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“Higher” School: Nineteenth-Century High Schools and the Secondary-College Divide

Amy J. Lueck

This article traces the emergence of nineteenth-century U.S. high schools in the landscape of higher education, attending to the gendered, raced, and classed distinctions at play in this development. Exploring differences in the conceptualization and status of high schools in Louisville, Kentucky, for white male, white female, and mixed-gender African American students, this article reminds us of how these institutional types have been situated, socially inflected, and structured in relation to broader political and power structures that transcend explicit pedagogical considerations. As a result, I argue for the recognition of high schools as historically significant sites in the history of college composition instruction.

In *A History of American Higher Education*, educational historian John Thelin reveals much of our common knowledge about the traditions and legacies of educational institutions to be backformations—attempts to shore up contemporary schools, policies, or practices by aligning them with a sense of revered history (xv).¹ That is, the development of colleges and universities as distinct institutions in this country seems smooth and obvious from a certain vantage point because some aspects of the story have been obscured through revisionist histories that have an investment in conveying tradition and longevity. Thelin cites the University of Louisville as an example of a university whose history was subject to such a revision when the city’s mayor traced the school’s founding beyond the traditionally accepted year of 1842, pushing it back to the 1798 founding date of its institutional forerunner, Jefferson Seminary, in an attempt to “contribute to civic or state pride” (xv). He uses this example to “illustrate that historical writing about higher education is constantly subject to new estimates and reconsideration” (xv).

Though Thelin does not explore the point further, the Seminary is not the only controversial institution in the University of Louisville’s past deserving of new estimates and reconsideration: The public high schools in Louisville are also importantly connected to—and perhaps purposefully obscured in relation to—the history of the university as it developed. As I will demonstrate, high schools played a central role in higher education in Louisville. They embraced a collegiate liberal arts mission as well as normal (or teacher) training work, were understood to be providing the highest branches of education for their

communities, and had a close (at times even indistinguishable) physical and administrative relationship to the University of Louisville in the antebellum period. An examination of Louisville's high schools illustrates the complex and unstable relationship between many nineteenth-century urban high schools and colleges across the country.

Newly established and still developing their own educational missions, early U.S. high schools had few distinguishing characteristics to define them as a type beyond their position at the upper level of common schooling and their public funding through taxation. Unlike today, the public high school in the mid-nineteenth century was not understood as a preparatory institution for college, even though many high schools did indeed prepare students for college, purposely or incidentally. Instead, antebellum high schools (and normal schools, as well as some academies) were more often framed as an alternative higher education, especially for those who would not pursue the traditional professions for which the antebellum college typically prepared students. After all, one did not need a high school diploma to attend undergraduate colleges (or even medical or law schools), and the average college and high school matriculant were similar in age, often around 14 or 15 but up to their late teens and twenties, following completion of grammar or common school, respectively. Thus, high schools' curricula, pedagogies, missions, and even degrees and credentials overlapped with those of academies, seminaries, normal schools, and colleges—each of which were often what Roger Geiger calls “multipurpose” institutions that provided various kinds of education under one roof (128; see also Leslie).

As numerous educational historians of this time period attest, “The definition of the college experience, as a formal entity distinct from secondary education and from graduate studies, remained unclear” throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century (Thelin 97; also see Farnham; Gordon; Hampel). William J. Reese explains the ambiguity that particularly surrounded the idea of “high schools” in the nineteenth century: “Americans throughout the early 1800s wrote approvingly of schools of a ‘higher order’ that offered ‘advanced education’ in the ‘higher branches’ in something often called a ‘high’ or ‘higher school.’ High was whatever was not low” (Reese 34). Reese himself uses the phrase “the higher learning” to describe the work of high schools throughout his comprehensive history of *The Origins of the American High School*. Karen Graves, writing about the St. Louis high schools, similarly points out that “‘high school’ was an ambiguous term in the nineteenth century,” noting that it was not until the 1880s that the public high school overtook the academy as the dominant institution of secondary education in the United States—taking on its preparatory status in the process (107). By the end of the century, reformers were attempting to articulate a reliable system of educational leveling in the

U.S., from elementary to secondary to post-secondary institutions, and those efforts established many of our current understandings of academic hierarchies and educational progression across academic levels. Before that articulation of programs in the system though, Marc VanOverbeke points out that some larger high schools “even offered courses and programs that exceeded those available in several colleges” and were actually in some competition with colleges and universities for students (18).

