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Construct Validity and the Demise of the Analytical Writing Placement Examination (AWPE) at the University of California: A Tale of Social Mobility

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Abstract: In 2021, the University of California System ended its decades-old timed writing assessment for course placement, due in part to challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond practical crisis, however, the event marks a sea change in educational philosophy away from a universalizing model of cognitive development, which dominated in the 1970s and 1980s, towards a concern for social mobility and student self-assessment. This article explores the historical factors that led to this change, including the emergence of the social mobility index as a new method for evaluating student success. It also unpacks UC's discourse on preparatory education and levels of proficiency, emphasizing instead fairness in writing assessment.

Keywords: preparatory education, standardized testing, construct validity, social mobility, fairness

On August 12, 2021, a long history of UC systemwide timed writing for course placement came to an end in a memo notably authored by Yvette Gullatt, UC Vice President for Graduate and Undergraduate Affairs and Vice Provost for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. Though finally precipitated by the "vagaries of the COVID-19 pandemic" and the resulting challenges of test administration, this moment in fact marks a sea change in the educational philosophy of the UC System and beyond. What was the primary underlying cause for this historical shift? And what are the implications for writing course placement today? To answer these questions, this article initially documents how the Analytical Writing Placement Exam (AWPE) and assessments like it emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s when universalizing models of cognitive development had recently triumphed first through educational psychology and then in critical areas of writing pedagogy and assessment theory as they appeared in the scholarly journals *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*. Then the article shows how this universalizing model fell apart and took much of its assessment methods with it, including the systemwide AWPE, just as a completely different and newly appealing alternative for (e)valuating student success appeared on the national horizon: the social mobility index. When in 2017 middle-tier UC campuses—Irvine, Santa Barbara, Davis, and San Diego—appeared in that order at the very top of the *New York Times* (2017) list of "Top Colleges Doing the Most for the American Dream," a new educational philosophy found motivation in the UC system so that students who had previously shown up as deficient cognitively now appeared to be valuable social actors who should be assessed and treated accordingly. Writing course placement models could then follow suit, with student self-assessment justified in terms of self-efficacy—a new horizon for validity. A persistent UC discourse on "preparatory education" is unpacked over the course of the article, including related terms "proficiency," "levels," and "thresholds," so that important social mobility goals can be continually disentangled from models of linear cognitive development that dominated when the AWPE first launched under a different name ("Subject A Examination") in 1987. Finally, in terms of method, the article expands Kathleen Blake Yancey's approach in her 1999 *CCC* article "Looking Back As We Look Forward: Historicizing Writing Assessment" by considering historical factors that appear beyond writing assessment: notably in this case, midcentury academic common sense about "cognition" and the later metrics of institutional ranking as they have increasingly recognized the value of social mobility as an avenue for social justice and hence, Norbert Elliot would argue, a potential avenue for fairness in writing assessment.

Writing Assessment Is History

As the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic wound down during the summer of 2021, University of California campus administrators received a historic but not totally surprising memo from the UC Office of the President titled "Discontinuation of Central Administration of the Analytical Writing Placement Exam (AWPE)" (August 12, 2021). And although the "vagaries" of the pandemic were named as contributing factors, more meaningful was reference to "growing campus dissatisfaction" with the AWPE, in part an oblique reference to a 2019 memo from eight UC Vice Provosts and Deans for Undergraduate Education ("Analytical Writing Placement Exam," April 15, 2019) which attacked the validity of the AWPE as a timed writing test that did not look much like the writing students would actually do once on campus, and because a 2012 study from the UC Office of the President Institutional Research indicated that the AWPE might be biased

against African-American, Hispanic, and international students who all performed significantly worse on the test than white students.[1]

A writing studies perspective in this 2019 memo was traceable in part from the advice of Linda Adler-Kassner, who was part of a 2006-forward hiring trend on some campuses in the UC System, a trend that, for the first time and unevenly, infused the System with strong researchers in the field. It was also meaningful that the memo author was not systemwide Provost Michael T. Brown, as one might expect when it comes to a consequential academic decision affecting the entire UC System, but rather from Yvette Gullatt, who was UC Vice President for Graduate and Undergraduate Affairs, and most significantly, Vice Provost for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. Though unstated in this memo, the message was clear. There was something wrong with the AWPE when it came to DEI, especially in light of the recent lawsuit-precipitated demise of the SAT and ACT as factors in UC admissions (a 2021 systemwide decision, following the 2019 lawsuit; see Nieto del Rio, 2021). So, in this newly constrained environment where the resources for systemwide test administration appeared precarious, and the test itself seemed newly suspect in terms of DEI, its continued central administration appeared for the first time untenable. Below, I will explain how the DEI problem that had been documented since at least 2011 finally found its precipitating moment when an appealing alternative, the social mobility index, took hold as a systemwide lodestar.

What a long way the UC System had come. Through the 2000s, the AWPE enjoyed almost universal support within the system (including from me as a director of the UC Irvine Composition Program starting in 2007) and especially at higher levels of administration and faculty governance where the highest value was placed on academic rigor and prestige (Wittstock, 2022). My support for the AWPE lined up with most faculty and administrative opinions at the time, as we considered the "local" systemwide AWPE better at writing course placement than the alternatives like SAT and ACT scores, and essentially valid as a direct assessment of writing proficiency we could expect of any incoming UC student, who should be able to read a Malcolm Gladwell-type text and then respond coherently in writing with evidence drawn from the reading material and from personal experience. Resulting course placements appeared reasonably accurate according to grade data, though course evaluation data and instructor experience in the classroom made it clear that morale started relatively low among students "held" for the entry-level requirement. All of these factors, including the abjection of low-performing students (see Jane Stanley's (2010) argument below), contributed to the perception of academic rigor, which included a locally developed assessment tool, direct writing, reliable expert evaluation from two readers plus a third in the case of certain splits, and community building amongst writing faculty across the system who participated in the annual "Big Read" where evaluators originally worked together in the same room and then later, online.

So, what happened? This article tracks a monumental shift in the validity criteria that hastened the AWPE demise after decades of support. And though this story is generally interesting for documentary reasons, more important are the horizons highlighted for writing course placement processes today. Nationally, this story about the University of California serves

1 "Rates of passing the AWPE exam varied significantly by race. International students were least likely to pass the exam (13%) while White students were most likely to pass the exam (63%). The odds of white students passing the AWPE exam are about 2 times as large as the odds of passing for Asian students, 2 and a half times as large as the odds for Black students, 3 times as large as the odds for Hispanic students and 11 times as large as the odds of passing for International students" (University of California, Irvine, 2012).

as a refined lens that lets us see in complex detail how a larger paradigm shift unfolds—and how this critical vision can help us formulate our actions today. We see how the shift is uneven, as incommensurable academic perspectives—for example, Black language initiatives and academic English expectations—jockey for position in a field where many different agendas are playing out at the same time, often unwittingly. It comes in fits and starts, as the crucial moments require both a groundswell to make new horizons visible, and also the dumb luck of a key individual chairing the committee that matters. But most importantly from a national perspective, the UC example reveals how the paradigm of universal cognitive development—still sometimes legible in the discourse about student "proficiency," "levels," and "thresholds"—shapes much of what we do in and around writing assessment, despite the Academy's recent turn to social mobility and social justice. We should learn everything we can about what diminishes the former while making way for the latter.

