

# School-College Partnerships and Their Impact on Writing Programs

Judy Fowler and Stefan Martin

For school-college cooperation to work, it must focus on action—not machinery. Time and time again, when people think about collaboration, they focus first on budgets and bureaucracy, on the costs involved. . . . Time and time again, the most successful programs are those where people see a need and find time to act with little red tape or extra funding.

—Gene I. Maeroff  
*School and College* (5)

## Introduction

When the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) began its partnership with two Baltimore City high schools in 1986, we shared Gene Maeroff's disdain for machinery. We had seen too many worthwhile projects die after being handed over to a committee. So when the English Department's Writing Program and the Learning Resources Center inaugurated the courses called Writing for College with only enthusiasm and a small budget, we the instructors figured that we could teach the top students of any high school a lot about writing.

Two years into the program, however, we concluded that we had counted too heavily on the efficacy of "seeing the need and finding the time." We found that offering college writing instruction at the high schools without additional support services for the students does not necessarily produce success, because this form of assistance does not address more basic problems of the students and the school. We were also unsure whether our low successful enrollment rate meant that the Writing for College courses were a failure. Finally, while pleased with the progress of some students, we wondered whether the gains made were worth putting additional demands on an already overburdened writing program.

## Goals of the Program

Baltimore began its college-school cooperative program, Adopt-a-School, in late 1985 after then-Mayor and now Maryland Governor William

Donald Schaefer saw the Yale University-New Haven schools partnership. UMBC's two "adopted" high schools, Walbrook and Southern, expressed interest in improving their students' performance in academic subjects, but they also wanted to set up peer counseling to deal with student problems of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic difficulties, and disaffection with school. Since we saw our institution as best able to offer academic and pedagogical assistance, we initially bypassed the issue of peer counseling.<sup>1</sup>

We shared with the high schools an interest in improving students' academic performance and getting more of their graduates to attend college. We hoped that their college choice would be UMBC. Another mutual goal—one which proved unworkable because of the city's centralized curriculum—was professional development of the high school faculty.<sup>2</sup> The University had additional, clearly political, goals—to increase dramatically its visibility in the community and to accede to the wishes of a powerful political figure. These political goals apparently were foremost for UMBC, since the University obligated itself to the Adopt-a-School project before it knew what would be required or even possible.

Good intentions and enlightened self-interest moved the project forward in its initial stages, but continued reliance on these motives eventually made the formation and execution of specific policies extremely difficult. The generalized decisions made at high levels did not take into account such specific difficulties as resources, evaluation, demands on instructors, and student readiness for college-level work.

## Selection of Students

English teachers at the two high schools selected students for the courses on the basis of performance and perceived ability. Thus, the standards which UMBC freshmen must meet to be placed in Freshman Composition (500 or above on the SATV or satisfactory performance on the UMBC Composition Placement Examination) were not applied to the selected students. We did not consider this difference in criteria a problem for two reasons. First, as instructors we wanted to improve students' writing, not just have them get college credit. Second, we believed that the additional instructional time afforded by high school scheduling would enable any deficient students to improve their writing to college level. In some cases, our beliefs seemed to work out. In the Southern H.S. course of 1987-88, almost all students performed well on their first composition assignment, an analysis of a contemporary short story.

However, we soon suspected that the course we offered was not suited to many of the students selected. Some (mostly juniors at Walbrook) did not have the ability to handle college-level instruction; many did not

adjust to the accelerated pace. A large group (mostly seniors at Southern) had the ability to succeed but were unwilling to fulfill such minimal requirements as bringing materials to class. Whereas some of these difficulties were a function of low skill levels, others grew out of students' attitudes towards school. We concluded that other measures besides teacher reference (such as interviews and composition placement tests) should be used in selection for a college-level course, if indeed college-level performance is a feasible goal.