These observations of the confounding morphology of “higher learning” by educational historians suggest the need to reevaluate our assumptions about what it means to study the history of college writing. While it may not be necessary to produce numerous institutional histories of high schools within our field, and while important political differences often do persist between colleges and high schools, we would do well to pay some attention to the ways early high schools can complicate our existing narratives about higher learning and, subsequently, the history of writing instruction in the U.S. As I argue, the historical role of writing in high schools is important not only because of how it may have *influenced* college writing but also because of the ways it *functioned as* college writing in some cases, both pedagogically and politically. Recognizing the differential social value attributed to historical high schools for different gendered and raced student groups is particularly important to our histories of writing and rhetoric because it helps us to engage critically with these terms and designations as we compose our historical narratives and consider their implications for present and future practice.

And yet, the history of high schools remains largely overlooked by our field. We do not write and publish stand-alone histories of high schools, and we neglect them in otherwise comprehensive lists of institution types in almost every volume on nineteenth-century instruction. But as we continue to extend the scope of historical institutions and sites of rhetoric and literacy learning that we examine, the tacit divide between secondary and college writing in our disciplinary self-conception is becoming increasingly untenable. In light of recent feminist recovery efforts, master narratives of rhetorical instruction and delivery in America’s colleges have already given way to a strong interest in local, archival histories that elaborate a nuanced rhetorical heritage in this country that increasingly understands such “peripheral” institutional spaces as women’s colleges, normal schools, agricultural colleges and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as centrally constitutive of our rhetorical past (see Donahue and Moon; Enoch; Gold; Gold and Hobbs; Ritter). High schools in many ways seem like the next logical sites to study to diversify our historical accounts of writing instruction and practice.

The need for this step towards examining the history of American high schools has been suggested by the work of Lucille M. Schultz in collaboration

with Jean Ferguson Carr and Stephen Carr. They have long been attentive to the theories, pedagogies, and practices of the lower schools, particularly through the examination of textbooks. More recently, Henrietta Rix Wood has explored the use of epideictic rhetoric by nineteenth and early twentieth-century school girls. A collection of histories edited by Lori Ostergaard and Wood brings together high schools and normal schools under one historical umbrella: institutions that taught the vast majority of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, both men and women. These texts remind us, as Kelly Ritter puts it in the introduction to *In the Archives of Composition*, that “‘writing’ does not emerge, fully formed, out of first-year college students (whether at the community college, the four-year comprehensive, or the research university, private or public). Writing happens in secondary schools, and *has* happened in this location in rich and vital ways for nearly two hundred years” (Ostergaard and Wood xi). As implied by Ritter, a great many students and their writing have never emerged on our scene of research at all, though writing and learning has been happening in our schools for a broad span of time. I will argue that high school students deserve our attention not only as *high school students* or *future college students*, as others have argued, but also as learners and practitioners of writing who powerfully challenge the historical high school-college divide itself.

