

Whatever Happened to Average? Heeding Mike Rose's Call

Kelly Ritter

*This brief essay puts Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* in conversation with recent scholarship on socioeconomic disparities present in pre-college credit programs in high schools (specifically Advanced Placement), and the effects these disparities later have on first-year college students who are also first-generation.*

As someone whose career has focused on histories of writing, social class, and literacy, I can think of no scholar more important to my own origin story than Mike Rose. In 2014, when I was editor of *College English*, I was fortunate to receive a letter from him, in response to an article we had published by Betsy Bowen and Kathryn Nantz, titled “What is The Value of the GED?”. It opened this way:

O.K., so this is going to be an odd letter, a hybrid form: a fan letter to Betsy and Kathryn and a letter commending Kelly for publishing an article on the GED and, equally important, for publishing an article in *College English* co-authored by an economist. I'll bet it's the only time in the last half-dozen years that an economist appeared as an author in *College English* . . .

The letter continued:

As Betsy and Kathryn point out, we in composition and writing studies don't focus much attention on the population represented in their article. I have heard many similar complaints from people who teach in community college and/or in remedial-basic-developmental writing programs. We're talking about a lot of students, many of whom present significant needs and challenges to our skill and knowledge. We need to be thinking hard about how to help them and how to advocate for them . . .

Why doesn't our field encourage (and create the conditions to make possible) a few of us to become knowledgeable—or collaborate—in both rhetoric and economics, or in statistics and feminist methods, or in teacher research and public policy analysis?

Eight years later, I continue to reflect on the lingering gravity of Rose's words. As Ken Harvey famously laments in *Lives on the Boundary*, “I just wanna be average” (28). Ken longs to eschew “the identity implied in the vocational track . . . [and be] the Common Joe” (29). Yet today, we want

students to be anything *but* average. Though we say we celebrate difference, we more typically erase it. We efficiently monetize the high school years so as to bypass the college general education experience, including first-year writing, through accumulation of pre-college credits in various forms (and potentially at inappropriate developmental levels). Right now, the *speed* with which one receives a college degree is more valued than the trajectory *of* that degree, or the *person* earning it. We do not do enough to interrogate how these economic models of higher ed impact our field. For their part, Kristine Hansen and Christine R. Ferris also sounded this warning over a decade ago in their groundbreaking volume on AP, Dual Credit, and Dual Enrollment (*College Credit* 2010). We have yet, however, to heed it.

Our current focus on credentialed pathways has the goal of a homogenized workforce that shudders at the label “average,” and has no use for students like Ken, or (ironically) GED recipients who bypassed high school *itself*. When Rose told Ken’s story in 1989, AP credit was typically granted to a small number of top students, usually in just one or two subjects. When I graduated in 1987, my 1200 person high school in a midwestern college town had only two AP courses; my daughter’s former high school of about the same size—also in a midwestern college town—in 2022 offers AP courses in 20 subjects. And yet, as my daughter has herself observed, the students who enroll in these courses are rarely those from lower socio-economic classes (and also, are rarely students of color). Even as the College Board claims to be working toward more widespread availability of AP curricula in both urban and rural underserved communities, the fact remains: pre-college experiences are at their root unequal in the United States today, and students who start college lacking the now-standard 12 or more hours of pre-college credit are made to feel *not ready*. AP is now the gold standard, offering “advanced exemption” rather than the original goal of advanced *credit*, to borrow from David Joliffe’s important distinctions. Though my own experience was not like Ken’s, I was a first-gen, working-class student who struggled with her own desire to be “average.” Had I been accelerated through, or altogether out of, my general education courses, I can’t say what kind of person and scholar I’d be now. Alternatively, if I’d been made to feel *less than* by virtue of having (many) fewer credits than more advantaged students, I don’t know how or whether I would have finished college at all.

While overall nationwide trends in overall class- (and race-) based bifurcation of the collegiate population pre- and post-enrollment have been well documented (Mullen 2011; Stuber 2012; Stich 2014; Mettler 2014; Armstrong 2015; Lee 2016; Hamilton 2016), and while these complement broader theories of other underlying economic class structures and studies of the university as an economic system (Conley 2009; Cottom 2017;

Bowen and McPherson 2016; Servon 2018; Newfield 2008, 2016), much more work can be done in our field on the relationship between social class, pre-college credit, and general education curricula. Such work would recognize how, in this new campus economy, we have continued to obfuscate—in Rose’s terms—the “abilities hidden by class and cultural barriers” (*Lives xi*) in the name of a streamlined curriculum that values the “effective, no-nonsense pedagogy we assume the past must have had” (7). In our haste to elide difference, we have changed the way we define *prepared*, and by extension, *literate*. The *boundary* of remediation has been socially and structurally extended beyond those in the vocational track at Our Lady of Mercy to a much wider range of students from various geographies and economies. These students without pre-college credit are told they must “catch up” to their peers. They are labeled remedial, even when their scholastic profiles are anything but, and even as general education was always meant to be a significant and core component of a liberal education. As Rose would say, these students are “already behind the economic and political eight ball” (127).

There’s no easy road here, but I believe that WPAs can help turn back the tide toward a slower, more thoughtful way of valuing literacy acquisition and general education in our current economy, in part by continuing to research the class-based constraints and affordances that pre-determine students’ pathways through the college experience. By recognizing the socioeconomic realities of how we move students through our curriculum, and what Mike Rose’s immense body of work has taught us in this regard, WPAs can build and sustain inclusive writing programs that send the message that it’s *OK*—even actually *good*—to be average.

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Elizabeth A., and Laura T. Hamilton. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Harvard UP, 2015.
- Bowen, Betsy and Kathryn Nantz. “What Is the Value of a GED?” *College English*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2014, pp. 32-54.
- Bowen, William G. and Michael S. McPherson. *Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education*. Princeton UP, 2016.
- Conley, Dalton. *Elsewhere, U.S.A.: How We Got from the Company Man, Family Dinners and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, BlackBerry Moms and Economic Anxiety*. Pantheon Books, 2009.
- Cottom, Tressie McMillan. *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*. The New Press, 2017.
- Hamilton, Laura T. *Parenting to a Degree: How Family Matters for College Women’s Success*. U of Chicago P, 2016.

- Hansen, Kristine and Christine R. Farris. *College Credit for Writing in High School: The "Taking Care" of Business*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2010.
- Lee, Elizabeth M. *Class and Campus Life: Managing and Experiencing Inequality at an Elite College*. ILR Press, 2016.
- Mettler, Suzanne. *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream*. Basic Books, 2014.
- Mullen, Ann L. *Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2011.
- Newfield, Christopher. *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class*. Harvard UP, 2008.
- . *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.
- Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*. Penguin Books, 1990.
- Servon, Lisa. *The Unbanking of America: How the New Middle Class Survives*. Mariner Books, 2018.
- Stich, Amy. *Access to Inequality: Reconsidering Class, Knowledge, and Capital in Higher Education*. Lexington Books, 2012.

Kelly Ritter is professor and chair of the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her scholarship focuses on archival histories of U.S. writing programs and pedagogies and the impact of cultural-historical conceptions of social class on literacy education. She is the author or editor of eight books, including the forthcoming *Beyond Fitting In: Rethinking First-Generation Writing and Literacy Education* (MLA, 2023). From 2012 to 2017, she served as editor of *College English*.

