

An Oral History of the SOUL Program and Teaching at William Paterson University

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I was born in 1932 and I grew up in Newark, New Jersey in the 1930 and 40s. My father immigrated from Sicily as a teenager; he had a butcher shop (he always called it a “meat market”) where he worked seven days a week. My mom was the only American born member of her Sicilian immigrant family. She was an executive assistant/secretary at the Mennen Company where she eventually worked for the company’s president. My dad went to the Barringer public high school at night while he worked full time. He was extremely well read and a great believer in learning.

My father was determined that my two sisters and I would all go to college. I graduated from Barringer High School and went to Bates College. Bates had a demanding fixed four-year curriculum and it sent many students to grad schools. A professor there convinced me to apply for a teaching fellowship at U Conn, which gave me my first chance to teach college English courses. I got my masters there and went on to U Minn for my Ph.D., focusing on the Romantic Movement.

In the Fall of 1966, I came to teach as an assistant professor at William Paterson University, then called Paterson State College. I was finishing up my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Minnesota and I was looking for a permanent home after teaching for eleven years in three states: two at U Conn, five at U. Minn and six at Boston U. WP was then a teacher’s college which was just beginning to expand into a full liberal arts college. There was a big population of night students back then, although that program has winnowed away over time.

Teaching at WP in the 1960s

Like all new English faculty in those days, I started teaching almost all introductory writing and literature courses. We had two mainstream writing courses. ENG 110 “Fundamentals of English” was required for all students. I also taught sections of ENG 210, also called “Fundamentals of English,” an elective writing course that focused on literature. (Those courses both still continue today as ENG 1100 College Writing and ENG 1500 Experiences in Literature.)

The SOUL Program

My friend Phil Cioffari and I were deeply troubled to see that there were almost no students of color at our college. We estimated in an interview with *The Morning Call* on November 7, 1967, that there were only about 45 black students out of WP’s 3,300 day students and 3,000 night students. We had no African-American professors or Deans. I thought we could start a program that would have an impact. Phil and I also wanted to “activate” our campus and change its culture.

In 1967, we began to organize the SOUL (Society of Unlimited Learning) Program to recruit black students to WP and offer them scholarships and other forms of support. We framed SOUL from the start as a desegregation/scholarship program; not an act of charity but of reform and activism. We knew WP needed more diverse voices to become a stronger community. I told *The Morning Call* that I hoped SOUL would unite our faculty and students in “dedication to a cause which has the best interests of school and country at heart.”

We faced resistance from some faculty. We got some polite hate mail. And a small group of white family/families picketed the college because their children were rejected for admission. When we asked for funding, we were stonewalled at the college: we met with the acting President James J. Forcina about our SOUL proposal, but no WP administrators would give us money and Forcina wrote to us on October 12, 1967, saying we should “not count on a State scholarship.” We did not have tenure and at times we worried if we were risking our jobs. But we pushed ahead anyway.

In October of 1967, we held a big SOUL organizing meeting and over 100 people showed up. On October 27, 1967 *The Beacon* reported on the meeting and described our goals as “to raise scholarship money for Negro students interested in coming to Paterson State; to launch an expanded recruitment program for prospective Negro students; and to establish a tutorial program.” We held many concerts and fundraisers.

Several newspapers reported our first fundraiser, a November 6, 1967 “Love-Rock” concert at the Marian Shea Center that featured the local band, Wax bananas Sanctuary. On November 3, 1967, *The Beacon* listed our by-then expanded goals:

- SOUL, hopes to advance to its goal through a four-point program. Members will:
1. Go into Northern New Jersey high schools to discuss opportunities for enrollment at Paterson with Negro youngsters.
 2. Invite groups of Negro teenagers to visit the PSC campus both to sit in on classes and to chat informally with students and professors.
 3. Provide tutorial help when needed for Negro high school youngsters, even 9th and 10th graders, who may have an inadequate educational background for college.
 4. Offer scholarships to needy Negro students.

Phil wrote for help from national rock bands. The Doors turned us down. But Phil got Little Anthony and the Imperials (“Hurts So Bad”) and they sold out 1100 seats. In December of 1967, we ran a crafts fair. We sold “SOUL” buttons; I still have one. All these events raised scholarship money. They also activated many students and faculty in support of recruiting more black students to attend our college.

We also wrote to Ralph A Dungan, the Chancellor of the New Jersey Board of Higher Education. On October 26, 1968, Dungan wrote back to us and offered a meeting with his staff,

since: “we want to learn about your work fairly soon.” We went down to Trenton and talked to Dungan. He soon gave us a \$40,000 state grant for SOUL.

Once we had funding, we went to churches and storefronts and put up signs in Paterson to recruit applicants. We gave talks. We tried to open up communities to the idea that WP was an option for their young people. We sent out lots of mailings. We networked; it was a grassroots effort.

