TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform

*The TYCA Executive Committee approved this White Paper at
its April 2016 meeting at the CCCC Convention.*

Executive Summary

Recently, two-year colleges have witnessed broad reforms to developmental education, instituted partly by state legislatures, partly by faculty and administrators, and partly by non-profit organizations such as Achieving the Dream. These reforms are intended to improve student success. A major obstacle to success, according to research from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University and elsewhere, is misplacement into developmental English courses, usually via unsound and unfair high-stakes placement tests. Fortunately, alternative placement processes have been developed that diminish if not fully eliminate the frequency of misplacement, thus expanding access to college-level courses, reducing financial cost and time to degree, and improving student success rates.

These new processes recognize the many factors that play a role in a student's success in a first-year composition course: academic literacies, study skills, time management, financial security, and engagement. Non-traditional students, more broadly represented at two-year colleges, may be strong in many of these areas in ways that standardized tests simply cannot measure. Just as significantly, these tests may negatively impact student engagement while misrepresenting college writing. Moreover, the educational opportunity that first contact with new students offers is squandered. Finally, relying upon standardized tests for placement may have legal implications as they have been linked to "disparate impact"; that is, they may unfairly penalize certain protected groups.

A relatively low-cost and yet theoretically supportable alternative to testing that TYCA recommends is using multiple measures to aid an informed placement decision. Among the multiple measures that have been used are high-school GPA, SAT/ACT scores, Smarter Balanced or PARCC scores, AP test scores and course grades, college transcripts, Learning and Study-Strategies Inventory (LASSI), and student writing samples. These multiple measures are often but not always used in some combination. This white paper presents the multiple measures placement process developed at Highline College in Washington State as an instructive case study of this approach.

Another promising alternative to high-stakes placement testing is directed self-placement (DSP). With DSP, students choose their own course placement through a process of guided self-assessment in relation to the college's curricular options. DSP can draw upon multiple measures as well as other educational information, provided either in person with an advisor or online. DSP has been studied widely at four-year colleges though less so at two-year colleges. Nonetheless, emerging research suggests that DSP enhances student engagement at all levels, including developmental courses, and increases access and success. Further, it supports the educational mission of the college. This white paper presents Mid-Michigan College's longstanding DSP process as a case study.

Regardless of the process—multiple measures, DSP, or some combination—TYCA recommends that all writing placement practices:

1. be grounded in disciplinary knowledge;

2. be developed by local faculty whose work is recognized and compensated by their institution;
3. be sensitive to effects on diverse student populations;
4. be assessed and validated locally;
5. be integrated into campus-wide efforts to improve student success.

TYCA encourages faculty and administrators to work collaboratively to develop the placement process that best suits the needs of their students and the capacities of their individual institutions.

Abstract

This white paper presents current research and makes recommendations on the array of placement practices for writing courses at two-year colleges. Specifically, this white paper (1) identifies the current state of placement practices and trends, (2) offers an overview of placement alternatives, and (3) provides recommendations on placement reform and processes. TYCA encourages two-year college faculty to use this white paper to guide placement reform on their campuses, to be leaders in the field and professional organizations, and to advocate for best practices with policymakers.

The moment we're in

In his 2009 State of the Union Address, President Obama laid out his goal that "by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world." He noted that in a global economy, where what one "sells" is knowledge, "every American will need to get more than a high school diploma" (qtd. in Humphreys). Framing postsecondary education as an economic necessity rather than a personal right or privilege brought the opportunities and missions of community colleges into the forefront of America's public discourse. Soon "the completion agenda" took shape, wherein state and federal bodies, private business groups, the testing industry, and philanthropic organizations focused on finding ways to increase completion and graduation rates at two-year colleges as part of the goal of making the U.S. once again the world leader in college graduates.

But prior to the completion agenda, research on the effectiveness of developmental education was already leading to many faculty-driven reforms. Perhaps the most widely adopted and best known is The Community College of Baltimore County's highly successful Accelerated Learning Program. It has been adopted and adapted by hundreds of two-year colleges across the country, largely driven by faculty desires to serve students better ("About ALP"). However, these faculty-driven and carefully studied programs have been countered or complemented by, and sometimes spurred, state-mandated changes, such as in Florida and Connecticut, where college-readiness has been defined by legislation rather than by local experts (see Hassel et al. *TYCA White Paper*). In other arenas, programs like Achieving the Dream, funded by Lumina and the Gates Foundation, partner with local faculty to initiate reform aimed at improving student success and completion rates.