It is important to understand why disillusionment with the systemwide AWPE started so slowly. In 2001, the University Council on Preparatory Education (UCOPE) concluded that the Subject A Examination was the "only available exam effectively directed at UC reading and writing requirements," and that it was an "essentially sound testing instrument for those expected proficiencies . . . highly effective at fulfilling its purpose of determining the adequacy of reading and writing competencies among entering student" (University of California, 2001). Then a year later, in 2002, the systemwide University Council on Educational Policy weighed in with its own analysis of the recent reports on Subject A, hoping to go beyond "psychrometric weaknesses" as an explanation for the problem of poor undergraduate writing, while proposing instead an exit exam required for graduation—perhaps the AWPE administered pre- and post-. That graduation requirement was never adopted systemwide, but the recommendation certainly reveals what was valued at the time, which was the prophylactic prestige that might accompany absolute standards. Or, as UCEP summed up in negative terms, "to the extent that students are receiving UC diplomas without having achieved adequate writing skills . . . the institution will likely suffer falling prestige" (University of California, 2002).

Indeed, the situation was considered dire, as it had been for over a century, according to Jane Stanley's (2010) research on the long history of remedial education in the UC system, which documents how the University of California has always competed not only with the other big publics like Michigan and Wisconsin, but also with the best private universities in the world. And this ambition could with a certain spin prevail, despite the fact that the University of California as a public- and state-oriented institution has an obligation to serve taxpayers and their students regardless of privilege. Like most US institutions of higher education, UC will always grapple with differently prepared students who earn acceptance due to their academic promise relative to their peers who are equally resource-starved, but would in many cases—typically about 1/3 of the incoming class—show up needing some kind of preparatory education, now carefully separated from "remediation" so that it can earn state support and baccalaureate credit.

For the sake of this critical distinction, UC Senate Regulation 761B was amended in 1996 so that "remedial" work in English was defined as "work primarily focused on topics in spelling, punctuation and usage, and in the basic structures of sentences, paragraphs, and short essays." These are essentially what we refer to in writing studies topographically as either "surface-level" or "lower-order concerns," here situated as a foundation for the five-paragraph essay as it is still practiced today in high schools training for AP exams and the like. In contrast, "higher-order

concerns" like source integration, complex argumentation, and rhetorical awareness, thereby could be separated out as the focal point for preparatory and subsequent education, fully sanctioned as college-level, and credited accordingly. Meanwhile, policy regarding credit for "English as a Second Language" was punted in SR 761 to individual campuses, where it remains to this day.

So, how did this awkward distinction amongst incoming UC students work in terms of both perception and practice? As Stanley (2010) shows brilliantly, the solution was the long-standing "disdainful embrace" where the loud and nationally visible signaling about a subset of underprepared students in fact underwrites UC's highest standards. Such national visibility is on display, for instance, in the year 1977 in a series of writing studies articles referenced below, this one from College Composition and Communication addressing "Placement Procedures for Freshman Composition":

> As every instructor of English knows, the teaching of composition is in serious trouble today. In a December 1975 cover story, *Newsweek* demanded to know 'Why Johnny Can't Write,' and with good reason: increasingly, not only high school seniors but also college graduates are unable to pass writing proficiency exams; SAT verbal scores continue their sharp decline; and even the best are no longer good—nearly fifty percent of the crème de la crème, the entering freshmen at Berkeley, must take 'bonehead' English. (Noreen, 1977, p. 141)

Embarrassing, yes—but no longer for the reasons mentioned. Here's what Stanley would say about this sentiment: the abjection of students who arrived underprepared in writing meant at every turn the affirmation of the other portion that came in well-prepared, and could thereby reinforce a national perception of rigorous standards applied ultimately to all. We can clearly see this disdainful embrace in the key documents from the early 2000s. "Faculty will be (or should be) embarrassed if this situation is not reversed," UCEP worried about students who arrived underprepared in writing, while predicting that students would "perceive a decline in the value of their degrees" (University of California, 2002). Some 20 years later, we can observe that fundamentally, this campuswide perception problem directed at underprepared students has not been reversed. At the same time, we can see that that student perception about the value of their degrees has not declined—quite the opposite in fact, as UC applications to most campuses now number well into the hundred thousands. So, what's really going on here? Stanley would have rightly observed how railing against student deficiency is always, at the same time, affirmation of standards that are supposed to be higher.

All this was a far cry from the validity concerns about the AWPE that would surface over the next decades, and also far from any consequential interest in student self-assessment, though both issues were certainly then present at the margins. The 2001 report, for instance, notes a Senate-faculty member in Art History from UC San Diego who signed up with seven others from across the UC System to read a set of AWPE exams so that reliability across campuses and across years of test administration might be confirmed, only to withdraw from the assessment with the observation that the AWPE "prompt passage and topic [are] both unsatisfactory for his aims" as an instructor of first-year Art History courses with a significant writing component. And in the 2002 report, UCOPE acknowledges that student self-placement is in fact one possible approach, though it is quickly dismissed in a single sentence as a "method of necessity used by the community colleges" that would be considered by UC faculty both "inaccurate" and "untrustworthy." On the national scene, Royer and Gilles (1998) had recently published their first important article on directed self-

placement, announcing to the field a practice that was already gaining momentum. Meanwhile, the social turns in writing studies and elsewhere in philosophies of education had been well-established since the later 1960s. All of this activity produced a dual-screen, or a "wave" effect as it is described by Yancey (1999), where the flows can run in different directions simultaneously. So, for instance, you could have a leading radical June Jordan (1984/1995) in Berkeley Ethnic Studies working seriously on Black English in a department where students could take their required writing courses next to and against all sorts of language traditionalists just down Dwinelle Hall. But systemwide and further down the road in Oakland where the System is headquartered, it was the administrative traditionalists who prevailed with their focus on academic prestige as it was then conceived.

A Universal Model of Cognitive Development

When it came to student writing and assessment through the 2000s and earlier, what exactly did count as rigor and prestige? And how was this version of value that could measure against the privates and perennial competitors like Hopkins, Chicago, and especially Harvard eventually diminished without ever abandoning the UC ambition to be a preeminent and world-class university competitive with all? The story only unfolds plausibly if we can identify how exactly the units of measurement for student success shifted in value over this time, from a certain attitude that can be seen in UCEP's above reference to "psychometrics" to new units that measures a delta of social mobility.

A powerful national tone of the time can be read in a brief, but disastrous, article by Myrna J. Smith (1977) in *CCC*, just as a strong developmental thread in educational psychology took hold in some writing pedagogy and assessment. The article helps us unpack more pervasive educational philosophies of the time just prior to AWPE systemization—philosophies that draw substantially from Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, Benjamin Bloom, and especially Jerome Bruner.

Smith, in her *CCC* article "Bruner on Writing," sets out to introduce teachers and theorists of writing to Bruner's most significant material. But the material Smith emphasizes in Bruner, with a spin beyond Bruner himself, is the cognitive capacity for abstraction as the signature of full humanity. "Bruner believes that it is written language that makes possible cognitive growth," Smith writes unassumingly, "because in writing, the referent is not present" (p. 130). She reaches that conclusion with Bruner referencing Piaget on the "stage of formal operations, where the real becomes but a subset of the possible" (cited in Smith, 1977, p. 130). And just like that, humanity has been divided into contrasting camps where the undereducated are stuck in a primitive oral stage—essentially proto or subhuman—imprisoned by concrete facts that extend only to their iconic representations. That might sound like an overstatement, but Smith's own language is at least as alarming:

> This last point [via Bruner] is the most convincing justification I have read for the teaching of writing. For if persons do not advance to the formal-operational level, their lives will always be limited to the here and now, to the simple operation of life. They will be closed off from the large generalizations about their own existence and the nature of the world. (p. 130)

Moreover, Smith had good company at the time, as she awkwardly applied developmental psychology to college-level writing pedagogy and assessment.

