INTRODUCTION

“To Embrace Every Child of California”

A toast to the University of California: To have laid its foundations broad enough to embrace every child of California that thirsts for knowledge!

Given at a banquet for legislators in February 1867, upon the occasion of their inspection visit to the proposed site for the university (Ferrier 1930, 284).

Remedial writers, like the poor, seem always to be with us.

It is more than passing strange, then, that programs and courses for these writers are almost always regarded as provisional by the institutions that offer them. With few exceptions, they are seen as special short-term measures to handle a crisis of illiteracy, or malliteracy, afflicting certain segments of the student body.

The crisis, in fact, has shown itself to have such remarkable staying power that the word crisis hardly applies. Throughout the 150-year history of composition instruction in American higher education, crises in students’ literacy have been declared with regularity. The pronouncements have been so regular that composition scholars have been able to map these “crisis events” onto a larger American topography: crises in literacy correlate closely with moments of broad social change in American life, and with the concomitant expansion of college admission practices. A crisis
—or at least a rhetoric of crisis—develops when the academy moves to embrace a population of students who had not previously been seen as “college material.”

The study of this rhetoric of crisis affords purchase on a delicate array of tensions that surround social class, race, entitlement, and access to higher education. Again and again, students’ incapacity to deploy appropriate grammar or diction has been elided with their perceived inability to exercise taste, refinement, and even moral probity. For example, Harvard’s Charles William Eliot expected, in 1869, that lessons designed to remedy students’ errors in punctuation and paragraph structure would erect for them a “moral superstructure” (Douglas 1996, 129). Nearly a century later, the University of California’s Clark Kerr, noting comparable sins of syntax, called for instruction in “the decencies.”¹

This peculiar elision of grammatical precision with moral fiber has been productively explored in composition scholarship. Richard Ohmann (1976) found it curious that students’ writing became cause for alarm when the merchant class joined the social elite on campus, upsetting their long-held monopoly on higher education. James Berlin (1987) found similar dismay over grammatical infelicities when World War II veterans, many from the middle class, more than a few from the working class, crowded into college classrooms. Berlin also noted the emergence of a similar rhetoric of crisis when civil rights initiatives brought a new kind of student through the gates. David Russell (1992) observed the same species of rhetoric when young refugees from the Vietnam War reached college age.

As elsewhere, this correlation between the rhetoric of crisis and shifts in the student population is apparent in California. Complaints about college students’ illiteracy are wholly correlatable with the population explosion on California’s campuses created by the GI Bill in the immediate postwar years. Likewise, California’s favored status as a destination for refugee and immigrant groups has given rise to the rhetoric of crisis around college students’ literacy levels. Complaints about students’ writing have served Californians just as well as they have served other Americans as a way to register publicly, if indirectly, dismay over the disruption of the social equilibrium caused by these new additions to the student body. For Californians, as for other Americans, the rhetoric of crisis was a way to confer dignity upon opinions about whom the gates to academia should bar.

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Those gates get rattled mightily by the University of California’s Mike Rose. In “The Language of Exclusion” (1985), he explores what he calls “the myth of transience” (341): the notion that, although a particularly unskilled and problematic group of students is pushing through the gates at a given moment, overturning the proprieties of prose, all will soon be well, and order will be restored to the academy. In Rose’s view, this myth of transience is deeply entrenched in administrators’ perceptions of student writers. This crisis thinking, Rose argues, is antithetical to the project of developing sustainably funded programs of instruction. The myth of transience fuels shortsighted planning, and localizes writing instruction to one or two composition courses. Worse, Rose believes, this myth effectively insulates the disciplines from the opportunity—and responsibility—to develop broad curricular responses to the needs of student writers. Finally, the myth of transience promotes what Sharon Crowley (1998) characterizes as a “composition-specialist underclass” (x), “temporary” faculty hired on a contingency basis year after year after year.

