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# (Re)Placing *Personalis*: A Study of Placement Reform and Self-Construction in Mission-Driven Contexts

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**Abstract**: Recent movements in higher education have opened opportunities to reform first-year writing placement procedures, including continued development and adaptation of directed self-placement (DSP) models alongside ongoing research into their potential to foster student agency and advance linguistic, racial, and social justice in the academy. Our study traces the efforts of two writing program administrators to reform flawed placement processes at their two mission-driven liberal arts institutions, one a small Lasallian university and Hispanic-serving Institution in California and the other a private research Jesuit university located in New York. Using inter-institutional grounded theory research, this study examines students' reflections on their placement choices to understand "substantive validity," inquiring intentionally into ways that students self-locate with regard to their self-placement assessments and connecting to the mission-based language of *personalis*, what belongs to the person. Findings indicate that students use four rhetorical moves to personalize their placement: proliferating, riffing, importing, and qualifying. Specifically, the study calls into question current assumptions about placement in DSP models, complicating DSP's fundamentals of *choice*, *guidance*, and *justice*.

*Keywords*: Directed self-placement, mission-driven university, self-efficacy, social justice, course choice rationale, substantive validity

In a recent study of directed self-placement (DSP), Christie Toth (2019) synthesized two principal points from decades of research following foundational studies (Royer & Gilles, 1998, 2003). First, no single model defines the approach: DSP comprises a diverse, dynamic set of practices, procedures, and principles "that can be implemented in a variety of ways with varying consequences in local contexts" (Toth, 2019, p. 2). Second, these models hold students to be active participants in a decisional interaction that balances the program's provision of meaningful assessment with the student's provision of meaningful information. "Given the opportunity to reflect on their own writing experiences in relation to the literacy expectations, course options, and other academic supports available at the institution they are entering, students can and should choose the writing course that best suits their preparation and learning preferences" (Toth, 2019, pp. 1–2); given the opportunity to account for these preferences, programs can and should weigh them conscientiously alongside other data in the local process. This sets DSP apart from the "undirected self-placement" (Hassel et al., 2015, p. 239) that deprives students of course options or assistance in selecting among them. "The twin fundamentals of DSP," Toth (2019) concludes, "are thus *guidance* and *choice*" (p. 2).

These "twin fundamentals" capture core convictions shared by a diversifying array of student self-placement (SSP) practices: trusting students as the "final authority on their writing" (Moos & Van Zanen, 2019, p. 68; see also Neal & Huot, 2003; White, 2003) founds their successful first-year writing (FYW) engagement, and placement systems first resource that authority then uphold that trust. At the same time, *guidance* and *choice* alone do not fully communicate another set of key commitments that Toth (2019) herself lists among the DSP literature's most enduring and exigent themes—that is, its concern with justice. From its earliest inception, DSP aimed to present a fairer alternative to top-down measures that were not "fair to anyone involved" (Royer & Gilles, 1998, p. 59). As college admissions shifted away "from a gate-keeping, admission-based enterprise" (Perryman-Clark, 2022, p. 100), and as evidence accumulated that standardized tests and timed writing exams skew negative impacts to students from racially, ethnically, linguistically, and neurologically diverse backgrounds, DSP gained appeal as a more equitable option (Henson & Hern, 2019; Nastal, 2019; Toth 2019). In tandem, DSP researchers increasingly centered the need to demonstrate more equitable outcomes for those same groups (e.g., Crusan, 2011; DasBender, 2012; Inoue, 2009; Ketai, 2012), with recent educational movements galvanized by the advocacy of Black Lives Matter further intensifying interest in DSP's antiracist potential. As DSP in its course of development has challenged and expanded writing assessment's "trinitarian model of fairness, validity, and reliability/precision" (Toth, 2019, p. 2), it has arguably formulated a trinitarian model of its own, with *justice* alongside *guidance* and *choice* as core fundamentals.

Importantly, these tenets can no more be reduced to a singular meaning than DSP can be defined by a singular model. Just as each DSP will "evolve over time as student bodies and curricula change and as new technologies and theoretical insights emerge" (Toth, 2019, p. 2), each system also constitutes choice, guidance, and justice in dynamic relation, imbuing them with local meanings based on how choice is invited, expressed, weighed; how guidance is presented, provided, balanced; how justice is defined, enacted, and measured; and how all factors interact. As systems evolve, these notions must be subject to continual reassessment to avoid becoming self-rationalizing assumptions. This point was made incisively by Tinkle et al. (2022), who contended that while DSP has earned its laurels as "a fairer practice than use of standardized test scores" (p. 1), *fairer* is yet comparative. To exemplify, their analysis of the pioneering "Michigan model"

illustrated various tensions among student choice, DSP guidance, and notions of justice, including a higher tendency among underrepresented minority students to "underplace themselves" (p. 6) by self-selecting pre-FYW despite survey answers indicating readiness for FYW and enroll in pre-FYW against recommendations. Such findings, they argued, affirm that "continual, reiterative self-assessment" of both instruments and assumptions is a "necessary commitment for those designing and administering DSP processes" (Tinkle et al., 2022, p. 10).

In this article, we echo the need for DSP scholars to pursue reflective assessment and examine placement data for evidence of disproportionate distribution. However, we also endorse caution against attaching "the harm usually associated with *mandatory* placements" to *optional* placements (Tinkle et al., 2022. p. 5, emphasis added). In mandatory paradigms that offer neither choice nor guidance, "under-placement" names a well-documented injustice: the systematic, often mechanized shunting of students from diverse backgrounds into pre-FYW courses. In SSP systems, however, assuming that students "underplace themselves" risks reducing the value of choice and installing an explanation that itself bears inequitably on students from racially, ethnically, linguistically, and neurologically diverse backgrounds: low self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a concern for DSP studies, as Aull (2021) demonstrated; but absent a rich understanding of how students weigh factors in course selection, the presumption that they *must* lack self-efficacy if they opt for a more supportive course when they may have succeeded in a less supportive course belies DSP's express values. To develop this understanding, we endorse use and study of a DSP feature beginning to receive more attention (Johnson, 2022): the course choice rationale field.