In *CCC*, for instance, David E. Jones (1977) sought "Evidence for a Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric" by affirming Frank D'Angelo's work, which was in turn based upon Piaget's (1952) "innate" structural patterns for developmental psychology as they were articulated in The Origins of Intelligence in Children. In Jones's article we see another version of this unwarranted leap from Piaget's theory of child development to wild speculation about how that theory should map onto adults in our introductory writing classrooms. "Obviously," Jones acknowledges, "Piaget does not discuss these functions" [i.e., "intelligent functions from birth through those mature stages of behavior that indicate the use of formally defined concepts, inference, etc."] in terms of "rhetorical principles" (p. 336). "But it is easy," Jones reassures us, "to infer that he [Piaget] recognizes the operations of analysis, comparison, and contrast, and classification in these innate mechanisms"—which then should inform us as teachers of composition who are in search of underlying mental processes that anchor our undergraduate writing pedagogy sequences, and the assessment thereof (p. 336). In fact, Jones's article ends abruptly with the expectation that studying the work of developmental psychologists and psycholinguists would eventually provide "adequate material for establishing the precise relationship between the formal modes of discourse and their underlying thought processes" (p. 337) thus indicating, like Smith, that writing assignments would someday march reliably from materiality to maximum abstraction, carrying with it the fruits of civilization.

Generally conceived, then, the reach of such cognitive development theory would extend beyond composition into the far reaches of the English department, and even beyond into speculations about a life of cognitive plenitude. By reading great English literature, for instance, students could have their cognitive abilities trained up to a level where that literature might be enjoyed—though this promised enjoyment always came along with implicit threat that not doing so would leave students bereft of both the literature itself, and, even more consequentially, the cognitive abilities developed thereby. Such philosophical confluence across subfields in the English department can be seen, for instance, in Michael S. Kearns's (1984) supportive response to Robert Bergstrom's (1983) *College English* article "Discovery of Meaning: Development of Formal Thought in the Teaching of Literature":

> Bergstrom insists that students cannot read the best works, the works we would most like to help them enjoy throughout their lives, until their cognitive abilities have matured to the point where they are capable of 'formal thought,' defined as 'a cognitive process in which *possibility* takes precedence over reality'; until students develop that capability, 'aspects of the work which will not yield to the students' mental capacities are either ignored or are transformed into more malleable shapes (some of which may seem unrecognizable to their teachers)' (p. 746) . . . that is, 'the door to the world of fiction' is closed to most beginning students. (p. 830).

Now one might think that this kind of concern in the English Department is a thing of the past, a relic of the later 1970s and early 1980s when developmental psychology provided a backdrop for architects of the AWPE, just before its new systemwide form took official shape in 1985 (first implemented in 1987). But it is worth mentioning how a condescending perspective persists to this day, now more often tied to cognitive psychology than to developmental psychology. Take for instance the influential work of humanists Martha Nussbaum and Suzanne Keen, both of whom parlay cognitive psychology into the argument popular amongst intellectuals that reading fiction develops the capacity for empathy because it removes the reader from personal and material reality, inviting instead the sort of imaginary identification where the reader takes an outside perspective,

an ethically healthy form of abstraction, as these theorists would have it (while implying logically that those who don't read fiction are comparatively hindered) (Keen, 2007; Nussbaum, 1998; Schmidt, 2020).

Even the composition luminary Janet Emig, best known for her helpful process theory of composition, in fact grounded her work in a biologically determined and unidirectional progress narrative for cognitive development where talking about concrete things developed—only in those fortunate enough to receive advanced education—into writing about abstractions. This is how Emig references the usual suspects in her 1977 article for *CCC* "Writing Is a Mode of Learning." "[A]s Bruner states in explicating Vygotsky, 'writing virtually forces a remoteness of reference on the language user'" (Emig, 1977, p. 127). It's about the brain, and brain development. Emig explains in her pseudoscience how "writing involves the fullest possible functioning of the brain, which entails the active participation in the process of both the left and the right hemispheres" (p. 125).

But of course, this developmental conviction as it appears in a journal called *College Composition and Communication* cannot stop at the point of educational philosophy researched primarily about and for children; it must be observed directly in the teaching of college-level writing. And that's where, as critics then and afterward insisted, the damage was done.

Healthy skepticism is already on display in a 1984 article by Ann E. Berthoff "Is Teaching Still Possible? Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning" published in *College English,* which takes on theories of writing "guided by whatever we are told has been validated by empirical research" (p. 749) while they casually invoking Piaget, who was then omnipresent either by name or by concept when his stage theory served as a powerful model (p. 748). As this kind of negative example Berthoff cites Randall Freisinger, who takes Piaget's stage theory to an alarming conclusion in his 1980 *College English* article "Cross-Disciplinary Writing Workshops: Theory and Practice." "Since the early 1970s," worries Freisinger,

> evidence has been accumulating which suggests that up to 50% of the adolescent population in this country failed to make the transition from the concrete operational stage to formal operations by the time they have reached late high school or college age. Judging from this empirical research, it would appear that as many as half of our students from junior high on into adulthood are unable to think abstractly, to process and produce logical propositions. (as cited in Berthoff, 1984, p. 744)

Berthoff then unpacks this damning quote with a careful takedown that I can only present here in its summary form: "These are all misconceptions. The attempt to apply the Piagetian stage model to non-children is futile; the claim that empirical research supports the efficacy of doing so is false; the identification of abstract thought with processing propositions begs the question of what constitutes the process" (p. 744).

But despite such criticism, rigid developmental thinking in college-level writing pedagogy and assessment largely prevailed, with the two—writing assessment and writing pedagogy—bound by way of construct validity. As a reminder, Perelman (2012) explains validity in psychological testing as "the ability of assessment scale or instrument to measure what it claims to be measuring . . . [a] theorized scientific construct that cannot be directly measured, such as intelligence, creativity, critical thinking, or writing ability" (p. 121). That is to say, reasonably enough, the measures employed by the assessment are expected to represent the relevant real-world construct of writing ability. And thus, when it comes to our topic, the AWPE was expected to separate

incoming University of California students who had cleared the ability threshold for entry-level writing from those who had not. Concretely that meant that an AWPE essay was satisfactory when it could adequately respond to a college-level text of the sort that might appear in *The Atlantic* or *Psychology Today*, using sufficient examples drawn from the text itself and from sources of personal knowledge, organized into some reasonable form. Or to cite verbatim from the AWPE Scoring Guide, a below-threshold "3" score (on a scale 1-6) "is unsatisfactory in one or more of the following ways. It may respond to the text illogically; it may lack coherent structure or elaboration with examples; it may reflect an incomplete understanding of the text or the topic. Its prose is usually characterized by at least one of the following: frequently imprecise word choice; little sentence variety; occasional major errors in grammar and usage, or frequent minor errors" (University of California, n.d.).

The problem was not that these expectations for entry-level students are crazy. In fact, it is still commonsensical to think that that incoming UC students should be able to comprehend academic-sourced work written for a lay audience, and then respond coherently in writing. Instead, the problem is that this expectation was at the same time quite specific in terms of the abilities measured—i.e., the ability to write this particular kind of essay by hand in a couple of hours during a proctored exam—and the very general implications that depart with increasing severity from any reasonable expectation for construct validity.