In her rich analysis of the history of remediation at City College of New York, Mary Soliday (2002), like Rose and others, challenges the notion that an institution’s need to mount a remedial writing program is merely an ad hoc response to a temporary circumstance, to a demographic anomaly. Her case study forges compelling causal links between City College’s literacy crises and the city’s fiscal crises, and does much to explode the myth of transience. Drawing from Barbara Ann Scott’s (1983) study of crisis management practices in universities, Soliday comes to see admissions policies and remediation programs as strategies to deal not only with demographic shifts, but also with the economic instability of boom-and-bust cycles.

Few states have ridden the boom-and-bust bronco as dramatically as has California, and her university began invoking the myth of transience as early as the 1880s, when instruction in composition (soon to be labeled “Subject A”?) was seen as a temporary solution to a shortcoming in pre-collegiate English instruction. The problem would dissolve, it was believed, just as soon as California’s high school teachers heeded the copious advice that the University’s English faculty pressed on them during their inspection visits to the schools.

This advice was later codified in the widely distributed publication Suggestions to Teachers of English in the Secondary Schools (1894), coauthored
by Cornelius Beach Bradley, a former teacher at Oakland High School who joined the University of California’s English faculty in 1883, and Charles Mills Gayley, an assistant professor of English at the University of Michigan who had been wooed away by California in 1887 (Kurtz 1943).

In “suggesting” curriculum and conducting inspection visits to California high schools in order to certify the quality of the coursework, these two men were following the practice established at Michigan during Gayley’s tenure there. By 1870, the University of Michigan had organized its admission standards around a certification program predicated upon a book list specified by Michigan faculty. This certification program was established partly in response to complaints about the weak writing skills of Michigan’s college entrants. Under this system, university faculty presented a list of texts and a curriculum to the high schools, and periodically sent professors to visit high school classrooms to certify that the curriculum was being followed.

Certification of high schools proved popular: the University of Minnesota established a certification system in 1871, Illinois and Indiana did so in 1872, and Ohio followed in 1874 (Rudolph 1962). Harvard issued its book list to secondary and prep schools in 1874, and the North East Commission of Colleges followed suit in 1884. Within three years, the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland presented a certification plan based on a book list and visits from college faculty, and finally, in 1895, the National Conference on College Entrance Requirements was established to promulgate a booklist appropriate to all potential matriculants nationwide (Wechsler 1977). By 1900, nearly all state colleges and universities had a certification program, as did some 150 private colleges nationwide (Rudolph 1962).

Still, despite the popularity of these rigorously articulated programs of directing and inspecting high school curricula, college entrants continued to be a disappointment to their professors. The disappointment was most keenly felt—and loudly bemoaned—in the matter of students’ writing. The tradition of certifying high schools continued, however, despite the evidence of its inefficacy, along with the tradition of complaint.

So too continued the tradition of seeing the “writing problem” as anomalous and temporary. As Mary Soliday crisply notes: “In the myth of transience, no group of students needs as much writing instruction as the group we currently serve” (2002, 11). Writing for College English back in
1938, Arthur Hudson identified this enduring and unquestioning perception as “the perennial problem of the ill-prepared” (728). Yet the University of California, like all its sisters in academe, continued to subscribe to the myth of transience throughout the early decades of the century and into the interwar years.

At California, the myth of transience was retold with particular vigor in the years following World War II, when the University’s Committee on Educational Policy asserted that the problem with students’ writing would abate with the departure of the large corps of war veterans who had enrolled with the aid of the GI Bill. Later, in 1967, the myth of transience got a picturesque retelling when the chairman of the Committee on Subject A at the UC Berkeley campus voiced the sanguine expectation that the Subject A course would “expire from malnutrition.”

Notwithstanding that complacent prediction, instruction at UC Berkeley in basic composition (Subject A) today is not even beginning to feel hunger pangs. The university’s Subject A requirement is over one hundred years old, and remedial coursework has been heavily mandated for most of that century. For nearly every semester since 1869, some students have been found lacking in Subject A—that is, in composition skills—and have been “held” in one way or another for instruction. The proportion of students held for instruction has decreased substantially at the Berkeley campus over the last thirty years, though the decrease has been less dramatic in the rest of the University of California system. (In the 1970s UC Berkeley held roughly 50 percent of its students for Subject A; currently the figure averages about 20 percent. On the other hand, some 50 percent of students have been held, considering numbers across the entire University of California system, in recent years.)

