 'knowing what' and 'knowing how'" (Machlup 8).

## **METHOD**

In the fall of 2018 and over the course of three months, I met with two instructors at one community college in New York state. At this time, the writing program was experimenting with replacing their Basic Writing courses

with a co-requisite model based on the Accelerated Learning Program. Both educators have been teaching Basic Writing courses and are recognized by their colleagues as experts in the teaching of pre-freshman writing courses. Given the nature of this study, and my own involvement in the data, interviews provided a good opportunity for “the joint production of *accounts* or *versions* of experiences, emotions, identities, knowledges, opinion, truth, etc.” (Rapley 16, author’s emphasis). Interviews with multiple participants produce an opportunity for a range of experiences and perspectives (Rubin and Rubin), which could help represent how policy and Basic Writing intersect, overlap, or collide at community colleges.

Approached with pre-written questions, my interviews supported participant-led dialogue. This became a collaborative, active format wherein, “interviewer and respondent tell a story together” (Denzin 343). Such a design allowed for greater dialogue, not just between the participants, their narratives, and their histories, but I was also able to work with what John M. Johnson calls a “complimentary reciprocity” wherein there was an exchange of “some form of help, assistance, or other form of information” (288).

I chose to meet with these two participants because I sought to see the issue of policy literacy in the Basic Writing course from the perspective of both a contingent faculty member as well as a tenured professor. Barbara<sup>1</sup>, a native New Yorker spent a time teaching in Georgia before returning to New York as a doctoral candidate in higher education leadership. She is well versed in student support structures, something substantiated by her working across multiple campuses and in a variety of roles from adjunct lecturer to student support specialist. Melody was recently awarded full-professorship, earned her doctorate from an ivy-league university, and originally specialized in linguistics and Medieval literature. Her introduction into Basic Writing was originally borne out of the “needs of the department,” as she puts it, rather than an independently motivated choice. Regardless of the differences between Barbara’s and Melody’s formal education and professional status at the college, both are professional educators but also, in a sense, professional students who seek to grow their knowledge of the field through their proximity to the workings of institutional power and its conveyances in the community college. Because it was not in my original study of students to ask instructors’ race, I do not assume their racial identities and do not report it here. Still, I acknowledge the overarching need in my own, and any, theory of policy literacy for instructors and other policy agents to come from and identify with the same communities as the students they serve.

## Learning on the Job

At the heart of this study, I considered the following primary questions, all of which I believe work to reveal the complexity and obfuscation of administrative policies at the community college.

- To what degree do community college Basic Writing instructors consider themselves literate in the details of academic, administrative, and financial aid policies?
- To what extent do community college Basic Writing instructors consider policy literacy a part of their professional responsibilities?
- To what extent do community college Basic Writing instructors believe that academic, administrative, and financial aid policies affect their classrooms and their students?

What emerged was an analysis of instructor literacy related to three important types of policies:

- Credit commensuration
- Grading and accreditation
- Financial aid and awards

Instead of framing my discussion around these questions and emergent findings, these questions are reflected in the implications of this text. I organize responses according to the above mentioned “types” of policies: credit commensuration, grading and accreditation, and financial aid and awards. The division of these types, I admit, is somewhat artificial, as the relationships between these issues overlap in ways that make them nearly impossible to untangle. However, by dividing my interpretation of the data into subcategories, I was able to locate key findings relevant to increasing policy literacy among faculty and persistence among students. I aim to describe their relevance and impact, and the possibility of their influence in future work, in the latter portions of this paper.

### **INTERPRETATIONS: INTERVIEWS WITH TWO BASIC WRITING INSTRUCTORS**

At the outset of my interviews, it did not take long for Barbara and Melody to begin discussing how financial aid and other administrative policies affect their teaching and classroom experience in the Basic Writing course. In discussing credit commensuration, grading policies for Basic Writing courses, and the distribution of loan awards, both Barbara and Melody recognized the material influence of policy design and their own

lack of preparedness, stressing that they are often underprepared to meet the challenge of mitigating their effects. Melody describes this succinctly when she states, “You know, we don’t stick to our specialties, so we often have to multi-task, and [undergo] on-the-job-training.” Despite the fact that Barbara and Melody are established and well-respected Basic Writing instructors, they recognize their shortcomings in light of the intersection of administrative and financial aid policies in the Basic Writing course and at the community college.