In what follows, we present a qualitative study of DSP implementation and revision at two universities: Saint Mary's College of California (SMC), a private liberal arts and Lasallian university in California, and Fordham University, a private liberal arts and Jesuit university in New York. We first describe how mapping key fundamentals of DSP to values of our institutional missions led us to premise placement revisions on the promise of a "holistic and more personalized" (Melito et al., 2022, p. 243) approach aligned with *cura personalis*, care for the whole person. Second, we relay how similar data patterns at each institution created challenges for reconciling survey scores with course preferences, leading to the determination that a student choice rationale field was essential to restoring student voice in the process. Third, we describe the development of a methodology for studying these rationales utilizing a grounded theory process to identify three recurrent categories of rhetorical constructions (past activities, current attitudes and aptitudes, and future aspirations) and four sub-moves (riffing, importing, proliferating, and qualifying) as key patterns. Fourth, we report findings of our qualitative analysis, detailing recurrent patterns that illustrate the conscious complexity of students' engagement with the DSP exercise and defy reductive assumptions about underconfidence. Finally, we highlight key implications, identifying directions for research and revision and advocating for potential of this methodological approach for others hoping to assess DSP instruments in the spirit of *cura personalis*.

## Situating the Holistic Promise of DSP

Before COVID-19, Toth (2019) noted that the "current era of reform" in higher education, including waning faith in standardized test scores as the ruling metric of college readiness, had opened a "kairotic moment for challenging writing placement practices" (p. 14). The viral outbreak resulted in immeasurable cost to human and social life, but it also, as Melito et al. (2022) note, enabled a "rare opportunity for both immediate and continuing educational reform" (p. 243)

by causing more schools to discard standardized testing requirements and turn to SSP practices. Private nonprofit schools already led public nonprofit schools as "prepandemic adopters" (Lovell & Mallinson 2021, p. 1) of test-flexible policies, but the pandemic paired with growing attention to anti-racist transformation drove more public universities and comparatively "more selective" private colleges to follow suit (Lovell & Mallinson, 2021, p. 1). This cross-institutional study emerged initially from discussion of our experiences proposing and adopting DSP at two private liberal arts schools one year apart, but from opposite sides of this watershed moment: SMC numbered among "prepandemic adopters" (Lovell & Mallinson, p. 1), with admissions reform at the state system level enabling the Writing Studies Program to discontinue outdated placement procedures, while Fordham adopted test-optional policies in 2020 out of necessity, requiring the Writing & Composition Program to respond to the abrupt collapse of the testing status quo with an instance of "the 'emergency' DSP" (Melito et al., 2022, p. 144).

A key parallel of our experiences was a surprising level of receptivity toward DSP on our campuses. To be sure, our DSP proposals packaged ready solutions for campus decision-makers facing urgent external mandates of their own. However, DSP also appealed powerfully because its core values mapped readily to core values espoused by our respective institutional *missions*. Although little research links institutional mission to DSP, writing studies often observed the rhetorical potential of connecting it to WPA work broadly (DelliCarpini, 2016; Janangelo, 2016; Johnson, 2014; Schoen 2019; Vander Lei & Pugh, 2013). Janangelo (2016) described mission as a source of rhetorical resources that help administrators make initiatives meaningful to diverse audiences; Vander Lei and Pugh (2013) added that because mission is "ever-evolving," programs can shape mission even as they are shaped thereby (p. 106). Such studies allow that mission is often a source of tensions, inciting debate about lofty promises versus actual policies that render them "functionally meaningless" (Johnson, 2014, p. 72) ) to creating conflict between upper administrative aims and writing program goals (Malenczyk & Rosenberg, 2016; Poblete, 2014; Schoen, 2019). Nevertheless, advocates can mobilize mission commonplaces (and their more secular expressions in periodic strategic plans) to invoke the "overall intended ethos of the institution" and locate "acts of institutional engagement within the orbit of institutional values" (DelliCarpini 2016, p. 5). Overall, this research supports Schoen's (2019) case for approaching mission as a useful "means of understanding writing programs as part of a rhetorical ecology" and enacting rhetorically situated forms of agency (p. 38).

We found a basis for that agency in the easy alignment between DSP's trinity of fundamentals and mission-based values for close faculty attention (guidance), respect for student identity (choice), and dedication to social and community service (justice). The Lasallian and Jesuit missions are distinctive in character: the former is inspirited by the teachings of the innovative 17th century pedagogue Saint John Baptist de La Salle, while the latter pays homage to the apostolic religious community the Society of Jesus and the spiritual vision of its 16th century founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola. Both center Catholic traditions that premise the educational experience on pedagogical pledges to address structural inequity and injustice, foster a "high-touch" learning environment with abundant faculty-student interaction, and radically value student agency by honoring the lived experiences, voices, and needs of every individual. While these promises underlie both Lasallian and Jesuit missions, their close entwinement is perhaps best captured by the Jesuit notion of *cura personalis*, care for the whole person. Asserting that students are not merely academic or intellectual beings but rather whole people with rich lives beyond campus and classroom, *cura*

*personalis* has long appealed to educators as an ethic for teaching, mentorship, and leadership that resists flattened notions of autonomous individualism, promotes liberatory pedagogy, and informs care-based models of relationality (e.g., Pace & Merys, 2016). The consonance of such principles with "the holistic and more personalized placement approach of the DSP" (Melito et al., 2022, p. 243) provisioned each of us to enact a mission-driven rhetorical agency that positioned new systems within our local "ecology of institutional place" (Schoen, 2019, p. 54).

Displacing reliance on standardized test scores, our DSP models appeared poised to address the layered mandates for justice accumulated by current placement research, demands facing our programs and institutions, and shifting political and educational urgencies. Indeed, revising placement quickly enabled both programs to express a stronger value for student choice, establish a more interactive model of programmatic guidance, and enunciate self-placement as an effort toward justice. In retrospect, we acknowledge initially feeling the complacency that Tinkle et al. (2022) warned against: we presumed that the new systems, by virtue of being fairer, would be *fair*, functioning effectively in the service of principles like *cura personalis*. Yet data on both campuses quickly destabilized this complacency. Specifically, the prevalence of requests for the more supportive course option despite survey scores signaling the need for less support prompted us to ask how our implementations could better deliver on the "holistic and more personalized" (Melito et al., 2022, p. 243) approach we had promised our schools, our students, and ourselves.

