Desegregation State: College Writing Programs after the Civil Rights Movement, by Annie S. Mendenhall, Utah State University Press, 2022. 208 pp.

Reviewed by Jessica Edens McCrary, Georgia State University and Emory University

From her vantage point at Georgia Southern University's Savannah Campus, which until 2018 was Armstrong Atlantic State University, Annie S. Mendenhall has written an important text advancing how we understand composition studies alongside complex desegregation policy, practice, and outcomes in colleges and universities across the U.S. South. She draws on historical sources of policies established by the University System of Georgia (USG) from the late 1960s through the 1980s as well as interviews and archival material from Savannah's two public colleges, Savannah State (historically Black) and Armstrong (historically white). Pairing this material with a detailed overview of court cases related to desegregation, *Desegregation State* overwhelmingly shows that desegregation established "a set of policies and norms for literary remediation that affected writing instruction for decades afterward" (35). The rest of the book provides a historical account of eras in writing programs—remediation, testing, and assessment—as spaces of direct and indirect desegregation policy for two public schools in Savannah from the early 1970s through the 1980s.

Desegregation State is an essential read for composition scholars interested in the systemic ways writing programs were informed by desegregation policies. While this might appear most applicable to colleges and universities in the U.S. South, I suggest that there are valuable historical contextual lessons for any U.S. postsecondary institution. Though I provide here a brief overview of the themes and her thesis, a full read is necessary to really understand the complexities of institutional policies today and the legacies of racism pervading everything from admissions to retention programs. With proper historical context and recognition of the systemic challenges Black students have faced, we can begin to uncouple our contemporary writing programs, retention and progression efforts, and admissions and testing policies from twentieth-century established practice. Scholars working in writing program administration roles in testing, basic writing programs, first year composition, writing centers, and writing across the curriculum (WAC) will find this a helpful reference for understanding the problematic theories and ideas driving the establishment of many of those programs.

In the late 1990s, my family moved from Michigan to Savannah, where the complicated educational landscape of the South was apparent and confusing to a white, Northern, adolescent transplant. I have since earned nearly three

degrees from Georgia's public institutions; I have worked in the USG for nine years. Mendenhall's book provides meaningful explanation of legacies of desegregation I observed in everything from "pre-college English" to the widely disputed Regents Test, a USG graduation requirement for decades.

Desegregation State evaluates writing programs for the systemic limits built into them by educational policy, which we often understand as rooted in anti-Black racism, and provides specific institutional history to help us articulate our understandings. Mendenhall's work proves—sometimes to a point of exhaustion—how organizations like Georgia's Board of Regents' (which oversees the USG) paltry effort at desegregation post *Brown v. Board of Education* created policies that established "desegregation as remediation." In other words, colleges and universities established remedial writing programs as their response to "addressing" what they observed as the linguistic insufficiencies of Black students. Colleges and universities also latched onto cultural deprivation theory, a concept borrowed from psychology, "to explain how culture and environment influenced learning" (33). Cultural deprivation theory would become the foundation for remedial programs. thereby becoming the basis for most states' desegregation plans (41). Through a cultural deprivation theory lens, the "insufficient" linguistic practices of Black students would be explained away for decades; meanwhile, policies continued based on a faulty premise. In its early years of disciplinary leadership, the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (CCCC) stance on pedagogy influenced the era of desegregation-as-remediation: "By emphasizing cultural integration and writing remediation, the discipline normalized remedial pedagogies focused on vocabulary, speech, and logic" (47). To scale remediation and address "the problem of increasing minority student enrollment," Special Studies departments were established at all USG institutions by 1974 (Mendenhall citing Georgia Board of Regents).

Mendenhall traces how the USG's desegregation plan evolved, under continued scrutiny by federal offices and watchdog organizations like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, which kept pushing southern states via lawsuits and policy revisions. Mendenhall's research shows how much of the language the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) used, with the intention of prompting states to broaden enrollment goals by focusing on admission and retention, backfired. In response to HEW, institutions used thinly-coded language of "academic standards"—crucial for "defining institutional quality"—to encourage "white colleges to limit remedial writing instruction" (84). In other words, HEW's language was used to support USG institutions' plans for further restricting admissions rather than drive wider access.

