

Beyond Writing Placement: Implementing Wraparound Self-Placement at Small Liberal Arts Colleges (SLACs) and Beyond

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Abstract: In this paper, two writing administrators at highly selective (and small) liberal arts colleges (SLACs) detail the process of developing and implementing a “wraparound” directed self-placement (DSP) model at colleges without a first-year writing (FYW) requirement. Gaiimo and Reardon underscore the impetus for the DSP and its impact on course placement as well as using DSP data to create robust support plans for individual students, including and beyond FYW-equivalent courses. Moving past traditional placement, the authors focus on extending placement models to the “extracurriculum” to include asset-based and wraparound support beyond corequisite interventions. Instruments and guidance are shared on using DSP in novel and comprehensive ways at, and beyond, SLACs.

Keywords: liberal arts colleges, directed self-placement, ecologies of writing, wraparound support

Introduction

Directing a writing program at an elite small liberal arts college (SLAC) comes with a range of unique challenges and opportunities. We, Genie Giaimo and Kristina Reardon, identified key differences between the SLACs where we served as writing program administrators (WPAs) (Giaimo has subsequently left for another position) and the larger research institutions where we obtained our doctorates. We had both been hired to effect change and to update writing programming practices. Yet we found that the faculty as a whole exerted strong ownership of the curriculum (including writing programs) in ways that extended beyond what we had seen at larger institutions. Our arrivals and work on writing programming accompanied conversations about “rigor” and “loosening standards” during COVID-19, and we found many conversations with colleagues about writing programming to focus on remediation and, by extension, placement into our (non-required) writing courses. Below, we discuss the unique institutional makeup of liberal arts colleges and share our institutional arrival narratives before offering a deeper explanation of our mutual development of a uniquely robust and wraparound directed self-placement (DSP) tool calibrated to serve the needs of high-performing students at small colleges that do not have formal first-year writing (FYW) programs.

As Gladstein and Rossman Regaignon (2012) note, SLACs often see writing as core to their mission and wish to support writing at all levels, which includes a “high touch” approach that involves coursework as well as theses, independent research projects, summer and in-semester research, etc. Yet writing courses at both of our institutions loosely define writing instruction but do not (and cannot) impose criteria that would create a consistent experience for students across sections, even in first-year seminar (FYS) programs (such as number of revised pages produced in a semester). Further, several SLACs face enrollment pressures that limit faculty participation in the distributed writing curriculum where all faculty “own” writing (loosely described as writing across the curriculum, writing in the disciplines, or a WAC/WID model). SLACs occupy an odd place between curricula flexibility (where students enjoy an open curriculum or a distributed one) and curricula stasis (where writing models change infrequently); therefore, our SLACs do not have the infrastructure or taste for further writing requirements, including mandatory placement. Yet there is an interest in adapting and modifying university-based placement models in a SLAC context and, particularly, to make a *recommendation* to students about writing courses they might optionally enroll in (as opposed to a *placement* into one of several options of required FYW courses, as at many universities). Our work adapts and reconfigures key values in existing DSP research in ways that respond to exigencies at SLACs but can be extended to larger institutions as well.

Writing programs, such as they exist at liberal arts colleges, look very different than at R1 institutions or two-year colleges; therefore, the directed placement model developed by Giaimo and then adapted by Reardon responded to SLAC curricula and faculty contexts. As Giaimo researched ways to provide writing placement, they perceived a renewed interest in DSP first developed at R1 institutions among SLAC peers (on the SLAC-WPA listserv, for example). Reardon, Giaimo and others at SLACS, however, have found that placement models do not always transfer neatly from university or two-year college contexts to SLACs for several reasons:

1. Writing classes are often not required—or writing is rolled into other requirements (like a methods course, a first-year seminar, etc.) with little, if any, oversight by a WPA.

2. Many liberal arts colleges have an FYS model which includes writing but also advisement and a host of other college readiness material, meaning the teaching of writing may be prioritized differently across seminars.
3. Rather than rhetoric and composition instructors, tenure-track and tenured faculty across the disciplines teach writing.
4. Writing courses are often coordinated through programs and centers rather than through departments with majors or minors; reporting structures for WPAs are not straightforward, and often, writing and rhetoric specialists are in positions that prioritize service (rather than research).
5. At SLACs, faculty generally prize academic freedom in ways that challenge uniformity in curriculum and assessment; for example, requiring a certain number of pages of revised writing across all sections may not be possible.
6. Assessment is often met with distrust both at the faculty level (because of concerns around academic freedom and autonomy in the classroom) and the administrative level (because of reputational politics).
7. Many SLACs have a changing student (and faculty) demographic that is more diverse but also a stable tenured faculty body with long institutional history (35+ years) and varied opinions on the teaching of writing.
8. Many SLACs, particularly elite SLACs, have endowments and budgets that allow them to support the teaching of writing in novel and perhaps more costly ways (if these initiatives are supported).

There are, however, some shared cross-institutional conditions that frame writing support at both SLACs and universities. Students come to college with a variety of writing experiences, confidence levels, and attitudes and writing goals; we benefit from having data on incoming student cohorts; data can be used to inform faculty writing pedagogy training; and writing instruction can be uneven; therefore, guardrails can help onboard students into the writing culture of the college. Ultimately, we were excited about the idea of DSP as offering “wraparound support” at both SLACs and larger institutions, particularly because such a model operationalizes the theory behind DSP and composition writ large: that writing classes aren’t punishment and that there are myriad reasons—based on both strengths and weaknesses—that students will benefit from taking writing courses, receiving support for their writing, and writing outside of the classroom.