Implication #1: this is the sort of writing that points directly to what you will write during your first year of college (it doesn't). Implication #2: your ability with this type of writing predicts how you will perform in your college writing classes (it doesn't any better, and in fact predicts worse than does the "objective" SAT without the essay).[2] Implication #3: a poor performance on this assessment indicates a deficiency that isn't just local—for example, "I haven't yet learned how to do this type of timed essay though I care about language elsewhere"—but is discouragingly broad: "I guess when it comes to writing, I'm not as smart as my peers." And plenty of research has documented how this kind of unwarranted self-doubt demoralizes and can practically hinder students, especially first-generation, who may not have the same navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) to localize this failure which was in fact common: typically, about two-thirds of the students who took the AWPE "failed," as it was commonly understood. Hence amplification of the regular refrain at the entry level "I hate writing" and "I'm a terrible writer," which certainly doesn't help students move systematically from the disdainful embrace to the UC crème de la crème.

Here we can summarize a broader historical shift in construct validity as it prevailed in the 1980s compared to the current prevailing paradigm that appeared in the 2010s, referencing UC as a concrete illustration. A generalized placement assessment like the AWPE could be justified initially when it appeared that the measurement was aimed squarely at cognitive development as it mapped onto progressive levels of writing ability. This paradigm, though by no means universal, was dominant to the point of seeming commonsensical, which was important if nonexperts were to feel like the right thing was getting assessed, namely what any incoming UC student should know and should know how to do. But this common sense and the feelings that go with it started to tip in a different direction as a critique of universal models of cognition stepped up to more situated models of cognition, which map very differently onto writing ability, which to be fair, must now account for a much wider range of student experience. Our incoming students know a lot, but

2 "By themselves, AP, SAT, and ACT had correlation with GPA of 0.25, 0.21, and 0.23 respectively; AWPE had a correlation of 0.14" (University of California, 2017).

what they know and know how to do varies tremendously based on background and experience. Now, assessment and placement must better take that diversity into account. Meanwhile, at the other end of college, students will come out with very different experiences and skills that would not be productively summed up in something like the AWPE as an exit exam; their "cognition" and the writing that comes from it will have shaped up in different ways and for good reason, since they will have been doing different things according to their majors and other elements of their personhood. Sure, we might still expect that all graduates have certain competencies, and we can try to orchestrate our curricula accordingly, especially our GEs and our graduation requirements. But the big difference is that these competencies can now be better understood as local goods—now we put a new premium on information literacy, next something else—not as proxies for general cognitive development. So, although some of the competencies might stay the same over time, the consequences for assessment change are profound: many of the reference points that once validated the construct in the 1980s—basic competencies, levels of proficiency, general skills in thinking and writing—have lost their grip.

Another way to get at this validity problem is to look at how a curriculum is supposed to move students from point A, where they were placed by way of assessment, to point B. For instance, if the stages of cognitive development are so clearly tied to writing pedagogy, shouldn't we have seen a quick and effective consensus about how a writing curriculum must appear at the college level? Shouldn't that have been the moment of a grand and permanent consensus about how to teach writing at the college level, fixing the problem of student writing once and for all? Of course that was not to be. If in fact you look at how cognitive development, as it was conceived in writing studies during the later 1970s and early 1980s when the AWPE and tests like it were developed, actually maps onto "abilities" and their manifestation in writing assignment sequences, you see all sorts of wild and incommensurable, things. For starters, recommended sequences typically looked nothing like what we teach now. Jones (1977), for example, tries to invoke via Piaget some then-familiar rhetorical "modes." If one's writing assignments are to line up with universal patterns of cognitive development, according to Jones, you must teach analysis, comparison, contrast, and classification. In contrast, Smith (1977), drawing from the same developmental psychology but coming to a completely different curricular conclusion, proposes with equal confidence a writing assignment sequence that is now practically unrecognizable: how-to-do essays and narratives must be assigned before description, and all that before a student writes about "ideas" which can themselves refer to something "symbolic" (p. 131). Everybody seemed to have a good but different idea about how to teach writing, and at the same time, everybody wanted to ground their pet curriculum in the same grand terms of cognitive evolution. Indeed, the empirical fact of our ongoing sequence diversity should alone give us pause when it comes to writing assignments that are supposed to reflect and advance universal cognitive development. If assignment sequences in fact jump all over when you look at actual curricula situated in time and place, that might not be an indication that a lock-step cognitive development model is wanting. It might indicate the opposite: such rigid models of cognitive development are wrong in the first place, especially as they would apply to college-level writing. To foreshadow the end of my story: assessment should follow the curriculum, not the other way around. And though this truism is now widely accepted even amongst the more conservative types in writing assessment, pedagogy, and administration, debilitating remnants of the universalist approach remain largely undetected.

Despite weak empirical connections between any particular writing course sequence and deep developmental psychology, a pseudo-empirical impulse remained entrenched for quite some time and persists in different forms to this day. For instance, we can still recognize Smith's (1977) educational injunction to "promote cognitive growth" when we try to nudge students beyond "lower-order" and visible sentence-level concerns and concrete genres (whichever we think those are), and then on to higher-order concerns and the "abstractions" they represent like ideas and arguments (p. 130). Of course, now the racist implications around primitivism are deeply interred; Smith's chilling implication is that students who don't ever get to abstractions remain themselves in a primitive condition, recapitulating those persistent primitive societies where education is constrained in mere talk and concrete necessity. But as I will demonstrate below, cognitive development models, and their racist implications, remain deeply entrenched in much college-level writing pedagogy and assessment, though it is now typically euphemized into the seemingly helpful language of "preparatory education" including related terms "proficiency," "levels," and more rigid versions of "threshold."

You might think that the simple solution is to throw out midcentury developmental psychologists altogether while rooting out their influence on subsequent writing studies and pedagogical practices. But surprisingly perhaps, the problem doesn't lie primarily in the psychologists; for the sake of critical clarity today, it is important to understand how interpreters got the psychologists astoundingly wrong on the way to universalist principles that could serve—this time not surprisingly—a regime of power that values abstract cognition.

Concretely at the level of scholarship, to what extent did Smith get wrong Bruner and his colleagues in developmental psychology, and what can we learn from such systematic mistakes? Did this kind of thinking really take hold in educational philosophy beyond the pages of scholarly journals? Now we can fact check key developmental psychologists in their own words, where we rediscover some important nuance we might heed today. Then we will track how developmental psychology in fact helped to shape administrative and faculty thinking behind the AWPE in its heyday. Finally, we will look at what has now changed, in fits and starts.

No doubt Jerome Bruner (1964) took the very long view, as he was interested in how we might harness our scientific understanding of human evolution to teach children better. As expressed in his 1964 *American Psychologist* article "The Course of Cognitive Growth," for instance, Bruner's basic goal was to identify and then mobilize for the sake of educating children the cultural mechanisms—including most prominently language—that produce "evolution-by-prosthesis" (p. 1). And no doubt Bruner saw this type of evolution as unidirectional and progressive; for instance, a child first "represents" by way of patterned physical activities, e.g., repetitive ball rolling, then progresses to iconic representation where a ping-pong ball and a football can be categorized by the same word, before the child finally progresses to the stage of "symbolic representation" that helps her knowingly retrieve a ball stashed by her sister in the "toy box" or desperately miss that ball as a memento after it is donated to Goodwill.