To make this case, I present a brief case study of the Louisville schools, focusing on how, in their own time, the schools’ pedagogies and their institutional titles invited productive uncertainty about their role and status in the landscape of higher learning. The unreliability of these institutional designations—high school or college—deserves more attention. While historians can (and do) make necessary distinctions between institution types in the course of their own research, my call is to attend to the interpretive (and political) process of making such distinctions. I make two observations in this regard: First, the institutional titles have been adaptable to different educational contexts. Second, those official designations have always been reflective of the interests of those in power, even as actual students and teachers have used rhetoric and literacy to work within and against those structures. Hence, I begin by establishing the white men’s high school as a chartered liberal arts college with an unequivocal (if short-lived) position within the university. I then turn to a consideration of the white women’s and mixed-gender African Americans’ high schools in the same city. These schools put the status of the men’s high school in relief: They evidence how non-dominant populations gained access to meaningful higher learning opportunities, pedagogically comparable to at least some colleges of the time, while the fact that *their* high schools were never proposed as colleges also reveals the differential cultural and political value that characterized the education of women and people of color. This development

had less to do with the identity of the *high school* than with the identity of the *students* therein. The stakes of accepting these institutional designations at face value should be clear.

In presenting this case study of Louisville high schools, then, I gesture also to the many other schools that challenge the historical reliability of the secondary and college designations. Take, for example, Baltimore's Central High School, which transformed into Baltimore City College, or the Philadelphia Central High School that conferred bachelors' degrees (and continues to do so to this day). Each of these white male high schools benefited from the uncertain nature of the "higher" school in relation to a college, while their female and non-white counterparts remained subordinated and contained. In the case of Philadelphia, until 1860 women were provided only a normal (teacher training) education, expressly *not* intended to provide advanced academic study as the prospect of such "higher schooling" for women remained controversial.

In light of these and other examples, I present Louisville as what proponents of microhistory would call an "exceptional normal"—a case whose value lies "not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness" (Lepore 133; see also McComiskey). Especially in the face of seemingly "new" challenges to the high school-college distinction posed by dual enrollment and similar programs, there is a need to examine more closely the historical nature of the high school-college relationship. While this relationship invites potential new sites for historical research and inquiry in our field, it also initiates an interrogation of what we have taken to be the defining features of college writing instruction in our past and present.

Higher Schooling in Louisville: Male High School

Like many across the country, Louisville's public high schools began with a general interest in expanded public schooling around midcentury, though the schools' relationship to existing educational models was as yet unclear. A brief overview of the early history of Louisville's Male High School illustrates the ambiguity of its institutional designations. Established in 1792 as the Jefferson Seminary, the high school was renamed Louisville College in 1842, "under the powers granted to the City of Louisville to establish a High School," demonstrating the close relation between several institutional titles (seminary, college, and high school) (*Public School Laws* 20-21). The college was renamed University of Louisville in 1846, and an "Academical Department" was established with reciprocal privileges for academic and medical students. In 1856, the Academical Department was renamed Male High School, though it was still located on the university campus and continued to be referred to also as the Academical Department.

The curriculum of Male High School in its earliest years aspired to cover the traditional collegiate subjects, though (like many high schools and colleges) they were limited by funding and staffing issues. As in many colleges, the curriculum during the school's first year was heavily weighted towards the classical subjects, with all 79 students studying mathematics, 65 studying ancient languages, and 37 studying modern languages (*Annual Report* [1857] 17). But already in that first year of operations, the school leaders were expressing interest in curricular reform. Reporting on behalf of the Committee of Examination and Control in 1857, a representative praised the school and averred that those citizens who had “stood aloof” of the other public schools are now “earnestly urging the claims of their sons to the educational advantages” of the high school; yet, he goes on to say, “the Committee cannot but lament the imperfect system of collegiate education as yet afforded,” without a “Professorship of Belles Lettres, or as it is styled, ‘Rhetoric and English Literature’”(ibid).