Because faculty across the disciplines are responsible for enculturating students to college writing and pre-major advisement, often through the FYS program, SLACs face challenges that are distinct from larger universities that rely on trained writing instructors who teach in the program year after year and professional advisors. These program pressures reveal a dense but distributed “culture of writing” that makes it difficult to uncover ecologies of writing and to offer wraparound support without further assessment that provides continuity in advisement and resource connection. Our wraparound DSP models enable us to forego “academic paternalism” (McGimpsey, 2019) where decisions are made by faculty and others for students, instead offering students informed placement recommendations that they can weigh with their advisors and personally. Many of the more personalized recommendations we make tap into the rich set of writing and academic resources on our campuses.

Origin Stories: Coming to an SLAC-DSP Model

Middlebury College and Amherst College are part of a set of small New England liberal arts schools with enrollments around 1,800 and 2,800 students. Middlebury College (2022) has a ~15% acceptance rate. In the most recent years for which demographics are available, Middlebury College enrolled a student body of 31.6% underrepresented minority students and 11.9% international students. Giaimo came to Middlebury College in fall 2019. Known for its language schools and the school of English, which were started in the early 1900s, the college has two writing requirements: a FYS taught by faculty across the disciplines and an upper-level college writing (CW) course taught in the disciplines. Giaimo served as writing center director with writing program responsibilities (faculty development, program assessment, writing curricula support, etc.). At Amherst College, enrollments hover around 1,900 students, and the class of 2026 had a ~7% acceptance rate. Amherst College enrolled 48% domestic students of color and 11% international students. Reardon arrived in fall 2021. Students opt into writing at Amherst College as it features a completely open curriculum, where a single-semester FYS taught by faculty across the disciplines is the only required class (beyond major requirements) for graduation. FYS has been designated “writing attentive” since 2009 (Amherst College, 2008, p. 11), but students are not required to take additional writing courses. Reardon is Director of Intensive Writing.

Both authors recognize that the eliteness of their institutions frames conversations about the teaching of writing, the purpose of academic support, and attitudes towards supplemental writing courses. Both have navigated the politics and challenges of teaching high-performing but differentially prepared students and worked hard to reframe the culture of writing at their institutions from deficit-focused to asset-based through assessment-driven curricula and co-curricular changes. Before developing DSP models and other assessments, however, equity-focused work began in the classroom.

Giaimo walked into WRPR100 with expectations that the course demographics and structure would be like introductory writing courses they had taught at other universities. As they looked around the room and noted that *only* students of color and a few international students were enrolled in this course, they realized that these courses played a very different role in students’ educational journeys at Middlebury College than, perhaps, at other institutions. As the group did introductions, the students admitted that they were unsure of why they were there. Some expressed frustration with how they were directed into the course, while others did not realize that this course was optional and did not “count” towards the two required writing courses at the college. One or two mentioned feeling coerced to take WRPR100 by their faculty advisor. From these rather distressing conversations, Giaimo learned a lot about this particularly diverse group of first-year students. Many spoke languages other than English at home. Several were educated internationally. And most were leaders in their high schools either through sports, student government, clubs, or service work. At the same time, most of the domestic students had attended public school, and those who did not were multi language learners—a point that several students thought influenced faculty advice to take the 100-level course. An undercurrent within these conversations was, of course, the demographic differences between the WRPR100 course and other classes at the college; we could not ignore the optics of majoritively BIPOC students taking a supplemental writing course. DSP did not entirely erase the racial dynamics inherent at our SLAC (Tinkle et al., 2022); it did, however, create a more consistent and equitable placement and

advisement process that attracted different—and more demographically balanced—populations of students (e.g., STEM majors, homeschooled students, gap year students) to WRPR100.

Meanwhile, at Amherst, Reardon found that demographic data on enrollments in Intensive Writing in the approximately five years prior to her arrival revealed no clear patterns; white students enrolled nearly as frequently as Black students or Latinx students, for example. Accordingly, the first questions she asked as she began her work were: how do students end up in these optional courses? And what do constituencies across campus understand, or want, this cluster of 100-level courses—listed in departments across the curriculum—to do? She found that students reported enrolling in Intensive Writing classes based on interest in the course themes (like human rights) rather than for a focus on writing. Reardon subsequently worked to redefine Intensive Writing with a strengths-based approach, removing remedial language (Intensive Writing classes were originally “designed specifically to meet the needs of students whose secondary education did not adequately prepare them for writing at Amherst College” (Amherst College, n.d.). Then, she began work on student placement. The college’s 2008 reaccreditation self-study estimated that around 10-15% (around 48-72 students) of the entering class would need an Intensive Writing course after taking a required “writing attentive” FYS. Yet no method for recommending students was formally established beyond consulting with FYS faculty. Thus, the recommendation process was uneven, depending on who was teaching; adopting a DSP model made the recommendation process more consistent and accessible to all incoming students (as opposed to only those whose professors responded to emails asking for placement recommendations).