Moreover, this progression through three stages of representation marks what we now might want to call "thresholds" that change perception irreversibly once traversed: "Their appearance in the life of the child is in that order, each depending upon the previous one for its development, yet all of them remaining more or less intact throughout life" (Bruner, 1964, p. 2). Indeed, for those now in writing studies, it might seem a small step from such proto-linguistic thresholds in developmental psychology to advanced "threshold concepts" like "rhetoric" as it might function

for adults (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015, p. 8; see also Rowbottom, 2007). In their influential collection *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) warn wisely against assessment regimes (p. 8) tied to some rigid understanding of how threshold concepts work as transformative, reversible, integrative, and troublesome (p. 2). They would instead emphasize the qualifying language about what is generally, not absolutely, the case when it comes to something like threshold concepts and the ontological transformations they enable. But in the context of a continuous history of psychology running from developmental in the 1970s and 1980s to the more recent educational and cognitive psychology of Meyer and Land who serve as the primary reference point in our academic conversation about threshold concepts, it becomes difficult not to operationalize thresholds into sequences that then beg for progressive outcomes, justified with as much scientific umph as one can muster, even if that means irreversible stages, or steps, on the way to some kind of fully realized cognition. To pick up an example from above, a progression from grammar-to-rhetoric has been around for millennia. Only now we are tempted to scaffold this progression in terms of a cognitive science—which changes everything.

As I frequently serve on UCOPE and thus have reviewed the most recent task force reports on the AWPE and the Entry Level Writing Requirement, I can attest to this constant pressure to finally establish writing ability thresholds, once and for all. These types of questions constantly hover: "What *are* the thresholds for entry-level writing?" "Shouldn't we finally be able to figure this out after 100+ years of UC systemwide inquiry?" "And mustn't such thresholds transcend the individual campuses by referencing the deep structures that tie levels of writing to levels of thinking, with UC 'college-level' as the ultimate distinction?" (Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004). A slippery slope is the conflation—or equivocation—of the "development" concept as it applies to very different things, and to very different sorts of human situations ranging from the curricular to the cognitive, and from the infantile to the expert. Which gets us back to Bruner.

Bruner (1964) hypes his careful study of childhood development in Freudian terms that exceed his data, all on the way to civilization theory:

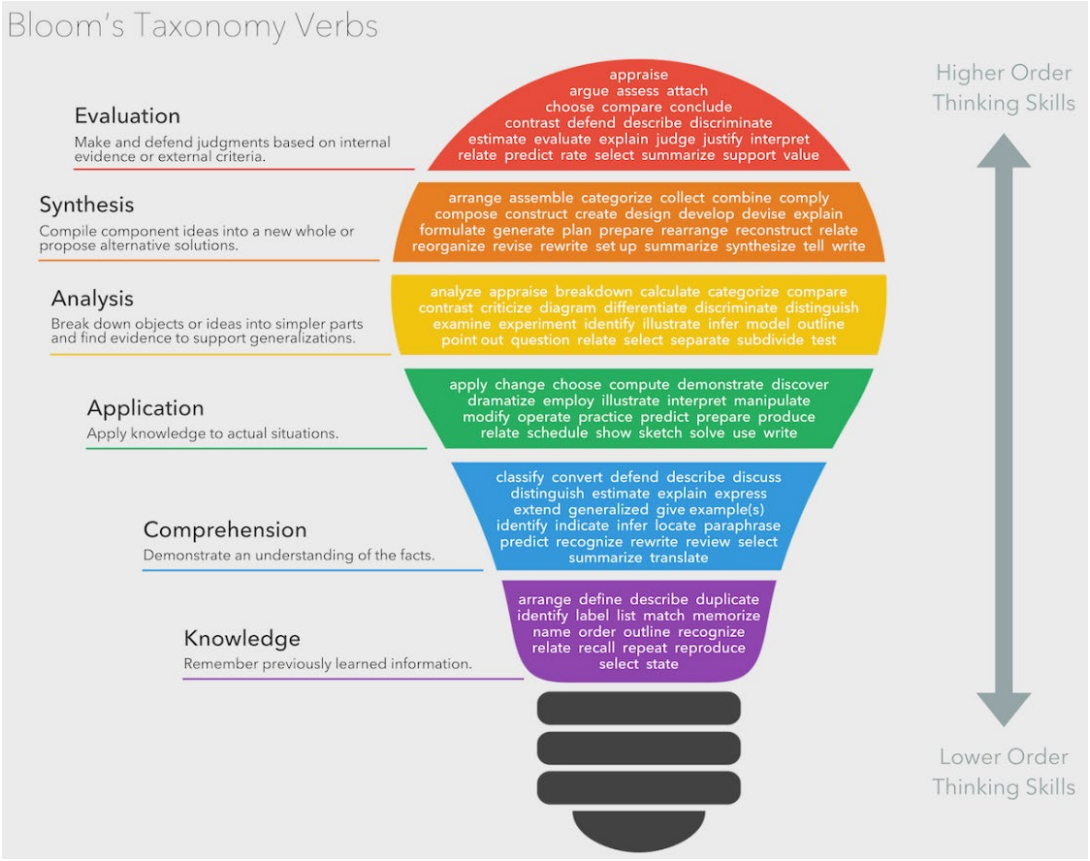
> Once language becomes a medium for the translation of experience, there is a progressive release from immediacy. For language, as we have commented, has the new and powerful features of remoteness and arbitrariness: It permits productive, combinatorial operations in the absence of what is represented. With this achievement, the child can delay gratification by virtue of representing to himself what lies beyond the present, what other possibilities exist beyond the clue that is under his nose. (p. 14)

I want to emphasize that despite this mashup of developmental science and midcentury ethics, Bruner is unequivocal: his work is about children. Not adults.

When it comes to adult education, it might be more promising to seek the historical smoking gun in the work of Benjamin Bloom, who draws from Bruner amongst others, including most prominently the educational psychologist John Carroll, and whose "taxonomy" has remained influential in college-level writing studies and practice, especially in STEM writing pedagogy (see Figure 1). (See "Using Bloom's Taxonomy" from the Purdue OWL (n. d.), for instance.) College-level writing curricula refer to Bloom implicitly or explicitly as these "levels"—with some variation depending upon the practitioner—progress toward mastery: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize/create (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Now, the basic idea is that these levels appear in succession as thresholds, with an engineering student first memorizing basic concepts, applying those concepts analytically on a test, for instance, and then successively

Figure 1

Bloom's Taxonomy Verb Chart



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working toward creative application. And in its most popular forms—widely distributed through this type of colorful diagrams and lower-to-higher order "thinking skills"—one might reasonably get the impression that Bloom himself promoted a unidirectional cognitive development model that primitivizes certain types of students and assesses them accordingly.

However, that would be wrong. In fact, Bloom was a vocal advocate for educational systems optimized for the different learning styles of each student, and he was against educational systems that track students according to aptitude testing. For example, Bloom (1968) argued against the simplest notion of causality whereby "the students with high levels of aptitude can learn the complex ideas of the subject while the students with low levels of aptitude can learn only the simplest ideas of the subject" (p. 3). Instead, he was convinced that "the grade of A as an index of mastery of the subject can, under appropriate conditions, be achieved by up to 95% of the student in a class" if the instructor flexibly meets students where they are (Bloom, 1968, p. 4). Not aptitude or cognitive ability, according to Bloom (1968), but rather *time spent* on student-sensitive learning was the key to mastery (p. 7). Good thinking! And thinking that is consistent with some of the post-AWPE placement projects now developing at the University of California.