William N. McDonald, who held a Master's degree from the University of Virginia, was accordingly hired as professor of rhetoric and English literature the following year, and textbooks selected for that year reflect a new emphasis on rhetoric and elocution, primarily in the first years of study, using George P. Quackenbos' *Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric* and Epes Sargent's *Standard Speaker* in the first year, along with assigned declamations in the first two years. Though they reflect the impoverished tradition of rhetorical theory in American colleges bemoaned in the foundational work of Albert Kitzhaber, James Berlin, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley, among others, these textbooks were nonetheless very common collegiate fare. In addition, students used Robert Gordon Latham's *A Handbook of English Language* in the upper two years of study, which is a volume marketed “for the use of students of the universities and the higher classes of schools,” comprised of one half history and analysis of the English language and one half exhaustive catalogue of grammar, syntax, and orthography rules, suggesting the ascendance of current-traditional approaches to writing instruction traced by historians of rhetoric and composition.

The superintendent of the school board, reporting on the students' exam performances, noted that “there was a demonstration of an attainment in each, of extraordinary excellence” such as “would be difficult to parallel—it could not have been surpassed” (*Annual Report* [1859] 25). While these remarks undoubtedly smack of adulation and hyperbole, they are also telling insofar as they reveal the expectations of the school board: that students and professors will reach the “highest” levels of performance and study in their fields. Though the students' examination papers in rhetoric and composition, which are said to be appended to the school board report, have been lost to history, the expectations of the school's leaders (as well as the textbooks used) tell us

much about what they understood the function and status of the high school coursework to be: a fully elaborated liberal arts education.

By 1859, the rhetorical instruction at Male had been further extended in this direction. While still featuring Quackenbos' *Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric* in the first two years of study, along with Sargent's *Standard Speaker* and declamations, the upper years of rhetorical studies became even more clearly collegiate, with students studying George Campbell's *Rhetoric* and Lord Henry Kames' *Elements of Criticism* in their junior year and Richard Whateley's *Rhetoric* and *Logic* in their senior year. According to the Committee on the High School, students' examination performances the following year, which included questions about rhetoric and elements of criticism, provided "evidence not only of a thorough acquaintance with their text-books, but a comprehensive knowledge of the subjects. They also evinced an independent and philosophical accuracy of thought, a purity of taste, and an elevation of moral sentiment rarely found among students of the most celebrated colleges in the country" (*Annual Report* [1860] 28; emphasis added).

And, indeed, 1860 is the year that the school became a college. While retaining the name of Male High School, it was determined by law that Male High School "shall be in fact and in law a College . . . [and] shall have power to confer any and all degrees that may be lawfully conferred by any College or University in the Commonwealth of Kentucky," at which point Male took on the additional moniker of the "University of Public Schools" (*Public School Laws* 43). Serving effectively as an undergraduate college for the university, though eventually moved to its own site separate from the university campus, Male High School conferred bachelors and even masters' degrees on its students until 1912, and the work of students during the degree-granting period from 1860-1912 is reported to have compared favorably with the leading colleges of the day ("300 Male Grads"). Even if not comparable to the *leading* colleges, it is doubtless that the school's work compared to a great number of lower ranked colleges across the country.

If this account of institutional title changes and curricular transformations seems confusing, that is the point: The boundaries between these institutions and the terms used to name them were unstable as the face of higher learning in the city was being worked out. At times a high school, university department, or college, what is now known as Male High School (which exists as a co-educational high school today) was not clearly distinguished from *collegiate* or *liberal* education, which it embraced as its mission and which it provided in connection to the University of Louisville for a time. In fact, when Male High School was separated from the university system in 1860, the University of Louisville functioned exclusively as a professional school for law and medicine (Federal Writers' Project 19). Emerging accreditation requirements pushed for

the revival of an academic department in 1907 in order for the University of Louisville to be considered a comprehensive university (Yater 53). In this odd way, then, the defining feature of the University of Louisville qua university was, for a time at least, the men's public high school.