For both authors, developing a DSP was a way to create a clear, equitable recommendation practice while also serving as a tool that educates students and their faculty advisors. In place of a well-meaning but uneven advisement model where FYS faculty reviewed transcripts, college essays, and other materials—or where WRPR colleagues sorted through thousands of direct and indirect writing assessments like transcripts, SAT/ACT scores, educational access, language/class/race background—Gaiimo developed an instrument that surveyed student attitudes, perceptions, and confidences related to writing, reading, executive functioning, and research literacy. In the summer of 2020, after consulting with several stakeholders, the DSP was finalized and given to all incoming first-year students through FYS. This process allowed Gaiimo to provide wraparound support for students, including connecting them to free disability testing and ADA support, executive functioning services, and research support. In 2022, Gaiimo and Reardon worked together to translate the values baked into the Middlebury College model to an Amherst College context and to devise an Amherst College-specific implementation plan. The value of Gaiimo’s work beyond Middlebury College, then, is their method for developing institution-specific DSP models that not only connect students to courses and wraparound support but to writing ecologies on campus.

Literature Review

Before moving into the ways that we adapted and reconfigured principles in DSP design from university and TYC contexts, it is useful to note which studies and theories informed our work. Educational testing has loomed large not only for open access institutions but, increasingly, colleges and universities that contend with multiple pathways into the college writing curriculum (Barnett & Reddy, 2017). Yet Haswell (2004) and others have long noted that most methods of placement “direct and indirect, have about the same predictive power, and it is painfully weak.”

Moving away from timed essays and test scores, our model embraces the DSP as a form of academic socialization that returns power to students in choosing college courses (Blakesley, 2022; Royer & Gilles, 1998). There are many different kinds of placement models with varying levels of “choice” baked into the process, ranging from those that embrace students’ choice(s) to placement without choice (Morton, 2022). And Aull (2021) has shown that whether or not questions on a DSP are accompanied by reading and writing tasks may influence how students rate their own proficiency. Our wraparound DSP model provides questions without any direct tasks and focuses on getting students access to a writing intensive course and connecting students to other support services and writing enrichment spaces on campus, and it also gives students an active role in choosing these educational interventions. This model takes seriously the idea that placement is “not a neutral action,” as Toth et al. (2019) argue, and instead is a powerful introduction to the educational values of the institution and the campus writing culture, even beyond classes. Agency (Morton, 2022, pp. 6-7), alongside prior learning experiences, then, are of paramount concern in our DSP model.

There is an additional challenge at SLACs, however, because the writing curriculum itself is often very diffuse (Gladstein & Rossman Regaignon, 2012). Therefore, we conceived of placement as being more than just about academic writing and skills building. Anne Ruggles Gere (1994) has theorized the “extracurriculum” of writing, noting how students self-organize their own reading and writing activities outside of class, and indeed, “outside the academy” (p. 80). Supporting reading and writing in and outside the classroom have important equity implications, especially in the current COVID-19 era (and beyond). At the same time, wraparound support *does* play an important part in persistence and success of diverse students. For example, Hirano (2014) studied seven refugees admitted to a liberal arts college who were “not considered ‘college-ready’” (p. 40). She interviewed students about the wraparound supports they accessed while writing, noting that they “positively impacted their overall writing performance” (p. 44). Accessing writing spaces outside of the classroom, then, provides benefits beyond academic success but also socialization which fosters feelings of institutional belonging. Even the act of writing is a spatial and social act that asks students to take agency over their executive functioning and approaches to learning; as Soliday (2002) notes, “writing courses are often institutionalized to prepare students to write someplace else in the academy” (p. 17). Connecting the work of DSP with the writing center, in addition to FYS (Caouette & Griggs, 2015), is one critical way in which SLACs can recruit their strengths (small student size, deep faculty investment, residential living, peer-to-peer learning, etc.) to do targeted outreach to students who need support most (Wilson, 2018).

Yet as Babb (2017) notes, “a single course or two [or writing center session cannot fix student writing” (if, indeed, that is even the goal) since “writing is not a skill people simply gain and attain” (p. 15). Instead, it is a constantly evolving sociocultural skill developed over time and through practice. Toth et al. (2019) argue that the logic of placement relies on the belief that by identifying weak writers and pushing them to enroll in writing classes designed to support them, retention and completion rates will improve at colleges. This has been a strong motivator for keeping writing placement intact, even when it imperfectly predicts student need or future success. At large universities or even community colleges, concerns about “under-placing students” (p. 137) in developmental writing courses have undergirded efforts to use DSP (Toth, 2018) alongside worries about the ethics of sentencing students to complete extra coursework in ways that make retention and completion more challenging (Toth et al., 2019). At SLACs, such concerns take a different shape; when students may not have multiple FYW courses to choose from, and when only a few

introductory writing courses exist, as Gladstein and Rossman Regaignon (2012) highlight, a DSP can be a lifeline to both students who feel lower confidence in their writing but also those who hunger for more writing in their educational experience.

There is also the added challenge of matching DSP to specific genres of writing and/or academic knowledge. A corpus analysis of placement models by Toth and Aull (2014) found that DSP measures many different concepts and dimensions of learning relevant to preparedness for writing courses; however, students might be confused by language and terms used to measure learning in higher education versus K-12 education (p. 13). For Middlebury College and Amherst College, the SLAC context is important: many students come from competitive high schools and have an awareness of writing genres that are demonstrated in their sophisticated responses to the open-ended DSP questions. Therefore, in addition to streamlining the concepts and dimensions of the DSP to measure student knowledge of writing, among other academic processes, SLACs present an opportunity to challenge some of the earlier research on validity of DSP from other higher education institutional contexts, especially considering our findings about the value of wraparound writing support on incoming student populations with varying levels of confidence and experience and the consistency of placement responses, over time, at Middlebury College.