What became clear to me, however, was that in identifying their own perceived shortcomings, Barbara and Melody were demonstrating their high level of policy literacy. Only in retrospect—when recalling a period in which they were *developing* their policy literacy—were they able to critique their own confusion and misunderstandings. This implies that many instructors may not even be aware of the limitations of their policy literacy in the moments it is most important. In the following sub-sections, I relay the observations and experiences of Barbara and Melody as they recall the impact of policy on their classrooms and teaching, as well as their own paths to a functional level of policy literacy. Together, these reflections reveal the complex ways policy literacy affects the classroom experience for both educators and students.

### **Credit Commensuration**

Perhaps the most striking aspect of policy illiteracy among both students and instructors in Basic Writing courses comes in the confusion surrounding credit commensuration. These enrollment policies are notoriously confusing—a bureaucracy of forms, protocols, and policies—part of the “cluttered and clotted condition” subsuming “the learning needs of teachers and students” (Shor 101). This is one way these policies obfuscate the *commensuration* of credits. Far too often, credits “count” differently for different administrative offices. For example, a Basic Writing course might “count” as a credit *hour* for the purposes of keeping a student matriculated and enrolled in services such as student health insurance, but that same hour may not “count” as a credit *point* for the Office of the Registrar. The implications of this bureaucratic mess are often dire. Dropping below a full-time credit load can jeopardize a student’s access to health insurance, financial aid, and matriculation. This often makes it difficult for working students with uncounted credits to maintain steady hours or for students with familial need to meet their personal obligations. If this type of policy is so important, why don’t more students and teachers understand it?

## Learning on the Job

Both Barbara and Melody describe a general confusion surrounding the commensuration of Basic Writing classes that occupies the first few days of class; the course counts as “hours” and not as “points.” Students, naturally, are confused. As Barbara and Melody face explaining credit commensuration to their students, they reckon with the fact that early in their careers, they wrestled with their own misunderstandings of the issue. They know their Basic Writing coursework is costing students money while not counting toward their degree, but this point is slow to resonate. Barbara explains:

I don't think students are aware. I'm not sure how it's explained to them, because you think of the process. . . They come in and take this test that they had no clue about—there's no studying or anything—and then they're in this class. They're like, “Oh, cool—this is the class I'm taking.” They don't even understand that this is not counting toward your credit, but it is exhausting your financial aid, and you have to think about a student who might be in developmental English and developmental Math.

Here Barbara underscores what feels like her own implicit understanding, something she credits to having taught Basic Writing at the community college “since the beginning of time.” She identifies with students' vulnerability, marking disenfranchisement. As with all good Basic Writing instructors, such identifications form early and strong.

To continue, Barbara describes her experience working as a “specialist of academic support” at another college, which she knows provides insider access and a privileged standpoint. Not all Basic Writing educators have the opportunity to specialize before their teaching begins. Barbara describes:

I work with pretty much all adult students, and they are students who probably are classified as going into a developmental course, so yeah it really is all related [to teaching Basic Writing courses]. It's just about trying to meet the students where they are right now, and then getting them to place where they want to—and essentially need to—be for whatever their goals are academically, and their whole selves basically.

Barbara stresses her experiences working directly with adult learners have helped to expose her to a variety of plights requiring students' policy literacy at the community college. That deeply refined institutional knowledge is necessary as a baseline for navigating policy is evidence of the complexity

of higher education bureaucracy as well as the risk it poses to vulnerable students.

Barbara also reasons that her students struggle to understand these issues at the most basic, conceptual level. When students do begin to perceive implications of knowing too little of policy, for example, commensuration, Melody reports that students see this as an issue of “fairness.”

I’ve had students tell me that this is a waste of time, and students’ parents will often say that this is a way for the school to get money from them. So, they didn’t view this as a skills thing. Students have said that they were frustrated that 101 is a prerequisite that they can’t take, and so they’re feeling as though they’re being held up.

