

# (Re)Envisioning the Divide: The Impact of College Courses on High School Students

> Kara Taczak and William H. Thelin

This article draws data from a participant-observation study that considers fourteen- and fifteen-year-old dual enrollment students and gauges the impact of their attendance in a section of first-year composition on them, on other students, and on curricular rigor.

High school students taking college courses that simultaneously fulfill high school requirements and give general education credit toward a bachelor's degree have become more of a presence on college campuses across the nation. The purpose behind these programs appears to be the belief that dual enrollment (also known as "concurrent enrollment") provides students with momentum toward degree completion. According to Clifford Adelman, students who earn fewer than twenty credits by the end of the first calendar year of college enrollment tend to experience a "serious drag" on their attempts at completion, so a "transition process" is necessary at the high school level (5). Furthermore, the National High School Center finds that the programs also reduce the amount of remediation at the college level, help gain access to education formerly reserved for top-performing students only, and offset some of the high tuition costs of university education (7).

This essay examines the effects of a dual enrollment program on teaching and learning in one particular section of English composition taught by an instructor we will call Professor Foley. Using data generated from qualitative research, we suggest that the cognitive capabilities of some dual enrollment students have not developed enough to handle effectively the challenges of the contemporary conception of composition. We believe that this furthers a regressive view of composition in the eye of the public, a view that does not take into consideration the research in the field and that focuses on current-traditional precepts to guide its perceptions.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

Nearly every state offers some form of dual enrollment, and at least eighteen of those states now mandate that the opportunity for dual enrollment be extended to high school seniors. Whether offered through distance learning (Bodmer), in conjunction with certified high school teachers on site at the high school (Far-

ris), or on the actual college campus, administrators and instructors have struggled with questions about the effectiveness of such programs. The High School Leadership Summit, sponsored but not necessarily endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education, suggests that policymakers need to address problems concerning equal access to these dual enrollment opportunities, financial arrangements equitable to all involved, collaborations between secondary and postsecondary schools, and the maintenance of college-level rigor in these courses (3). Quantitative studies have attempted to link dual enrollment to both short-term and long-term success. In a study of Florida's statewide program (3), Karp et al., for example, found strong correlation between participation in dual enrollment programs and students' likelihood of earning a high school diploma, enrolling and staying enrolled in college, and maintaining high GPAs. Although not as consistently as in the Florida sample, Karp et al. discovered that dual enrollment participants in career and technical education programs also profited (4–5). Bodmer, however, relates qualitative evidence concerning composition curriculum being censored by high school principals, leading to a review from administrators and other faculty in determining what was appropriate for a composition course (122–24). Furthermore, Tom Miller's research at the University of Arizona found that dual enrollment students failed the college writing assessment at a rate a third higher than that of other students, although this result was partly attributed to the fact that students started with lower verbal SATs and high school GPAs (Yancey 2003). Overall, however, little is known about the effects of dual enrollment on students (Bailey and Karp 21).

Our study examines a different type of dual enrollment. During the summer of 2007, six high school sophomores walked into a college composition classroom at a Midwestern state university, poised to complete a college-level course. The students were part of the Strive Toward Excellence Program (STEP) that was established by the university in 1988 to help middle school and high school students prepare for and understand college. The intention behind STEP, according to the university's website, is to provide "students with the attitude, skills, support, and financial assistance to pursue and successfully attain a college degree." The six students were admitted into Professor Foley's class as part of a STEP pilot to determine whether a group of fourteen- and fifteen-year-old students could, indeed, succeed alongside other college students and, if so, perhaps achieve the equivalent of an associate's degree by the time that they were finished with high school. The students were handpicked by STEP, based on their previous success and their ACT scores (which needed to fall in the range of 16 to 26).

Bailey and Karp's review of existing literature on "credit-based transition programs" produced a taxonomy from which to understand STEP (although STEP is not specifically mentioned in the article). AP programs, for example, are called "singleton" programs because they are stand-alone college courses. STEP appears to be a mixture of what Bailey and Karp term a "comprehensive program" and an "enhanced comprehensive program." Comprehensive programs include a majority of students' junior and senior high school courses, sometimes on the college campus, sometimes not. No social preparation is given. Bailey and Karp differenti-

ate the Enhanced Comprehensive Programs by this social aspect, describing them as seeking to prepare students for college—not only through rigorous academic instruction, but also by offering a wide range of activities such as counseling, assistance with applications, mentoring, and general personal support. They aim to address all elements of the secondary-postsecondary transition and encompass the majority of the students' high school experiences (12).