Pedagogically Similar, Politically Different: Female High School

The history of Louisville's Female High School runs parallel to Male's, beginning with an 1851 charter that designates a school tax for the "support of the Public Schools and High School for females of said city, and the University of Louisville" (*Public School Laws* 20-21). As indicated by the language of this charter, plans to establish a female high school were circulating prior to any specific mention of a male high school but in tandem with developments of the "academical department" of the University of Louisville that would become Male High School, suggesting its alignment with that collegiate project (*ibid.*). From the language of the charter itself to the operation of those schools in subsequent decades, Louisville highlights the unclear status and function of the early high school in the landscape of nineteenth-century higher learning. But that lack of clarity meant something different for women than for men: It meant that the city's young women were getting their advanced collegiate education at a public institution with the name of *high school*, not college or university. While always designated a high school, though, Female's institutional position and status is complicated by its own advanced curriculum and the fact that it was at several points in its history posited as a normal, or teacher training, school for the city and even the state.

Though not as advanced as the curriculum of Male in its early years (and also omitting that most collegiate of subjects, Greek), the curriculum at Female was nonetheless serious and ambitious. From 1859-1861, students studied Latin and French, mathematics, geography, history, English, and rhetoric and composition across a three-year course of study. In rhetoric and composition, they used Greene's *Analysis of English* in the first and third years, and Quackenbos's *Advanced Course in Rhetoric and Composition* in the second year, along with weekly composition exercises across all three years. Quackenbos's text, as discussed earlier, was commonly used in colleges, even though it has been criticized by modern scholars of rhetoric and composition for being reflective of a "less theorized" nineteenth-century rhetorical tradition (Berlin; Connors; Crowley; Kitzhaber). Greene's text is more complicated to unpack. Insofar as the instruction of English grammar became the purview of elementary schools, Greene's text has been remembered as foundational to the development of grammar instruction at the elementary level; and yet, in its own time, *Analysis of Grammar* was in use at Michigan's Hillsdale College and other colleges that were using English grammar in place of ancient languages for mental discipline

at the higher levels. Thus, the various uses of this text speak not only to the “low standards” of colleges but also to the frequent overlap between different schools, their texts, and their curricula in a time of changing educational philosophies (“Formal English” 255).

It is also important to consider how these texts might have been used in different contexts. Though we cannot capture much about pedagogy and rigor in the use of these texts (particularly given the limited archival records of these schools), the studies at Female were praised as “solid, rather than showy” by the 1859 board of examiners—a claim certainly intended to contrast then-current characterizations of women’s higher education as ornamental or superficial, which was a criticism often leveled at women’s education in the South (*Annual Report* [1859] 24). Elaborating on this same theme in a speech the following year, Principal Holyoke of Female High School expressed the high aspirations he had for his students, writing

We aim to do our part in making honorable, intelligent, high-minded women. . . . We wish them to become accurate thinkers and reasoners. . . . We wish them to be able to communicate the knowledge they have gained, and we instruct them in the great principles of language by means of a thorough instruction in the Latin and French, by constant practice in impromptu compositions, and by giving the simpler principles of Rhetoric. . . . Above all this, however, we labor to make them independent in thought and action. We endeavor to cultivate the individual character of each, and not bring all down to one dead level. (*Annual Report* [1860] 11)

These “high-minded,” independent women are akin to the “female scholars” in St. Louis high schools recovered by historian Karen Graves (xii). In both Louisville and St. Louis, the educational atmosphere of the public high school is comparable to women’s and coeducational colleges across the South and West. But unlike their college counterparts—who were barred from presenting their own essays at graduation ceremonies even at the most liberal colleges of the time—Female High School students had another benefit: They composed and read original compositions for their public commencement ceremonies, essays that reveal evidence of strong rhetorical instruction and remarkable freedom and variety in topics, ranging from playful meditations on the occasion of graduation to earnest critiques of women’s position in society (Lueck; see also Buchanan). Since students were up to 21 years old, they challenge our ideas about age and maturity as markers of high school or college writing. As late as 1905, Emma Woerner (who would later become the first principal of Louisville’s Atherton High School for Girls in 1924) was able to enter the

University of Kentucky as a junior, based on her academic accomplishments at Female High School (“History”).