According to the University of California’s Glynda Hull, the Subject A requirement evidences a peculiar institutional ambivalence toward underprepared students. In “Alternatives to Remedial Writing: Lessons from Theory, from History, and a Case in Point,” Hull (1999, 13) considers carefully the language of a report prepared in 1972 by the university’s Committee on Educational Policy, hereafter called by its colloquial name, the Turner-Martin Report:

One inevitable result of the University’s generally admirable admission standards . . . is the admission each year of many students who are unable
to write a straightforward, literate answer to an essay examination in any college course.6

Here, and elsewhere in this report, Hull sees the university’s ambivalent attitude toward underprepared students as “welcoming and marginalizing them in the same breath” (13). I’d like to propose that this ambivalence, like breathing, has been necessary (and autonomic) to the university. From its earliest days, the university has needed the construct of the remedial student to establish (and later, demonstrate) its status among other institutions of higher education. This is absolutely not to suggest that there is no such thing as an underprepared student or an improficient writer. The University of California (and every other institution) certainly enrolls some students each year whose academic future benefits greatly from the extra work in composition that they are asked to do. Few who work in composition would gainsay this.

Rather, I would suggest that the university’s ability to label a group of students “remedial” is a powerful rhetorical tool. I hope to show in the following pages how this rhetorical tool has been wielded very successfully over the course of the university’s history to define and defend its stature. I am convinced that the well-published lamentations about students’ “illiteracy” (and later, “deficiency”; and later, “need for remediation”; and recently, “underpreparation”) have accomplished important political—that is to say rhetorical—work for the university, and for California herself.

This claim is easiest to defend in a discussion of UC Berkeley’s—and California’s—early history, when the wild young state struggled for legitimacy among her more stable elders. I begin by telling the story of the curious administrative accommodation that allowed the cash-strapped young University of California to accept nearly all applicants, but at the same time to identify half of them as illiterate.

The University of California was not alone, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in accepting nearly everyone who had the means to buy a place at the university. Educational historian Harold Wechsler (1977) characterizes it as “inconceivable” in those times that any college or university had the “luxury” of choosing only the most qualified applicants (8). The University of California was alone, however, in the remarkable—
and very public—way its head of English, Charles Mills Gayley, made lemonade of these lemons.

Gayley (1895) asserted rather peculiar bragging rights over these students who were accepted despite their apparent unacceptability. In 1894, the widely read literary and cultural magazine the *Dial* published “English in American Universities, by Professors in the English Departments of Twenty Representative Institutions.” In his contribution to the series, describing the University of California’s curricular demands, Gayley insisted that, although the secondary school preparation of California’s young aspirants to higher education was far more thoroughgoing than that offered to young people in many eastern states, their training still was not as thorough as would be necessary for them to benefit fully from all the university had to offer. In his paean to the University of California’s high standards—higher, apparently, than the eastern states”—Gayley did not remind readers that these high standards were unconnected to acceptance. He neglected to mention that applicants whose accomplishments fell short of the university’s aspirations were enrolled—enveloped, as it were—in a disdainful embrace.

California’s aspirants to higher education were not the first young people to find themselves embraced and disgraced. As early as 1871, the brilliant and politically astute James Angell used the occasion of his inauguration as president of the University of Michigan to complain that entrants’ disappointing proficiency levels prevented faculty from “do[ing] work of real university grade” (Kitzhaber 1990, 29). And Harvard, just three years before Gayley’s adulatory yet condemnatory claim about California’s college-bound youth, characterized the task of working with students’ writing as “stupefying” and an “obviously absurd” misuse of Harvard’s faculty and funds.⁷

Next, my story rewinds several decades to consider the rhetorical ground from which Professor Gayley’s audacious claim of 1895 bloomed. I assay the bleak economic conditions that gripped California during the closing quarter of the nineteenth century, and the equally bleak prospects for her university’s success: both agriculture and education battled drought conditions in California during those years.