Bailey and Karp add that these programs seem best suited for students who are not traditionally on the college track (12). The programs look for socially or economically disadvantaged students and locate their courses on the college campus, usually in an embedded high school on the campus. STEP focuses on middle school students whose parents do not have college degrees. Therefore, the students, as young as fourteen, become first-generation college students. Yet, unlike most of these programs, in STEP the students take some courses with other students, and the program looks for academically inclined students. The instructors are regular college lecturers and professors. The curriculum is supposed to be the same as offered to other first-year students.

For our purposes, we insist that STEP is a hybrid program and thus avoid easy comparisons to other dual enrollment programs. Yet, despite this hybridity—or perhaps because of it—the results of our study might inform many instructors teaching dual enrollment courses because, as stated earlier, we argue that, for the teaching of composition at least, students need more maturity and the chance to develop cognitively in order to succeed. On top of that, we demonstrate the negative impact that these students had on both the traditional students in the class, ages eighteen to twenty-one, and the nontraditional students, over the age of twenty-one. We also demonstrate the loss of pedagogical rigor and standards, resulting from instructor efforts to negotiate differing maturity levels. However, signs of progress did emerge in at least one of the STEP students examined.

We used a participant-observation methodology to glean information from these students, as well as from the other students in the class. A team of four participant-observers attended class on a daily basis and took detailed notes, interviewed the students and the instructor outside of class three times during the term, collected all classroom materials, and reviewed student writing for signs of growth. The STEP students were part of a broad focus of research that aimed to see the effects of particular pedagogical techniques on a diverse group of students. The team also wanted to uncover student reaction to the espoused commitment of the professor to critical pedagogy. The team leader had to make an amendment to the IRB form, in order to interview minors, and eventually secured permission from the parents of four of the six STEP students to include those students in the study. Each STEP student who participated in the study was interviewed three times during the five-week session: the first week, the third week, and the week after the class concluded. They were also given an exit survey, which they turned in at the same time as their final portfolio.

Two important variables to consider include teacher preparation and the term in which the course took place. Foley had no knowledge that the STEP

students would be a part of the course until a coordinator from STEP greeted him at the classroom door, minutes before the first session was to take place. Such a lack of communication between university units is consistent with some of the discoveries that Farrell and Seifert document about failures in dual enrollment programs (75–76); it paved the way for what could have been a “blunder,” as Thelin and Tassoni describe it, in a critical classroom (1–3).

Foley’s classroom already had nineteen students in it, ranging in age from fourteen to thirty-eight. The Midwestern university where this research took place is a comprehensive school where nontraditional students are common: thirteen of the students were older than eighteen, four were mothers with multiple children, and six were eighteen-year-old first-year students. At least one of the students had failed the previous composition class. Into this mix of students came the six STEP students. The STEP coordinator gave Professor Foley instructions not to modify any of his materials or his approach to the class for the STEP students, because the program encouraged the students to experience college-level instruction and expectations unfiltered. Yet, Foley found it impossible to proceed with the curriculum as he had planned, given the unexpected diversity of the students.

The second variable might account for his reactions—the course took place over an accelerated summer term. As Foley noted in all of our interviews, summer sessions move too quickly for already-admitted students. The experience of the STEP students must have been especially trying, because they had a limited understanding of what the course would entail. The four students in the study, all of them female, came into the classroom seemingly eager to learn and ready to develop writing skills. However, one student, named Juliet, understood skills as “closing sentences on paragraphs” or “spelling,” whereas another student, Shannon, hoped that this class would prepare her for an education degree so that she would be able to “write letters home to parents or to other faculty in the school.” Another student, CeCe, stated that she wanted “to further [her] education . . . to get ahead of the regular classes in high school.”<sup>2</sup> The students did not recognize composition as encompassing more than grammar or preparation for other tasks. According to the university’s website, one of the goals of STEP is “assist[ing] students to develop identifiable skills in writing, mathematics, and analytical thinking, which will enable them to enroll in the appropriate college-prep courses.” Therefore, the students most likely assumed that obtaining skills was the only appropriate goal for them to have as well. Certainly, the STEP students might have benefited from having more time in a fifteen-week term to adapt to the expectations of the course, as well as to the contents and methods of the critical pedagogy that Foley envisioned.

Keeping these variables in mind, however, we believe that our data raise some important issues for educators and administrators to consider. The creation of this particular dual enrollment program was characterized by good intentions, which could be seen in the actions of the support staff throughout the term. Yet, did this program have a positive impact, socially and academically, on these students?

## Foley's Classroom

Foley follows the democratic methods of critical pedagogy that Paulo Freire and Ira Shor have defined. Foley promotes a student-centered classroom that frontloads the students' needs and backloads his own, as well as encouraging an analysis of common precepts that ultimately challenge the status quo. Often Foley had to adjust to the needs of the students, especially the STEP students, when it came to some fundamental understanding. Early on, after two of the STEP students had misunderstood an assignment, he had to explain that an essay consisted of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Furthermore, he had not planned on teaching any grammar classwide, wanting to reserve such discussions for one-on-one conferences based on patterns that he uncovered in individual student papers.<sup>3</sup> However, Foley had to replace planned activities with two grammar instructional sessions, each lasting twenty to thirty minutes, because of the STEP students' need to learn basic terminology and the reasoning behind sentence combining and comma placement.