In addition to the advanced liberal arts education and rhetorical training, students at Female High School were professionally trained and credentialed as teachers at what was at several points in time the only public normal school in the area. Seniors were trained in teaching theory and methods, and all eight of the first graduating students (and a large majority thereafter) were said to have gone into teaching, their diplomas from Female serving as a privileged credential in district hiring decisions.

The provision of both advanced liberal arts and normal education at Female suggests it has a place in a broadly construed history of higher learning. For historically underprivileged or underserved populations, in particular, access to *higher* schooling was not only quite significant but also not always usefully distinguished from access to college in terms of either form or function within the community. That is, students in high schools and colleges learned a similar curriculum, and attending higher schooling was a privilege that conferred occupational benefits comparable to college attendance at a time when neither was a required credential.

And yet, it is also for these populations that it becomes most clear why a “college” designation has been so powerful: It is no coincidence that women’s and African Americans’ high schools were *not* conflated with colleges, as high schools for white men were. Instead, the boundaries around the term “college” were heavily policed by state legislatures and conservative social critics alike. As Christie Anne Farnham explains in her study of southern women’s colleges, some women’s schools across the South specifically avoided the term “college”—opting for “collegiate” or other variations—to avoid the additional public and governmental scrutiny attendant to colleges. Such scrutiny included both ongoing social criticism about the appropriateness of college for women and the necessity of having a charter passed in state legislatures for the granting of college degrees (18). Farnham goes on to argue that the flexible naming conventions and the “incremental process” of expanding course offerings at women’s academies to include college subjects led to important gains in the expansion of higher education for women.

This incremental process was necessary even within the high school itself. Female High School serves as an example in light of its ever-expanding course of study: The school began with a limited curriculum that comprised only two years of study, then extended to three years, then added a preparatory department, until it finally became a four-year course of study, like that offered by the Male High School. As Principal Holyoke explained in 1860: “We have thus accomplished something, but each year the mark is set higher, and both

teachers and pupils look upon each succeeding year as but a step towards a constantly receding summit” (*Annual Report* [1860] 11).

The “A Grade” and High School Course at Central Colored School

Access to anything resembling a public high school was a feat in itself for African American communities in the South, and it was through a similar progression that African American students of Louisville attained access to public high schools. After the much-delayed public schools for the lower grades were established in 1870, an “A Grade” was added to the Central Colored School in 1876. The “A Grade” was a one-year course for the education of prospective teachers who, as was commonly believed, required at least one more year of education than their pupils.

The central importance of teacher training as a sponsor of higher learning opportunities for both women and African Americans should not be overlooked, nor should the challenge that normal schools have posed to institutional designations. As both Female High School and Colored High School featured teacher training as a central aspect of their operation and even their *raison d'être*, the distinction between high schools and normal schools is less than clear. Recent recoveries of normal schools in our discipline have already invited us to reconsider the role of these schools in our histories, but the case of Louisville’s African American schools further reveal them to be an almost exclusive pathway to higher learning for black students in the segregated South. As historian J. Blaine Hudson explains, “The state’s determination to preserve the color line by staffing its segregated Black schools with Black teachers prompted the development of limited public higher educational opportunities for African Americans” (113). Though limited, these opportunities for higher education, including the “A Grade” and high school, were not insignificant.

The writing curriculum recorded in this “A Grade” in the annual report for 1880-81 features English and History as one combined subject, taught with the use of Noble Butler’s *Practical and Critical Grammar*; Greene’s *Analysis of English*, accompanied by exercises in composition; and reading aloud, reciting or speaking selections in prose and poetry. Butler’s text is produced by the city’s own notable educator, Noble Butler, by a printing press in the city. Greene’s is recognizable as one of the texts in use at Female in the 1860 school year. By the next year, changes were made across the course listings. In particular, the English and history course was replaced by three separate courses of study, marked as follows: John Seely Hart’s *A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric*, English Literature, and John J. Anderson’s *General History*.² Courses on spelling and defining were added, as well as weekly lectures on the theory and practice of teaching.