A traditional indicator of student readiness for college-level instruction, class rank, proved misleading. Baltimore's system of placing almost all college-bound students in "magnet" schools (three academic high schools and one school for the arts) removes most academically inclined students from the "comprehensive" schools, like Walbrook and Southern, which serve specific neighborhoods. Magnet schools take the top fortieth to forty-fifth percentile of students as measured by standardized tests like the California Achievement Test and the PSAT. So while our students had high class rank in their own schools, they occupied about the fifty-fifth percentile city-wide. Predictably, then, our goal of raising students' writing levels to that of UMBC freshmen (average combined SAT 970) in one or two semesters proved unrealistic.

Colleges, when they join partnerships, often assume that their primary purpose is to prepare students for college attendance. They ignore the fact that historically only about 30% of Americans have earned bachelor's degrees. Furthermore, only about 50% of all high school students anticipate going to college (Coleman 169). These figures should be instructive to colleges considering partnerships: many students will have to be taught the value of college attendance as well as the importance of writing. The goals of partnership programs should reflect the needs of the students they intend to help as well as the aspirations of those designing the program.

## Scheduling and Its Implications

We attempted five different scheduling arrangements over the three semesters of the program.

Site	Duration	Days/ week	Minutes/ class	Scheduling	Successful Enrollments
1. WHS	spr/87	2	90	after sch.	0/17
2. SHS	spr/87	3	50	before sch.	3/17
3. WHS	fall/87	2	55	during sch.	0/16
4. WHS	87-88 year	2	55	during sch.	1/4 <sup>3</sup>
5. SHS	87-88 year	5	50	during sch.	6/21

Total Successful Enrollments: 10      Total Enrollments: 71  
 Percentage of Successful Enrollments: 14 or 24<sup>4</sup>

If we judge success by the number of students who received either developmental or regular college credit, option 5 was the most effective. We attribute the greater number of successful enrollments in option 5, and the much lower numbers elsewhere, to three factors: voluntary enrollment, scheduling during the regular school day, and amount of class time. Students drafted into short-lived option 3, a "pull-out" program,<sup>5</sup> were unwilling to do assigned work from the start. The idea of a clearly delimited school day is unfamiliar to college instructors, but in high schools it turns out to be important: Students enrolled in classes 1 and 2 viewed sessions before and after school as extracurricular and therefore entirely optional. As a writing professional's common sense would indicate, greater amounts of class time devoted to writing tasks produced the best results.

## Instructional Methods

We had planned to teach a class which resembled a freshman composition class on the UMBC campus. While we followed our instructional philosophies throughout the three semesters, we found that the pace of teaching had to be radically slowed.

Our program used the following procedures and emphases:

- Reading and ranking of models
- Formulating criteria for judging compositions based on discussion of models
- Using heuristics to generate material
- Conferring with the instructor during various stages of composing
- Evaluating peers' writing
- Practicing new syntactic structures and using them in compositions
- Revising compositions frequently
- Stressing the process model of writing

The reader will remark that this list should be the same for any English or language arts class at any level. But, if researchers are correct (e.g., Spear and Maloney; Hillocks), the curricula of many high schools partake only sparingly of this list, for at least two reasons. Classes of 35+ and total pupil loads of up to 190 make it impossible for teachers to do much more than assign and give one reading to each composition. Moreover, the emphasis on state-mandated functional tests often displaces other curricular aims.

We cannot explore the larger ramifications of the functional test mentality in this article, but we note here that two salient ones for writing instruction—a preoccupation with grammar and usage and an abandonment of higher standards of learning in favor of the lower ones of the

functional writing test—were significant obstacles to improving the writing of our students.

## Evaluation of Students' Writing

During the Spring 1987 semester, when students were enrolled in the extracurricular courses, the instructor awarded no quarter or semester grades. The evaluation of individual compositions followed UMBC freshman composition standards, and the final assessment of students' writing ability was a portfolio examination by UMBC instructors. In the 1987-88 year-long classes, however, two standards of evaluation were in effect, those of UMBC and those of the Baltimore City Public Schools. The substantial difference in these two standards reflects the widely diverging agendas of the two institutions.