Critical pedagogy encourages a democratic classroom where students have a voice. Therefore, Foley also had the students negotiate and vote on things such as classroom rules, grading contracts, and essay topics. The students created a uniform grading contract on the first day of class that generated a list of criteria that needed to be met in order to get an A, B, or C. Four of the STEP students signed an A contract initially; the other two signed a B contract. As the weeks progressed, Foley met with the students to discuss whether or not they had a realistic chance to meet their contracts, and two of the STEP students had to rework their contracts twice, each negotiating for a lower grade.

The research team rotated in shifts to cover all course hours, but at times all four participated in the class. The observers noted that, from the first day, the students broke themselves into "pods" or cliques that were segregated based on age and gender. One class member responded to the pod issue by stating that the students got into "the cliques depending on how they [we] act" and felt that cliques were a part of life. She qualified this by saying, "I think you can grow with the clique. Some of the people I already knew from school. But if I saw someone outside class, I would probably talk to them." The STEP students broke themselves into groups, with the two boys staying together. CeCe, a fourteen year-old, offered an explanation for this division:

Because you feel comfortable working with them after you work with them once. You base yourself off of a group of people in that classroom. And that is the group that you want to continue to work with because if you don't work with them then you feel like your paper is not done right or something like that.

Foley led discussions on audience awareness, critical analysis, and organization, approaching these issues through subject matter that ranged from environmental issues, to drunk driving, to appropriate and inappropriate public displays of emotion, which gave the students the opportunity to share their differing experiences. The

pedagogy that he implemented also allowed the students the opportunity to listen and engage with students from different backgrounds. One of the nontraditional students was a breast cancer survivor, which seeped into her conversation often; another was on probation from a mixup with a friend's ATM card. One STEP student mentioned in an interview that she liked the diversity of the class because it allowed her to see different types of people. However, she did note that "some people older than me might have a problem with it because you know teenagers are usually chatty and we aren't used to being in a college class, so we just talk anyway."

The STEP students had regular tutoring, and one member of the observation team, who was also an instructor at the midwestern university, volunteered to tutor them once a week. They were enrolled in two other classes; one was a library instruction class, the other bowling. The library instruction class helped these students with the final essay assignment, which dealt with human relationships with animals. The other three essay topics, however—stereotyping, public displays of emotion, and the difference between aspirations and dreams—did not involve a research component. For the purpose of this article, we present three case studies of the STEP students: one who was a high performer, one a middle performer, and one a lower performer.

### **Shannon**

Shannon, a fourteen-year-old, participated in class regularly and seemed to be eager and willing to work. In her profile, an assignment from the first day of class, she demonstrated an awareness of the world around her that the other STEP students lacked. Shannon voiced concerns about the environment and the war in Iraq, suggesting that more recycling must be implemented and that the fighting had been going on for too long.

This awareness, however, did not manifest itself in deep critical analysis. Shannon could explain a problem and show some of the subtle consequences, but she did not develop her writing beyond pat conclusions. For example, she understood that stereotyping presented a problem to society and gave examples about how it could limit or intimidate people. However, her conclusion—despite the fact that Foley gave her the opportunity to revise multiple times—never moved beyond "the world would be a better place for everyone if we stop stereotyping each other." Although Foley commented that just saying "Don't do it" does not take into account the complex reasons that stereotyping exists, Shannon did not dig deeper, even when given examples and parallels. Her final paper on the extinction of jaguars relied solely on lightly paraphrased research and did not answer the assignment question about weighing the beliefs of those who believe in "human destiny" against those who believe in animals' innate right to exist. Despite Foley's coaxing, Shannon never submitted a revision that showed effort at tackling the complexity of the issue. Shannon excelled only on the third paper topic, about aspirations, probably because it did not ask her to extend her analysis above and beyond herself. Overall, her writing showed proficiency in sentence structure and organization, but she

had difficulty developing examples and did not incorporate lessons on analysis, anticipating audience needs, and thesis development into her essays.

Shannon projected a positive attitude throughout the term. She liked the differences in students:

The kids obviously, the students in class, are a lot different from being in a class with people strictly your age. People are *married* in our class; so the maturity level is a little better in this class than it would be in high school. But then again I know I go to a private Catholic school so everyone's pretty mature there, too. It's still different.

She understood that the older students might have more direct experience on issues, and she acknowledged during her last interview that some of the political issues that surfaced did not hold her interest because of her age. She said that when a topic made her uncomfortable, she contented herself with listening and did not feel slighted.