In addressing remedial placements as an issue of “fairness,” Barbara’s students are identifying a more generalizable trend, namely that basic education courses in many circumstances do appear to have an impact on students’ rates of retention and persistence – a point widely recognized in Basic Writing literature, but which continues to be challenged by more current research (Schnee and Shakoor; Schrynemakers et. al.).

Above all, Barbara and Melody observe students’ frustration and confusion concerning the commensuration of credits. Such feelings are justified. Nowhere is this material clearly articulated. As Barbara says, “I don’t think they’re getting that. . . information from financial aid or orientation.” How might we simplify the way information is distributed to Basic Writing instructors and students, especially given that basic writers and many adjuncts teaching Basic Writing are in a skewed position against a large and often obscure system?

While both Barbara and Melody have developed a relatively strong policy literacy, they note that many of their colleagues—especially contingent faculty and those teaching Basic Writing for the first time—rarely have the exposure necessary to develop this type of literacy. Barbara relays that she does not believe that many new instructors conceive of how commensuration policies influence their courses, especially credit commensuration:

I don’t think that they are well-informed. It takes time for you to know the institution’s policies about those things. It takes time for you to be informed about that, right? So, just coming in, I didn’t know my first semester. So, thinking back to my first semester, “This is it,” and someone told me that they don’t get credit for this, that this is just a pre-req for them to get into 101, and I was like, “Oh,

okay,” and that’s pretty much what I knew. . . but it’s always been a population I’m interested in, so I’m not sure if everybody else is doing that sort of research. . . and if they’re brand new, I can’t imagine that they are...

Barbara’s emphasis on “time” is an important aspect of her discussion. She recognizes that only through consistent and repeated exposure did she develop a functional policy literacy and doubts whether “everybody else is doing that sort of research.” If adjunct, contingent, or early-career instructors do not have the time or exposure to learn these policies, if they are not pursuing the relevant literature or spending time near or around sites of policy action within the college, the students who enroll in their courses—by no fault of their instructor and only by the roll of the dice—may be at a significant disadvantage.

Direct contact between adjunct faculty members and department chairs, program directors, and departmental mentors makes this information more accessible (Diegel), but as both Barbara and Melody describe, most adjuncts are left to learn on their own. Barbara explains that her only exposure to information about the Basic Writing course and its credit commensuration policies came by word-of-mouth, which should remind us of Melody’s claim about “learning on the job.” These informal exchanges are described by Barbara and Melody, who recall both receiving policy information as well as relaying policy information via e-mail, over coffee, and in the faculty lounge.

Again, Barbara’s comment that she is “not sure if everybody else is doing that sort of research” is really the key here. While Barbara’s own professional interests in Basic Writing student populations and pedagogies may have helped to substantiate her knowledge, her understandings—as she readily admits—have come primarily from the *time* she has spent with students and in a variety of roles, ranging from instructor to student support specialist. This begs an important question: What is happening when Basic Writing instructors do *not* independently seek this information and have not had much experience with Basic Writing student populations? The constraints of teaching, especially for many adjuncts who are historically overworked and underpaid, could make these asks difficult.

### **Grading Policies**

Because the commensuration of Basic Writing credits is so cryptic, students rarely perceive how their work is evaluated. Dealing with so much

obfuscation around credit accumulation likewise obscures the process of grading. This is further complicated by the trend toward non-grading, labor-based grading, and portfolio evaluation at community colleges and in Basic Writing courses. In any of these approaches, instructors forgo standard numerical grading throughout the duration of the semester, which—while well-intentioned—can often further obfuscate an already numbingly bureaucratic process and alienate the students with the most need. These innovations are often placed on top of, or adapted to, departmental and campus policies that are not fully flexible. These layered combinations make it difficult for both instructors and students to recognize the limitations, possibilities, and impacts of grading in Basic Writing courses.

For their Basic Writing courses, Barbara and Melody describe a “SWUR” grading policy, which Melody explains stands for “Satisfactory, Withdrawal, Unsatisfactory, or Repeat.’ If they’ve completed all of the work, but they just didn’t complete it at the college level, students get the R and then Withdraw is W.” I asked her how accessible this information was, if it was generally understood. She responded frankly: “I’m going to say no, because it actually wasn’t until two years into my teaching this course that someone actually explained what ‘R’ meant to me, and that’s because I asked, ‘What is the difference—I don’t understand.’ Like I had to hunt it down.”