Disagreements about grading emerged between UMBC instructors and high school students and between the instructors and school staffs. Students, accustomed to receiving grades of 70% (the lowest passing grade) or above just for attending class or submitting a minimum of work, were dismayed by the instructors' insistence that failing to attend class regularly or to turn in work would result in a failing grade. The instructors maintained their standards for the college-level grading, assigning marks as low as zero, but were told by high school administrators to inflate failing grades to a minimum 60% for the report card; a system-wide rule, the explanation went, forbade giving any lower than that.

Governed by economics, neither a school system nor a university can fail too many students and remain solvent. The necessity of passing non-performing students is one of the most influential forces in forming the agendas of urban schools. These schools are unaided by funding formulas based on enrollment and not characterized by a student body that voluntarily attends and submits to standards. School budgets are strained, teachers are in short supply, and classroom space is not available to house the great numbers who would be retained by higher standards. In this climate, the University instructors found that they could not easily implement their own agenda of improving writing and grading on the basis of performance.

Conflicts over grading will be likely if the adopted high school has a history of poor student achievement and low college attendance. Discussions between heads of writing programs and school administrators are essential to reveal these differences and to determine whether they can be resolved before a class is inaugurated.

## Defining Success

When we initially looked at our percentage of successful enrollments (14 or 24 depending on method of calculation; see note 4), we were disappointed. Compared to the average pass rate of freshman English at UMBC (75%), our classes fared poorly. But given the great difference between UMBC freshmen and our high school students, the environments in which the college and high school classes were conducted, the purposes of the courses, and the agendas of the two types of institutions, we concluded that the comparison was neither fair nor meaningful.

Given the numerous forms of partnerships and their various goals, both stated and implicit, those who administer writing programs or divisions of a university may have great difficulty in determining what constitutes an acceptable level of success. As administrators, we may be tempted to rely upon the notion of cost-effectiveness, but this concept is not very useful either.

Our Writing for College courses were considered not cost-effective by some members of the UMBC administration. Though not pleased with the results ourselves, we now wonder on what, besides the percentage of successful enrollments and the price tag for three semesters (about \$10,000), the success of the program could be judged. Some administrators saw the Adopt-a-School program exclusively as a recruitment device for UMBC. But since the UMBC admissions office has not released a per pupil cost for its own recruitment efforts, we had no standard against which our results could be compared.<sup>6</sup>

Another problem with cost-effectiveness standards is that some of the goals which the university had set for the project—increased visibility in the community, for example—could never be measured in a quantifiable way. Corporations spend tens of thousands of dollars on public relations, but there is almost no way to tell whether a corporation has received value for its money—aside from attitude surveys and subjective appraisals, which for some lack the lure of “hard” data.

Before proceeding with a partnership agreement, therefore, heads of writing programs should decide whether the desired results can be quantified to their satisfaction, and if not, whether the qualitative data available can determine success in the estimation of those committing resources to the project. If administrators choose to rely solely on quantitative information, they still must decide what the figures before them mean, and what other quantitative data the statistics can be fairly compared to.

Another issue in defining success is whose voice should be heard in forming the definition. School-college partnerships which have claimed the greatest success report that the school and the college have committed equal resources to the project and that success is defined jointly.<sup>7</sup>

But if a university brings a larger contribution to the project, the issue of equal voice for high school personnel becomes more difficult. Ideally, a partnership is a mutual undertaking. Both of our adopted schools committed time, energy and some money to the project; it would have been insensitive, and impolitic, to deny their representatives a voice. In meetings with UMBC administrators and instructors, the high school staffs made clear that they were pleased with the courses and wanted them to remain in the schools. University goals of increased good will and visibility in the community would have been compromised by discounting these opinions.

On the other side of the question, UMBC contributed the large majority of resources. In the past, colleges have frequently *offered assistance* to schools, rather than entering into equal partnerships with them. College administrators, while recognizing the merit of assisting schools, may not feel that the benefits which accrue to their colleges are proportionate to the investment. While they may understand the case for equal voice, writing program administrators may find this practice difficult to defend before their superiors. Therefore, we can envision giving equal voice to both parties only under one of two conditions: (1) the school matches resources with the college, or (2) a third party, such as a foundation, finances the partnership. Since most schools are not in a position to commit substantial resources to a partnership, the outside funding option may be the only one available. Even with the disadvantages of “soft money” funding (see page 51), this option is preferable to the college scaling back its available resources to match the smaller commitment of the school.