Even though her interviews show that she maintained some of the expectations of high school—instructors should call on students, groups should be assigned, etc.—she also liked what she considered the more “laid back” atmosphere of the college course. She noted the more mature themes of assigned reading and enjoyed the emphasis on papers as opposed to testing and memorizing, believing that writing essays taught her more. Very interestingly, by her last interview, she came to regard Foley as “a member of the class” who gave his opinions as freely as others. She had trouble seeing herself as a knowledge-maker and did not feel that she learned more about herself through writing, but she seemed to have been able to change her opinion of the instructor—as the sole authority to one who shared authority with the students. She remarked especially about the considerable input that Foley encouraged students to give on topic selection and assignments.

Shannon appears to have taken away from the class, at the least, a level of comfort with the pedagogy and with her responsibility as a student. In this way, she benefited from dual enrollment. However, when she discussed what she had learned, Shannon had difficulty articulating concepts. She still spoke of her revision process as “fixing [and] deleting.” Although she mentioned the need to incorporate more analysis into her writing process, she did not define this need in such a way that we could determine whether she had a firm grasp of what analysis entails.

## **Juliet**

Juliet, a fifteen-year-old, participated regularly in class, although, as with many maturing teenagers, she often spoke before thinking through the issue and thus answered with responses that did not pertain to the questions. However, she asked many questions if she did not understand something and voiced a willingness to work hard. Her profile suggested some obstinacy in considering the ideas of others. She called herself a “very opinionated person” and tied it to the need “to have someone speak the truth regarding world issues,” but she did not mention any

interest in national or international affairs. She stated emphatically that she says what she feels and means it.

This obstinacy presented itself in her writing. She seemed very sensitive to criticism, and, although she submitted several revisions, she often did not take into consideration comments from her peers or from Foley. Foley eventually settled on having her work through internal inconsistencies. For example, in Essay # 1, she stated that stereotypes are “assumptions made of someone by . . . first sight.” Foley pointed out that her description in this essay of her father being stereotyped by his friends as a “computer whiz” did not fit this definition, because, according to Juliet, he had gained this reputation because of his talent with computers, not by anything that could be seen at first sight. Juliet still did not revise to clear up such contradictions, making deletions and changes to her experiences and observations that often compounded the problem.<sup>4</sup> Foley pointed out larger issues, showing her that her paper on public displays of emotion did not confront the key question of the effect of suppressing public emotion, and he urged her to renegotiate her contract so that he could concentrate on basic issues of focus and correctness. Juliet’s final essay still contained multiple sentence-level errors, and she showed no signs of understanding the needs of an audience, connecting a body to a thesis through explicated analysis, organizing effectively, or incorporating relevant, specific detail. Her prose was coherent, but she seemed to lack control. Even though Foley gave her a B on her aspirations paper, he did so with hesitancy, explaining that he was going to allow her to move on despite her not having attended to the sentence-level errors from the first draft. The other papers, which had required Juliet to use her experiences and observations to explore larger issues, never rose above the C level.

Juliet seemed inconsistent from one interview to the next. As stated in her profile, she viewed herself as a “very opinionated” person, and when presented in class with a different opinion, she appeared to resist listening. She would look away, fidget, and talk to the student sitting next to her. She sensed that Foley disagreed with her stance on same-sex marriage and gave this response in the interview:

I think it is my stance and where I stand on it and where he stand on it because we have two different opinions that could affect the way I think and act about it because my opinion is completely different from his and he wants to make sure that he proves his point so that I could maybe change my way I think.

Later, she said that the discussion could be “politically controversial but it doesn’t matter” to her. The research team’s field notes document several occasions during class when Juliet visibly shut herself off to others’ opinions before she gave herself the chance to understand them fully. One example of this occurred during peer workshop, when others had critiqued her second paper. Her face grew red, she shook her head while averting her eyes, and she said sarcastically, “Okay, what else?” without writing down the comments or engaging the other students in dialogue.

Juliet also had a hard time deciding on what a teacher’s role in the classroom should be. In her first interview, she stated that Foley created a comfortable atmosphere, saying that he “doesn’t pressure and make people talk,” but in her next

interview she stated, “a teacher is just a teacher to me . . . ones that are good quality (they) made things easy for us . . . a bad teacher is someone who is controversial, opinionated.” When asked if Foley could improve his teaching, she explained that when he provided sample essays, there were “mistakes” in them. She wanted him to give essays to use as examples that had no “mistakes.” Foley’s purpose, however, was to present the class with writing of his own—at the drafting stage—to model for the students some effective methods of responding to writing and ways for a writer to incorporate peer responses into revision strategies. Julie wanted Foley to represent a teacher that she had envisioned in her mind—a teacher who gave a “perfect” example of writing. Understandably enough, she did not know how a college professor’s approach to a class might differ from that of a K–12 teacher, but Foley did not match the ideas that she had in mind.