Writing in 1883, four years before Gayley arrived from Michigan, and twelve years before that claim in the *Dial*’s “English in American Univer-
sities” series about California’s students, Professor Cornelius Beach Bradley mourned the grave ineptitude of generations of composition students, constructing a student population as “unfortunate, lazy, and feeble-minded.” Bradley’s lament, though particularly pungent, was not novel. Rather, it was the latest entry in a national competition of complaint begun back in 1837, when students of America’s first public university, North Carolina, were declared wanting in their ability to write clearly and intelligently (Hudson 1938). In 1879, no less a luminary than Adams Sherman Hill, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and founder, in 1872, of Harvard’s composition program, summed up the complaints of his forebears in an address to secondary school teachers: “Every one who has had much to do with the graduating classes of our best colleges has known men who could not write a letter describing their own Commencement without making blunders which would disgrace a boy twelve years old” (Brereton 1995, 46).

Everyone who had much to do with the entering classes knew young men (and women) whose blunders would disgrace their high school English teachers. Since colleges and universities, particularly public ones, could ill afford to disappoint these disappointing applicants, an accommodation called “conditioning” was created. Conditioning served not only pedagogical aims, but also political and pecuniary ones. Under this accommodation, students who had passed their entrance exams in some subjects but failed in others were offered conditional acceptance, and given a grace period (typically a year) in which to acquire proficiency in the subjects they had failed.

Swiftly, a great number of students were cast into that dubious state of grace. Like certification, the practice of conditioning readily gained currency nationwide. Historian Harold Wechsler (1977) estimates that by 1905, conditioning was widely practiced in both public and private institutions. So widespread was the practice of conditioning that the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching was moved that year to characterize the practice as “indiscriminate charity” (Wechsler 1977, 73). The University of California was well ahead of the curve in the practice of this “charity,” whereby students were declared unworthy of acceptance yet accepted anyway. In its first year, 1869, when the university was little more than a few rooms on a muddy hill with a student body of thirty-nine, a conditioned caste was created.
In 1883, when California’s Professor of Rhetoric Cornelius Beach Bradley was charging his students with feeblemindedness, and levying conditions upon them, the legislature was attacking the university and threatening to withhold funds. California’s legislators charged that the university was actually doing a disservice to the state by offering a curriculum too elevated for most of California’s higher-education seekers. This charge by California’s legislators would not have been unfamiliar to legislators of many states who grappled with the political unpalatability of levying taxes to support higher education. What would have been unfamiliar, however, was the remarkable way University of California President Horace Davis responded to it.

President Davis resolved this disjuncture of educational standards brilliantly. He performed nothing less than a feat of academic-political alchemy on this intellectual dross that Professor Bradley had so deplored, turning it into pure gold for the university. President Davis argued that the very existence of so many unsatisfactory students was prima facie evidence that the university desperately needed the legislature’s strong support if California were to drag upward the intellectual level of its youth. This argument was, of course, an early instantiation of the rhetoric of remediation. In California in 1883, then, it might be more accurate to say that the practice of conditioning was not so much indiscriminate charity as strategic charity.

But that was then.

It would be easy to read these remarkable feats of statebuilding sleight of hand as no more than an artifact of California’s and her university’s early days. A one-off. An example of the brilliance and opportunism that built California. Yet I will pick up the trail of this rhetoric of remediation in the early decades of the twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1900, enrollments at state universities throughout the nation nearly doubled, and they had nearly doubled again by 1920 (Brereton 1995). California’s economy in particular had begun to thrive and California’s taxpayers were clamoring for higher education for their offspring.

The university had more than enough students to justify its existence to the legislature. In fact, in the late 1890s, University of California President Wheeler characterized the press of students clamoring for places at his university as “an avalanche” (Douglas, 2000, 107). It wasn’t only
Wheeler’s university, though. It was California’s, and demands for access from her young people, seconded by their taxpaying parents, had to be accommodated. Also demanding accommodation was President Wheeler’s fierce ambition—fueled by competition from an energetic and rich young Stanford just down the road—that the callow young state campus at the foot of the hill in Berkeley become nothing less than a “world university” (Ferrier 1930, 444). Wheeler’s struggle to accommodate California’s students along with his own ambitions posed a by-now familiar dilemma: how could the university accept more students than ever, all the while insisting that its academic standards were higher than ever?