## Confronting the Absence of Student Voice

DSP's promise as a *fairer* alternative to traditional placement measures that direct students unfairly into developmental writing courses has received substantiation: beyond affirming that trusting student authority is *itself* an act of justice (Inoue, 2009), studies found improved FYW success and retention rates for linguistically and racially diverse students, confirming DSP as better predictor of best placement than test scores (Cornell & Newton, 2003; Crusan, 2011; Inoue, 2009; Kenner, 2016). Yet debate remains about whether and how DSP might risk replicating the same injustices it aims to offset. Some asked if delegating placement decisions may unfairly burden students whose self-concepts have been negatively shaped within racist educational systems; others warned against the micro-aggression of questioning the decision-making capacities of racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students (Das Bender, 2011; Toth, 2018). Even as careful attention goes into designing antiracist instruments, scholars stressed that DSPs remain entrenched in assessment ecologies that cater to white privilege (Inoue, 2009) and recourse to racialized stereotypes of developmental writers (Ketai, 2012). Recent research on self-efficacy adds cause for concern: Aull's (2021) study found that students who chose the preparatory over the standard course had a mean lower sense of proficiency and autonomy, while Tinkle et al. (2022) found that domestic URM students were most likely to take a presumptively unnecessary preparatory course.

Certainly, DSP scholars cannot reject the possibility that an instrument may produce outcomes showing correlations among student groups adversely affected by structural inequality, lower self-perceptions of academic self-efficacy, and self-placement into more supportive writing courses. Even when we defy linguistically and racially oppressive "deficit models" by placing authority with students, "students may still draw on a deficit narrative in their self-assessment patterns" (Moos & Van Zanen, 2019, p. 70). The pandemic augmented concerns about deficit narratives: early research found that this event amplified the inverse correlation among anxiety and

academic self-efficacy for students with pronounced impacts for race and gender (e.g., Ahmadi, 2020; Alemany-Arrebola et al., 2020), and long-term effects are yet unknown. Yet as DSP scholars continue to explore the ethics of developmental placement (Toth & Aull, 2014; Toth, 2018) and the bearing of self-efficacy (Aull, 2021), they also must also confront assumptions rooted in the forced-placement paradigm. As we noted, Tinkle et al.'s (2022) study illustrated the ease of associating "the harm usually associated with mandatory placements" (p. 5) with self-placement in pre-FYW by presuming that students "underplace themselves." Clearly, it is easy for those who administer and study DSP models to fall prey to deficit logic when attempting to interpret data points that exclude the student's own rationale.

We arrived at this realization while grappling with unexpectedly high preferences for what we will term the "more supportive" writing course option at each campus. To give context, we first briefly recount how different student bodies, course structures, and implementation experiences at our two universities brought us into confrontation with "under-placement" assumptions. We then re-synthesize our narrative to explain a transformative insight: in the absence of any rationale from our students about their own preferences, we were allowing our guidance to override their choices on the assumption that we were serving justice.

### Saint Mary's College of California

Saint Mary's College (SMC) is an Hispanic- and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution with an undergraduate population of around 2500 students. In 2022, it enrolled 27% Hispanic/Latino, 18% Asian/Pacific Islander/Native American, 7% Black, and 37% White students. The Writing Studies Program serves 500-700 incoming students each year. In AY 2023-2024, it placed and served 652 students (522 first-years/130 transfers). Before 2019, the FYW curriculum included three courses: a basic writing course and two required courses, Writing 101 and 201.[1] Students who placed into basic writing took three semesters of writing, while 90% of students took two. In 2017 and 2019, California legislators passed Assembly Bill (AB) 705 and 1705, requiring community colleges to replace basic writing courses with transfer-level co-requisite courses. Surrounded by statewide curricular innovation and supported by research showing that basic writing disproportionately affects students of color (Henson & Hern, 2019; Nastal, 2019), Sweeney secured internal grant funding to create two new cohort classes, Writing 100 and 200, eliminating basic writing. Students now had two options: the 101/201+ sequence or the 100/200 cohort class with the same instructor for a full year (see Table 1). The program also revised placement, eliminating standardized tests and timed-writing exams and implementing DSP—a prescient change, as in 2019, the UC system dropped standardized test requirements.

Drawing on DSP literature (Blakesley, 2002; Royer & Gilles, 1998, 2003; Toth & Aull, 2014), Sweeney designed an online survey with twenty multiple choices questions distributed across three categories—Reading Practices and Self Efficacy; Writing Practices and Self Efficacy; and Student Practices and Self Efficacy. The survey then described the sequences, emphasizing that WRIT 100/200 is designed for those who are less confident in reading and writing practices while 101/201+ is intended for those who are more confident, and concluded by asking students to indicate preference. The intention was to honor all preferences, but the program was surprised in the pilot year that as many as 50% of students requested WRIT 100/200. Cohort courses are

1 These courses were English 4 and 5; however, a recent change to departmental structures and the core curriculum resulted in this change to prefix and numbering.

**Table 1**

*First-Year Writing Sequences at Saint Mary's College of California*

| Writing 100/200 Cohort Courses | Writing 101 and 201+ |
|---|---|
| Students who identify as wanting more reading and writing support take the cohort sequence, where they are with the same instructor and students for the entire year of their writing requirement. These courses use the Writing about Writing curriculum. | Students who identify as college ready take this sequence. 101 emphasizes writing as inquiry. Writing 201+ represents a series of courses students can take for research and argument: technical writing, writing about the sciences/ humanities/ social sciences/ business and economics. |

challenging to staff and schedule so sections were necessarily limited, and the volume of requests could not be accommodated. For 2022, the algorithm was adjusted to place students primarily according to survey score, and any student wishing to challenge placement was invited to contact the program by email.

Initial assessment of retention and pass rates suggested that the process, placing 25% of students into 100, 65% into 101, and 10% into 201+, was effective. Student challenges to placement were few (e.g., only seven students in 2022). However, the adjustment did not reduce the high volume of requests for the cohort sequence. Disappointed to deny the preferred experience to nearly half of those who requested it, Sweeney also found herself at a loss to explain why students would opt for the more supportive sequence despite survey answers suggesting less support was needed. Increasingly, the absence of the student voice from the process felt at odds with the "high-touch" goals of the mission-driven program and the values of DSP.

### Fordham University

Fordham University's undergraduate population hovers around 10,000. Fordham enrolled 40.6% underrepresented populations—17.4% Hispanic, 13% Asian, and 5.4% Black students. The Writing Program serves most of the 2500-2900 incoming non-transfer students each year with two FYC courses. Composition II (ENGL 1102) is a research-intensive writing course and the sole Core writing requirement; Composition I (ENGL 1101) is a credit-bearing preparatory course that counts toward degree as an elective (see Table 2). Before AY 2020-21, placement was automated: a minimum SAT of 610 or ACT English of 24 placed 75-80% of students into Comp II, while lower scores generated a Comp I placement. Students with very high scores were referred to the English Department for possible Advanced Comp II placement, while international students and non-native English speakers were placed by a dedicated program, with a fraction taking an ESL course before Comp I. A final chance to confirm placement was the Writing Program's "First Day Diagnostic" tradition: all instructors reviewed low-stakes writing activities early in the semester, generating a small number of placement changes.