In her interviews, Juliet seemed hesitant in her answers, often asking for the question to be repeated in a simpler manner and then ending her response with “Was that ok?” or “I’m trying to think of it [her answer] to help you.” She wanted to learn and wanted to do her best in her interviews, but her lack of experience showed with the inconsistencies in her answers. Even though she acknowledged that age plays a part in learning, later in the same interview, she stated she had not learned anything about herself through this classroom experience, but then she said that experience can be a form of knowledge. This shows that she did not push her surface reactions with further analysis. Juliet wanted to do well and wanted to learn, but her lack of experience kept her from opening up to learn from others, including from Foley.

### **CeCe**

Fourteen-year-old CeCe resisted the classroom from the beginning, explaining during her first interview that she found Foley “boring.” She rarely paid attention in class, hiding her constant text messaging from Foley (but not from the research team) and chatting with Juliet and others about extracurricular matters during small group work. She enjoyed fashion and could critique clothes lines and jewelry for their quality, but her writing did not reflect this ability to critique, because she did not follow assignment requirements to analyze in a way that put her experiences into a larger context. She had severe sentence-level difficulties and stated in her profile and several times thereafter that she hated English. Although Foley met with her one-on-one several times to help her, she appeared incapable or unwilling to use his suggestions and examples. According to Foley, she lost patience with the close scrutiny that he would give to her papers during these conferences and she would leave prematurely, telling him that she got it now and could do the rest on her own. Her papers did not reflect this understanding.

CeCe was caught plagiarizing twice. Although the composition program had a strict disciplinary policy connected with plagiarism, Foley chose to work with CeCe’s STEP advisors rather than enforce the policy, which would have resulted in her receiving an automatic F for the course. After recognizing CeCe’s attempts at

plagiarizing on the first essay, Foley coached her to take “one step at a time,” suggesting that her many errors needed to be addressed after she settled the content issue. He had hoped that, with encouragement, CeCe would understand that she could write an essay that was all her own. Yet, CeCe failed to address these major content issues. For her essay on public displays of emotion, CeCe responded to the assignment in a way that showed a misunderstanding of the prompt: her essay dealt with the effects of growing up without a father. She did not relate a story about having to suppress emotion and left unanalyzed the experience that she did talk about. Unlike Shannon’s or Juliet’s, CeCe’s third essay was her weakest. This essay’s topic was aspirations, and she wrote about wanting to be a barber and a race-car driver. She plagiarized information from the Internet about Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Jennifer Tumminelli, saying that she loved to watch them race, but then, according to Foley, she admitted in conference that she had never even seen them. Foley noted that her paper hinted at the way gender impacted aspirations, but although CeCe added some details about her motivations for being a barber, she did not submit a revision that attempted to analyze further the effects of gender. Rather, she added statements such as, “With my personal determination, personality, hard work, and openness, I will prove the society wrong, and women are just as good in these two male dominated fields.” Her final paper of the term, however, seemed to show improvement in sentence structure and organization, but the paper, about bald eagles, was largely plagiarized from multiple Internet sources, including the website of a fourth grader who had put his school project online. Therefore, our research could not track any improvement over the course of the semester. She showed little, if any, understanding of the rhetorical concepts stressed throughout the term.

4<sup>th</sup> grader's memoir

CeCe appeared more defensive in her response to learning alongside older students, saying that

people that are like forty have way more experience, through like . . . like he telling us to write a paper on aspirations and emotions. I don't know what my aspiration is yet. They been knew that. Like they been knew what they wanted to be and that is not an equal balance as far as the topics go. Like the animal paper, I agree with the animals, because that is like a neutral thing. You don't have to have experience.

For CeCe, it seemed as if her lack of experience did more than hold her back in her writing; it held her back in discussions as well. She believed that the discussions were “dead.” She continued by saying, “No one talks and everyone just sits there and listens to him talk all day long with the same voice. No one smiles. No one does anything. Everyone just sits there.” Although the sessions varied in response levels and excitement, the observers’ in-class notes do not indicate that no one smiled or talked. Most class sessions had a mixture of small and whole-class group work. Foley did not rely on lecture except to introduce concepts. CeCe’s impressions probably have more to do with her discomfort with participating in discussions.

Although other STEP students seemed to benefit from the diversity of the classroom, CeCe rejected it. Many of her responses to her interviews were one-

word answers, and those that were longer were negative. When asked if she thought she had learned anything in class, she responded, “Besides that I suck at writing? No.” She also felt that Foley did not “talk about . . . nothing to do with English or writing.” She believed that composition dealt with grammar, so when asked again if she learned anything in class she said, “I basically learned some grammar and how to expand some papers, you know. Pretty much it.”