The extent to which high school and university agendas diverge also makes defining success complex. High schools have to educate students planning to work after graduation as well as the college-bound. Unlike colleges, many schools seeking partnerships believe that the education which they can offer their students is deficient. The appearance of writing instructors on the high school site is an immediate and visible improvement: it represents increased educational opportunity for students and decreased pupil load for the faculty. A high school's poor conditions and its lesser investment in a partnership may cause high school administrators to equate any improvement with success. Consequently, high schools and colleges must define success in a way that takes into account their divergent missions.<sup>8</sup>

## Impact of Partnerships on a Writing Program

However success is defined, it will come to partnerships at a significantly higher price than college writing programs are accustomed to paying. Our most successful class received the greatest amount of time per week,

250 minutes (100 more than a three-credit composition course), and lasted two semesters (twice as long). The university compensated some personnel for travel and time spent meeting with high school administrators. The UMBC English Department paid for most instructional materials. The question for writing-program heads is whether the resources available to them will be sufficient to sustain this (or an even higher) level of involvement.

One factor creating a higher level of involvement in high schools is the differing roles of teachers and instructors. The teacher's *in loco parentis* role is global, the college instructor's specific. College writing instructors, aside from a modicum of humane concern, have scant involvement in the private lives of their students. High school English teachers, in addition to teaching writing and literature, act as counselors, social workers, and policemen. These extra demands are often cited as justification for the significantly higher salary paid to public school teachers. (In the Baltimore area, a public school teacher at the top of the pay scale commands a salary nearly double that of a full-time college writing instructor with comparable education and experience.)

Not only were many students in Writing for College deficient in writing skills, more importantly, they lacked the attitudes and study habits required for success in the course and in college—regular attendance, timely preparation of assignments, and intellectual curiosity, for example. We now feel that it is fruitless to attempt to improve students' writing without also dealing with deep-rooted tendencies that prevent them from learning to write.

High school English teachers must work hard to change these tendencies, and sometimes they succeed. College writing instructors do not typically have as great a responsibility for this kind of teaching, because students with counterproductive behaviors and attitudes do not go to college in great numbers, and those who do either change, leave college, or drop courses. But when instructors enter a high school, expectations and needs increase. Adopting a school with significant needs before locating sufficient resources will produce two outcomes—failure to service the needs of the school, or depletion of resources intended for use on campus, things like money, materials, and the time and energy of personnel. In the worst of cases, both may happen.

## Recommendations

While this paper mainly discusses the mistakes made in our partnership and the dangers of entering into such ventures without appreciating their requirements and complexities, we believe that partnerships can benefit students, faculty, and their institutions if the programs are well conceived and amply funded. But since a program will be called well-

conceived only if it succeeds, administrators must, from the beginning, match goals with funding and define success with these goals and funding levels in mind. Heads of writing programs should try to determine whether proposed funding levels will permit participation in the venture without negative effects on their own program.

To clarify thinking on the subject of school-college collaboration, we see the need for defining two distinct forms: (1) *partnerships*, which require equal participation, control, and commitment of resources by the school and the college; and (2) *assistance*, which involves a college supplying the majority of resources and retaining (or sharing, at its option) control of the agenda. Partnerships are the ideal, because they can offer benefits to all parties and help to eliminate the "top-down" mentality, historically a source of much bitterness between the two types of institutions. Considering the slim resources available to many schools, however, equal commitment of resources can never be assumed.