Hart's *A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric* is notable as the text that introduced personal writing to composition classrooms, according to Robert Connors' *Composition-Rhetoric*—though Schultz contends that other textbooks did so earlier in the century (Connors 156; Schultz 156). The text is also notable as the earliest example of what Carr, Carr, and Schultz call (drawing on Connors) a “composition-rhetoric”: texts that “orient their account of rhetorical principles toward a direct intervention in student writing” and “selectively adopt some practices of composition books” (66, 68). That is, composition-rhetorics like Hart's were not philosophical treatises on rhetoric but instead combined theory and practice, which was a common approach to rhetorical instruction in the last quarter of the century.

Because of its status as a composition-rhetoric, Hart's text has been a lightning rod for disagreement among scholars of nineteenth-century writing and rhetoric textbooks. Specifically, Carr, Carr, and Schultz disagree with Connors about the audience that Hart's text addresses. Connors' claims that, from 1865-1890, composition-rhetoric texts “were relegated to secondary school texts, while college texts again became treatises” (Connors qtd. in Carr, Carr, and Schultz 68n33). But Carr, Carr, and Schultz consider composition-rhetorics to be intended for college audiences or a combined high school and college audience (68). So, are composition-rhetorics for high school students or college students? My findings help to explain this ongoing confusion about texts like Hart's: The attempt to distinguish between high school and college rhetorical traditions has always been confounded by the uncertain relationship between these two educational sites before the turn of the century. Indeed, the distinctions are further blurred by the introduction of something like an “A Grade” into the educational landscape.

In 1882, the “A Grade” at last was replaced by a proper high school curriculum, though the course of study still comprised only three years in contrast to the four-year course at the all-white Male and Female High Schools. Nonetheless, the establishment of the city's first public high school for African Americans, called Colored High School (later Central High School, which name it retains today), was a point of pride for the Black community and students who had long fought for it. The school provided an advanced education and normal school training for its graduates, and the curriculum advanced each year.

The student speeches at the early commencement ceremonies of this school provide insights into the writing and rhetorical instruction of students, each one of whom presented during the ceremony, many reading original pieces of prose and poetry. In the early years of the “A Grade,” in particular, graduations featured a range of genres, including a narrative poem, a humorous stump speech, and historical orations and essays such as one on Frederick Douglass

as “the hero of the colored race, the world over,” on “Our Next Door Neighbor, Mexico,” and other historical figures and topics (“Commencements”; “Commencement Day”). These topics appeared alongside those more current-traditional themes such as “A Rolling Stone Gathers No Moss,” “Life Is What We Make It,” and “Progress” (“Colored Children”; “Commencement Day”). Several students spoke on themes of oratory or rhetoric, showing metacognitive engagement with their own rhetorical education and the notion of themselves as students and writers.

In fact, rhetorical and political education was the focus of this school to such an extent that the principal was criticized in 1893 for overemphasizing subjects like rhetoric and political economy to the detriment of basic studies in geography and mathematics, needed to pass the teacher examination. Not coincidentally, then, the leaders of this school were noted educational and political leaders in the city, such as Principal Albert E. Meyzeek, second principal of Colored High School (1893-1896), who was counted among the “more militant proponents of the activist civil rights thrust of W. E. B. Du-Bois” (Hudson 112). Though access to public college for African Americans in Louisville would be delayed for nearly another half century, it is thanks to these leaders that Louisville’s African American students were learning (and teaching) writing in public and private institutions of higher learning since at least the 1870s.