If, at SLACs like Amherst College and Middlebury College, the only recommendation available is to become one of a small percentage of first-year students who need a supplemental writing course, these recommendations have the power to communicate stigma, even as they may provide support. Yet if other possibilities emerge beyond course placement, opportunities for more positive associations begin, such as those documented by Wilson (2018) in her analysis of a writing center partnership with students outside of classes that resulted from DSP placement at Warren Wilson College.

Method

Our assessments (see supplementary materials) include Likert scale questions, demographic questions, and open-ended responses. Incoming first-year students fill out the survey prior to arriving on campus. Students who do not complete the survey by the deadline are further contacted by the authors.

Rather than adapting questions from existing DSPs, Middlebury College's survey instrument includes questions adapted from, or inspired by, instruments that include the Writing Apprehension Test (Daly & Miller, 1975) as well as critiques of it (Richmond & Dickson-Markman, 1985), executive functioning (Castellanos et al., 2018), reading and writing (Kim & Shin, 2006), and language learners (Crusan, 2002) as well as research on psychometrics, instrument development, and validity (Boateng et al., 2018; Hinkin, 1995). Middlebury College's survey also features questions developed with the Learning Resources Director (on executive functioning) and the Head Librarian (on research literacy). The questions about writing and reading were further revised based on self-efficacy scales and domains (Bandura, 2006; Sanders-Reio et al., 2014) like confidence, attitude, perception, and behavior. There are also two open-ended questions about student language backgrounds and learning needs. After consultation with Gaiimo, a similar process for developing the DSP was followed at Amherst College.

Data at Middlebury College is analyzed for placement recommendations by adding Likert scale questions about writing, reading, executive functioning, and research literacy by individual domain, which is then averaged to make a single code. For example, at Middlebury College, the

12 questions about writing are added and averaged to form a “writing” code, the five questions about reading are averaged to form a “reading” code, and so on for the other learning domains. At Middlebury College, analysis for each code is conducted to determine responses that are -1 standard deviation (lowest 16% of responses) away from the mean response in writing, with the majority of recommendations being made for -2 standard deviations (lowest 2.5% of responses) from the mean response. Similar analysis is conducted on the executive functioning score and library score.

Standard deviation allowed Giaimo to identify students who were in the tails of the distribution more readily for placement. Initially, this approach was determined to be the most straightforward way to identify a cut off for placement recommendations, given the limited WRPR100 seats offered each term, although qualitative responses superseded numeral ones whenever a student indicated interest in additional writing education. Over time, it was further observed that the means were consistent across annual student cohorts, and responses were highly clustered around the mean. On average, most students are fairly confident in their writing, reading, executive functioning, and research literacy, with the majority of respondents’ scores clustering around 3.8-3.9 on a five-point Likert scale. Scoring by standard deviation from the mean made sense because responses were consistent by year (and cohort) and by positive average response rate. Further, there was only one writing intensive course (WRPR100/101) and several other co-curricula interventions; therefore, the score cutoff was not attempting to predict likelihood of success with any one particular intervention (i.e., those who score ## are likely to succeed in XYZ), only a way to identify students and recommend interventions among a less variable and less help-seeking, but near-universally high performing, student cohort.

Amherst College followed a similar model in its first full year of implementation with some minor differences. Following Sriram (2017), Amherst College model uses a six-point Likert scale with three agree and three disagree options (rather than a five-point scale); the goal is to force students to slightly agree or slightly disagree with statements rather than selecting a neutral option (Sriram, 2017, p. 64). Students who scored an average of lower than a 3 in two or more domains (out of six domains) were recommended for an Intensive Writing course. Using a six-point Likert scale, a score of *more* than 3 indicates strong confidence, motivation, writing experience, research skills, organizational skills, or reading skills; with a score in only one domain *below* a 3, a student might sufficiently build those strengths with a campus support like the writing center, but they might benefit from the longer-term, sustained engagement of a course to build strengths in more than one domain. Further, Reardon was asked to determine how many seats Amherst College should *ideally* provide annually for Intensive Writing, and thus Reardon aimed not only to place students into existing Intensive Writing seats but to use DSP data to determine how many courses should be offered annually. Thus, seats currently available were less of a limiting factor in making recommendations than at Middlebury College.

Because the open-ended questions yield honest and thoughtful responses, both Giaimo and Reardon consult these when making placement recommendations; students often reveal a preference for enrolling in an additional writing course because they may feel under-prepared for college-level writing or because they enjoy writing and are worried they will not get explicit instruction in their FYS course. As a result, recommendations are expansive and include those who display fairly high confidence (and high interest in writing) alongside students who have low confidence/low interest in writing. Other kinds of textual information are also shared in the DSP,

such as student excitement to begin learning, learning preferences and processes, and, at least a few times a year, a disclosed but not formally diagnosed disability. At both colleges, students are given placement recommendations that may include one or more of the following: (a) enrollment in a writing course (WRPR 100/101 or Intensive Writing); (b) sustained engagement with the Writing Center; (c) connection with a center for Learning Resources; (d) connection with library services (later in term); (e) engagement with writing enriched communities on campus.

Both Giaimo and Reardon worked with librarians, the writing center, and learning centers to co-author and coordinate supportive messaging sent at various points throughout the semester. Students may enroll in writing courses through the end of their second year, giving them flexibility to assess their learning. Advisors are also sent recommendations so there is an opportunity to discuss placement during advising meetings. Faculty are further informed about the placement process through pre-semester orientations (with FYS or first-year advisors) which may include a presentation and a FAQ document with course offerings, non-course support services, student testimonials, and contact information. Both colleges maintain program websites that also include information about writing placement, courses, and support for students.¹

The Middlebury College DSP was reviewed by the head of Institutional Research for the college, and it has been approved by the IRB (Protocol #120), which is necessary for sharing out findings in an aggregated and non-identifiable manner. Amherst College completed its first full survey this academic year (Fall 2023) and did not submit an IRB application on the survey, but Reardon was told she could share basic placement statistics.