Such a phenomenon felt so unbelievable that I decided to try to hunt this information down myself. I figured I would visit the English department website to get some clarity. When I followed the hyperlinks from page to page and finally clicked on “developmental writing,” I was brought to a dead page. Where could I find the answers? How is this course graded? I couldn’t help but wonder how many confused and anxious faculty must have done the same thing, sought out the information, and wound up at this same dead end. It took a while, but I was able to track down some information. After navigating my way to the course catalog, I read that basic reading and writing courses were assigned according to placement exam score, graded on an S-W-U-R basis, and could not be applied to any degree or certificate. Still, this was unclear. What does SWUR mean, anyway? There was no definition, only acronyms. So, it was not just me, nor was it just Melody. This information was as confusing as it was inaccessible. Even if one had the initiative to track this information down, it’s unlikely that they would know what to do with it.

Barbara describes a similar sense of frustration and even despair when she explains how her course is graded to her students. Her students do not typically understand the evaluation processes, so she attempts “to engage them and tell them how valuable this course is to them and that. . . just trying

to motivate them so that they feel better about the situation.” But she also adds that many instructional faculty, and most other part-time faculty, do not get the SWUR policies either. She explains this in an extended response:

I’m actually mentoring a new adjunct. She came last year. We had coffee and stuff. So, her first semester, she didn’t teach developmental, and I think that might be kind of—if at all possible—they try not to do that anymore? I don’t know. Maybe? I don’t think it’s an official rule, but I think they may just try not to do that. . . so this year, she got a developmental writing and a 101, and then the e-mails about the portfolio reading came up, and she e-mailed me and said, “Hi, I haven’t talked to you, but I got developmental writing this semester and a 101. I saw this e-mail about a portfolio—what is that?” So, I was like, “Oh, cool. . .” I have all the information, and I gave her the information, but “You’re teaching developmental writing, and you don’t know about the end requirement of that course. Wow, that’s problematic.”

Barbara is emphatic in her frustration with such a fundamental lack of information, though she remains empathetic to her fellow part-time colleague. She believes this problem stems from the institution, the nature of adjunct labor, rather than an individual shortcoming. She reminds me that adjuncts simply do not “have the institutional knowledge, because you’re not there. You don’t have an office. You’re floating around, but you’re also teaching at ten thousand different places, so even if there is an info session like that, you’re not available to go.”

Barbara’s description of an “institutional knowledge” is really a synonym for policy literacy. When she says “You’re not there. You don’t have an office,” she means you do not have the downtime or the casual interactions with colleagues and students that would lead to a functional policy literacy. Again, it appears time, exposure, and insider access are the decisive elements in developing a deep and functional policy literacy.

Of course, grading policies are more complex than simply administering final grades. Throughout our interview Melody muses on the implications of grading policy design on her classroom. She thinks about the campus-wide attendance policy, which states that absence equivalent to one week’s coursework results in a failure of the course. Instructors have leeway here. But while most instructors opt to threaten a reduced grade, this type of bargaining doesn’t work in the Basic Writing course, because the

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course is graded on a pass/fail basis. What seems like a moot point reveals deep problems with policy implementation in the Basic Writing course, as Melody explains:

So if I say, I deduct 10 points [for attendance], I deduct 10 points from what? 10 points deducted from “pass” equals what? . . . Some people I know will say, if you miss 5 or more classes, you won’t be able to submit your portfolio, so at least there is some sort of policy that tries to reinforce that attendance is important, but at the same time you’re trying to be more lenient than the school’s official policy.

This scenario exemplifies the complexity of the relationship between policy and the course experience, including pedagogy and classroom management. As an experienced instructor, Melody has a good understanding of the campus attendance and enrollment policies, but to a novice instructor, the idea of allowing leeway on a campus wide attendance policy is nothing short of Kafkaesque. As Melody describes, what results is often a cryptic and confusing network of pedagogical moves based on a flawed understanding of the policy implications.

### **Financial Aid and Award Policies**

Of all the policies that govern the experience of Basic Writing instructors and students, the impact of financial aid and awards may be the most abstract, and one may argue, the least associated with the Basic Writing instructor’s professional responsibility. And yet, both Barbara and Melody contend that they witness aid and award policies influencing their classroom practice every semester.