In Fall 2020, Fordham announced a test-optional policy to begin Fall 2021. The urgent mandate for revised placement was serendipitous for the Writing Program, which had recently received a DSP recommendation from an external review. College leaders quickly endorsed DSP, and after a rushed consultation of models, we selected 12 multiple-choice questions, with a final query describing the two courses and asking students to indicate preference. The fact that all data

had to be processed manually added to the challenges of the pilot year, as did a pronounced test-optional admissions rebound: Fordham, in Fall 2021, admitted its largest and most diverse class ever, approximately two-thirds of whom did not submit test scores.

**Table 2**

*First-Year Writing Sequence at Fordham University*

| Composition I | Composition II |
|---|---|
| Comp I is designed to help students build competence and confidence in the use of language for expressive, analytic, and expository purposes before progressing to Comp II. Emphasizing the development of skills in critical reasoning and close reading, Comp I supports students to build familiarity and comfort with conventions of academic writing, reading, and research. | Comp II is a required Core course. It provides intensive training in the principles of effective expository writing with an emphasis on research writing techniques, including use of the library, analysis of sources, conventions and principles of academic citation, and ethics of scholarly research. |

Despite rushed development, Fordham's DSP appeared functional. There were no more last-minute placement changes than usual, and instructor surveys expressed general satisfaction. As at SMC, however, we discovered that student choice skewed surprisingly toward the "more supportive" option, with the 40% of Comp I requests well outnumbering the 20% of available seats. We initially sought to address this by aligning the survey score "breaking point" with the seat ratio and deferring to any explicit choice of Comp II. Still, we struggled for satisfying explanations why so many students would choose Comp I. We considered multiple factors, including misunderstanding, user error, and decreased sense of self-efficacy and/or actual declines in writing practice due to the pandemic, but had few ways to corroborate.

### Opening Space for *Personalis*

In each implementation described above, instruments utilized two well-validated DSP elements: the multiple-choice survey with scored answers totaled to indicate placement (Gere et al., 2010; Gere et al., 2013; Toth & Aull, 2014) and explicit course preference, for some definitive of "student *self*-placement" (Toth, 2019, p. 2; see also Balay & Nelson, 2012). Resource limits precluded other practices known to add information, such as advising sessions or writing prompts (Gere et al., 2010; Toth & Aull, 2014). As a result, our efforts to honor choice, offer guidance, and serve justice concentrated on two data points and the congruities and incongruities between them. With seat limits at each institution on the more supportive choice, we refined procedures making the survey score the leading determiner in discrepant cases, though we also deferred to requests for the less supportive option. If this asserted our guidance over student choice, then we presumed that this exercise of authority was mediated by the invitation to students to dialogue and DSP's conceptual insistence that faculty expertise still has a role in the process. At SMC, where both sequences take equal time to degree, some implications of steering students away from "unnecessary" developmental courses are less material; at Fordham, with its more traditional course hierarchy, they are more material. Still, both programs navigated institutional constraints

with the same initial assumption that affording *more* students *less* support served justice, but increasingly found this assumption dissatisfying. Questions plagued us: What reasons might students have for preferring a more supportive FYW experience? If we could neither understand those reasons nor honor that choice, were we not discounting student authority, replicating the self-efficacy problem, and enacting a hollow form of justice?

Compelled by Johnson's (2022) case that the course choice field enriches evidence of engagement in the DSP process, both programs added an open-response question asking students to explain their choice (for SMC, "WRIT 100/200 or 101/201 as your preferred sequence;" for Fordham, "Comp I or Comp II as your preferred starting point for your first-year writing experience"). Since DSP instruments serve as "first contact with the theory and practice of first-year writing programs" (Harrington, 2005, p. 12), we felt that adding a reflective writing opportunity would communicate programmatic values for reflective writing, bring student voices more directly into placement processes, and better enact *cura personalis* by informing the analytical act of our *cura*, our care for the needs, experiences, and preferences of each individual student, with richer information about *personalis*, that which is *of and about* our students as individuals. With rationale fields in place, our next task was determining how to analyze them.

## Developing a Methodology for *Personalis*

Our inter-institutional IRB-exempted qualitative study, designed to examine our survey instruments and a representative sample of student reflections, does not aim to offer a comparative analysis or draw causal conclusions. Instead, our goal as Lasallian and Jesuit program leaders was to gain a more holistic understanding of student course selection, guided by the following research questions: What rhetorical materials do our DSP implementations provide and what do students use to explain course preference? What data patterns shed light on course choice, especially in cases of discrepant placements?

In 2023/24, every incoming student was invited to take the DSP survey. At the time of data analysis, the survey had garnered 1,981 responses at Fordham and 276 responses at SMC. To draw parallels across our different course structures, we considered WRIT 101/201 and Comp II the "less supportive" options and WRIT 100/200 and Comp I the "more supportive." Because some research questions concerned discrepant placement, we ensured that our representative sample reflected the percentage of students in four categories corresponding to alignment of survey score/direct preference (consistent) and difference of survey score/direct preference (discrepant) (see Table 3). For convenience, we preserved the "breaking points" used by our instruments, although we acknowledge that such distinctions are subjective and reflect local constraints (e.g., seat limitations). We used the following shorthand:

- **L/L**: Survey score and direct preference indicate the less supportive option
- **M/L:** Survey score indicates the more supportive option; direct preference is for the less
- **L/M:** Survey score indicates the less supportive option; direct preference is for the more
- **M/M**: Survey score and direct preference both indicate the more supportive option

One limitation of our study is that M/L placement was not common, so sampling data was too small to draw valid conclusions; therefore, our focus on "discrepant placements" is primarily attentive to L/M placements, the pattern sometimes assumed to signal that students "underplace themselves" (Tinkle, 2022, p. 6).

