

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

By Phil Cioffari
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I grew up in the Bronx in the 1950s. I graduated from St John's University. In January of 1966, while I was studying for a Ph.D. at NYU, I came to teach as an assistant professor at William Paterson University, then called Paterson State College. 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

When I first arrived, I started at \$6700 a year. There was no teachers union. We taught five courses each semester. We often got two or three lit classes and two or three comp classes. My department made a deal with me to teach a four-course load of writing courses (which were more work) while I finished my dissertation. The writing classes met for 50 mins, three times a week. There were also Sat courses and I taught 8-11 every Saturday. I was soon swamped with student essays as I also completed my dissertation which focused on Southern literature after Faulker.

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.) I was the only creative writer when I arrived and soon I began to teach those courses.

Like all new English faculty in those days, I started teaching almost all introductory writing and literature courses. As a new teacher here, I was shocked to find that students needed to learn writing and grammar. I had attended Holy Cross High School in the 1950s where it was just assumed that you knew how to write. The same was true at Fordham. So I did not know how to teach writing. I developed many extra lessons because I was afraid to run out of material. Vocab quizzes, etc. There was an ENG 110 textbook that forced me to articulate all my ideas about writing. In ENG back then, we assigned five essays in the modes: narrative, description, exposition, persuasive.

Joan Hartman started in the English Department just before I did, in September 1965. She had studied comparative literature at NYU. She taught courses in world literature and literature of Western Europe I and II. She also taught first year writing ENG 110 for many years.

The SOUL Program

Fort Manno joined the English Department in the Fall of 1966 and we quickly became good friends. 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. Fort thought we could start a program that would have an impact. We 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. I told *The Morning Call* that we chose the name because it was “identified with music, the epitome of heart, selfless giving, and [camaraderie] between all people.” We framed SOUL from the start as a desegregation/scholarship education program; not an act of charity but of reform and activism. We knew WP needed more diverse voices to become a stronger community.

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.

After the first concert, I told *The Herald News* that I was more interested in “getting the college community involved in social problems” than how much we raised.

I wrote for help from national rock bands. The Doors turned me down. But I 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. 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 met with Muriel Greenhill, a wealthy Manhattan woman who also supported us.

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 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.

Fort 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. There was no financial review process; but 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: Terry Ripmaster taught black history. Virgie Granger and Sue Mcnamara taught writing. They also studied math, maybe with Bernie Levine. The students felt like they went to the country. 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. Fort 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.)

Fort 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, Fort 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

Virgie Granger was the head of the FYW writing in the 1970s. She was here for many years. Eventually, she retired and moved away, maybe back to Minnesota.

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. I never taught these courses because by the mid-1970s I taught only creative writing courses.

As of the fall of 2019, I will have been teaching at WP for 54 years.