For example, Melody keeps a running calendar in her head. Over the course of her career, she has learned that both state and federal aid awards are disbursed about a week after classes begin. This means her students will not see those funds, and cannot use them to purchase their textbooks, until the third or fourth class session. In her words:

The way the students have explained it, the textbook money does not come to them until the first week of class, so if I have them do homework from the textbook, then to some of them that represents a hardship, because they can’t outlay the cash and get reimbursed.

This type of practical issue is only understood through experience, and so a novice instructor worried about course preparation, syllabus design, and classroom management would likely miss it.

What the students are experiencing is an incongruity between classroom experience and financial aid policy, and Melody—who is a seasoned educator—knows how to adjust because she has listened to her students over the years. She has been in the classroom where these realities have impacted her practice in concrete ways. She has taught when only half of her students had access to texts and materials. In assigning her work through digital formats and even paper photocopies, Melody has found a workaround. Are we to reasonably expect that all instructors can intuit or afford the type of moves Melody has made?

Put simply, in the case of aid distribution and the problem of textbooks, students receive financial aid to attend class, but then the methods of administering financial aid awards make it impossible to complete the coursework unless an instructor adjusts for the schedule of aid distribution. This, however, is dependent on the instructor *knowing* that they have to make those adjustments in the first place. Both Barbara and Melody comment on this throughout their interviews. Barbara has more years in the Basic Writing classroom and more formal training in support services, while Melody has evolved her nuanced understanding of policy in Basic Writing through other responsibilities at the community college as well as through teaching.

For example, Melody has served as a member of the academic dismissal committee in a role that offered insight into the material conditions of her students' lives. I asked Melody about college cost and students' reactions to accruing debt while enrolled in developmental writing, and she responded by describing academic dismissal hearings as a place many students first confront their mounting debt.

Our academic dismissal hearings are for students who have failed two semesters, and there's more language I could look up for you, but I haven't done it in a semester or two, so I've forgotten it, but basically, they are failing out, and before we let them come back, they have to come talk to us. And some of them have really compelling stories, so you sit there and go--okay, there's a reason your head wasn't in the game. But other students say, "Well, I was working 40 hours a week," so you ask, "What's your plan for this semester," and they say, "I'm gonna work 40 hours a week," and you can say, "Okay, you didn't figure it out yet. You didn't get what caused the

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problem.” But one of the things I always ask at those dismissal hearings is, I ask about their financial situation, because some of them are already 10, 15, 20 thousand dollars in debt. And they have no idea. I think it’s because they’re on financial aid, and they don’t see the numbers. You know it’s like magic money. . . . As you know they don’t see the bill, and then they see the bill and they gasp.

Melody’s experience with the academic dismissal hearing committee was not required because she taught Basic Writing; rather, it was a contingency of her position as an associate professor. This reveals that her understandings of how financial aid policies impact the standing of her Basic Writing students came only through her interactions with those students who were already at risk of being dismissed from the college, already had failed Basic Writing, and had already accrued mounting student loan debt. This type of position—serving on an academic dismissal committee—is not something that most, or even many, instructors are likely to have, especially not adjunct and contingent faculty. As a full-time faculty member, Melody possesses the status of a privileged insider. She is closer to the institution, and so she has more policy knowledge than even a part-time instructor teaching the same courses.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

As I read over the data from Barbara and Melody’s interviews, I came to realize that time as well as institutional positioning and experience were the decisive factors in forming a functional policy literacy. While such an observation may at first appear intuitive, I began to reflect on Janice Kaplan and Barnaby Marsh’s pop-science book, *How Luck Happens*. As their central thesis, they argue that “luck” is not some supernatural phenomenon, but rather a calculus in which one can manage the variables within their control to increase the likelihood of a desired outcome. The simplest example they give is as follows: If one wants to succeed as an actor, spend as much time as possible in the cafes around Hollywood production sets. The same may be said here. To better understand the policies pertinent to the Basic Writing course, spend more time around the department and students. Instructors must come from and identify with these communities, finding ways to decrease the distance between students and the institution.