**Table 3**
*Representative Sampling*

| Placement choice | Saint Mary's College | | | Fordham University | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | % of total | *n* | Total | % of total | *n* |
| L/L | 111 | 40% | 35 | 1397 | 71% | 72 |
| M/L | 4 | 1% | 1 | 86 | 4% | 4 |
| L/M | 115 | 42% | 37 | 288 | 15% | 15 |
| M/M | 46 | 17% | 15 | 210 | 10% | 11 |
| Total | 276 | 100% | 88 | 1981 | 100% | 102 |

Our goal was to develop a methodology to discern how students not only "interpret and use" (Johnson, 2022, p. 104) but also *personalize* rhetorical material to assert *personalia*, defined by the *Collins Dictionary* "as the accoutrements, concerns, or intimations that are personal to one," as meaningful placement factors. We used grounded theory to qualitatively code two DSP instruments and 190 anonymized reflections (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Throughout a multi-step analytical process, we open coded, wrote memos, and met regularly to discuss themes, adjust codes, and rectify codes for two-way agreement. Through discussion and selective re-coding, we noted where codes overlapped to combine codes and create codebooks. Our process required three rounds of coding before consistent patterns emerged.

### First Open Coding Round: Survey Constructs

Inspired by Johnson's (2022) methodological choice to code surveys along with student rationales, our first round of coding focused on surveys, attending to the framing discourse that introduces the FYW program and placement process; multiple-choice questions; and course descriptions preceding the direct preference and student reflection fields. We found four categories of constructs serving as sites of meaning-making: *DSP constructs*, characterizing the placement process; *FYW constructs*, defining the local FYW experience; *course constructs*, differentiating course options functionally; and *experiential constructs*, presenting a broad category of practices, behaviors, dispositions, feelings, preferences, and goals as relevant to student identity and experience.

Comparing constructs highlighted the rhetorical materials our surveys provided to students and cued us to local rhetorical choices. Surveys used similar but variable DSP constructs to appeal to authority, inviting students to do "what is best for them" (SMC) and choose the "best starting point" or "fit" (Fordham). Likewise, both employed FYW constructs to assure students of a relevant learning experience regardless of choice: SMC emphasized that either sequence will prepare students for many college writing experiences, while Fordham identified both courses as "keystone(s) of academic experience" and "starting points" for college writing. Course and experiential constructs cued us to previously unrecognized patterns in our messaging. For instance, we realized that both surveys offer comparatively less description of curricular content

for the "more supportive" option, instead emphasizing how students *feel* and the classroom experience they *wish* to have. While this pattern was slightly less marked in Fordham's survey, it was present in both, suggesting that both programs consider how to articulate curricular content more evenly. Since our two surveys used many similar questions, they did not widely differ in the presentation of experiential constructs: both invoke frequency of past writing activities, the length of past writing activities, and self-assessments of their writing practices, though SMC places more emphasis on reading. Taking note of these concepts also aided later analysis, highlighting the difference between experiential activities we marked as relevant to the placement decision and activities students themselves asserted as meaningful.

### Second Open Coding Round: Rhetorical Constructions of Past, Present, and Future

In attempting to analyze constructs in student responses, we became attuned to a different set of sentence-level patterns we began to call rhetorical *constructions*. We perceived that while survey constructs invited students to generate "socially recognizable identities" (Johnson, 2022, p. 105), constructions functioned as templates for re-employing survey constructs alongside a range of rhetorical *personalia* and signaling the relevance of past, present, and future to choice. This called for further analysis, so our second round of coding focused on constructions, identifying three categories that recurred in responses at both institutions, across all placement types:

- **Activities:** Constructions that locate **past** experiences, practices, accomplishments, or achievements (e.g., "My high school GPA placed me in the top of my graduating class");
- **Attitudes/Aptitudes:** Constructions that assess **current** attitudes or aptitudes with reference to feelings, skills, dispositions, tendencies, abilities, etc. This category includes statements about enduring qualities of identity, skill, or capacity (e.g., "I am a good editor"); statements about habitual practices, habits, and tendencies (e.g., "In my spare time, I read news or other informative pieces"); and statements about feelings, convictions, or senses (e.g., "I hate to write because I'm not good at it"); and
- **Aspirations:** Constructions that assess **future** needs, goals, preferences, or beliefs about the course (e.g., "In this class, I will learn at a more gradual pace.")

Preliminary identification of patterns specific to L/M placers (e.g., the highly visible use of concessives we name *qualifying*) drew us into a third round of coding attentive to differential moves within and across the three broader categories of constructions.

### Third Open Coding Round: Rhetorical Patterns that Personalize the Survey Response

In the final round of coding, we identified four patterns of rhetorical constructions:

- **Riffing:** Students reach from a survey-provided construct to attach interpretative associations;
- **Importing:** Students use a survey-provided construct to introduce information not included in the survey;
- **Proliferating:** Students use one construction (e.g., activities, attitudes/aptitudes, and aspirations) recurrently to build meaning; and
- **Qualifying:** Students modify their own assertions using clauses or hedging words.

This three-stage process offered useful insights regarding our instruments and attuned us to students' rich rhetorical practices, affirming that close analysis of choice rationales support the values *cura personalis* and also the broader need in DSP studies to approach course preference in

nuanced ways. Moreover, it generated a methodology that aligns well with DSP's commitments to "decentering institutional authority and foregrounding student agency in the placement process" (Toth, 2018, p. 147; see also Blakesley, 2002). The following section details findings generated by the final sets of codes.

## Reporting on Rhetorical Personalizations

Invited to discuss placement preference, students provided rhetorically rich answers. The sample of SMC reflections total 5518 words, an average of 63 words per entry; Fordham's totals 8926 words, an average of 88 words per entry. Less detail did not correspond with less supportive choices: students across the placement spectrum offered various levels of detail, and many requests for more support were lengthy. Cross-analyzing sample responses for the constructions activities, aptitudes/attitudes, and aspirations and the patterns of riffing, importing, proliferating, and qualifying generated findings that highlight complex rationales and offer many lessons about what students value. Perhaps most importantly, aside from the rare misunderstanding or user error, these configurations *consistently demonstrated rhetorical awareness for the placement decision*. This awareness not only affirms absorption of DSP in relation to college writing but also provisions against assumptions encoded in "under-placement"—that is, that any *more supportive* course choice belied by other indicators necessarily signals a self-efficacy problem. We advance this assertion by presenting construction distribution and then data from the four rhetorical patterns.

### Distributions of Rhetorical Constructions of Past, Present, and Future

Basic distribution of the three rhetorical constructions revealed several patterns (see Table 4). SMC students cited fewer activities and more current attitudes/aptitudes and aspirations. Fordham students employed all constructions reliably, with a small dip in aspirations. Overall, students used all three constructions frequently, with aptitudes/attitudes and aspirations most frequent at 74%. However, this fairly even distribution shifted when we cross-analyzed the data by L/L, M/M, and M/L-L/M cases (see Table 5). Notably, L/L placers focused more at SMC on current attitude and aptitude and at Fordham on past activities. M/M placers focused at SMC on attitude and aptitude and at Fordham on aspirations. L/M placers at both schools favored aspirational constructions to a striking degree: 92% of SMC and 100% of Fordham students employed them.