But before we get there, it's important to document with even more precision how UC faculty themselves conceptualize the AWPE when it was in its formative stages during the early 1980s. What did consequential UC Senate documents actually say about writing course placement, and the Entry Level Writing Requirement, at the time? It is interesting to note how both a Bloomesque flexibility and a lockstep developmental model of cognition, produces dissonance in an important 1983 Senate document (just as it still does in the UC system today, as I will discuss below).

No doubt by March 1983, when the Meeting of the Assembly of the Academic Senate minutes were drafted, some UC snobbery had been tempered. No longer could a grading pamphlet for the "Subject A Examination" tie writing proficiency to cultural capital with the nonchalance of 1958:

> A writer must have something to say if he is to write an acceptable composition. His writing should indicate that he has done some thoughtful reading or that his personal experience has led him to form some conclusions. The readers of examination essays … do hope to find some concrete details and definite opinions, some logical arguments that will stand up under thoughtful analysis, some reasoned conclusions that follow logically from the facts presented. Reading and personal experience should supply the raw material for writing. Persons who have read little and thought less will find the writing of an acceptable essay somewhat beyond their powers. But those who would habitually follow the current of world affairs as reported in daily and weekly papers and those who have learned to recognize the meaning and significance of personal experience will have the material out of which an acceptable essay may be constructed. (Quoted in University of California, 1958, p. 18)

Interesting for our purposes in this formulation is the link between cultural capital conceived as good habits, tied directly to "thinking" quantified: apparently those who read little think less. By 1983, instead, the key Senate document considers academic English *idiomatic*, and potentially askew with respect to a diverse student population.

That argument starts by observing with approval how UC campuses approach composition differently depending upon their different populations, and differently also according to the educational philosophies held by the faculty so charged on each campus:

> The data indicate that the campuses offer multiple approaches to composition, in part as a consequence of the particular student populations that they serve, in part as a consequence of their educational philosophy. Contrary to any fear that multiplicity represents a falling away from any ideal, unique, systemwide course that would definitively instruct all UC students in the problems of composition, the data show that rigidity of format cannot guarantee the results that programs currently achieve through variety. (University of California, 1983)

And this pedagogical argument for local flexibility has implications for cherished key terms and concepts that would be imposed across the board—"rigidities" that would harken back, as I have demonstrated, to the lockstep form of developmental psychology that make generalized assessments possible. "We must acknowledge that the notion 'remedial' in relation to work in language and composition skills only has meaning within a specific context: it is relative, *not absolute* [emphasis added]" the document authors rightly insists. And at that moment in 1983 when UC remedial education was getting redefined so that all UC courses would appear to be college-level, such flexibility with respect to student assessment could be discerned in its nascent form as academic English itself was relativized:

> What Subject A represents in fact is a method for teaching students the idiom of discourse that prevails in the University. Some students come with this idiom under control, as a result of attending the kind of high school that gears them for expression in this idiom. But others do not come so geared, for a number of reasons, but none of which bears upon their potential teachability as university students in the long run. For these latter students, it makes sense to expect that the University itself—especially since it is a public institution—will provide the necessary indoctrination into the idiom which their classes will for the most part be communicating. (University of California, 1983)

This is essentially David Bartholomae's famous essay "Inventing the University" published a few years later in 1986, missing only the explicit Foucauldian framework and the examples drawn from actual placement essays. There is nothing sacred or universal or absolute about university writing. It is an idiom, or set of idioms, of some consequence in terms of the powers that be—hence that creepy word "indoctrination"—and it should be taught and assessed as such. By extension, then, a good system for initial writing course placement might help a student figure out where they are in terms of a range of idioms including academic first-year, while giving them informed opportunities to navigate going forward. A bad system for initial writing course placement would give the impression, intentionally or not, that criteria for assessing any particular form of writing is absolute. Moreover, this is not just an issue of fairness. Or student sensitivity. It is a validity issue insofar as there should be a good match between what incoming UC students experience in their writing course placement process and the range of experiences that follow.

But despite some of these wiser opinions expressed in the collective voice of 1983 UCEP, the UC Senate was at the same time working toward what would become a couple years later the systemwide Subject A Examination. And as it moved in this direction, the Senate was grappling with a question that persists to this day. In the 1983 minutes, the question is posed most pointedly by the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools and the University Committee on Subject A, which sought to determine "whether there is a *basic level* [emphasis added] of language skills which should become a University entrance requirement" (p. 50). And though this question is no longer posed in terms of an entrance requirement—excepting international students who have minimum score requirements on tests of English as Another Language (EAL)—the question itself persists in the very name of the key Senate committee charged with such things: the University Council on *Preparatory* [emphasis added] Education (UCOPE). It persists in the nearly universal agreement that the Entry Level Writing Requirement is meaningful across the system, and should be defended both on strategic grounds so that preparatory courses can't be so easily outsourced to community colleges as they were at UC Davis and UC San Diego until just recently, and on pedagogical grounds that start to produce contradictions when they are pressed. For how can you have at the same time a systemwide Entry Level which students can pass by demonstrating certain elite proficiencies,[3] and for which they can be "held," while at the same time sustaining a strong argument for diverse student populations, diverse student needs, and diverse educational philosophies across the different UC campuses? The short answer is you can't.

When it comes to levels, proficiencies and indeed "preparatory education," how are the thresholds determined at a level of generality that can cut with precision across different UC campus curricula? Is it lower-order concerns like spelling, grammar, diction, paragraphs, and punctuation, before higher-order concerns like complex argumentation and rhetoric? Those

3 AP 3+, SAT 680+ etc. See Entry Level Writing Requirement (UC Admissions, n.d.).

familiar with multilingual writing pedagogy at the UC-entry-level, for example, would say no. It's not the prior, and then the latter. Academic English is best taught to multilingual students in a way that demonstrates the ongoing relationship between formal features of language and rhetoric.

So, is it instead concrete writing about personal experience, whether "creative" or nonfictional, before abstract writing? Well, in part, that's a curriculum decision. A perfectly reasonable sequence might start with writing about personal experience before expanding outward to social context and then policy. But such directionality has nothing to do with absolute thresholds or with cognitive development in any sense beyond how a person learns in this case. And it could just as easily run in the other direction: start with policy research, for example, and then weave that research into an essay that draws from personal experience.

Is it lab report before a paper in the history of psychology, or the other way around? Is it imitation before creativity? Or should one start with a creative impulse students find organically motivating? Is genre pedagogy the best starting point because it determines form? And so on. No doubt as a pedagogue or academic administrator at the college level, one should have a well-researched and compelling argument for why a curriculum sequence runs one way not another. But that argument will always function at the level of a curriculum-in-context. It will never be about sequences that are absolutely right or absolutely tied to cognitive development. Thus, it also makes sense that a writing course placement procedure ties most immediately to the curriculum, not to more general conceptions of proficiency and preparation.

As we have seen, concerns about the rush to generalization in writing pedagogy and assessment has been voiced at higher levels of UC administration since the early 1980s. But these concerns took a backseat to the benefits of generalization, as they were conceived in terms of a developmental psychology that promised prestige that comes along with setting high standards. The balance tipped in the other direction, finally, when social mobility indices took hold in the 2010s.