Wheeler’s solution was to float a rather disingenuous interpretation of the university’s requirements. This interpretation resulted in the admission of an unprecedented number of students, and Wheeler’s accommodation of that “avalanche” endeared him to Progressive, education-minded Governor Hiram Johnson. With Governor Johnson’s support, Wheeler’s university began its march toward “world university” status. Of the freshmen whom Wheeler welcomed, fully half were deemed illiterate, and were remanded to the custody of the so-called Committee on the Treatment of Incompetent Students. Once again, less-prepared (a.k.a. “incompetent”) students were embraced and yet disdained, enabling the university to assert its high standards, yet, at the same time, to accept all the students it needed to in order to meet its political responsibilities.

In the 1930s, the dilemma was the same, but by then the university’s administration had changed, as had the nature of its competition for the state’s higher education dollars. Robert Gordon Sproul presided over the University of California during the Great Depression, and, like every other president of a public university or college, he had to contend with sharply diminished allocations for higher education. President Sproul bore an even heavier burden throughout the Depression and beyond: he struggled to suppress fervid legislative interest in developing a rival system of regional colleges. Such a system of regional colleges, the legislators hoped, would provide a more practical, populist education, a much-needed antidote to the elitist university in those desperate times.

Sproul insisted that there be but one university, and he fought tirelessly against what he called “little replicas” (Stadtman 1970, 158). He had the delicate rhetorical task of persuading the public that the university

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was “a genuinely democratic institution,” while insisting that it must strive to strengthen its standards, as a service to California and “to the careers and happiness . . . of its young men and women” (Douglass 2000, 145). In short, Sproul’s university had to be both democratic and elitist. If it failed “to embrace every child of California that thirsts for knowledge,” it risked fueling the fever for regional colleges.

In an effort to limit the scope of that embrace, while still demonstrating the university’s populism, President Sproul made common cause with the high schools. Once again, the construct of the remedial student proved invaluable in helping the University of California negotiate the line between accessibility and elitism. The university’s Committee on Subject A was urged to rethink whether the composition exam was properly objective in its assessment of what students had learned in high school. The committee decided to add a section with questions on grammar and usage. The new exam was first administered in 1930, and it resulted in the highest pass rate in the university’s history. Fewer students were suspected of illiteracy that year and remanded for treatment. However, the redefinition of the remedial student didn’t help President Sproul remediate his university as a more populist institution. The accusations of elitism stuck; the legislature stood firm in its determination to establish regional colleges.

The University of California experienced enormous growth during and immediately after World War II. Every American institution of post-secondary learning felt this enrollment pressure, but the land grant universities and colleges in each state were particularly pressed to expand their enrollments. The University of California’s members felt a different kind of expansion, as well—an expanding awareness of the University of California’s importance as a resource to the nation, as an engine of research.

War veterans, bankrolled by the GI Bill, applied in record numbers to California’s colleges and universities. By that time, President Sproul had lost his war on the regional colleges, the “little replicas” he so deplored. California’s many regional colleges had grown into state colleges or universities, and were well placed to accept the veterans, as well as the federal funding that accompanied them. The University of California struggled to accommodate as many veterans as it could, even deciding to relax its admission standards temporarily. This decision was borne of patriotism, surely, but also of prudence, given the fact that the gates to these new
state colleges and universities—those little replicas—swung open wider and with far less noise than did the gates of the University of California.

In the aftermath of the war, however, the University of California was still dodging bullets. President Sproul feared the diversion of the university’s resources to the “little replicas,” and he worried about the dilution of the university’s status as it competed with those replicas for money and students. Sproul had a potent weapon in this war; he worked hard to assert the university’s standards against those of the state’s four-year public colleges. As before, new students’ dismal writing proficiency was offered up as evidence of the university’s high standards. The invading horde was welcomed, but complained about vigorously and publicly.