**Table 4**
*Construction Distribution*

| University | Activities | | Aptitudes / Attitudes | | Aspirations | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | % of surveys | Total | % of surveys | Total | % of surveys |
| Saint Mary's | 34 | 39% | 69 | 78% | 73 | 83% |
| Fordham | 71 | 70% | 71 | 70% | 67 | 66% |
| Total | 105 | 55% | 140 | 74% | 140 | 74% |

**Table 5**

*Construction Distribution by Placement Choice*

| Placement choice | Activities | | Aptitudes / Attitudes | | Aspirations | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | % of survey | Total | % of survey | Total | % of survey |
| | Saint Mary's College | | | | | |
| L/L | 16 | 46% | 32 | 91% | 26 | 74% |
| M/L | 0 | 0% | 1 | 100% | 1 | 100% |
| L/M | 13 | 35% | 22 | 59% | 34 | 92% |
| M/M | 5 | 33% | 14 | 93% | 12 | 80% |
| | Fordham University | | | | | |
| L/L | 61 | 85% | 53 | 74% | 40 | 56% |
| M/L | 2 | 50% | 3 | 75% | 2 | 50% |
| L/M | 6 | 40% | 9 | 60% | 15 | 100% |
| M/M | 2 | 18% | 6 | 55% | 10 | 91% |

While we did not extensively further quantify constructions *within* answers for this study, we noted a number of prevailing patterns. Respondents who requested less support often invoked past activities, especially honors and AP/IB classes taken, class-based assignments that may have seemed similar to FYW assignments, personal literacy practices, and more. At both universities, L/L students employed activities as claims heavily, though Fordham students did so most frequently. (This may be explained by more emphasis in Fordham's survey on course activities.) An inverse pattern was exhibited where M/M and L/M placers often dwelled at length on aspirations, often linking personal goals for or feelings about development to identified or presumed features of the course. For instance, SMC students expressed desire for "gradual learning," learning about themselves as writers, staying with the same professor, and gaining confidence, while Fordham students cited desire to build writing proficiency, gain comfort, and work more closely on style, voice, and grammar. L/L placers less frequently cited aspirations. Disparate patterns in attitudes/aptitudes were less marked, with an obvious exception: M/M and L/M placers were more likely to speak less confidently about abilities, while L/L students often made confident assertions about their reading, writing, and academic abilities. While L/L placers often collated activities and aptitudes/attitudes to affirm readiness for college writing, that combination lacked for L/M placers. Finally, we noted that while students imported many personal ideas not mentioned in the surveys in these constructions, survey constructs proved mobile, with themes from across DSP, FYW, and Course and Experiential categories frequently entwining with rhetorical *personalia*.

***Riffing: Attaching New Interpretations to Survey Constructs***

More than simply *using* DSP materials, students *riffed* in their constructions, picking up key terms and attaching new interpretive associations through experiential and analytical connections. Riffing often involved interpreting survey descriptions of curricular content, classroom environment, and learning experience (e.g., by moving from "intensive learning experience" to the idea of "strict teachers" or inferring that if one course option was "gradual" the other would be "faster-paced"). These rhetorical departures were at their richest and most revelatory with experiential constructs, as students countered DSPs provisions (e.g., writing academic papers, earning a high GPA) with personally valuable literacy practices and other experiences (e.g., writing short stories or poems, earning high grades in an AP course). In the SMC survey, for instance, several students riffed on the cohort construct to express hope of building relationships, an idea not explicitly mentioned in the survey:

> I also value my *relationships* with my teachers and keeping the same one will help me get through the class a little easier. (SMC, emphasis added)
>
> I chose this school partly on the *relationships* developed with professors and I think it would be much more beneficial for me to have the same one during my whole first year. It will be great if I have one person throughout that can help and watch me grow. (SMC, emphasis added)

Similarly in the following Fordham example, the student riffed from the construct of research-based writing emphasized in Comp II with reference to an AP class, asserting that its focus on poets, authors, and themes attuned them to rhetorical study:

> I then took AP Literature and Composition the following year, which focused on developing my reading, analyzing, and writing skills through different forms of literature. The different literary techniques and styles that I learned throughout the year has not only helped me develop my own writing style, but helped me analyze other authors and writers' work. By being exposed to various authors and poets, I am able to interpret a certain theme an author wants to reflect back to the audience. (Fordham)

Riffing recurred throughout the corpus and disrupted any assumption that students merely "use" the rhetorical resources of the DSP, attesting that reflective engagement involves making inferences, forging associations, drawing interpretations, and more. As a result, instances of this pattern provide meaningful information about gaps between what surveys *say* versus what they *imply* or leave open to interpretation, attuning us to possibilities and problems for revision (e.g., the possibility that SMC might more intentionally emphasize the notion of relationships).

***Importing: Introducing an Alternative Version of the Survey Constructs***

Students also reached beyond the DSP constructs to import new information. Importing occurred most notably via activities, as students brought to bear events, habits, and practices from past experience; however, they also imported attitudes, aptitudes, and aspirations. Among other things, we were struck by how many L/L students cited curricular experiences, especially AP and IB courses, as evidence of preparation:

> Since the 8th grade, I had always chosen the advanced course option available for English . . . My junior year of high school I had taken AP English Language and Composition, and my senior year I had taken AP Literature . . . (SMC)

The significance that students clearly attached to these courses in preparing them for college writing was eye-opening, especially given that neither survey referenced them. Conversely, while both surveys mention high school GPA, no student referenced GPA; however, high course grades were frequently mentioned.

As the following examples illustrate, students also imported projected aspects of college life we did not predict, from choice of major to expectations about college athletics to speculations about time management and workload:

> I will also have a tight schedule with sports so I think this class would benefit me more than WRIT 101/201, since that is an advanced writing course. WRIT 100/200 would also be better for me because I took a gap year, so this class would get me back into the flow of writing. (SMC)
>
> Computer Science and STEM majors in general do require a lot of writing, so this course will advance and prepare me into my major faster. I can succeed in computer science and other STEM fields if I have the ability to explain complicated concepts clearly, conduct research, and write larger papers. (Fordham)

As with riffing, importing cued mismatches between experiences marked relevant by surveys and experiences asserted as meaningful by students. Our comparative coding also suggested that importing may reveal characteristics of broader student bodies. In our admittedly limited sample, only SMC students cited college athletics to lobby for the cohort sequence, while only Fordham students cited anticipated majors to explain Comp II self-placement. These are merely anecdotal observations, but they engaged us in productive conversation about the distinctive characters of our student bodies, prompting us to consider how our placement processes might cultivate more attention to localized concerns.