At the outset of this study, I asked three primary questions: To what extent do community college Basic Writing instructors consider themselves literate in the details of academic, administrative, and financial aid policies?

## Learning on the Job

To what extent do community college Basic Writing instructors consider policy literacy to be a part of their professional responsibilities? And further, to what extent do community college Basic Writing instructors believe that academic, administrative, and financial aid policies affect their classrooms and their students? Despite differing backgrounds and institutional statuses, Barbara and Melody revealed strong policy literacy, a shared sense of instructor responsibility, and a common understanding of the impact of such policies. In addition, it also became evident that first, a nexus of time and experience creates the best opportunity for Basic Writing instructors to develop a functional policy literacy; second, that students who arbitrarily place into sections with more policy literate instructors may have a more informed and generative experience, and perhaps even more success, in Basic Writing; and third, that novice and contingent faculty members should not be saddled with or faulted for this incongruity.

In my interviews, instructors disclose that they do not have formal academic or professional training in either writing pedagogy or higher education policy. Barbara and Melody have learned the political nature of their work through first-hand experience. Given that most Basic Writing courses have high instructor turnover, the students who land in Barbara's and Melody's classes are the lucky ones. They will receive an education informed by meaningful understandings of relevant commensuration, accreditation, and financial aid policies. Barbara is an expert in student support services, a doctoral candidate in educational leadership and administration, who still admits only to understanding the ins-and-outs of the political network unique to community college mainly through first-hand experience. Melody, a tenured professor who has navigated the same program, department, and policies for over a decade, states the same.

Recognizing how both instructors and their students understand policy design is critical in gauging how community colleges work. Many instructors who teach Basic Writing have their hearts in the right place, but without the requisite policy literacy, they may do more harm than good, as they are more prone to see the classroom as an isolated arena, reinforce the misalignment between rigor and policy, or worse, evince a lack of care. I have heard a select few Basic Writing instructors tout the "toughness" of

their grading, believing that their job is to repair a student's writing before they earn their seat in the first-year writing course. While I protest this sentiment first on a pedagogical level, I am also viscerally reminded of Hsun Tsu's comparison of education to the act of straightening a board (Tsu), not to mention repeated failures in developmental education exhaust financial aid, and exclusive enrollment in developmental studies prohibits students from accessing many need-based awards programs.

Thus, policy literacy has deep implications for Basic Writing students, the majority of whom come from low-income backgrounds and are often the first in their families to attend college. Those students who wind up in classrooms with policy-literate instructors will be at an advantage, as these instructors can pass along that institutional knowledge, or the rules of the game, that often predict success or failure for so many students.

In this regard, policy-literate instructors may produce more policy literate students. This is important, as the cost of college and the complex web of financial aid policies most clearly affect the most economically disenfranchised. Given that financial aid policies are so cryptic and loan lending policies so predatory, many students who cannot afford to pay for college out of pocket may wind up in financial situations far worse than if they had not enrolled in the first place, because they lack the requisite cultural or social capital necessary to navigate for better loan conditions, a fact evidenced by the notorious practices of some private for-profit colleges (Gavira).

I want to be clear: this phenomenon is not indicative of the *people* who populate these positions but rather the nature of the position itself. The very nature of part-time faculty positions makes it such that adjunct instructors are less likely to be included in departmental meetings and less likely to occupy institutional spaces where policy is created or enacted in real time, but— perhaps more importantly— they are equally unlikely to be included in informal dialogue with colleagues around the office. Barbara and Melody recall that many of their policy understandings evolved out of “water-cooler” talk, as colleagues trouble-shoot the more onerous parts of their work. They mean to say that a part-time position places these instructors at a distance from opportunities around campus for learning more about institutional policies.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

As stated, the primary finding from this study is that experience, time, and repeated interactions with both students and faculty around the Basic

Writing course leads to the highest levels of policy literacy, but that institutional location, status, and privileging also play a significant part. Recommendations must build on these understandings, expedite the process of attaining a functional policy literacy, and address the institutional inequities that ostracize adjunct and contingent faculty in particular.