Phil and I recruited applications and then interviewed the candidates. Their grades and SAT scores were lower than WP’s usual entrance requirements at the time; but we had authority to admit twenty students based on our informal, separate admissions process. We wanted to see commitment. I had a very strong feeling that if people had a real desire to go to college, that was enough to give them a chance. There was no financial review process; but almost all the applicants all came from working class backgrounds. On May 17, 1968, *The Beacon* announced our first seven scholarship winners. We ultimately offered admission and full scholarships to twenty students: ten men and ten women.

In the summer of 1968, we ran a residential summer bridge program. The summer carried no credit. We gave no placement tests or final exams. We chose empathetic teachers who were younger members of the tenure track faculty: Terry Ripmaster taught black history. Virgie Granger and Sue Mcnamara taught writing. They also studied math, maybe with Bernie Levine. During the summer program, the students felt like they went to the country, since it was so quiet at night. It was a shock for them.

Since there were only twenty SOUL students, in Fall 1968, we formed them into a single learning community; they took many classes together during their first two years. Phil and I hand-picked the teachers for two years for these sections. There was no separate tutoring program but the SOUL section teachers all offered extra tutoring time. Beginning in their first year The SOUL students took some mainstream courses outside their learning community, like physical education classes: archery, bowling etc. Gradually they moved fully into individual course schedules. None of the SOUL sections were stretched to offer more instruction hours. (Any kind of stretch courses would have stigmatized the SOUL students and also created bureaucratic hurdles.)

Phil and I kept close tabs on the SOUL faculty and held conferences with all the SOUL students for four years. We were their college counselors.

For the most part, the SOUL students were accepted right away on campus and became popular. Ed Mosley became President of the student government. In 1972, Gary Hutton was president of the Senior Class. Hutton went on to become WP’s Director of Housing.

As we hoped and expected, the SOUL students had an immediate impact on our campus culture. They formed a Black Student Union and in March of 1969 began to protest for a Black studies program and the hiring of black faculty members. They briefly occupied

President Olsen's office and Raubinger Hall. Hutton gave an account of the racism he encountered at WP and the activism of the SOUL students and the Black Student Union in an October 25, 1977 interview for *The Beacon*.

We could not find a New Jersey model for our program and we did not try to theorize SOUL; we shaped it based on common sense and regular feedback from the SOUL students and their professors.

In 1968, a new president James Olsen came to WP from Kent State; he was far more supportive of the SOUL Program. A conservative old Dean of Students opposed a SOUL concert fearing there would be cigarette burns on the carpet. But Olson ordered her to help. He even came to a summer reception for the SOUL students. Fort and I got tenure and promotion after all.

In 1972, many of the SOUL students were graduating. Phil and I asked Shirley Chisholm to come; she spoke at the 1972 graduation. Eventually, more than half of the SOUL students graduated. (In 1977, Hutton counted 11 graduates among the 20 SOUL classmates.) Ed Mosley became a college professor. Some went on to be teachers. At least one became a lawyer. Gary Hutton became WP's residence life director.

Teaching in the 1970s and Beyond

We voted to join the teachers union in the early 1970s. By then we all taught four courses a semester; the union fought to limit our work to two preps. There were two substantial strikes with picket lines and maybe another short one. The union was amazing in boosting the salary structure. The law was that state employees could not strike, so there was risk of jail.

In the early 1970s, our student body grew and as we expanded access and admitted more working-class and students of color. The English Department began to offer new writing courses to support these more diverse students; these courses all carried college credit, satisfied core requirements, and awarded letter grades. In 1979, two English writing courses were changed to ENG 108 Basic Reading 108 and ENG 109 Basic Writing, pass/fail courses with no college credit. There was controversy at the time, as we were forcing students to take courses for which they got no credit. For a while the English Department ran both the basic reading and basic writing courses; we offered maybe 20 sections a semester. Then the Education Department took over the Basic Reading course.

Over my career I also created and taught courses on the Romantic era, 19th and 20th Century novels, and many other literature courses, including Ethnic American Literature. I created the ENG 330 Critical Writing course, which was a new version of our old advanced composition course.

I also taught many sections of both ENG 108 Basic Writing and our mainstream writing ENG 110 class. Both courses had final essay exams. But the ENG 108 class was graded in a

group session based on review by two other teachers. Students needed to pass this exam or repeat the course. The majority of my students advanced to the mainstream after one semester.

I didn't like the fact that the ENG 108 Basic Writing course carried no college credit. But I loved teaching those students, many of whom came from working class or immigrant families as I did. Some fought hard to get into college and succeed here. I arranged the desks in a circle and we all talked together. I mimeographed student drafts and we workshopped them together. Seeing their progress was a great pleasure. Sometimes I also compiled lists of sentences from student writing and we edited them together as a class. I thought a lot of our ENG 108 students hadn't been taught very basic things in HS, like topic sentences. But I could see very big changes in just two weeks.

In ENG 110, teachers graded their own students' final essay exams and the finals were a small factor in the final grades which were based more on the required papers over the whole semester. I did not find my ENG 110 students to be very different from my ENGL 108 students.

Due to health problems, I retired from WP in 2000. In all, I taught there for 34 years. I'll be 87 this month.