The postwar years saw another assault on the University of California’s reputation. The loyalty oath controversy of 1949 through 1951 brought low the university and its president. In those early years of the “Communist menace,” President Sproul tried to quash the University of California’s (especially the Berkeley campus’s) reputation as the “Red University,” and the resulting furor dimmed the luster that the war years had conferred upon it.

Clark Kerr’s appointment as the Berkeley campus’s first chancellor in the wake of the loyalty oath debacle brought his efforts to restore UC Berkeley’s reputation among universities—and among taxpayers. In those years, the legislature was asking prickly questions about why it should fund higher education’s freshman and sophomore years three times: at the state’s junior colleges, at her four-year colleges, and at the University of California. An even pricklier question was put to the University of California by the legislature: why were its “13th and 14th grades” so much costlier than those offered by the other institutions?

This was a tight spot for the university to be in. It swiftly strove to impress the legislature and the public with the idea that those thirteenth and fourteenth years of instruction on offer at the junior colleges and four-year colleges were inferior to those available at the university. The university chose this moment to take note of the copious complaints among its faculty about the low proficiency levels of transfer students who had done their thirteenth and fourteenth years in the junior colleges. The university was particularly attentive to complaints that transfer students had not learned to write properly. A “Prose Improvement Project” was established
at UC Berkeley, and a number of committees were appointed to take up the “Subject A problem.”

The Prose Improvement Project might well have exceeded its portfolio, however. It quickly moved beyond consideration of transfer students’ problems and the implicit deficiencies of instruction in the thirteenth and fourteenth grades at the other state schools. Rather, the Prose Improvement Project asserted that students do not learn writing once and for all in freshman year. Writing instruction, they insisted, must be the focus of all academic departments across all four years. This is an important observation in the history of composition, of course, and it anticipated by twenty-some years the development of the writing-across-the-disciplines movement. It was not, however, an assertion that helped the University of California promote that complicated dual agenda of accessibility and elitism: its accessibility to transfer students, and its elite status as having expectations that exceeded those students’ attainments.

In 1951 the Liaison Committee on the Subject A Problem was formed to consider the shortcomings in transfer students’ writing. The committee made two recommendations, both of which were politically fraught. First, they recommended that the Subject A exam be used in deciding admissions, rather than as a tool for placing already-admitted students into the appropriate composition course. Subject A had been a placement tool for most of the university’s life, and the Academic Senate of 1951 quickly found a compelling reason why it should remain so. They discovered that males had a higher likelihood of failing the exam, and that, if it were to become an entrance requirement, the University of California would have to admit substantially more females than males. This outcome, they declared, was “to be looked at askance.” The recommendation was promptly withdrawn. The second recommendation of the Special Committee on the Subject A Problem was that transfer students be required to take the Subject A exam even if they had completed the composition requirement at a junior college before entering the university. This proposal was understood, reasonably enough, as an affront to the politically emergent junior college system. It too was withdrawn.

The passage into law of the Master Plan for Higher Education brought with it the triumphal rehabilitation of the University of California. The Master Plan was in large part the brainchild of Clark Kerr, who by that
time had moved from chancellor of the Berkeley campus to president of the University of California system. The university’s and California’s celebration was cut short, however, as the FBI began its coruscating investigation into the lives and professional practices of the university’s—especially UC Berkeley’s and UCLA’s—administrators, faculty members, and students. FBI Director Hoover was at the height of his powers and full exercise of his whims in those years, and, bizarrely, the Subject A exam was among the unsavory aspects of the University of California that drew his ire. As I will detail, one of the exam questions roused his ire, and Subject A committee members found themselves on an FBI suspects list.

UC Berkeley students made the list as well, having demonstrated in San Francisco at hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1959. This student activism was followed by demonstrations that grew into the watershed free speech movement. Gubernatorial candidate Ronald Reagan fumed through the free speech movement, and then Governor Reagan positively exploded when UC Berkeley students demonstrated to preserve People’s Park. Reagan vowed “to rid the campus of disruptive elements, at the point of a bayonet, if necessary” (Rorabaugh 1989, 66). Prime among those disruptive elements, in Governor Reagan’s view, was the university’s president, Clark Kerr.