CeCe’s immaturity, even more so than Juliet’s, limited her learning experience. She had difficulty opening herself up to new or differing perspectives and approaches to learning, dismissing what was not already in her repertoire with disdain. It did not appear that she attempted to analyze, to question, or to scrutinize. She tried to do the bare minimum to get by; consequently, this led to her ending the session with the belief that she had learned little and gained nothing from the experience.

How older students feel about Freshman in College

### The Class Reacts: Overall Atmosphere

Given the diversity of the class, other students felt that the STEP students’ lack of experience held the class back. Several of the students noted in their interviews that the “kids” seemed immature and not ready for college. Some questioned why the STEP students had enrolled in a college class. It created an unequal classroom dynamic that was divided by the third day, according to the observers’ notes. The STEP students never attempted to venture into another “pod,” and the traditional students never attempted it either. The older students often felt frustrated with the younger students and sometimes even appeared to refrain from joining the classroom discussion. This frustration was evident in their interviews. One student, Marisa, had a particularly harsh reaction to the STEP students:

most of the time, this particular classroom, it was just too much noise, trying to do writing assignments, trying to focus or concentrate, and constantly having noise in the background, not just basic noise from people moving around, but just constant talking and bickering and that was so very annoying.

She continued by saying that the class “seemed kind of elementary, but then at the same time it’s [the students] a distraction.” Samantha, a mother of six, agreed with this by stating that the classroom felt “kind of high-schoolish. A lot of whispers that go on and we have to go over a lot of things over and over again because the younger kids just don’t have the knowledge and the experience to understand.” These two were the most outspoken in the class, but many of the other students experienced similar emotions. The research team often sat with the nontraditional students outside on breaks, and many times these students voiced concern and frustrations over class and the discussion. The students’ general reaction to the STEP students was that they held the class back from fully realizing its potential, and the students felt that they would have learned more about writing if the STEP students had not been in the class.

According to many of the students interviewed, both traditional and non-

traditional, the STEP students lacked life experiences, so the problematic classroom behavior was not entirely their fault. They were just young; thus, some of the older students suggested the impossibility of the STEP students responding to situations in the same way that adult students could. The STEP students' lack of experience held the discussion back, but it could not be helped because of their age. One student, Elizabeth, felt that the STEP students responded to this with fear: "Oh, I think with the younger kids it's a fear of the age, of fitting in, mutual interests I'm sure." The fear led to a discomfort in the classroom, making it hard for the STEP students to adjust. Elizabeth believed that fourteen- and fifteen-year-old students are more concerned with "fitting in" to the situation and not as concerned with learning. She felt this was a typical response because high school is a different setup than college, and in high school the maturity that comes with experience is not the same as in college. Students learn different life experiences at different ages, and certain experiences can only be learned at a specific age.

Some of the non-STEP students did respond well to the diversity. These students believed that age gaps showed different sides of an experience and brought a new perspective to the discussion. They also felt that the STEP students would benefit from older students because it allowed them to be a part of a mature experience, which could lend itself to a new understanding and appreciation for education. However, only three students out of nineteen offered this positive feedback about the STEP students' presence.

No heated arguments took place within the class or during breaks from class. The observers linked this to the traditional students feeling that such confrontation was not worth the effort. However, Marisa did address the students one day in class. During an interview, she recalled what she had been thinking before the in-class scolding unfolded:

we had to do a writing assignment about our thought process while we had a five-minute quiet time, and well you know I started not to say it but even during that five minutes of trying to be quiet it was still noise coming from that same area, and I'm like even when it's time to be quiet, they'll find a way to make noise and that was just so annoying to me.

She was not harsh in her manner, but she attempted to get the students back on track. The students' reactions to her were to be quiet for a bit, but once the activity was over, they picked back up with the whispering and noise. Marisa felt that Foley should have separated the STEP students from each other at the beginning of the session, feeling that this might have helped the situation: "He never did say too much. He was just kinda, you could see that he was irritated, but sometimes he would wait awhile before he would finally say or he would just say the person's name in the process of you know explaining something to us to get their attention." Foley responded once to the disruptive behavior by attempting to put the STEP students into different groups; however, by the end of the session, none of the other students wanted to work with them, stating that they did not feel their work was being properly evaluated by fourteen-year-olds.

Peer review on ESSay by a 14 year old?

Marisa, along with some other students, walked away from the class with a negative attitude toward writing, mentioning in her final interview that she was unhappy with the progression of the class. The observers wondered how much of this was attributed to the STEP students' presence. Although the final interviews were not definitive on this issue, ultimately neither the STEP students nor the traditional and nontraditional students appeared to benefit from one another, because no pod ventured willingly into other pods during any of the group activities (including peer response groups).