As the USG revised its plan based on legal pressure, language surrounding affirmative action also plagued the intentions-versus-results of large-scale policy.

Popular definitions for the so-called disadvantages facing college students in the 1970s downplayed vestiges of slavery and legalized racial exclusion impacting realities for Black Americans. As Mendenhall shows, such language was manipulated by anti-affirmative action leaders to suggest race was one in a list of "disadvantaged" identity groups to address. Such subtle manipulations of language are constant in *Desegregation State* amd demonstrate the longstanding discrimination Black students face(d) in USG institutions.

Mendenhall also shows how those interpreting the court cases and federal policies guiding desegregation in the 1970s were continually caught up in equality, rather than equity, as the means for successful integration. HEW required states to revise institutional missions to eliminate references to race to encourage students to apply to secondary education institutions based on program rather than on the racial identity of the college. This meant public Black colleges, already neglected by states and disparaged by white communities, "now had to abandon their mission to serve Black students and focus on recruiting white students who considered them inferior" (86). This approach neglected ideas we recognize today as key to retaining students across marginalized groups, namely that students need more than strong academic programs to be successful: They need teachers whose expectations assume their success, support programs and staff, and psychological safety. None of these were part of the USG's plan, at least through the 1980s.

Mendenhall illustrates the legacy of standardized testing for college admissions and placement testing for determining writing level–and the problematic nature of this practice since inception–even as retention and assessment policies evolved. Only after the COVID-19 pandemic have policies on testing finally begun to budge, despite ample early evidence that minority students were negatively impacted by white racial bias in standardized tests of writing and reading (68-70). Mendenhall's well-built arguments show how "indicators of prestige and effectiveness" like standardized test scores, retention rates, and institutional selectivity, were based on norms that benefited historically white colleges and universities (65). By the 1980s, remediation programs were seen as ineffectual, which posed a delicate problem for the USG because so many of its remediation programs were tied to federally-approved plans for desegregation. This period exacerbated a tension composition scholars felt, namely of writing program growth set against racially-biased suggestions of their necessity. Meanwhile, the debate to define and measure academic standards continued, and institutions shifted investment to growing programs like writing centers and WAC.

Mendenhall adds essential historical context to composition studies as a discipline. She illustrates how even those with the best of intentions were perhaps basing their approach to basic writing on white-biased assumptions of

success and linguistic practices—the problematic theories grounding desegregation plans in the first place notwithstanding. While many educators were not carrying out those policies intentionally to advance racist agendas, that is what often occurred in the USG in practice. Compositionists' involvement in the standards established in testing is one strong example of how this played out in practice, and is discussed in detail in chapter three of the book. Mendenhall shows that composition was singled out in the 1970s for its "racial bias in the hiring process," evidencing composition as a "white-oriented discipline" (97).

Mendenhall's work advances foundational scholarship in our field, including Janet Emig's and Mina Shaughnessy's work on composing practices and basic writing. Importantly, Mendenhall suggests their foundational work has roots in white cultural assumptions on Black linguistic practices. Rather than reject outright the important work done as composition studies theorized alongside a legacy of desegregation, Mendenhall's work suggests that by understanding the roots of racism built into college writing programs, we can continue the work of disassembling practices that devalue historically excluded students and pursue the longer-term objective of finally providing higher education that serves students equitably. The book builds toward important questions related to the legacy of composition studies that demand action; I leave you with one: Can historically white institutions avoid succumbing to political pressures that plagued desegregation progress for decades, or will they acknowledge "the reality of racism" and our role in redressing it (32)? This question is relevant not only to administrators across postsecondary education. The insights Mendenhall exposes call those of us working in composition departments and running writing programs to actively consider the ways our programs have fallen short based on legacies of discrimination built on white-coded and white-serving policies.

Atlanta, Georgia

Works Cited

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders.* NCTE, 1971.

Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing.* Oxford UP, 1977.