One of the core principles of the completion agenda, and a principle of developmental education reform, is to remove obstacles to student success (McPhail). One obstacle that has been identified is misplacement, especially "under-placement," when a student is placed into a class below one in which he or she could have been successful (Scott-Clayton). The consequences of under-placement are several: it leads to lower course completion and persistence, as well as greater time, tuition, and opportunity costs for the student (Hodara et al.; Nodine et al.). The Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University has sponsored research

that has studied the effects of under-placement. This research and others have determined that high-stakes testing, which even now dominates placement practices at two-year colleges, is unsound and unfair. One of those high-stakes tests, COMPASS, will no longer be offered by ACT after the 2015-16 academic year (Mathewson). Many two-year colleges that have used COMPASS are now faced with an opportunity and a challenge: how to replace an easy-to-use and relatively cheap placement process which has been shown to be severely flawed with a practical and affordable process that is supported by current research.

In the context of these research and policy shifts, new principles of placement have come to light. We now recognize that a person's success in first-year composition is determined by many factors, only one of which is traditional conceptions and measurements of literacy. Study skills, time-management skills, financial security, and other life circumstances are also relevant to student success. This recognition is especially important at community colleges, where some students, such as returning adults, may bring some of these attributes in abundance while facing unique challenges in others. We also recognize that a sense of engagement is instrumental in success, and when a student is placed into a developmental course, their sense of engagement is often lowered. Additionally, students who are placed without opportunity for input into the placement decision are often less engaged and motivated than those who have some agency over their academic paths. Finally, research and theory in composition has made clear that 21st-century literacies are complex and must be accounted for in placement practices.

The problem with "business as usual"

The most common placement process currently in use at two-year colleges, a single, high-stakes standardized test, has long been critiqued by writing assessment experts. The most popular tests—Accuplacer, COMPASS, and many state-developed instruments (Hughes and Scott-Clayton)—rely on multiple-choice tests of sentence-level "skills," i.e., knowledge of written grammar and punctuation conventions. These assessments are troublesome for many reasons: they are indirect rather than direct measures of writing ability; they focus narrowly on mechanical issues rather than broader rhetorical knowledge and practices; they fail to communicate what most college writing programs actually value to incoming students; they have limited predictive validity and result in significant misplacement; and they may have disparate impact on diverse student populations (Yancey; Williamson; Huot "Toward"; White; White and Thomas; Hassel and Giordano; Poe et al.).

Since the early 2000s, Accuplacer and COMPASS have sought to counter the perceived limitations of multiple-choice tests by offering an impromptu writing component to their English assessment package (for an additional fee). These writing tasks ask students to compose short essays in response to a generic prompt. The writing sample is then scored either entirely or in part by automated writing evaluation (AWE) software, often referred to as "machine-scoring."

The use of AWE for writing placement has been critiqued on many of the same grounds as multiple-choice tests: the computer algorithms driving these instruments focus on easy-to-tabulate language features rather than complex rhetorical considerations, quality of reasoning, or actual meaning (Anson; Condon "Why"; Ericsson; Haswell; Herrington and Moran "What Happens"; "WritePlacer"; Jones "Accuplacer"; McAllister and White; Perelman "When"; "Length"; Vojak et al). Thus, they identify and reward common language patterns but are unable to assess content, logic, or language complexity, abilities that are often crucial for success in college writing. Likewise, using AWE for placement assessment risks having a disparate impact on diverse students because such software measures narrow ideological constructs of "standard" academic English (Elliot et al. "Placement"; Herrington and Stanley; Herrington and Moran "Writing"; Poe et

al.). These instruments also fail to align with the genres and practices valued in most college writing curricula (Condon "Why"; "Large-Scale"; Anson; Haswell), and they communicate to students that their writing is not worth being evaluated by a human reader, a message that may influence students' engagement with the writing task (Herrington and Moran "WritePlacer"). Finally, placing students based on test scores alone, whether derived from multiple choice questions or AWE, effectively removes the opportunity for students, advisors, and instructors to discuss course curricula and learning strategies, a process that can empower students and foster academic success.

