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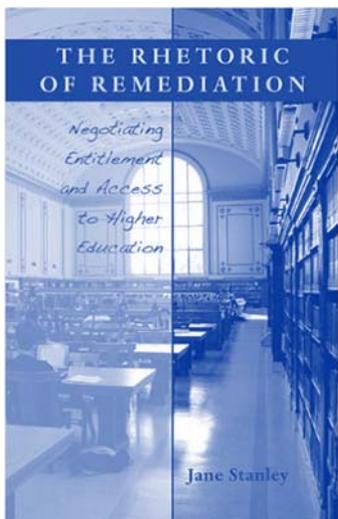


Book Review:

The Rhetoric of Remediation: Negotiation Entitlement and Access to Higher Education



Reviewed by Chad Patton (Grand Valley State University)



It is an important question in higher education: whose job is it to teach basic skills? Clearly it is primary and secondary school teachers' responsibilities; they are the ones who

should be preparing their students for college. Unless, of course, it is the university's responsibility; shouldn't universities be preparing the students whom they have accepted into their institution?

In *The Rhetoric of Remediation*, Stanley (2010) did not claim to have a clear answer to that question. Rather, she made it abundantly clear that despite being the center of numerous political debates for the last 140 years, remedial students will continue to need the assistance of the education system. As the associate director of college writing programs at University of California-Berkeley, Stanley examined remediation throughout UC-Berkeley's expansive history. Through reviewing Berkeley's archived texts, Stanley

found that there was never a point in UC - Berkeley's history when at least a few students' academic ability "did not cause disappointment" (p. 140).

While students in need of remediation have been a constant for the last 14 decades, their role in the political landscape of higher education has been uniformly integral. The rhetoric of remediation is a rhetoric that Berkeley has used "to establish (and later demonstrate) its status among other institutions of higher education" (Stanley, 2010, p. 6). In other words, the rhetoric of remediation can best be described as "demands for access crash[ing] against insistence on elitism" (p. 140). While remedial students were used as pawns in order to prove pedagogical status, they were also used as a means to prove the university's utility as a community institution. Using a wide brush, Stanley painted the changing political landscape of higher education in California, and how Berkeley positioned remedial students between itself and California lawmakers.

Stanley's (2010) strength was apparent in her ability to research, and in her access to the history of an institution that has shaped the



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policy of many institutions of higher education across the United States. Although her research was historical in nature, her narrative was a platform upon which college access professionals can understand the role that remedial students play in college admission policy and practice. Given the current state of college access testing in the United States, college access professionals will appreciate Stanley's use of the Subject A exam as the crux of UC Berkeley's admission. More specifically, college access professionals will value Stanley's research on the evolution of the Subject A exam. Whereas Subject A began as a means to pinpoint students' deficiencies, its existence would pave the way for K-16 coalitions, remedial testing, policy on curriculum, university transparency, and an open debate on the efficacy on standardized testing.

It was Stanley's (2010) strong historical research that brought *The Rhetoric of Remediation* to full fruition. At times, however, Stanley's history lessons became heavy-handed such that the argument lost focus. In particular, I think of chapter seven. Stanley documented a lengthy description of Reagan's politics within the contentious battleground that was 1960s higher education in California. While many individuals have considered Reagan to be an important political figure vis-à-vis the changing landscape of higher education (Berrett, 2015), the central argument on remedial students seemed to lose focus throughout Stanley's lengthy history on the matter.

Nonetheless, Stanley's (2010) weakness was, more often than not, her strength. Her wide breadth of research and in-depth historical analysis created a three-dimensional landscape of the political tensions surrounding remedial education. This does not only apply to the focus of Stanley's work (UC Berkeley), but can also be a lesson to many universities across the United States. Indeed, one of Stanley's final questions in her text was whether or not the history of remediation at one university "has legs" (p. 141). In other words, could the rhetoric of remediation at one university be applied to others? With President Obama's desire to provide free two-year education (Mangan, 2015), the growing concern placed on the value of a liberal arts degree, and a consistent push for a more utilitarian education (Berrett, 2015; Brint, 2011), it seems that Stanley's text does have legs. The importance of access shares a positive correlation with the rising trend of globalization in the United States and within its system of higher education. Stanley's (2010) research was an important reminder that remedial education is not a transitive trend. When universities opened their doors to "middle drawer" (p. 21)—or middle achieving—students, higher education professionals believed remediation would end. However, it did not. When the G.I. Bill passed, higher education professionals believed that remediation would end after veterans received their degrees. Once again, it did not. During the immigration boom in 1979 when "some 55.8 percent had to enroll in Subject A" (p. 123), it became apparent that

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the remedial student would not be leaving higher education.

Although I mentioned that Stanley did not claim an answer to which institution (either K-12 or higher education) should be taking responsibility for the remedial student, her implications were apparent. With the help of her current department, UC Berkeley has been able to integrate remedial students into their introductory classes. While this is not a complete answer to an evolving question, it is a manner of filling a need using the resources that universities currently have.

Overall, Stanley's (2010) work surmounted to the successful inclusion of the remedial student into the university system. Instead of blaming K-12 education, Stanley asserted that UC Berkeley paved a 140-year history that ultimately lead to the institution taking ownership of the students they accepted. *The Rhetoric of Remediation* demonstrated a lesson in college access politics. It took 140 years of a dependence on remedial students before UC Berkeley could become independent from the remedial student. However, the independence that UC Berkeley created was one that made both political and social sense. In quoting Mankell, Stanley (2010) explained that "to walk backwards is to find out how to walk forwards" (p. 142). Stanley's work represented an integral part in the process of walking backwards. And while she does not contend to have the answer to helping the remedial student, her strategy is surely one more step toward discovering how best to continue walking forward. 

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