Top Colleges Doing the Most for the American Dream

The relationship between education and social mobility has been of interest so named in the U.S. since 1920s sociology, and earlier in principle going back at least to the Morrill Land-Grant Acts starting in 1862, which inadvertently promoted what we now call social mobility in its express effort to educate the "industrial classes," including those who would soon attend the University of California (Morrill Act). But auspiciously, the direct link between writing ability and social mobility took off during the same 1970s-era of educational psychology we've just visited, appearing most often under the keyword "literacy," while substituting a model of universal cognitive development with a more practical but still single standard for academic writing aimed at students in the proliferating open admission colleges. For instance, in the first 1975 volume of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, just after its introduction by Mina Shaughnessy of the recently opened CUNY, Sarah D'Eloia asserts with confidence that " . . . linguistic change toward control of the standard facilitates social mobility and social change for individuals" (p. 9). Moreover, this notion that mastery of Standard American English is the key to The American Dream persists to this day, though evidence supporting this link doesn't match the size of the claim. Indeed, it did not take long for any tight link between absolute literacy standards and social mobility to come under attack as unsupported by the evidence, a mistake named memorably the "Literacy Myth"

by Harvey Graff and colleagues during the 1980s.[4] And such remains the criticism to this day, summarized by Poe, Inoue, and Elliott (2018), who introduce their important work on *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* with the documented reminder that one's chances of earning more "have little to do with the isolated cognitive traits or [Standard American English writing] skills acquired in college" (Poe et al., 2018, p. 8).

That's not to say there are no demonstrable links between literacy and social mobility. It's just that those links pale in comparison to underlying socioeconomic factors better addressed at the structural level, even as they can be obscured by the claim that a particular student just needs to master the standard discourse in order to advance socioeconomically, and links between literacy and social mobility sometimes actually contradict the initial argument: a single and traditional standard of literacy can be demotivating. Though there is no room here to explore all of the research on student motivation, it is worth identifying some key implications for writing course placement and writing assessment after the demise of tests like the AWPE. To summarize, motivation research in the new educational psychology has paid increasing attention to the relationship between a student's sense of belonging in all types of school settings, and their academic success—a typical prerequisite for socioeconomic advancement—highlighting how students benefit from a wide range of opportunity structures that might validate, for instance, linguistic and cultural diversity (see for example the summary article by Gray et al., 2018). But when it comes to influence on decision-makers in the UC System, it probably isn't this type of recent research that has motivated the most. Most likely, considering the prestige orientation of a UC System still bound to some contrary principles of egalitarianism, it is the rise of the social mobility index as it has appeared prominently in the press.

Though they had already been around for a few years, social mobility indices really took off in the UC system in 2017, when *The New York Times* published its revised college access index, showing for the first time traditionally middle-tier UCs at the very top (see Figure 2). The Irvine, Santa Barbara, Davis, and San Diego campuses snagged the top four spots in that order, with UCLA at five and Berkeley at nine just above Harvard (Riverside, Santa Cruz, and Merced did not appear in the 171 listed; all three of these UC campuses are now in the top 20 on the *U.S. News and World Report* national rankings for social mobility, with Riverside at the very top since this ranking was initiated in 2018) (*The New York Times*, 2017).

For quite some time, as the accompanying *New York Times* article rightly warns, "the country's most powerful engine of upward mobility [has been] under assault" due to a precipitous decline in federal and state funding for public institutions, which meant that lower-and middle-income students have been disadvantaged once again (Leonhardt, 2017). And this decline in public funding certainly applied to the University of California system, where the article mentions UC San Diego Pell grant recipients declining from 46% to 26% over the five-year period leading up to 2017. But given the UC context for reception of this *NYT* article, where public funding declines were not news at all, the local takeaway was completely different: as a system, we are at the very top when measuring social mobility, with campuses previously in the middle tier according to *U.S. News & World Report* ranked over the traditional prestige campuses Berkeley and UCLA. Moreover, this recalibration was not restricted to the *New York Times* and its readership. Also

4 "Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic. religious. and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility" (Graff, 2011, p. 49, citing the *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*).

Figure 2

Screen Capture from the 2017 College Access Index

Top Colleges Doing the Most for the American Dream

MAY 25, 2017

Welcome to the third annual College Access Index. It's a New York Times ranking of colleges — those with a five-year graduation rate of at least 75 percent — based on their commitment to economic diversity. The ranking is based on a combination of the number of lower-and middle-income students that a college enrolls and the price it charges these students. The top of the ranking is dominated by campuses in the University of California system, while the most diverse private colleges include Amherst, Pomona, Harvard and Vassar. Notably, a college's endowment does not determine its commitment to economic diversity. There are wealthy colleges and much less wealthy ones at both the top and bottom of the ranking. Read the related column.

Rank	College	Freshman class	Pell grad share	Net price, mid. income	College Access Index ▾	Endowment per student
1	University of California-Irvine	5,400	39	$12k	1.90	$11.1k
2	University of California-Santa Barbara	4,600	31	$13k	1.61	$7.1k
3	University of California-Davis	5,100	30	$13k	1.60	$11.2k
4	University of California-San Diego	5,200	29	$11k	1.58	$22.2k
5	University of California-Los Angeles	5,700	26	$11k	1.52	$54.2k
6	University of Florida	6,500	22	$8k	1.46	$33.3k
7	Amherst College	500	22	$9k	1.44	$1.141m
8	Pomona College	500	20	$7k	1.43	$1.288m
9	University of California-Berkeley	4,700	22	$11k	1.38	$46.3k
10	Harvard University	1,700	15	$5k	1.36	$1.51m

in 2014, *CollegeNET* published its first social mobility index, with California State Universities peppering the top positions instead of the UCs. Even *U.S. News & World Report* reported adjusting its methodology in 2018 so that social mobility is now more heavily weighted, though "you wouldn't know from those at the top of the lists" according to Scott Jaschik's (2018) article "The 'U.S. News' Rankings'(Faux?) Embrace of Social Mobility."

At this moment, when you look at the promotional fact sheet for a campus like UCI, you see that four of the seven highlighted "institutional honors" are social mobility related:

- UCI is ranked among nation's top 10 public universities for the eighth year in a row by *U.S. News & World Report*. *U.S. News* also puts campus among the Top 10 for social mobility.
- UCI is ranked among the top 10 in nation for public universities by *Forbes*.
- UCI is the top choice for first-generation students among all UC campuses for four consecutive years.
- UCI is ranked No. 9 in *Money* magazine's "Best Colleges" in the U.S. list, making it the highest-rated California university.

Cynicism suggests that the UC 2010s shift in attention from traditional markers of prestige like reputation, endowment, research output, and *crème de la crème* students to this new marker of prestige is self-serving. Even though the UC System once embraced only with disdain its differently prepared students, embrace it still did, with all sorts of positive consequences now indexed with

pride. Of course, once that outward recognition met with internal pride, helpful projects in the UC System took off to support social mobility, and also the diversity that tracks as a collateral virtue (the same UCI website boasts "#3 in the nation for diversity" (*Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education*, 2022)).

It's also important to remember that there is no pipeline that runs directly from DSP, for instance, to the new "excellence" of social mobility. Zhaozhe Wang (2020) and others insist that "a consistent line of inquiry interrogating the validity of DSP" (p. 46) must reckon with measures designed to track progress and make invidious comparisons on the way to institutional excellence (p. 62; see also Gere et al., 2010). DSP by itself does not guarantee educational equity and excellence, as the frailer forms on the national scene indicate when they rely heavily on the student "self" while minimizing "direction" due primarily to resource poverty. And in fact, the University of California did a lot in terms of social justice inadvertently and sometimes begrudgingly, even while foregrounding universal models of cognitive development that wound up in the AWPE. Hence, AWPE champions can still argue speciously, I believe, that UC successes with the social mobility indices took hold completely under the systemwide placement regime of the AWPE; the argument is that the test helpfully identifies which students needed more help with their writing, thus serving to this day as crucial support for those students who are most in need.