Results and Discussion

At Middlebury College, the DSP response rate hovers around 100%, despite not being connected to course registration releases or other incentives. ~675 incoming first-year students respond each fall and ~110 respond each spring. In 2020-2021 (the first year), Giaimo provided recommendations to ~64 students per year (see Table 1) for the WRPR100-level courses. Recommendations for other supports vary with ~65 receiving Learning Resources and ~44 receiving library services recommendations. The first year of placement recommendations, across all modalities, shows a similar number of invitations and placements made (~280) at Middlebury College as at Amherst College, though Middlebury College has become more conservative in course placement over time due to the limited number of WRPR100 seats offered each term (~18). Historically, Amherst College has offered more Intensive Writing seats per term (around ~36-48). In fall 2023 at Amherst College, ~339 students responded to the DSP, which represented around 70% of the incoming class of 2027. In 2023-2024, Reardon provided 279 invitations to engage with campus writing resources and support to 180 unique students based on the DSP.

Middlebury College's first year showed little overlap in recommendations by different modalities: ~18% of students were given more than one recommendation; furthermore, pathways into enrolling in WRPR100/101 were highly varied and not only due to writing placement recommendations; students also enrolled based on executive function or research literacy recommendations. Additionally, of the students who were given writing placement recommendations, eight became peer writing tutors in later semesters. At Amherst College, ~38% of students who received recommendations received more than one. Importantly, only 76 of the

¹ Middlebury College: <https://www.middlebury.edu/college/academics/writing-rhetoric-program/student-resources>. Amherst College: <https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/intensive-writing>.

Table 1

Placement Breakdown in Year One of Implementation

Recommendation	Number of students	
	Middlebury College (2020-2021)	Amherst College (2023-2024)
Intensive Writing course	64	76
Writing Center	45	40
Learning Resources	65	22
Library	44	57
Campus-Wide Writing Engagement	62	84

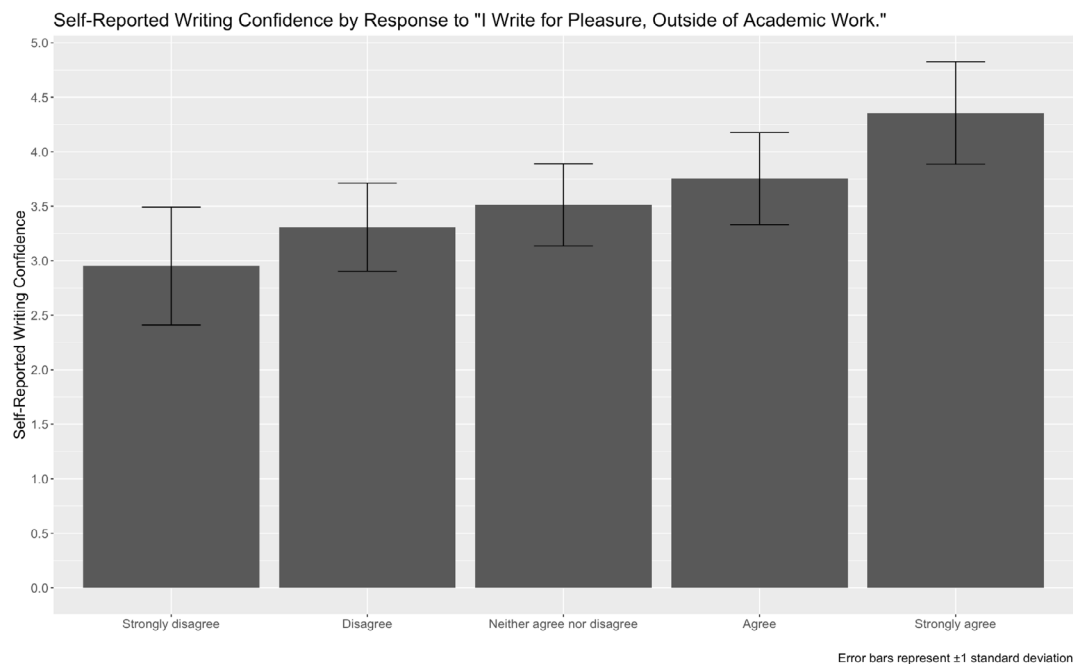
180 who were sent recommendations received one for an Intensive Writing course. That means that 104 students—roughly 57% of those who received recommendations—were matched with support *other* than a writing course. Among the 76 who received a recommendation for Intensive Writing, 19 *also* received the encouragement to view the campus-wide writing engagement map due to strong interest in writing or career goals in writing. Thus, even in its first year at Amherst College, we see overlap in course enrollment recommendations and writing engagement recommendations that result from the writing placement, which interrupts assumptions about writing instruction and remediation.

Since implementation, WRPR 100/101 has fully enrolled (and, at times, overenrolled) more consistently. Instructor feedback on these courses has been incredibly positive. Based on the positive engagement with the placement model, and its subsequent findings about incoming students’ attitudes and confidences around writing and related learning domains, Writing and Rhetoric (WRPR) faculty updated its 100-level writing course in fall 2021 to focus on confidence and other self-efficacy domains alongside linguistic justice. The newly named “Writing and Power” includes explicit education about the hidden curriculum of college and embraces linguistic diversity in its content delivery, therefore aligning itself with the domains in the DSP, per Toth and Aull’s (2014) argument that placement should reflect the values of the institution and its writing programs alongside considering the “rhetorical context” that students are entering (p. 15). In fall 2023, WRPR further streamlined course offerings to a single course, WRPR101, offered in fall and spring.