Both standardized multiple-choice tests and AWE-scored writing tasks are more widely used for placement in two-year colleges than at four-year institutions, which raises a number of concerns. First, two-year colleges serve a disproportionate number of low-income, first-generation, older and returning students (AACC). They also serve a more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse student body (Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker). However, nationally marketed writing assessments offer little flexibility in terms of evaluation criteria or scoring mechanisms: they cannot be adapted to local curricula or student populations beyond crude adjustments to cut scores. Moreover, as Poe et al. assert, such standardized tests as commonly used may impact protected groups unfairly.

Second, standardized tests disconnect placement from the education process as manifest in curricula and pedagogical practices. They wrest the instruction of writing from faculty and render it a set of mechanical adjustments that can be evaluated by a computer algorithm (Condon; Herrington and Moran "What Happens"; "WritePlacer"). Furthermore, the disconnect between recommended assessment practices in writing studies and the actual placement practices in many two-year colleges undermines faculty professional authority: it impacts faculty potential to effect change at their institutions, diminishes the status of the two-year college English professional knowledge in the field, and contributes to the overall de-professionalization of English instructors across institution types (see Griffiths; Toth, Griffiths, & Thirolf).

In short, "business as usual" in two-year college writing placement is problematic on many levels. It runs contrary to established assessment theory and practice in the field of writing studies; it erodes the institutional and professional authority of writing faculty by removing writing assessment from their influence of expertise; it ignores student agency; and it may disproportionately punish our diverse student populations. This final point is evidenced by a growing number of studies demonstrating that issues of misplacement undermine student success at many two-year colleges (Hughes and Scott-Clayton; Belfield and Crosta; Scott-Clayton).

The special problem of assessing student writing for placement

One of the most complicated issues related to assessing student readiness for college composition is that students' abilities as writers seem best assessed through an evaluation of their actual writing and not through other placement measures. In other words, the most effective way to evaluate what students are capable of doing as writers would seem to be to assess their writing. However, the practice of assessing writing outside of the educational context and the local curriculum presents special challenges.

In "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement" (revised 2009 and reaffirmed 2014), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) provides principles for incorporating writing assessment effectively and fairly into an institutional placement process. First, high-stakes writing assessments should be based on more than a single sample: "Ideally,

writing ability must be assessed by more than one piece of writing, in more than one genre, written on different occasions, for different audiences, and responded to and evaluated by multiple readers as part of a substantial and sustained writing process." A single piece of writing as a standalone placement measure to replace standardized testing does not assess a student's readiness to successfully complete varying college-level writing tasks in different academic contexts. Placement processes that adhere to this disciplinary guideline typically assess a portfolio or other collection of student writing.

Second, effective writing assessment is situated within the context of an institution. The *CCCC* position statement asserts that "best assessment practice is undertaken in response to local goals, not external pressure." These local goals are, of course, reflective of the student populations that the institution serves, the institution's mission and learning objectives, and the writing program's curriculum, sequence of courses, and assessment practices. For placement, this means that the criteria used for evaluating readiness for college writing should correlate with the courses that a particular institution offers and are sensitive to the diverse and unique student body of the institution.

Third, student writing must be assessed by faculty who teach the courses that students are placed into. The *CCCC* position statement argues for a process in which "instructor-evaluators . . . make a judgment regarding which courses would best serve each student's needs and assign each student to the appropriate course." A white paper jointly published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) calls for "several readers" who bring different "perspectives . . . to student texts" (2).

TYCA recognizes that assessing student writing for placement presents several challenges at two-year colleges. First, many two-year colleges lack dedicated writing program administrator positions or roles, which makes it difficult to train placement readers and coordinate placement processes on a large scale. Second, most composition courses, especially developmental writing, are taught by contingent faculty who generally are not afforded opportunities for professional development and at times are shut out of decision-making processes, including the assessment of student writing. Finally, some established best practices in writing assessment may be "infeasible" for many colleges due to the "inefficiency" of a theoretically sound process (Hodara, Jaggars, and Karp 29).

In what follows, we look at the two most promising alternatives to the one-size-fits-all, high-stakes standardized assessment that many colleges have relied upon for years. These alternatives have a long history but are not, as yet, widespread. They offer pragmatic options for enacting more theoretically sound placement assessment within the very real institutional constraints at many two-year colleges. TYCA recommends that faculty consider the possibilities, challenges, and opportunities of implementing these alternatives in their local contexts.