Attempts to develop other public and private institutions for African Americans in Louisville reflect this same dedication as well as the same trend of confounding institutional morphology. There was a normal school established by the Freedmen’s Bureau and the American Missionary Association as early as 1868, which later came under control of the local school board. A private normal school was established in 1879 (that would later become Simmons University), and another private institution was established just outside the city in 1890. But Hudson notes that “true higher education opportunities” for African Americans in Kentucky were available only through the State University in Frankfort (which grew from a state normal school established in 1886) and the coeducational Berea College (114). To further complicate matters, though, with the passage of the Day Law in 1908, school leaders of Berea College established a segregated African American branch of the college, which became “recognized as one of the premier *secondary* institutions for African Americans in the South” (Hudson 114; emphasis added). When the racially segregated Louisville Municipal College was at last established in 1931 as a branch of the University of Louisville, it was among the first nine municipal institutions of higher education established for African Americans in the U.S. by that time, the first six of which were all normal schools and the other two of which were part of the regular public school system, “housed in the same

buildings with the public schools and under the control of the local Boards of Education” (qtd. in Hudson 120). The question, then, is how do we “count” Kentucky’s previous six normal schools, the two junior colleges housed within the public schools, or the Louisville “A Grade” or high school when we turn our attention to “college” writing? What are these terminological short-hands missing? By not paying attention to politics behind these institutional titles, we may be inadvertently perpetuating the racism and sexism that informed them.

Implications: New Terms of Engagement for College Writing

This history of Louisville’s “higher” schools is necessarily abridged, but the story that emerges here begins to push against rhetoric and composition’s commonly accepted narratives about the development and practice of U.S. higher education by insisting on the inclusion of at least some high schools as sites of advanced literacy practices and progressive pedagogy on par with, sometimes forerunner to, and at other times quite literally equated with college composition and rhetoric instruction. Whether specific schools were or were not ever considered colleges, they all raise the question of what—and more pointedly, who—has constituted and defined histories of writing.

From the perspective of rhetoric and composition as a field, the history of Louisville’s high schools pushes us to question current institutional designations and terms that we have taken for granted and to rethink our disciplinary histories and the origins they posit. High schools were not just preparatory institutions, perennially inadequate to the task, as they came to be commonly understood by the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, many were institutions of higher learning in their own right and represent an alternative tradition that is worth recovering. Though the histories of high schools and colleges ultimately follow different trajectories, it is important to draw on both to recover some of the messiness and overlap that existed at this moment in history and to highlight the stakes of this project for ongoing conversations about the shape, meaning, and purpose of writing instruction in the U.S. In this recovery, we need more meaningful connections between our field and the fields of education and history, where the methods and claims may differ, but where important work about rhetorical education is undoubtedly occurring. The research on historical high schools that comes from education, which I have cited throughout this piece, refreshes and challenges our disciplinary perspectives and assumptions.

We have much to gain from cross-disciplinary work, and I offer this piece as a beginning from which I hope will arise further archival research on student writing, classroom practices, and the uses of education across diverse institutional contexts. My book project, *A Shared History: Writing in the High School, College, and University 1856-1886*, responds to and extends this call.

As I elaborate there, such historical work influences our approaches to major questions within our discipline today. In particular, this historical inquiry has bearing on one of the most pressing questions facing our discipline: the role and status of dual-enrollment programs that are blurring the divide between high school and college. I suggest that a shift in historical perspective can help—and that collapsing traditional distinctions between secondary and college writing might, paradoxically, enable us to develop more useful partnerships in their place. We might recognize that the seemingly clear divide between high school and college has never, in fact, prevailed. From there, we can focus our energies on understanding how best to negotiate that fluidity and advocate for teaching and learning across this ostensible divide in our present historical moment. I hope that this history supports these efforts, and that subsequent histories of high school and college connections will help us to better understand both: What has made these sites of writing instruction distinct, and what they have had (and continue to have) in common.

Notes

1. For their invaluable feedback, I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers of this article and those who commented on previous drafts.
2. The courses of study at the high schools were frequently designated by the textbook in use to teach that subject. Here, rhetoric and composition and history are both designated by a specific textbook; it is not clear what students read for English literature.

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