### **Rigor and Standards**

As noted, Professor Foley changed class lessons to accommodate the STEP students. More importantly, however, his expectations clearly lowered as the term progressed. Although several of the other students in the class demonstrated abilities that Foley could have tried to elevate, he appeared to relent, telling students that papers had fulfilled their contracts, even when more issues could have been addressed. Consistently, the research team analyzed the quality of essays as lower than Foley did, especially for the students who had more talent.

During several discussions with Foley, he pointed to the STEP students as a factor. Essays from other students who had potential looked better than they perhaps were in comparison to the STEP students, and Foley did not ask for further revisions. He lingered on the topic of maturity during our interviews with him. For example, he thought Alicia's experience as a server gave her more insight into public displays of emotion than the grade school experiences used by the STEP students. The older students' ability to reflect, draw out meaning from their words, and put observations into a larger context stood in stark contrast to the fourteen-year-olds in the STEP program. Even though he had not realized that he was inflating grades at first, by the time he assessed their portfolios, he knew that work he had accepted for A contracts was not as strong as it could have been. However, he justified the higher grades to an extent, indicating, perhaps, that he knew earlier that he had lowered standards. The STEP students occupied much of his time. The STEP students' supervisor would line up all six students at his office for his scheduled hours, preventing other students from discussing their writing with him on several occasions. Foley had tried to steer students to the writing center, but its hours were limited during the summer, and the tutors there also had ended up being overwhelmed by the STEP students using their facilities because the students had taken many of the available appointment slots. Foley mentioned that he felt bad for several of the non-STEP students because he had not given them the attention that they needed. He might have raised grades as a way of making up for this lack of attention.

Foley lamented that he had had no previous experience teaching K-12 students; he felt that he could not measure which cognitive demands in his pedagogy exceeded the normal abilities of a fourteen-year-old. As noted earlier, the STEP program administrators had not consulted with him prior to putting the students

in his course, and the supervisors—not K–12 specialists themselves—offered no training or mentoring. When deciding on grades, he felt that he could not, in all fairness, judge the STEP students by collegiate standards. He gave an A to two STEP students when he normally would have given a B mark. He even felt that an F for CeCe was too harsh, so he gave her a D instead. Therefore, the STEP students received grades for college credit in English composition that were not awarded on the basis of their performance, but on the basis of Foley’s best estimation of a fair standard for young adolescents taking a college course. It seems that rigor and standards suffered on all fronts.

Inequality among students

### Conclusion

Our study indicates that taking a college-level course did not serve the STEP students in this dual enrollment program. On the one hand, the STEP students had the opportunity to become better-rounded as students, gain more knowledge than a normal high school student, and become better prepared to enter college. The STEP students believed that by taking college classes while still in high school, they would gain information that they could apply to high school and later on in college. In their interviews, some STEP students stated that the class experience had been worth it because they learned the “skills” of writing. On the other hand, they appeared to have overlooked the larger mission of the writing course; they misunderstood the goals of the class, so the application to later courses, civic participation, and employment opportunities might be limited.

No easy solution presents itself. This study is small and perhaps if it were replicated to consider dual enrollment students during a regular term, the results would be different. If Foley or another teacher had had the opportunity to prepare for the STEP students, the curriculum might have unfolded differently and yielded greater returns. But as they are, our results suggest a conflict between the conception of knowledge that motivates a college instructor like Professor Foley and the growth of dual enrollment. The work of developmental psychologists Robert Kegan and William Perry Jr. informs our analysis. Both researchers divide cognitive development into stages with strong associations to age. The stages progress from egocentric outlooks on life to more nuanced reflections on one’s position in the world—or roughly, a range from childlike attitudes to mature perspectives. Although Doug Hunt believes that watching composition students working on a problem that catches them in a transitional stage of development gives “some insight into the way people in this culture cross the threshold of adulthood” (36), what happens when the students are four years away from what this culture now deems adulthood? In other words, if prepubescent and pubescent students are, by virtue of age, in the natural state of what Perry calls “dualism” or are moving toward the first substage of “multiplicity” (66–80), we cannot reasonably expect the vast majority of them to respond to the challenges found in a progressive composition classroom.

This conclusion should hardly startle any educator. Yet, dual enrollment programs are rapidly changing the landscape of college campuses. Clearly, there

must be a view of education in the minds of administrators and state legislators—an epistemological ideology—that does not value composition as a knowledge-generating discipline. In fact, knowledge under this scenario must be a static collection of information that can be memorized and regurgitated, not something applicable and relevant.

We could explore the implications of our research for dual enrollment programs and suggest ways to make them more effective. Perhaps fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds are simply too young for this experience, and programs should wait for the junior and senior years of high school to start this transition. Maybe isolating the students from the general population would allow instructors to focus on more appropriate topics for the students' maturity levels. It is possible, also, that instructors could benefit from more exposure to K–12 research and translate or transform best practices for this population into the college classroom. But finding ways to fix dual enrollment is akin to helping students find ways to fix their papers. Just as we want the writer to learn about writing, we should want administrators of dual enrollment programs to understand the flaws in the grand narrative about composition instruction. We remain convinced that the solution to the problem lies in shaping better messages about writing instruction.