Multiple measures for placement

Recent research suggests that what are called "soft skills," such as persistence and time management, as well as situational factors, such as financial stability and life challenges, can play as large a role in a student's success as their literacy experiences (Hassel and Giordano "First-Year"). Many colleges are now using a variety of measures to assess a student's best placement. These other measures may give a much fuller picture of an individual student's chance of success. Such measures, along with what they assess, include but are not limited to:

Assessment	What is assessed
High-school transcript and/or GPA	Performance over time; non-cognitive and academic abilities; grit and persistence (Belfield and Crosta; CCCC Committee).
Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI)	Learning and study strategies related to "skill, will and self-regulation necessary for successful learning" (LASSI; Cano).
Interview	Academic and non-cognitive skills; self-evaluation contributing to metacognition and self-efficacy (Royer and Gilles "Directed" and "Basic").
Writing sample	Self-assessment and metacognitive awareness of writing ability situationally appropriate (CCCC Committee).
Previous college coursework	Performance over time. Aligns course sequence with previous experience (CCCC Committee; Belfield and Crosta).
Portfolio	Multiple examples of complex and varied work. Performance over time (CCCC Committee).

In spite of the advantages, moving from using a single standardized test to multiple measures for placement can present challenges. It can be difficult and costly to redesign often long-standing institutional structures that have been built around testing and linear placement. Moreover, institutional culture can be resistant to change. At times, administrators and faculty, who are unaware of current research on placement, may question the need to change, especially when they point out cost and the demands on already overworked personnel. Moreover, divisions between college-level writing and developmental writing faculty and departments may expose apparently conflicting views about what writing is, how it is best taught, and therefore how placement should be determined.

TYCA encourages faculty to consider small-scale changes as a first step. For example, a college may honor any of several single measures for placement, such as a state-instituted PARCC or Smarter Balanced test score; an SAT or ACT score (to match practices at a local university, for example); AP test score; or high-school GPA, which seems to show the greatest predictive validity (Belfield and Crosta). Alternatively, with only a little more investment of time, a college may be able to weigh a number of measures, such as high-school GPA and a Learning and Study Strategies Inventory. Advisors, already working with students, may find that the additional time that a multiple measures approach may require is balanced by the time and money saved by eliminating the standardized test.

TYCA offers the case study below to highlight the process one college engaged to implement multiple measures for placement. It is hoped that the more detailed presentation will aid as others seek to navigate reform in highly complicated and politically charged climates.
Case study

Highline Community College, in Washington State, is one of the many colleges that has recently implemented multiple measures of placement. Like many other colleges in Washington, Highline used COMPASS writing scores as the sole measure of placement for many years, and cut scores had been set decades previously. The Student Services office conducted placement for math and

English as part of admission. The placement director was dedicated to the current system. While the English department had lobbied successfully to add COMPASS reading scores to the placement decision—responding to a curricular emphasis on reading and in keeping with CCRC studies (Belfield and Crosta)—cut scores and the single, high-stakes test for placement remained unchallenged and unexamined.

English faculty were aware of CCRC research (Bailey, Jeong, and Cho) that showed that the lower a student places in a developmental sequence, the less likely he or she is to reach, let alone complete, the college level course. Faculty conducted an internal study of students who placed into Highline's three levels of developmental English and found evidence similar to the CCRC findings. Highline quickly developed and implemented an accelerated model of instruction, where students who placed below college level were offered first-year composition with extra instructional time and support. Although completion rates for first-year composition improved with the acceleration model, faculty quickly realized that not all students needed the additional support. In short, acceleration was a way around under-placement but not a solution to it.

With the data on acceleration and support from administration (as well as a newly hired placement director), English faculty developed alternatives to COMPASS. Working with area high schools, they developed transcript-based placement, which the placement director promoted to all high school groups, and a portfolio-based placement, made possible by the use of portfolios to show mastery at some of the local high schools. In addition, faculty sought out alternative measures, such as GED scores and scores on the Smarter Balance assessment. Now when a student applies to Highline, he or she has a variety of ways to demonstrate readiness for college level work. The placement website and placement advisors help students determine which assessment path will be best for their situation.

Highline's move to multiple measures for placement has had positive results. Between May 2014 and January 2015, 18% of incoming students were able to place through high school transcripts or GED scores. Twenty percent more students now place into first-year composition while the success rates for first-year composition have not changed. Moreover, as a result of this change, 26% more students of color now place directly into first-year composition than did the previous year, thus suggesting that students of color were disproportionately affected by the use of COMPASS as the sole instrument for placement. Moreover, assessment of transcripts and portfolios, which often take less time than completing the COMPASS test, demonstrates that the college values prior learning and student commitment.