#### *Proliferating: Relying on Only One Construction*

Within often richly detailed answers, many students proliferated certain constructions over others, relying on one construction (activities, aptitude/attitude, aspirations) more than the others. Table 6 shows reliance on only one type of construction, with a concentration of Fordham students using only activities and both schools' students using only aspirations.

The differential distribution of proliferation confirmed and amplified the basic distribution patterns we identified earlier: L/L tended to proliferate past activities to assert present aptitudes

**Table 6**

*Reliance on One Construction*

| University | Only Activities | | Only Aptitudes / Attitudes | | Only Aspirations | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | % of surveys | Total | % of surveys | Total | % of surveys |
| Saint Mary's | 2 | 2% | 6 | 7% | 12 | 14% |
| Fordham | 12 | 12% | 4 | 4% | 10 | 10% |
| Total | 14 | 7% | 10 | 5% | 22 | 12% |

and attitudes, with L/M and M/M students extending present aptitudes and attitudes into strong reliance on aspirations. Notably, 11 of 12 Fordham students who relied exclusively on activities were in the L/L category, with their answers often detailing numerous high school experiences known or assumed to demonstrate preparation:

> I would like to start in Comp II, as was in the Omega Program at my high school, which focused on the humanities and led me to take AP Language and Composition and AP Literature. On the AP Language and Composition Exam, I scored a 4. (Fordham)

Students who relied on aspirations, on the other hand, often connected goals or hopes for development to course constructs, whether course selection was referenced explicitly or not. 10 of 12 SMC and 10 of 10 Fordham students who relied solely on aspirations were in the L/M category. As these examples suggest, activities were often notably absent:

> Building relationships with the same professor and students will help me benefit from my classes. It will make me feel comfortable and not afraid to ask questions. I'll be able to make better plans and focus on multiple different tasks. I will make an effort to remember more names in my class and focus on the tasks at hand. Although there are other benefits to having different professors this seems to suit me best. (SMC)
>
> Between these two options, the one that fits the best for me is Composition I, because I have to develop my critical thinking and reading skills in order to be able to do research writing projects. Truthfully, I think that I will feel more confident with the process of developing my overall skills in English starting with the College Writing course. (Fordham)

In the first example, the student relies exclusively on a hopeful vision of the more supportive cohort sequence. In the second example, the student relies exclusively on how the first course in the sequence will prepare them for the second. Neither student integrates past experiences or current abilities but instead focuses on progress in imagined future courses.

Proliferating proved provocative, differentiating students with ready access to past experiences or current assessments from students whose emphasis on future hopes eclipsed both past experience and present assessment. While we did not further quantify proliferation within answers, data suggested that this would be fruitful, as internal repetition of one construction at the expense of others seemed to speak as strongly to what was present as what was absent. Finally, this pattern raised a question that traces back to the initial construct analysis: in emphasizing the curricular features of the less supportive option while relying on attitudes and aspirations to describe the more supportive option, had our survey instruments in fact seeded this skewing of past, present, and future? As with other patterns, the complexities disclosed by proliferating suggest that tensions between programmatic and student constructions must enter into the DSP's essential cycle of "continual, reiterative self-assessment" (Tinkle et al., 2022, p. 10).

#### *Qualifying: Deemphasizing Constructions to Emphasize Students' Values*

Finally, students personalized via rhetorical qualifying, a pattern marked by use of *concessives*—plainly, words like *while* and *although*—or other joining words to subordinate certain clauses (Kolln, 2007). In contrast to certain-sounding rationales, which arrayed constructions of past activities, current aptitudes/attitudes, and future aspirations in unqualified advocacy, qualifying responses modeled self-analysis in process, juxtaposing constructions against constructions and constructs against constructs to express and resolve ambiguity. Some qualifying constructions de-emphasized attitude/aptitude to emphasize aspirations. In these examples, students often noted

that they felt prepared as writers and readers but sought more support to build confidence, grow as learners, and transition to college:

> I feel that I'm a strong reader and writer and my school prepared me for college level writing courses. *At the same time,* I need support during my transition from high school to college and I want to set myself up to succeed and grow as a learner and as a person. (SMC)
>
> I consider myself a proficient writer. *However*, I would like to build more confidence with research papers and improve my critical thinking skills. (Fordham)

In the many examples like these, students appear aware that the survey may place them differently than their choice. Qualifying statements read as possible attempts to anticipate and mediate an unwanted assessment by acknowledging contrasting factors. Some combinations did this work by pitting one aspect of attitude/aptitude against another—frequently, skill against passion:

> *While* hard work and refinement of my writing and reading skills with time were significant reasons behind my success in English, my genuine love and joy of reading and writing was the main reason behind why I performed as well as I did in English (Fordham).
>
> I'm not actually bad at writing, *but* I do not enjoy it very much (SMC).

In the first example, the student uses a qualifier to argue for the less supportive sequence; in the second, for the more supportive. In both cases, the students weigh passion against skill.

Qualifying occurred across all types of placers: overall, 28% of responses included some type of emphasis/de-emphasis technique (see Table 7). However, this pattern was most consequential where discrepant placements are concerned—when student choice rubbed up against the DSP's assessment. When we further coded within our sample for qualifiers, we found that SMC and Fordham, in the L/M category, used qualifiers 41% and 59% of the time, respectively. M/M placers

**Table 7**
*Students Who Use Qualifiers to Personalize Reflections*

| University | Total | % of sample |
|---|---|---|
| Saint Mary's College | | |
| L/L | 7 | 20% |
| M/L | 1 | 100% |
| L/M | 15 | 41% |
| M/M | 5 | 33% |
| Fordham University | | |
| L/L | 10 | 14% |
| M/L | 1 | 25% |
| L/M | 9 | 59% |
| M/M | 5 | 45% |
| Total | 53 | 28% |

were the second most active users, with 33% and 45%. As in earlier findings that aspiration constructions distribute to L/M placers, the same population often (in 12/24 or 50% of cases) de-emphasized attitude/aptitude to emphasize aspirations, often describing the experience they want to have in the classroom.