Faced with this inequality, colleges can seek outside funding, allow equal voice to the high school anyway, or offer assistance on their own terms. Whether outside funding is a viable method depends on its source. "Soft money" from short term grants should be avoided; establishing a partnership and then having to abandon it three years later when the money runs out may cause ill feelings between school and college. Sharing power in spite of unequal commitment may help to retain the democratic spirit of partnership, but it may, we believe, be impossible to sell to higher-level college administrators who see the money as an investment for the college. Offering assistance to a school unilaterally may benefit the major parties, but not equally, since a college administration will seek to accomplish its agenda first. Assistance also will reinforce the perceived hierarchy between college and school and perpetuate long-standing resentments which can compromise the program. If, after considering these cautions, a college decides to proceed with assistance, it should do so without expecting that the greater benefits of a partnership will accrue.

*Planning:* In talks between the college and the school, discussions may remain at too general a level because both sides wish to avoid conflict. Representatives of the writing program should press for specifics and ask the hard questions: How large is the budget and how long is the commitment? What level of writing proficiency is required for participating students? Who will pay for materials? How will college writing standards enter into evaluation? Who will set the standards? How will writing be taught and who will have a say in pedagogy? How will substitute teachers be obtained, by whom, and at whose expense? Are the school and college calendars compatible? What will become of chronically absent and non-performing students? Who will evaluate the program? By what criteria will a program be judged? Asking these questions will probably reveal significant differences which must be reconciled before a project begins.<sup>9</sup>

*Site:* A true partnership will involve students and faculty from both institutions participating in activities on both sites. If, on the other hand, the college decides to offer assistance on its own terms, it should consider the cultural milieu of the high school before selecting a site. The more a high school is characterized by a lack of college preparatory work and by students disengaged from active learning, the more difficult it will be for effective writing instruction to take place at the school. Many high schools seeking partnerships have these characteristics, and their agendas are too firmly established for a college writing course to withstand. In the high school, meanwhile, the college should offer other forms of assistance which answer the students' more general needs, such as peer counseling and tutoring in most subjects. This assistance should be managed by other departments in the university, under the leadership of a full-time administrator.<sup>10</sup>

*Selection of Students:* If the goal of a partnership is to increase college readiness and college attendance, the program must select students who can reasonably be expected to succeed within the time span of the program. The more deficient students that are in writing, the longer it will take to bring them to college level. In schools where students read two or more grades below average, where combined SAT's are around 700, and where most writing tasks focus on the concrete and functional,<sup>11</sup> colleges need a program which serves students for longer than one year. Given the limited resources that many colleges are willing to commit, college-level performance may not be a feasible goal.

If the partnership sets as its goal the improvement of student writing regardless of present level, college level indicators like the SAT are not relevant. Instead, evaluators should use controlled writing samples, attendance records, and interviews to make certain that the students selected for a class are approximately at the same achievement level and that they possess in sufficient quantity the attitudes and behaviors necessary for success. High school teachers and members of the writing program may have different opinions of students' level and aptitude, so students selected for the program should be mutually acceptable.

*Scheduling:* Assuming our recommendation for offering the assistance courses on the college campus, there are three scheduling options: after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer. After-school programs will not work; there exists too much competition from part-time jobs and extracurricular activities. Saturday classes are too widely spaced to give continuity to a writing class. A comprehensive, daily summer program with a jobs component has the greatest chance of success.

If the college-campus option is not possible, the class offered on the high school site should meet daily during a regular high school period and should carry high school credit. Only in this form will students regard the course as a serious undertaking. Regardless of student level, any writing

course on the high school site should meet for an entire academic year. Besides its limited effectiveness, the one-semester course poses too great a difficulty for high schools which run on a yearly calendar.

*Program Design:* Because even the best students of a collaborating school will probably have poorly developed skills in most academic subjects, and because they also will need help in adjusting to the accelerated pace and higher level thinking, college writing courses alone will not assure academic improvement. At a minimum, writing should be offered along with courses in reading and math. Counseling which stresses the importance of daily work and regular attendance, and which provides emotional support to students, is also essential.

Offering financial incentives such as jobs and scholarships to program participants may encourage students to persevere and may diminish the lure of part-time jobs, which proved so troublesome to the progress of our students. To acquaint them with new people, places, and ideas, the group should take regular field trips. To make their college experience intensive, the program should house the students in dormitories for at least part of the time.