Costs have been relatively modest in light of the success. Assessment of high school transcripts has fit seamlessly into the previous placement procedures and has not resulted in additional costs. Highline has added an Assessment and Placement advisor to support students during this important introduction to college. This additional cost, like that for an acceleration model of instruction, has been deemed more than justified by greater access and success for new students, particularly low-income and students of color.

But Highline continues to seek to offer greater access for more capable students. Highline is now piloting directed self-placement, allowing students to inventory their own reading and writing practices, read sample assignments and student responses, view videos of actual classes and student interviews, and assess their own needs within these contexts.

Directed self-placement

First introduced by Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles in their seminal 1998 article "Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation," directed self-placement (DSP) is best understood as a principle rather than a specific procedure or instrument. The principle holds that given adequate information about the writing curriculum and expectations at the institution they are entering, students are capable of making their own decision about which course and/or writing support option(s) will best meet their needs.

Writing studies scholars have advanced compelling theoretical arguments for DSP. Invoking the educational theories of John Dewey (Royer and Gilles "Directed") and Paulo Freire (Royer and Gilles "Basic"), Royer and Gilles argue that exercising agency in writing placement encourages students to take responsibility for their own education. Making placement a choice, they assert, fosters positive student attitudes in developmental courses and, as a result, improves the teaching and learning environment in those classrooms. It also motivates students who have opted into higher-level courses to demonstrate that they have made an appropriate decision. Also, many argue that DSP also plays an important teaching role: it creates an opportunity for incoming students to begin to construct the writing context they are entering and reflect on how their own prior writing experiences have prepared them for that setting (Royer and Gilles "Directed"; Gere et al. Toth and Aull).

DSP often serves as an impetus for program development. DSP invites writing programs to articulate more clearly their local conception of writing (that is, what is valued and expected from writers in the program and institution), as well as the particular local context (i.e., when and where students have the opportunities to develop the capacities to meet those values and expectations). Thus, DSP pushes institutions to clarify and articulate learning outcomes across the writing curriculum (Leweicki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni; Tompkins; Royer and Gilles "The Public"; Toth and Aull).

Empirical evidence supporting the use of DSP is also promising. Many early adopters reported that, under DSP, student pass rates in higher-level writing courses were similar to those under previous placement procedures, and sometimes better (Royer and Gilles "Directed Self-Placement"; Blakesley, Harvey and Reynolds; Chernekoff; Cornell and Newton). Likewise, local validation studies have shown significant differences between the writing of students who choose to take preparatory courses and those who opt to enroll directly in first-year composition (Gere et al. "Local"). Others have described important lessons learned through DSP implementation, such as the crucial role of advising (Bedore and Rossen-Knill) and the need to pay attention to how DSP instruments and procedures affect diverse student populations (Das Bender; Ketai).

Institutions structure their DSP procedures differently to respond to particular student populations, curricular configurations, and institutional resources. Most programs scaffold student decision-making through some combination of explanatory handouts or checklists (e.g. Royer and Gilles "Directed Self-Placement"; Blakesley et al.), online questionnaires (e.g. Gere et al. "Assessing"; Jones "Self-Placement"; Toth and Aull), group orientations or individual advising sessions (e.g. Royer and Gilles "Directed Self-Placement"; Chernekoff; Crusan; Bedore and Rosen-Knill), and/or self-assessment in relation to a specific writing task or sample assignment (e.g. Leweicki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni; Pinter and Sims; Jones "Self-Placement"; Gere et al. "Assessing"; Toth and Aull). However, they are structured, these processes adhere to the guiding principle of DSP: respect for student agency and an appreciation for the pedagogical value of asking students to reflect on their prior writing experiences in relation to the new writing context they are entering.

While several two-year colleges have successfully made DSP available to all incoming students (Leweicki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni; Toth), large institutions with limited advising infrastructure may find this option unfeasible. One compromise is the "decision zone" model described by Patrick Tompkins, which offers DSP to students whose scores on the mandatory standardized writing test are in the least-predictive middle range. Alternatively, multiple measures may be used to determine decision zones. In either case, the process identifies a subset of students eligible for DSP, sometimes generating a placement recommendation that students decide whether to follow. Finally, some colleges have developed hybrid models that make DSP available only for students participating in special programs that offer high contact with faculty, advisors, and/or support staff (Toth).