In addition to the curricula developments, increased visibility of writing support on campus, and advisement support for rotating FYS faculty, the DSP provides key information about the attitudes, experiences, and confidences of students enrolling at the college around writing, reading, research, and executive functioning at Middlebury College. For example, while many students report high confidence and a clear sense of the kind of learning support, or content, they want to engage in with writing, they also report not writing for pleasure (see Figure 1). Their qualitative responses have shaped faculty development, such as workshops on how to integrate meaningful writing assignments (Eodice et al., 2017) into the writing classroom. Furthermore, responses allow

Figure 1

Student Response to Confidence in Writing by Response to Writing for Pleasure



Gaiimo to connect students excited by writing with writing clubs and the writing center, even before they arrive at the college, thus emphasizing the informal writing communities on campus. The DSP also serves as a mentorship and support model outside of the writing classroom insofar as student responses enable Gaiimo to connect students to necessary learning resources (like educational testing for an undiagnosed disability) or connect particularly eager first year students with current peer writing tutors. Wraparound support is an obtainable goal when the incoming annual class is around 800 students; furthermore, offering curated and personalized support based on assessment can help in retention and orientation into college—something Gaiimo and Hanwen Zhang (‘24), a student researcher and peer tutor—examined institutional data on transfer and course enrollment.

Moving Beyond Placement with the DSP: Revising and Connecting Curricula and Extracurricula Writing Ecologies

Beyond providing writing support through a curricula recommendation, DSP connects students to resources. Both Gaiimo and Reardon feel strongly that these resources include a range of writing spaces on campus beyond the classroom. While a student may get a recommendation to take Intensive Writing or WRPR101, that same student could also receive an invitation to engage with campus writing groups if they indicate on the DSP that they enjoy writing, aim to use writing in their careers, or generally want to engage with writing beyond the classroom.

Reardon created a “Sites of Writing” map with the help of staff from digital communications for students that invites them to engage with campus writing culture (see Figure 2). Providing

Figure 2

Sites of Support at Amherst College on the Sites of Writing Map

Sites of Writing

INTENSIVE WRITING

For Students

For Faculty

For Advisors

• Sites of Writing

Events

Amherst College has a number of places on campus that offer writing support and opportunities—and provide students the opportunity to reflect on their writing goals for college and beyond. The following locations provide writing support and writing opportunities on campus. Click the link for each site to show the precise location on the campus map.

Sites of Writing Support

The Writing Center

Students meet with the Writing Center’s professional staff about writing assignments and projects, presentations and public speaking, and active reading strategies. The Center cultivates a community in which students develop skills, voice, confidence, and fluency at their own pace. Students [book appointments](#) with staff—including specialists in multilingual writing and science communication—for facilitated brainstorming, organizing, revision, and reflection. Students are also invited to drop by the Center’s new space in the Learning and Teaching Commons to write and study.

Visit the resources on [the Writing Center’s website](#) and follow the Writing Center on Instagram @AmherstWritingCenter.

The Intensive Writing Program

The Intensive Writing Program offers courses to students who would like to practice academic writing in a classroom setting over the course of a full semester. Students may be recommended for Intensive Writing classes after a writing experience survey, which gives them a voice in their own placement process.

The program is an excellent resource for students in humanities, STEM, arts, and social sciences alike—the courses aim to teach transferable writing skills that will help students clearly communicate to a variety of scholarly audiences.



WHERE ARE WE EXACTLY?

Find our exact location on the College’s digital map.

The Research Librarians

Research & Instruction librarians can help you get started with or past a stuck point in a research project, strategize about finding sources, and offer approaches to incorporating writing into your research. [Librarians for each department](#) have [online guides](#) that point to useful resources in specific areas, including [steps of the research process](#). You might meet us when we come to your class to teach a research session; research librarians also offer support for thesis work and citation management/annotation with [Zotero](#). [Help is available](#) at the Reference Desk in Frost, online via library chat (look for the mammoth), or by [appointment](#).



WHERE ARE WE EXACTLY?

- 1 Find the Frost Library location on the College’s digital map.
- 2 Find the Science Center location on the College’s digital map.

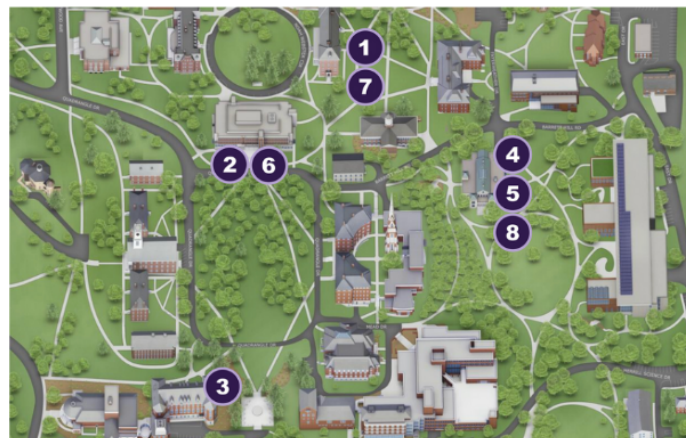
both sites of writing support and sites of writing engagement, the map orients students to local writing ecologies in and beyond the classroom by showing them specifically where they can go to talk about or do writing (see Figure 3).² Support sites include the Writing Center, Library, the Career Center, Writing Studio events, the Strategic Learning Center, and the Intensive Writing program itself. Sites of writing opportunities include the campus newspaper, the poetry club, literary journals, and the Creative Writing Center, among others. Members of each of these offices or groups authored the descriptions for the map. For example, student representatives of the Poetry Club wrote a 130-word blurb which begins by stating that their club “aims to provide a safe and encouraging place for Amherst College students to explore and *practice* the art of poetry, learn from established poets, and experiment with spoken word.” The Bullet Journal Club wrote, in part, “if you like stationery, paper crafts, or writing, this club is for you!” Thus, student voices

