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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Educational Climate of the Sixties

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

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

Tear gas was the method of choice for containing protests as violence escalated. One never knew when or where you'd find tear gas. One morning someone opened the window in the reading lab and tear gas filled the room; we were next door to the Placement Office where military service groups were recruiting. You could walk across campus and get gassed in low places where tear gas clung. One day at high noon, the guard chased a group across Sprout Plaza and helicopters tear gassed staff and faculty going to lunch. Rioters firebombed the reading lab at a nearby community college, but we escaped fire damage. One morning someone found a crudely made pipe bomb on the inside stairway of our old wooden building. Fortunately, it failed to ignite; had it gone off our building would have been totally burned out.

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

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

I was active in the women’s movement because when I went to Berkeley as a visiting associate professor from Maryland, the dean promised, “We will review you for tenure when you get here.” They kept saying that for 3 years and then reduced me to a lecturer. I helped organize the protest to Department of Health, Education &
Welfare on sexism and later was on the class action suit we filed. The lawsuit was eventually dismissed with prejudice against those of us who had filed it. After 3 years, the dean finally broke down and reviewed two of the women in education for tenure, myself and another woman, and two men. We all submitted our portfolios in the fall. The two men were validated by their committees in February and went ahead and got approved and got tenure, but the women’s committees delayed until April. (My youngest granddaughter recently finished her senior thesis on the legal actions of the League of Academic Women, of which I was a member, against the University of California at Berkeley. She found that most of the women teaching at Berkeley today are still lecturers. Although only two percent of the full professors were women in 1970, today they represent four percent of that rank, not a great increase in 30 years (Maxwell email message, 2003).

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

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

Providing Learning Assistance

In addition to the students already described, other populations started coming through the doors of higher education. Beginning with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with disabilities were granted easier access to college and also given assurances of academic assistance (Hardin, 1988). Continuing to 1990, with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, access for the disabled became a matter of course for all postsecondary institutions. Schools have been charged to provide “reasonable” accommodation, and the number of disabled students attending college has grown steadily from the 1970s, in part due to increased support provided by the elementary and secondary schools. By 1994, 75% of disabled adults had completed high school (Education Daily, 9/2/94), and 14,994 seniors took special editions of the SAT designed for the disabled (Casazza & Silverman, 1996). One group of students at Berkeley, although I had them at other places as well, were LD (learning disabled) students, who had become juniors and seniors. What was fascinating about them was how they had managed to find interesting ways to compensate for their disabilities. Some of them would get their textbooks for fall courses at the beginning of the summer and read them before fall. Others would spend 20 hours on an assignment, and some of them would totally avoid writing anything. One man very ingeniously would scotch tape and paste his essays together, and he got caught because he was a graduate student in social work where he had to write up his own cases. Another one was a Forestry major, very bright kid, and he just had a terrible time with reading and spelling, but he hired the secretary in the Forestry Department to type his papers. (There were poor spellers on the Forestry faculty, so she was used to it.) This student had very good ideas; one of his ideas was on reforestation in Africa. The professor took it and actually applied it to a project in Africa. These students were not dumb at all, but they had difficulty expressing what they knew and could do in written papers. I have always admired LD students because they work so much harder than anybody else.

Along with giving students freedom of choice in their education, however, came risk and the subsequent “opportunity to fail” (Cross, 1983). This sometimes resulted in a “revolving door,” a concept created to describe the process of opening the doors to college without providing the appropriate support systems to assist students to succeed, causing them to come in out of the open door. As students dropped out and stopped out more frequently, the debate regarding lowering standards became more heated, and was often followed by a call to raise admission standards and essentially close the door of opportunity to thousands of new students (Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

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

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

Every four-year college graduated or retained a higher proportion of its lower-achieving students than any community college did. To be sure, the selective colleges did have to deal with the massive numbers of open-admission students, but there may be other reasons for the difference in graduation/retention rates. Perhaps the underprepared students who entered junior colleges were more highly motivated than those who entered junior colleges, or perhaps the expectations of the faculty in four-year colleges that students will complete college made a difference (Maxwell, 1979, p. 15). A lot of southern states mandated testing and remedial courses, but there are always problems with forcing students into a program. There is really no one way, one best way, to deal with underprepared students. From a faculty point of view, if you can assign them to a course and get them out of your office you are fine. That is cheap and quick, but it doesn’t assure success.

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

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

The Link to High School Preparation

I think we are really in a state of flux now because, after all, we have dumped (to use the term advisedly) billions of dollars into helping disadvantaged students to pull up their educational achievement. They are not on a par yet, but they are getting closer to the traditional students.

There is still room for improvement, but compared to what they were 20 years ago many of them can compete successfully in today’s programs. And we also have better high school preparation for many students. So although we have pulled up a lot of students, we are also getting a lot more who need help. The proportion of high school graduates who want to come to college is larger than we have ever seen. In some areas today, it is hitting close to 75%; groups are predicting it will be 80% in 5 years. It is as if everybody will be going to college, and there are more opportunities because you have even the armed services giving college courses as a recruiting tool.

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

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

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

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

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Looking at the Future

I think it (relegating developmental education to 2-year colleges) is inevitable as we get more students in college because, with very few exceptions, 4-year college budgets are not growing. They have increased every year since WWII, and the public is saying, no more. Since 2-year college budgets are easier to increase, that puts the 4-year college in a position where it has to shift more to 2-year schools. I think it will hit the 4-year college in a position where it has to get rid of those terms we have inherited. “Learning assistance” still hasn’t got contaminated. I still think we have to learn to avoid compartmentalizing people and stay open to the fact that they can improve. Not only do we need to give them a chance and the support to improve, we need to help them really believe that they can. That must be conveyed, so they have some hope.

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

NADE News: The Chairperson Is Not The Committee

By Patricia J. Newell, NADE President

Effective committees can be one of the most important working mechanisms at the center of any organization. NADE has over 15 committees within our organization. Are you involved with any of them?

Working on a NADE committee can and should be an extremely rewarding experience to both the individual and NADE. Effective committees allow responsibilities to be shared in many areas. More members can become involved, specialized skills of members can be used to best advantage, new or inexperienced members can gain confidence while serving on a committee, issues can be examined in detail by a committee, and committees allow NADE to work more efficiently by delegating some of the work to committees.

We need you to take an active role in your organization, and serving on a committee is an excellent way to get started. The most effective committees have a mixture of personalities. The big thinkers understand how the committee serves NADE and fits into the big picture. The creatives provide the ideas that get the committee moving. The pragmatics recognize the limitations of the committee, identify possible problems, and suggest solutions. The team players understand the importance of working together for the good of the committee and NADE and help the committee function. What kind of committee member are you? We need you all!

Please go to the NADE Web site at www.nade.net and look at the committee descriptions. See if there is one that interests you. You can find the current Chairperson’s contact information in the Leadership Directory. Please contact him or her and volunteer to get involved.

NADE: Helping underprepared students prepare, prepared students advance, and advanced students excel!

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