In the intense drama of the free speech movement, of course, Subject A performed no more than a walk-on role in the first act. Governor Reagan performed the leading role, and by the time the curtain rang down, Berkeley’s and Clark Kerr’s golden ages were over. Soon enough, the Vietnam War and attendant student activism were in full swing, and a new wave of public complaint was focused on the moral and intellectual laxity of students. One of the myriad manifestations of this complaint was increased scrutiny of Subject A and the remedial student.

Thus arrived a new era of widespread complaint about students’ writing abilities. California was only one locus of a national upheaval about standards, remediation, and access to higher education. California was, in fact, a continent away from the epicenter of that upheaval, the City College of New York. City College’s historic—and historically repercussive—response to the call for expanded access to higher education ignited a firestorm of rhetoric about remediation that began in New York, but ultimately consumed the attention of politicians, public intellectuals, pun-
dits, college presidents, educators, and compositionists across the nation. In California, firestorms are known to seed the growth of new forests, but this western phenomenon was observed in New York City when the basic writing movement was born from the flames. California felt the heat in a very public way in 1975 when a *Newsweek* feature entitled “Why Johnny Can’t Write” (Sheils 1975) memorialized the low attainments of student writers at UC Berkeley, and fatefully attached the name “Bonehead English” to UC Berkeley’s remedial writing course.

Cultural tensions surrounding gender and race entered the equation during this time, as renewed interest arose at UC Berkeley in making Subject A an entrance exam. Once again, the specter of admitting more women than men was raised; once again, the proposal died. Moreover, charges of racism were levied in the 1970s against the Subject A Office and its affiliate, the Subject A Office for Non-native Speakers of English (SANSE). The Subject A and SANSE faculty members successfully and unequivocally defended themselves against the accusation that their instruction and attitudes forced Asian American students “to compromise their cultural loyalties,” and other charges. The Academic Senate lauded the Subject A and SANSE programs for their work. Notwithstanding that praise, the Asian American Studies Program was granted authority to teach a special Subject A course judged appropriate for Asian American students.

The 1980s saw an increase in the number of University of California students for whom English was a second (or third) language, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, California’s poor economic health impacted the University. These two demographic developments produced a compound

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result. Proportionately speaking, more low-income, minority, and immigrant students than ever before were being admitted, and, in general, they had encountered less preparation for college-level work, and had less fluency in English, than their predecessors. Not surprisingly, this situation exacerbated the complaints from faculty that they “were being asked to handle problems, especially in writing, that they were never trained to handle.”

University of California President David Saxon, like his predecessors, was bound by the ethos of mass access to higher education, the duty to provide instruction appropriate for all the students the university accepts, and by the conflicting need to maintain the high standards expected of this proud university. Confronted with the threat of severe budget cuts, and mindful of the chorus of complaints, President Saxon commissioned a study of the cost of Subject A instruction, its extent, and the possibility of outsourcing it to the university’s extension program or to the community colleges.

The findings convinced Saxon that Subject A was an essential component of on-campus instruction, given California’s demographics. Saxon also remained convinced that Subject A coursework was plainly remedial, even though, at that time, over 55 percent of the students who had qualified fully for admission were identified as requiring Subject A instruction. University of California Senate Resolution 633(D), enacted during President Saxon’s administration, made clear the disdain in that embrace: students who placed into Subject A courses were to be considered remedial, no matter what percentage of the freshman class they constituted, and they would face dismissal if they did not solve their writing problems by the end of the freshman year.

The external review of the Subject A program that was undertaken at UC Berkeley in 1989 had far-reaching results, particularly in response to another charge of racism and discriminatory behavior and policy toward Asian-ancestry students. As before, the members of the external review committee found no evidence of intentional racism or discriminatory behavior. Additionally, they made a brace of recommendations intended to demolish the program’s identity as remedial, to refresh what they labeled a “stale curriculum,” to raise faculty morale, and to bring Subject A instruction and faculty into closer communication with departments offering composition courses. Their recommendations included the establish-
ment of the College Writing Programs, to be directed by a ladder-rank faculty member with research interests in composition, and offering credit-bearing courses.