The students of our adopted schools were accustomed to a curriculum which stressed the memorization of facts without context. Likewise, most of their writing assignments stressed the restatement of previously acquired information, did not provide a rhetorical frame for the composing task, and used the writing-as-product model. To counteract these tendencies, the curriculum should integrate its subjects and stress the higher cognitive levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The assignments of a composition class are a natural place for these tasks. Writing instructors should coordinate with instructors teaching other subjects in the program, so that students are placed in real or realistic situations where higher level tasks are naturally required in written form.

*Evaluation of Students and the Program:* Letter grades on individual compositions are necessary for informing students of their weekly progress in the writing portion of the program and for motivating them to do their best. If the program offers college credit, students should be required to submit a portfolio of their writing to a panel of college instructors (and high school teachers, if the arrangement is a partnership). But to judge improvement in writing on an absolute scale and provide the most persuasive evidence of progress, students should take controlled pretests and posttests which are graded by a similar panel. While the quantitative data supplied by the pre/posttests are indispensable to a determination of success, evaluators should not ignore the benefits of qualitative indicators such as attitude surveys. In preparing the budget for the program, planners should allot ample resources for evaluative tasks.

*Personnel:* Instructors should know in advance the greater workload and the increased custodial role they may have in dealing with high school students. Recognizing these added responsibilities, writing program directors would not reasonably expect instructors to assume the responsibilities of high school teachers without a substantial increase in salary. Heads of writing programs should be prepared to monitor the program.

## Summary

It may not take much to devise a collaborative effort which looks good to the public but accomplishes little. The requirements for a truly effective program—one which substantially improves student writing and increases college attendance—are much greater. Careful planning, effective communication, and realistic expectations will do much to accomplish the political and academic goals of a partnership while preserving the integrity of a college writing program.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The view that it is pointless to deal with the problems and deficiencies of a school optimistically is widely held (e.g., Goodlad; Powell et al.). Nonetheless, many partnerships, including our own, have tried to deal with problems separately or have offered limited assistance (see, for example, Maeroff; Salvner; and Schuman).

<sup>2</sup>While cautioning against a "villains and victims" interpretation, Schultz et al. (144) note that high school teachers tend to view *staff development* as a euphemism for the lecture from professors ignorant of the real world of the school. Most researchers agree that equal input from high school and college personnel helps to preclude resentment on both sides. (See, for example, Thompson et al. 12-18; Flynn 26; Trubowitz 19.) Some (e.g., Spear and Maloney; Goodlad; Powell et al.; Cuban) view staff development as one means of pedagogical and curricular reform, but centralized curricula and high pupil loads may make it impossible for teachers to take advantage of new techniques.

<sup>3</sup>These four students were also part of the class listed as scheduling option 3, so we do not include them in our total.

<sup>4</sup>Three students in scheduling option 5 who decided to attend college elsewhere would have received credit had they applied for it. Including them in the successful enrollment category would bring our successful enrollments to 24%.

<sup>5</sup>A pull-out class is one in which students are removed from their regular class to receive additional or special instruction. They usually are responsible for the work missed in their regular class. So a pull-out class for most students means extra work.

<sup>6</sup>In a program larger than but similar to ours, Syracuse University concluded that their Project Advance drew only a few more students than it would have gotten ordinarily (Maeroff 21).

<sup>7</sup>See Mocker et al. (47); Thompson et al. (12-16); Flynn (26); and Evans and Shaw (88).

<sup>8</sup>For another analysis of the differing cultural environments of high schools and colleges, see Schultz et al.

<sup>9</sup>Mocker et al., Schultz, Thompson et al., and Evans and Shaw all stress the importance of planning in partnerships.

<sup>10</sup>Appointing a full-time partnership/assistance administrator is probably a mixed blessing. Such a position is essential to coordinate anything larger than a minimal program, but it also introduces another line of reporting for a writing program administrator.

<sup>11</sup>Spear and Maloney found in a survey of Salt Lake City schools that most writing assignments involved the recording of memory-level information. Few assignments required any level of abstraction. We have seen little during our years in public schools to contradict their findings.

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