

The Politics of Writing in the 2 Year College;

Barry Alford & Keith Kroll, editors; Boynton/Cook, 2001; \$19.95; 135p

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Community colleges are an indispensable and unique feature of American education, yet they have often been marginalized, scoffed at by four-year institutions, underfunded, and seen as the last resort for economically and socially deprived students. The editors of this thoughtful and eclectic collection of essays have tried to bring together a number of voices that have some important things to say about one of the community college's chief functions: offering basic writing courses to a diverse student body.

Looking at a typical community college catalog today, one is struck by the preponderance of courses devoted to freshman composition, developmental and ESL courses. These "foundation" courses are the bread and butter, so to speak, of the institution but they rely mostly on adjuncts to teach them and are caught up in wearying battles about assessment, curriculum, degree requirements, remediation, program management and the social conditions outside which affect the way students are treated inside. More importantly, the community colleges end up taking students (in keeping with their "open door" policy) who have graduated from high school, yet are completely unprepared to do the kind of analytical and self-reflective writing/thinking required across the curriculum.

The diversity of the community college population—from 18-year-olds to mid-life career changers, immigrants, international students, senior citizens, working class low-wage earners, part-time students (many working 40 plus hours a week) is seen as a plus in bringing to the classroom a richness of experience. On the other hand, this diversity brings daunting administrative and pedagogical challenges in terms of how to teach to, support, and nourish such disparate, conflicting needs. Can one even have minimum standards in such an environment? Does one size fit all? Should all students be given endless tries to complete a degree? Is vocational tracking fair? How should literacy be defined and best attained? Is it just reading and

writing or should students be trained for civic involvement in their communities since they are going to *community* colleges?

Finally, the role of technology cannot be underestimated as all institutions of higher learning are spending billions to wire their campuses. One of the contributors to these essays even muses on a time when students will come to school only one day a week to “check in” with their instructors; the rest of the time they will be using web interfaces to carry out course assignments! All in all, this book is a good introduction to what committed and passionate people are thinking about the role of writing and learning in America’s community colleges.