Unfortunately, the scholarship on DSP in two-year colleges is limited. As Heather Ostman observes, Sullivan's 2008 overview of placement practices at two-year colleges, which drew on a national survey of TYCA members, did not include a category for DSP. Sullivan notes that respondents appeared to "strongly favor mandatory placement" ("Analysis" 16). While more than a dozen two-year colleges have tried DSP (Toth), to date there have been only two published studies from these settings (Tompkins; Leweicki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni). Both highlight unique considerations that open-admissions colleges face as they develop DSP procedures, including limited resources; the need for rapid, year-round placement assessment; state policies mandating the use of specific placement instruments; and, perhaps most importantly, a highly diverse student displaying a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, language and literacy experiences, academic goals, and preparation for college writing.

Despite these challenges, both articles suggest that versions of DSP can work at two-year colleges. As the current reform climate opens up possibilities for rethinking writing placement at two-year colleges, new DSP models and evidence regarding their effectiveness in local context continue to emerge. TYCA offers the case study below to highlight the practices of one college that has employed DSP for over a decade. It is hoped that the more detailed presentation will aid others who seek to explore implementing DSP in their own institutions.
Case study

Mid-Michigan Community College, which serves approximately 6,000 students across its two campuses in central Michigan, began using DSP in 2002. English faculty were dissatisfied with both the accuracy and the logistical challenges of the previous approach to placement: Accuplacer reading scores plus an impromptu faculty-scored writing sample. Faculty saw DSP as an opportunity to involve students in their own placement decision by inviting them to reflect on their prior reading and writing experiences. Faculty hoped this process would lead students to become more invested in their writing courses while reducing issues of under-placement.

Mid Michigan's DSP process might be classified as a non-compulsory version of the "decision zone" model. Enrolling students have three course options: English 104, 110, and 111, with 111 being the required writing course that all students must eventually complete. Students who have earned a score of 21 or higher on the ACT reading exam within the last three years can enroll directly in 111. All other incoming students who have not fulfilled the writing requirement elsewhere must complete the Accuplacer reading comprehension exam. Prior to meeting with advisors to select their courses, students who have completed the Accuplacer view online sample writing assignments for the three course options, as well as descriptions of what they will be expected to do in each course. Students then complete an electronic survey about their prior writing experiences and preparation. Their responses to these questions, which become part of their permanent electronic advising record, are the basis for a placement recommendation which they discuss with an advisor.

Students who score at the low or high end of the Accuplacer reading exam are strongly advised into English 104 or 111 respectively; however, most incoming students score in the middle range. These students arrive at a placement decision based on their reflections on the online DSP materials, the recommendation generated by their questionnaire responses, and an intensive discussion with an advisor. Although outcomes data are complicated by many factors (a shift in student and instructor demographics and inconsistent advising practices, among other variables), in the three years following its adoption of DSP, Mid-Michigan found that the average percentage of students who successfully completed English 111 exit portfolios increased from 75% to 84%, without dramatic changes in per-student placement costs (Vandermey).

In the years following implementation, particularly during the rapid growth the college experienced in the late 2000s, English faculty engaged in sustained dialogue with advising staff to maintain the institution's commitment to student choice in the placement process. Faculty found that in some instances, advisors defaulted to a placement based on a standardized test score or otherwise failed to engage students in a meaningful conversation about their preparation. In the early 2010s, the move from paper-based questionnaires to an electronic record-keeping system, which advisors used to track students' placement recommendations and decisions, helped make the process more transparent. Likewise, English faculty periodically reviewed and revised the DSP questions themselves based on evolving curricula, input from advisors, and data about which questions were most predictive of student course decisions and outcomes.

In 2015, the major challenge to Mid Michigan's DSP process is the rise in the number of dual-enrollment courses the college is offering in area high schools. English faculty are working to determine how best to adapt the DSP process for a younger demographic and to engage high school counselors logistically and philosophically. Thus, DSP is not a static procedure at Mid-Michigan, but rather a principle that guides placement and the revision of placement processes, a principle which English faculty believe serves their students and reflects the institution's values better than other available placement options.

Other Placement Reforms

While using multiple measures for placement and incorporating DSP are perhaps the two most prominent approaches to placement reform in two-year colleges, institutions have introduced a variety of other options to standardized tests.