² Screenshots taken from Amherst College’s Sites of Writing Map (<https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/intensive-writing/sites-of-writing>).

Figure 3

Sites of Engagement at Amherst College on the Sites of Writing Map

Sites of Writing Opportunities



1. The Amherst Student

The Amherst Student is the official student-run newspaper of Amherst College. They are always looking for staff to fill a variety of roles, ranging from writers and photographers to podcasters and web designers. No prior experience is required to join.

[Find The Amherst Student on campus](#)

2. The Common

The Common is a professional literary magazine based at Amherst College. It publishes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry with a strong sense of place, and offers internships for current students interested in publishing. Visit *The Common* in the basement of Frost and read more about the magazine online.

[Find The Common on campus](#)

3. The Creative Writing Center

The Creative Writing Center is a home for all creative writers on campus. We offer courses in a wide range of genres, including fiction, poetry, playwriting, creative nonfiction, hybrid forms and translation. Students from any major, discipline or background are welcome to enroll in creative writing classes. We host a reading series each semester, facilitate co-curricular writing activities and support a variety of campus-wide literary events, providing opportunities for students to further their writing and connect with other writers beyond the classroom. Our goal is to bring together a diverse literary community to deepen and support the creative work of all our students.

[Find the Creative Writing Center on campus](#)

4. The Poetry Club

The Poetry Club aims to provide a safe and encouraging place for Amherst College students to explore and practice the art of poetry, learn from established poets, and experiment with spoken word. The club structure is based on three interconnected prongs. Firstly, the club hosts events such as Poetry Parlor where writers can come to share their work

are included alongside institutional voices in the map, an important measure that corresponds in some ways to the student voices which drive the DSP itself.

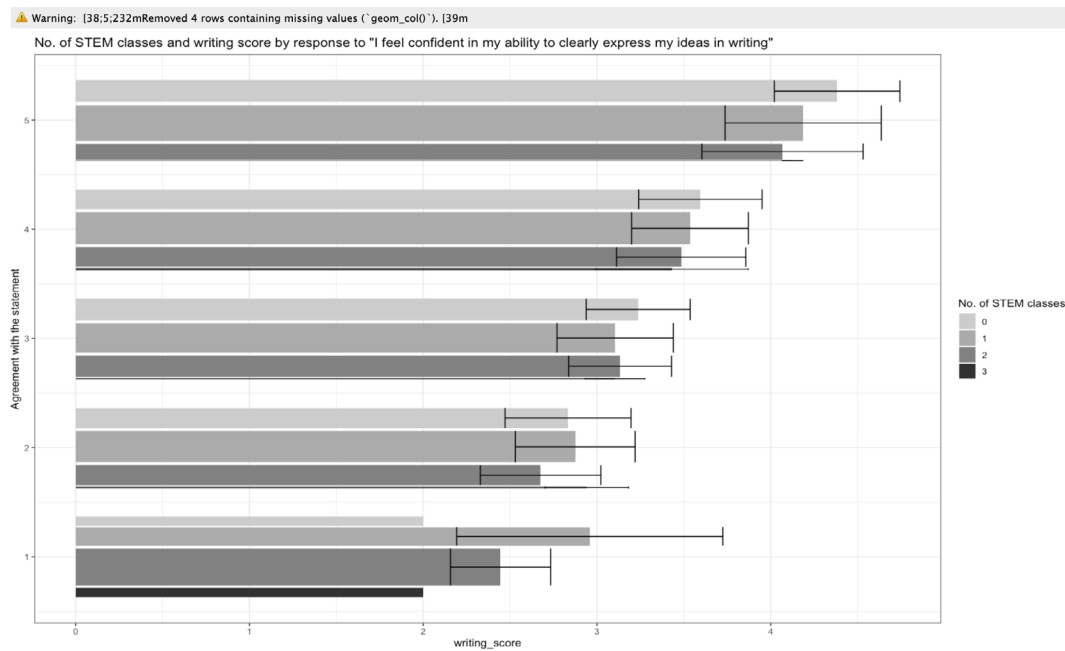
Both Gaiimo and Reardon have observed that students yearn for a place to both discuss their writing course options—beyond meetings with their advisors—and to engage in writing beyond the classroom. An IRB-approved survey (Protocol# 22-051) after the 2022 pilot at Amherst College found that personalized outreach influenced students' decision to enroll (or not). While

several students were persuaded by meetings with Reardon, one participant who did not enroll said they might have been more interested if “there were group sessions with students who have taken the course talking about their experience and how it improved their writing.” Thus, Reardon now organizes opportunities for students to speak with peers about Intensive Writing classes prior to course enrollment weeks. This may be especially meaningful at Amherst College, given that opportunities to discuss writing with peers are limited since the writing center features an all-professional staff. Both Giaimo and Reardon note that giving students several opportunities to discuss writing enriched curriculum options makes the process more welcoming and autonomous.