In 1991, University of California President David Gardner mandated that all remedial instruction be removed from the university’s campuses. UC Berkeley’s institutional response was to implement the recommendations of the external review committee. The College Writing Programs were brought into being through the strenuous efforts of then-Dean Donald McQuade, professor of English and veteran composition specialist; Glynda Hull, professor of education and composition specialist; and Arthur Quinn, professor of rhetoric and founding director of the College Writing Programs. The programs’ first curricular move was to combine Subject A-level instruction with instruction in first-year freshman composition into a single, intensive, accelerated, six-unit course that the university credited as “non-remedial.” This protected Subject A instruction from removal from campus in response to President Gardner’s mandate. Thus was the ghost of remediation exorcised.

Quinn became the first ladder-rank faculty director in 1992, and he shepherded the faculty through the transition from Subject A to College Writing Programs. He oversaw the complex curricular and cultural shifts entailed in that transformation. Hull became the College Writing Programs’ director in 1995, and began initiatives to further increase the faculty’s and the programs’ participation in writing instruction beyond Subject A. These initiatives included the development of advanced composition courses, and the appointment of some new faculty with PhDs in composition/rhetoric. It is during this period in the history of Subject A that the ghost of remediation seemed finally to have been laid to rest.

However, the circumstances of the mid-1990s—economic and demographic—resurrected that ghost, or rather, the haunting was relocated. This time, the complaints about students’ improficient writing were lodged against juniors and seniors, rather than incoming freshmen. This concluding part of the history is testament to the persistent—and resistant—power of the rhetoric of remediation, and a final meditation on the purpose this rhetoric serves.

A close examination of the history of composition instruction and of the institutional discourse surrounding it demonstrates that the rhetoric
of remediation has persisted throughout the century, encoded at the University of California in the Subject A apparatus. As I worked my way through the University of California archives and the Subject A archives, I came to see the discourse of remediation as incantatory language that wafts through a century of discussions at UC Berkeley. It revealed itself to me repeatedly in the records of the university that I consulted—the memoirs, the memories, the minutes, the minutiae.

The documents that I examined included the minutes of the academic council and senate; records of committees on courses, on educational policy, on student prose, on student preparation, on remedial matters, on affirmative action; reports of task forces; findings of blue-ribbon panels; letters of complaint penned by University of California presidents, chancellors, professors, taxpayers; and accounts in the popular press, and in memoirs of university luminaries. The earliest documents that I examined were written in 1867, the most recent in 2006. I strove to examine all relevant materials between those years.

The discursive network of these records is dense; it yielded some quite remarkable blasts from the past—and bleats—that taught me to prick up my ears to the connection between matters of proficiency and matters of purse strings, between concern for standards and concern for stature. In Politics of Remediation (2002), Soliday exhorts us to look harder into institutional and ideological arrangements to understand why for “over a century faculty and administrators in every segment of private and public higher education have skirmished over writing curriculums, complained about student writing, and lamented the decline of standards” (3). The chapters that follow attempt to shine a light on (and, I hope, through) the University of California, Berkeley’s particular skirmishes, complaints, and lamentations around student writing. This book will, I hope, document that university’s place as a stage upon which the rhetoric of remediation was enacted with particular art. And artifice.

This story of the rhetoric of remediation at UC Berkeley will, I hope, be read as an illustrative case study of the dynamics of remediation; the fluid, complex nature of standards; and the myriad ways in which the decisions about students’ attainments as writers can be seen as responses to prevailing political, economic, and social forces.

In The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary (1991), John Trimbur posits the following: “To think of literacy crises as ideological events is to
think rhetorically . . . ” (281). I hope that my effort to describe this perdu- ring rhetorical phenomenon at Berkeley will encourage fellow composi- tionists to consider their institution’s own rhetoric of remediation, with particular attention to the complex purposes it may have served, and may continue to serve.