Another challenge comes with implementation. Which writing course placement procedures actually enhance social mobility? And how do you know? Critics warn that writing course placement designed to enhance social mobility actually does the opposite. This critical misunderstanding typically assumes that attention to social mobility can too easily turn into the mere appearance of social promotion as incoming students are allowed to place themselves far beyond their actual abilities, thereby inviting more of what nobody wants: course failures, course repetitions, demoralization, dropout. Then when students in fact choose in overwhelming numbers to "up place" as in the case of Michigan DSP, and immediate course failures do not proliferate, the rejoinder is that these same students are just misled by grade inflation, which means in the long run that they will still be poorly served in terms of social mobility, because they will disproportionately struggle in upper-division courses and beyond in the working world. Such skepticism about DSP is drawn from a former AWPE Committee Chair, for example.[5] Meanwhile, the virtues of absolute standards as manifest in the AWPE are defended on the grounds that they focus the entire UC system and indeed the state on the importance of key benchmarks in writing ability; accusations of bias are rejected as the result of prior social injustices, not the test itself.[6] Such worries are summed up by long-time director of the University Writing Program at the University of California, Riverside, in an article published on the website of the UC Berkeley College Writing Programs, "The Folly of Weakening the Analytical Writing Placement Examination and Promoting Directed Self-Placement." The summary ends with a familiar warning about how this will all look on the national stage:

5 It should be noted in this example, however, that Michigan has no evidence of such significant academic challenges in the upper division, according to the former Sweetland Writing Center Associate Director, who was long the primary administrator of Michigan DSP (N. Silver, personal communication to D. Gross, January 11, 2020).

6 At a key UCOPE meeting where the AWPE demise hung in the balance, the AWPE Committee Chair passed around excerpts from Asao Inoue's award-winning *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecology's: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* in order to undermine the accusation that the AWPE was racist. Passages from Inoue were chosen to demonstrate how recent work on race and writing assessment overshot the mark by situating writing assessment in terms of a "white racial habitus."

> We must not be indifferent to the consequences these proposed changes would create for our principles as well as our practice. Such changes would undermine instruction by encouraging social promotion. They would jeopardize our writing programs' credibility. They would undermine our work in the schools. What might look like a practical change would in actuality be a repeal of the Entry-Level Requirement, a loss doubly regrettable because it would defy principles deep in this university's heart and structure. Our friends across campus would begin to doubt us. So, most certainly, would opinion leaders beyond the campus walls. (Briggs, 2018)

But of course, on the national stage, writing course placement philosophies and procedures are changing, with the UC System bringing up the rear.

Conclusion

At the moment I'm writing this article, three UC campuses, UC Riverside, UCLA, and UC Berkeley, are essentially administering the AWPE locally, in some cases including a student survey and a "collaborative" element. Four campuses, Davis, Santa Barbara, Merced, and San Diego, are fine-tuning different versions of hybrid and collaborative placement processes. UC Santa Cruz calls their process "directed self-placement." All of these placement processes continue to evolve substantially and quickly, which means that they are best understood by looking at the current course-placement website for each campus. And it is important to acknowledge that all of the current campus autonomy when it comes to writing course placement is undermined, fundamentally, by the fact that each campus must recognize the elite, ELWR-satisfying test scores: SAT 680+, AP Language or Literature 3+, and so on.

A local note. At UC Irvine where I currently chair the Working Group on Writing Course Placement, we experimented with collaborative placement before adopting portfolio assessment, which we like because it shapes the continuity of student experience. Also by design, it gets expert eyeballs on a rich set of student writing, which my moderately conservative campus finds reassuring. In the 2023 cycle, we directed students to (a) take a survey that asks them to recount their previous writing and literacy experiences, (b) provide personal information relevant to their writing course placement, (c) upload two [specified] samples of their writing, and (d) write a brief reflection on their reading and writing experiences. Student portfolios are available to the instructors of their first writing course, a practice inspired in part by the Michigan example. Our overarching goal is to establish a good match between what incoming students experience in their writing course placement process, and the range of experiences that follow: a match that is designed to maximize assessment construct validity. At the same time in terms of educational philosophy, our goal is to emphasize local student experience, not general models of cognitive development.

Finally, to the issue of construct validity and its implications for fairness. Placing students based on a universal model of cognitive development that allows for a single indirect measure of college-level writing proficiency—AWPE-type timed writing—maps poorly onto the actual diversity of UC students and the actual writing environments they will encounter. Sure, the AWPE might do a decent job reinforcing the historical two-tiered system in the University of California identified by Jane Stanley, where the crème de la crème go on to compete with all of the best students nationally, while those from underresourced high schools mostly get through with a degree. More fair is a writing course placement process that is designed to redress traditional systems and structures of power by affirming the diversity of student experience in the context of

what they will actually write going forward—construct validity with respect to the assessment tool used for writing course placement.

Philosophically, this means that we can pursue writing course placement against the backdrop of a new evaluation scale—social mobility—instead of developmental psychology.[7] *Conceptually*, it means mind-in-society, not progressive levels of individual cognition hardwired by evolution.[8] *Practically*, it means enhancing social mobility instead of punitively "holding" for the entry level. And *affectively*, it means that students who start in the UCs differently prepared in terms of academic writing are still embraced, but this time without the disdain. In Norbert Elliot's writing studies and assessment context, the "American Dream" is not the traditional bootstraps version, where individuals have the freedom to improve themselves. Instead, it is a very different, equity-oriented value, which makes explicit room for measures that would correct historical inequities, and provide reparative support for those who had been systematically disadvantaged (Elliot, 2016). Writing course placement geared toward actual students in context, not toward abstracted cognition, can only be a step in the right direction.

Finally, some humility when it comes to this article's practical attitude. No doubt the historical arc now places us in the UC System safely on the downside of 20th-century developmental psychology in its most misunderstood forms. Meanwhile, it registers the recent rise of the social mobility index, and the student sensitivities around writing that now make sense systematically, for the first time. But these best practices of today will inevitably dissipate in the new realities of tomorrow. And that is the only certainty we have about writing. It is always and only an element of the local cultures, and the histories in which they are embedded. The painfully slow demise of the systemwide AWPE is thus also a cautionary tale: a concern for yesterday's value can obfuscate the next pedagogical horizons. And though they are unimpeachable values today, it is important to understand for methodological reasons—for historical analytic reasons, and to avoid absolutist frameworks—why even our current commitments to equity and social justice won't orient best practices forever.

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7 Social mobility indices have an indirect relationship with fairness and social justice, as those have become central concerns for writing assessment. See, for instance, Toth, 2018. See also Elliot (2016) where "fairness in writing assessment is defined as the identification of opportunity structures created through maximum construct representation. Constraint of the writing construct is to be tolerated only to the extent to which benefits are realized for the least advantaged" (p. 6).

8 See the earlier view in Peggy O'Neill and Sandra Murphy (2011), where writing is considered "a socially situated cognitive activity" (p. 586). See also the recent view in Matthew Overstreet (2022).

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