At Middlebury College, STEM majors have become one of the major groups to take the supplemental course, which is in line with ongoing research on writing confidence and course enrollment trajectories (see Figure 4). Giaimo and Hanwen Zhang (2024) traced student pathways into disciplinary courses (Humanities, Social Science, STEM, Arts) and how reported writing confidence and writing for pleasure can predict engagement with writing beyond FYS. They found that students who report lower writing confidence gravitate to STEM-heavy course loads, even in their first semester. At the same time, behavior might impact writing confidence as Figure 1, above, shows: those students who report lower writing confidence overall also report not engaging in writing for pleasure outside of academic work. Reardon has similarly experienced this STEM-based phenomenon when reviewing qualitative feedback; in her survey about the 2022 pilot, some students reported avoiding writing intensive courses, citing their interest in STEM as justification.

Figure 4

Writing Scores and STEM Course Enrollment at Middlebury College



Note. Students with lower writing scores (2 or lower) at Middlebury College take more STEM classes, even as first semester students, than students with higher writing confidence.

The DSP, then, reveals broad patterns that can help faculty and advisors mentor high-performing students who avoid writing in both personal and academic contexts; further, these patterns can make writing administrators aware of how to target recruitment, like, in this case, finding ways to invite STEM students into formal and informal writing spaces on campus.

Future Research

Future research includes analyzing other institutional data, such as course enrollments (by discipline and level), retention, and grades to more fully understand and trace how a student navigates their education and, in particular, college writing courses at Middlebury College and Amherst College. In addition to using DSP data to inform outreach initiatives to highly confident—but writing avoidant—students on campus, Gaiimo is also analyzing exit survey data about students' writing development throughout college and both inside and outside the classroom. Finally, because of changes to incoming student enrollment processes, Gaiimo piloted a truly self-guided placement process where students take the survey as an automatically scored instrument that provides unique scores and cutoff recommendations for placement. This approach allowed Gaiimo to give certain questions more weight, like writing for pleasure, in the writing placement score which nuances placement through using correlation statistics on the aggregated dataset. The college-wide change in enrollment and advisement processes for incoming students has provided Gaiimo with an opportunity to further develop the placement model and assess its efficacy. Meanwhile, Reardon is studying the way that students act on recommendations to engage with supports across campus, and she is considering adding a question on AI usage to the process section of the DSP. Reardon is developing an exit survey in line with Gaiimo's, which she plans to distribute once the class of 2026 (the first group to take the incoming placement) finish their last year of college. Our model is also adaptable to larger institutional contexts but more work would need to be done to assess the scalability of this approach to a university with many thousands of students.

Conclusion

Developing a curated DSP model that involves wide and deep engagement among different constituencies might prove complicated for writing administrators at larger institutions. In part, this model was attractive at our institutions *because* it is highly individualized and more extensive than other models. At the same time, this labor deserves material support. At Middlebury College, the DSP work became integrated into Gaiimo's administrative tasks but without compensation or other support offered to them to do this work. At Amherst College, Reardon moved more slowly (starting with a pilot) and secured course release time to do this assessment work. Amherst College also paid Gaiimo as a consultant for their expertise in developing a DSP at their institution in collaboration with Reardon. We feel that moving more slowly might help to develop momentum for such a process and will give writing administrators time to negotiate support for this additional workload which is critical for the model's success and longevity.

In its fourth year at Middlebury College, DSP data has been shared as part of faculty development workshops on creating meaningful writing assignments; it has been included in a data science course on educational testing; and it has formed the basis for reframing the impact of DSP and assessment more broadly in liberal arts institutions. In fact, at Middlebury College,

STEM faculty consulted with Giaimo on the implementation process for a STEM-quantitative skills assessment for incoming first-year students, thus broadening conversations about academic preparation, student advisement and mentorship, and the value of assessment in guiding curricula change. In its first full year at Amherst College, data were sufficient to demonstrate the need for more writing courses, and as a result two more courses were funded for the next year.

At the same time, deep collaboration with stakeholders generated the buy-in necessary to enact this change. SLACs often move slowly with new initiatives and programs. In some ways, 2020 was the opportune time to advocate at Middlebury College for changing writing placement and advisement practices because the ground was already shifting under our feet. Reardon's position at Amherst College was advertised and hired during academic year 2020-2021 when it became clear for a variety of reasons that new processes needed to be adopted. The DSP was one of several initiatives Reardon proposed when she arrived that were supported by her home department in English as well as the deans' and provosts' offices.

Ultimately, our assessments found that students self-select into or out of writing-intensive curricula for varied but patterned reasons. At the same time, liberal arts colleges prize the integration of writing in the curriculum but struggle to centralize and harmonize writing outcomes. The DSP allows us to "square the circle" of writing engagement on liberal arts campuses through clearer and more consistent advisement and connection to curricula and co-curricular support. Students with specific attitudes, confidence levels, and behaviors might try to avoid writing; thus, the DSP can play a powerful role in surfacing these proclivities for conversation with advisors and help us to design pathways these students can take through the institution. However, the DSP also offers access to on-campus writing ecologies that connect students who love writing to the distributed writing spaces on campus like writing clubs and events. And, as Reardon illustrates, it has served as a model for other liberal arts colleges hungry for their own institutionally specific DSP models. Placement work, then, not only identifies students to take a specific class but can help to shape the culture of writing throughout the institution from faculty and staff to first-year students, peer tutors, and beyond.

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