Linda Adler-Kassner identifies a four-step process from which to enact change in this way: identifying an issue and a goal for change, identifying what we know and need to know to achieve the goal, identifying audiences/shaping messages, and assessing work toward the next steps (131–61). Certainly, for this particular issue, the outreach has to be to high school administrators and teachers, a historically difficult bridge to cross. Yet, if we are to shape a consistent, strong, effective message, we cannot ignore this collaboration. Once we speak the same language as K–12 educators, we can start conveying a message about writing instruction that is based on research, not lore, and reach another target audience—parents and the public at large. If we can change perceptions of education and writing instruction in particular, we can better argue for slowing down this seeming race to adulthood and allow children to be children. We must write this story. ◀

## Notes

1. The authors wish to thank Peggy Richards, Patricia Kincaid, and Brandon Sloan for their work as part of the research team that collected the data for this article.

2. All students' names have been changed.

3. Our review of Foley's commenting on student papers revealed a system meant to help students learn how to use the course handbook. Foley would put an "x" next to sentences with surface-level errors and write down the page numbers of the handbook that explained the appropriate rules. He expected students to refer to the book and ask him questions when he conferred with them.

4. At one point, Foley had to confront her on issues of honesty, pointing out

to her that she had changed details and facts from the same personal experiences and observations she had used in earlier drafts so that it would appear to answer marginal questions of logic and consistency.

### Works Cited

- Adelman, Clifford. "The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College." United States Department of Education (Executive Summary) 2 March 2006. 11 August 2008 <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/toolboxrevisit/index.html>.
- Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2008.
- Bailey, Thomas, and Melinda Mechur Karp. "Promoting College Access and Success: A Review of Credit-Based Transition Programs." *The Progress of Education Reform* 6.3 (May 2005) 1–36. 20 July 2008 <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cclo/crdbase.pdf>.
- Bodmer, Paul. "Is It Pedagogical or Administrative? Administering Distance Delivery to High School." *Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon*. Ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2006. 115–26.
- Farrell, Patricia L., and Kim Allan Seifert. "Lessons Learned from a Dual-Enrollment Partnership." *New Directions for Community Colleges* 139 (2007): 69–77.
- Farris, Christine. "The Space Between: Dual-Credit Programs as Brokering, Community Building, and Professionalization." *Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon*. Ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2006. 104–14.
- High School Leadership Summit. "Dual Enrollment: Accelerating the Transition to College." United States Department of Education. 19 June 2008 <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hsinit/papers/dual.pdf>.
- Hunt, Doug. *Misunderstanding the Assignment: Teenage Students, College Writing, and the Pains of Growth*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2002.
- Karp, Melinda Mechur, et al. "Dual Enrollment Students in Florida and New York City: Postsecondary Outcomes." *CCRC Brief* 37 (Feb. 2008). <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=578>.
- Kegan, Robert. *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983.
- National High School Center. "Findings from the Early College High School Initiative: A Look at Best Practices and Lessons Learned Regarding a Dual Enrollment Program." American Institute for Research. March 2007. ERIC.

20 July 2008 [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/3d/79/8a.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/3d/79/8a.pdf).

Perry, William Jr. *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970.

Thelin, William H., and John Paul Tassoni. "Blundering the Hero Narrative: The Critical Teacher in Classroom Representations." *Blundering for a Change: Errors and Expectations in Critical Pedagogy*. Eds. John Paul Tassoni and William H. Thelin. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000. 1–7.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Delivering College Composition into the Future." *Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon*. Ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2006. 199–209.

---

**Kara Taczak** is a second-year Ph.D. student in Rhetoric and Composition at Florida State University, where her research interests focus on transfer in the first-year composition classroom. **William H. Thelin** is associate professor of English at The University of Akron and author of the textbook *Writing without Formulas*.

---

## HELP SHAPE NCTE POSITIONS BY SUBMITTING A RESOLUTION

If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching or positions you would like to support, and you think NCTE should take a stand, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention. If passed at the Annual Business Meeting for the Board of Directors and Other Members of the Council, proposed resolutions become part of the Council's position/philosophy on questions related to the teaching of English and can assist the Council in developing action programs.

For further details on submitting a resolution, or to see resolutions already passed by Council members, visit the NCTE website (<http://www.ncte.org/positions>) or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters (800-369-6283, ext. 3644; [resolutions@ncte.org](mailto:resolutions@ncte.org)). Resolutions must be postmarked by **October 15, 2009**.

---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.