One long-standing practice at many colleges is first-week "diagnostic" assignments that help instructors identify students who have been under- or over-placed. This approach can also be a means of providing additional advising for students who are self-placing, whether through DSP or because of state legislation that limits mandatory placement (see Hassel et al.). A variation on this approach is the "just in time" acceleration model described by Sullivan: students who place into developmental courses but show early in-class indications of readiness for college-level writing have the option of receiving differentiated instruction leading to the capstone assignment for the credit-bearing course ("Just in Time"). Successful completion of this assignment enables students to receive credit for first-year composition without requiring them to first complete the developmental sequence.

Many institutions also have indirect "challenge" options that enable students who believe they have been underplaced to seek enrollment in higher-level courses (see Toth). At some institutions, it has long been possible for students to simply disregard developmental course placements and enroll directly into credit-bearing courses if they choose to do so. Some research

suggests that students who ignore their developmental course placements are more likely to complete credit-bearing writing courses than students who accept such placement (Bailey; Bailey, Jeong, and Cho). One possible explanation is that disregarding a placement recommendation signals a higher level of motivation or ability to learn independently (Sullivan and Nielsen); another is that such students' self-assessments are more accurate than the placement tests they completed.

In a less direct example of the challenge approach, at Whatcom Community College in Washington State, students who have placed into developmental courses are still permitted to enroll directly into credit-bearing literature courses or a specially designed study-skills/academic discourse class, both of which are offered for credit leading to a degree or certificate. Successful completion of one of these courses is taken as an indication of readiness for college-level writing, recognizing that perhaps the best indication of a student's chance for success in a college-level writing class is demonstrated success in a related college-level class. In this way, students who believe they are ready for college-level work have an alternative pathway to first-year writing.

In these indirect challenge processes, students have agency over their pathway to college-level writing. By themselves, however, neither option constitutes DSP, which by definition involves a guided process by which students learn about and self-assess in relation to the college's writing curriculum. However, both options could be easily adapted to become versions of DSP.

Finally, many colleges have developed more formalized challenge procedures through which students petition to be admitted into college-level courses. These procedures might involve advising conversations with English faculty members, additional self-assessments and/or writing tasks that are reviewed by faculty evaluators, or portfolio-type assessment of students' previous written work (Hassel and Giordano "First-Year"; Toth). In some cases, such challenge procedures shade into forms of multiple measures for placement or DSP, especially for students who have the motivation to seek these options. It is worth noting, however, that such procedures privilege students who possess enough knowledge of how colleges work to aggressively self-advocate. This raises concerns that the benefits of challenge-based approaches might privilege white, middle-class, traditional-aged students, and TYCA encourages faculty to be sensitive to bias in the design and redesign of such systems (see Inoue and Poe).

Special considerations for two-year college placement reform

Non-traditionally aged students

Whatever model is developed; English faculty must be sensitive to the needs of the populations they serve. Community colleges serve more non-traditionally aged students than do four-year colleges and universities. Nearly 50% of all community college students range in age between 22 and 39, with another 14% being over 40 years old (American Association of Community Colleges). These returning students tend to be less familiar with college expectations, college structures, and computerized testing, which can lead to lower performance on placement exams. Moreover, most of these returning students won't have recent high school transcripts, ACT, or SAT scores. Locally developed multiple measures for placement can better serve returning adults, including veterans, who Elizabeth O'Herrin notes may "cite frustration with younger classmates" as something that interferes with their comfort level, motivation, and success. Finally, DSP can better assess these prospective students holistically and better account for their life experiences, circumstances, and goals while respecting their self-knowledge, motivations, and agency.

Joseph Worth and Christopher J. Stephens, of St. Louis Community College (STLCC), note that a growing number of returning adult students attended college at some time in the past but withdrew "during a period of personal crisis that is reflected by a less-than-stellar academic record." As a result, STLCC developed opportunities for "academic forgiveness or a subsequent adjustment to a student's grade point average." These practices helped level the playing field for returning students. Advising returning students helped the college recognize "in some cases, well-developed lifelong skills (such as reading and writing) [which] allowed students to enter college-level courses" directly (Worth and Stephens).

Racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity

Some of the first efforts to challenge placement tests in two-year colleges resulted from concerns over their racially discriminatory effects. The legal theory known as disparate, differential or disproportionate impact, which was first developed in critical race and legal studies, posits that if a practice systematically disadvantages already disenfranchised groups, the practice itself is discriminatory and illegal (Wex Legal Dictionary; Poe et al.). Invoking disparate impact, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) sued the state of California in 1986 over the perpetual under-placement of Latino/Latina students in the state's community college system. The lawsuit argued that disproportionately higher rates of remedial placement for Latino/Latina students indicated an inherent problem with the placement tests (Kosiewicz et al.). Eventually settled out of court, the lawsuit resulted in the state's mandated adoption of multiple placement measures to mitigate the discriminatory effects of high-stakes, standardized placement.

Empirical studies have since confirmed that placement tests such as Accuplacer and COMPASS do not accurately predict the success of diverse student populations in first-year composition (Armstrong; Elliot et al.). Such placement tests disadvantage some students, in part, because they privilege certain kinds of language uses and cultural knowledge. Reading comprehension questions, for instance, often rely on subject matter related to Euro-American culture. These reading passages might assume a knowledge base that alienates writers from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The CCCC Position Statement on Second Language Writing cautions against mistaking cultural knowledge for writing proficiency when assessing multilingual writers (CCCC Position Statement on Second Language Writing).

Similarly, placement tests often use multiple-choice proofreading questions that privilege meta-knowledge of grammatical correctness. Assessment of error correction abilities can, in fact, over place some multilingual writers such as international students (Crusan "An Assessment"). On the other hand, a lack of meta-grammatical knowledge may result in the under-placement of Generation 1.5 students into ESL classes (Crusan "Promise").

As many two-year college instructors know, linguistic homogeneity in first-year composition is becoming more of a myth with each new school year (Matsuda). Two-year college students are increasingly "translingual"; every day, they shuttle among a wealth of languages, linguistic resources and modalities (Canagarajah). Placement using a single, standardized exam in Standard Written English tells diverse students to leave their language differences at the otherwise open-access door. Such placement tests do not value language difference and cannot measure the complex ways students bridge their literacies and languages with the often unfamiliar practices of the academy. TYCA recognizes students' "right to their own language" and asserts that this right must be affirmed at the very site of their placement into composition courses (see CCCC Students Right to Their Own Language).

Recommendations

In order to align with current writing assessment theory and established best practices in the field, TYCA recommends that faculty charged with reforming placement at their institutions proceed from the following principles.

All placement reforms and processes should:

1. be grounded in disciplinary knowledge.

   Much recent research has been disseminated in CCCC position statements, academic journals and books, and through the Community College Research Center. The Works Cited list of this paper is a good place to start but is not comprehensive.

2. be developed by local faculty who are supported professionally.

   To assure continuity between placement, curriculum, and pedagogy, faculty must be empowered to design and reform the placement process. In some instances, this may mean reorganizing institutional structures and long-standing practices that have divorced placement from instruction. Simultaneously, faculty must be given the financial means and the necessary reassigned time to become and remain current in the field of writing assessment. This includes contingent faculty who make up the majority of the teaching force at two-year colleges.

3. be sensitive to effects on diverse student populations.

   Placement practices impact racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups differently; moreover, these and other factors, such as gender, age, (dis)ability, veteran status, etc., intersect. Assessment of the placement process must be on-going and include disaggregated data that reveals the impact of placement practices on student sub-populations (see next bullet and see Inoue; Elliot et al. "Placement"; Elliot et al. "Uses"; Ruecker; Poe et al.).

4. be assessed and validated locally.

   Validity does not reside in the assessment instrument itself, but rather in the alignment between what the instrument measures and the local construct(s) of writing. The case for adopting or maintaining any assessment instrument—whether purchased from a testing company, provided by the state, or developed in-house—must address the instrument's theoretical soundness, the use to which it is put, and the consequences of that use in local context. Such local validation cannot be a one-time study but rather must be an ongoing process that evaluates assessment practices in light of shifting student populations, institutional curricula, and other contextual factors (e.g. Huot "Toward"; Huot *(Re)Articulating*; O'Neil, Moore, and Huot; Elliot et al. "Uses"; Broad et al; Gallagher; Hassel and Giordano).

5. be integrated into campus-wide efforts to improve student success.

   Placement is one of many factors bearing on student success that colleges across the country are recognizing as interrelated. First-year experience courses, new-student orientation, curriculum revision, faculty development, and student support services are some of the factors that must be coordinated to ensure that placement reform has the strongest and most positive impact for students as possible.

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