First, there is a great need for more research into the efficacy of policy implementation among Basic Writing instructors and especially among part-time and contingent faculty members at community colleges. Second, writing programs need to include meaningful and substantive dialogue about policy in their discussions of departmental protocol as a way to make clear the relationship between policy and practice. Third, adjunct and contingent faculty members require more support and mentorship, not simply in terms of pedagogical development, but also in their ability to navigate policies early in their careers.

1. *More Research into the efficacy of policy implementation among Basic Writing instructors.* The dearth of research in instructor policy literacy is notable. Given that Basic Writing courses are often beholden to a uniquely complex set of policies and protocols, more research into the efficacy of the dispersal of these policies and protocols can only help educators and administrators bring the picture of this complex problem into focus. While there is a small body of literature on policy literacy, there is even less available research in part-time, contingent, and adjunct faculty members' experiences working with the complex policy framework undergirding the Basic Writing course.

Particular research might take on the sub-area of adjunct and contingent faculty's experience with policy literacy in Basic Writing. Similar research might be conducted through the professional development materials available to prepare instructors to teach Basic Writing. Ultimately, research might continue to ask: In what ways are instructors preparing to teach Basic Writing being prepared to navigate the policy network undergirding their courses?

Here, research could work to extend our understandings of what Mary Soliday posits as "the politics of remediation." Research and recursive practice in the politics of Basic Writing is critical in developing the meaningful dialogue addressed in these two recommendations. Without more data on the experiences of adjunct and contingent faculty preparing to teach Basic Writ-

ing, we can neither equitably reform policies nor ensure that the educators who must work within them have access to the literacy necessary to understand and implement them. Some of this work has already been taken up by scholars in the field of Basic Writing studies. As Lynn Reid aptly questions in her *JBW* article from 2018: “Are administrators and legislators inherently disinterested in equitable education across the board? Are all instructors who are labeled ‘Basic Writing experts’ necessarily aligning their work with a social justice mission?” (28).

2. *Linking the Discussion of Policy Decisions with Departmental Protocol.* Community college writing programs are frequently tasked with reimagining their department protocol. Committees regularly form to redefine the protocol of writing programs’ learning outcomes, assessment practices, and goals in general. Because the study of learning outcomes and assessment practices is viewed by many as an ongoing and evolving sub-field in the discipline of Writing Studies, connecting more dialogue about the policies that undergird those outcomes and assessment practices might lead to higher levels of policy literacy among writing department faculty members. After all, learning outcomes and grading and assessment practices represent the political nature of a writing program. Educators should thus be encouraged to consider the implicit political nature of their work not necessarily as *additional* labor but rather as an embedded aspect of teaching Basic Writing.

One way to link the discussion of relevant policy to these issues of protocol is to specify the symbiotic relationship between policy and protocol. While learning outcomes and assessment practices are often discussed, argued, and designed over pedagogical orientation, it is important that instructors also recognize their policy relevance – that these decisions manifest in concrete experiences for Basic Writing students.

3. *Advocating for Adjunct and Contingent Faculty in Basic Writing.* The problem of adjunct labor extends far beyond the scope of a study such as this. We should all be aware that the problems identified by these participants have much more to do with the politics of adjunct faculty labor than they do the shortcomings of individual adjunct faculty members. Still, I make this practical recommendation based on the belief that, even though adjunct labor is in desperate need of reform and reinvention, Basic Writing students will benefit

from an increased policy literacy of *all* writing program instructors.

Adjunct and contingent faculty members teaching the Basic Writing course might, for example, be grouped into cohorts with more seasoned instructors with a functional level of policy literacy. This strategy is not unique among portfolio assessment groups, and thus research into the efficacy of such a strategy as well as its implementation could pave the way for a more equitable distribution of policy literacy among instructors and ultimately to the benefit of students.

Taken together, these recommendations represent an effort to increase dialogue and collaboration among Basic Writing instructors, college administrators, and other policy agents. Given that writing programs are often seen as programs unto themselves, Basic Writing programs become an even more esoteric community, further separate from the college community at large. By encouraging Basic Writing instructors to address the implicitly political nature of their work by means of a more developed policy literacy, we might work toward a more intelligent, equitable, and transparent policy design, one that is not imposed solely from the top down, but rather informed, and even authored, by the very people who need to understand it most.

#### **NOTE**

1. Names are pseudonyms.

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