We gleaned many insights by attending to riffing, importing, and proliferating, but qualifying most powerfully challenged "under-placement" assumptions by calling us to confront underlying beliefs about self-efficacy. We saw that students were *not* under-estimating themselves as academic writers and readers: they recognized and acknowledged the preparedness and confidence they were signaling in survey answers while *also* asserting desire for more support. These reasons ranged from anticipating a busy schedule to simply wanting an easier class. These rationales will not assuage all discomforts that cling persistently and rightfully to contra-indication in DSP data. However, perhaps they may inform the difficult task of resolving discrepant placement by enabling decision-makers to tailor their guidance to specific factors weighed in a complex choice.

## Tracing Implications for Future Research

Broadly, our findings support Johnson's (2022) advocacy for the course preference rationale. Despite insistence in DSP literature on explicit course choice as a defining feature (Balay & Nelson, 2012; Lewiecki-Wilson et al., 2000; Toth 2019) and frequent discussion of reflection in reading, writing, or review tasks (e.g., Gere et al., 2010; Kenner, 2016; Toth & Aull, 2014), reflection *on* course choice is surprisingly underdeveloped. Our findings show how qualitative research of course choice reflections tell stories behind DSP decisions, revealing a rich tapestry of rationales that inspires us, as WPAs administering and assessing DSP, to reconsider assumptions. As research on basic writing reform enriches understanding of disproportionate and deleterious impact (Henson & Hern, 2019; Nastal, 2019), and as DSP scholars continue to assess instruments for unintended reproduction of systemic equities, our research complicates the notion that less supportive sequences always result in more justice for students. It uncovers a multitude of reasons students may want more time or support in FYW, from a focus on sports, to a busy work schedule, to a difficult science lab, to an adjustment to college, to the development of skills that they deem crucial for success in their major. These insights do not negate the potentially negative impacts of basic writing, but they do suggest that other universities may explore student rationales in assessment and revision processes.

Our study also provides a method for qualitatively assessing DSP. While there are always limitations to generalizability with qualitative studies, the deep description it offers at our two universities suggest that applying methodologies similarly attentive to rhetorical *personalization* may yield rich insight into how students use the course choice rationale. For us, moving from constructs to constructions illuminated myriad rhetorical practices that availed students as they articulated past activities, current attitudes and aptitudes, and future aspirations to course selection. The fact that our surveys did not fully anticipate many "experiences, strategies, hopes, and insecurities" (Johnson, 2022, p. 97) students asserted as relevant invites us to confront gaps between our notions of preparedness and students' own. Likewise, we found it notable that despite differences in student populations, course structures, and DSP framings at our respective schools, dominant patterns recurred across the data—for instance, the emphasis of students who requested less support on activities, of students who requested more support on aspirations, and of students who predicted their preference may not align with the survey assessment on qualifying. Beyond

giving evidence to the substantive validity of our instruments by detailing multivariate ways that students performed in meaningful reflection in self-placement, these patterns also urge us to re-assess and revise our instruments for problematic cues. For example, our study has shown us that both universities may want to better align the student values with our DSP questions, by, for example, assessing the possibility of adding questions about personal literacy practices or advanced course experiences. Likewise, both may want to adjust course descriptions to evenly emphasize curricular activities in both courses, reducing the reliance on affective descriptions in the more supportive option.

While both programs are early in assessing next steps, we anticipate this data entering the feedback loop of programmatic assessment and revision in multiple ways, foremost by informing adjustments to DSP instruments and processes. We have begun to consider how data may help localized insights on anti-racist writing assessment within our particular institutional ecologies. For instance, the construct "reading for enjoyment," which appears in the SMC survey, has been identified to "assume a white habitus as normative" (Johnson, 2022, p. 112; see also Behm & Miller, 2012; Ketai, 2012). In the SMC responses in our sample, however, students frequently used the construct of enjoyment to import personal and creative literacy practices, such as writing poems and short stories, to situate college writing and reading readiness. To be sure, the marked reliance on activities among students who request less support comparative to other students has affirmed for us the need to scrub our DSPs of the messaging that "students who are 'prepared' for college writing have earned that designation through personal effort alone" (Ketai, 2012, p. 149). At the same time, the Jesuit and Lasallian insistence that students are more-than-academic beings urges us to seek more invitational, less value-laden ways to admit these unique literacy practices. Revising processes for more *cura personalis* may include treating qualifying among other markers of ambiguity or confusion as an occasion to offer further personal consultation to students. Providing relevant information to communicate with instructors, administrators, and other stakeholders, this study offers many ways to reshape our DSPs for more thoughtful, communicative, and high-touch engagement with students as well as to enrich programmatic connections to institutional missions.

Certainly, we acknowledge the limitations in this study and the need they indicate for further research related to gender, sexual, linguistic, and/or intersectional identities that speak to the real diversity of our student populations. While we initially hoped to utilize such information in this analysis, limited institutional data precluded this (approximately half of SMC students left *race* blank; institutional data fields collapsed ethnicity into only white/non-white categories; and non-binary students self-identified in numbers too small to make arguments). Still, construction analysis yielded preliminary provocations that demand further attention—for instance, a prevalence of qualifying among L/L placing Black students. Given contrasting perspectives on whether students with minoritized identities may be at risk of assessing with lower confidence during DSP (Inoue, 2009; Ketai, 2012; Moos & Van Zanen, 2019; Tinkle, 2022), we think it essential to conduct further research before drawing conclusions. We suggest that other researchers may likewise benefit from using a construction-based methodology in exploring the presence of a "deficit narrative in DSP self-assessment" (Moos & Van Zanen, 2019, p. 70).

Finally, if our experiences affirm that mission-driven schools are rich contexts for DSP inquiry—smaller populations may permit attention to features that would tax the resources of larger institutions, and resonant mission precepts may advance DSP both pragmatically and

conceptually—then they also gesture toward challenges facing many DSP adopters at a moment of possibilities and problems for the approach. The pandemic aided the turn from status quo placement, but it also introduced complications for adopting, adapting, and assessing new measures, from rushing "emergency" DSPs to stripping writing programs and their leaders of necessary support for ongoing assessment and improvement. More over-extended than ever, under-resourced WPAs may risk assuming that DSP is equitable *de facto*, but the approach cannot rest on its laurels. Delivering on the promise of the "holistic and more personalized placement approach" (Melito et al., 2022, p. 243) requires realizing that DSP's fundamentals of *choice*, *guidance*, and *justice* are never stable or finished, but rather shifting sites of meaning that require our ongoing assessment and reflection.

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