

## Editor's Introduction

# The "Accidental California Issue": Critical Questions about Fairness and Equity in Writing Assessment and Placement

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**Abstract:** *JWA* 17.2 features five articles that explore evolving practices and critical questions around fairness and equity. Daniel Gross (2024) examines the implications of construct validity in the discontinuation of the Analytical Writing Placement Examination (AWPE) at the University of California. Julia Voss, Loring Pfeiffer, and Nicole Branch (2024) share how they used interviews from programmatic assessment to understand student learning outcomes in ways that value minoritized students' experiential knowledge. Edward Comstock (2024) investigates the interplay between self-efficacy and programmatic assessment, emphasizing the value of qualitative methods in evaluating writing programs. Sarah Hirsch, Kenny Smith, and Madeleine Sorapure (2024) present on Collaborative Writing Placement (CWP). Julie Prebel and Justin Li (2024) critique the equity of a first-year writing portfolio assessment through lenses of curricular design, performance, and reliability.

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I have come to think of the latest issue (17.2) of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* (JWA) as the “accidental California issue.” On one level, what I mean by that is only chance and the vagaries of publishing cycles have given us four of five articles written by researchers from California. Yet, on another level, it may be that the large issues at play around—and within—writing assessment have come to play in particularly pressing ways in California in the early 2020s. As we have emerged from the pandemic, shifts within higher education have driven changes within writing assessment and placement systems. These changes may be being felt first and most keenly in California with its diverse population and extensive network of both public and private colleges and universities.

JWA 17.2 features five articles that explore these evolving practices and critical questions around fairness and equity. Daniel Gross (2024) examines the implications of construct validity in the discontinuation of the Analytical Writing Placement Examination (AWPE) at the University of California, framing the discussion within the context of social mobility. Julia Voss, Loring Pfeiffer, and Nicole Branch (2024) present their findings about how first-year writing students develop information literacy when researching and writing with popular news sources; they share how they used interviews from programmatic assessment to understand student learning outcomes in ways that value minoritized students’ experiential knowledge. Edward Comstock (2024), our one contributor from outside California in this issue, investigates the interplay between self-efficacy and programmatic assessment, emphasizing the value of qualitative methods in evaluating writing programs. Sarah Hirsch, Kenny Smith, and Madeleine Sorapure (2024) highlight a collaborative approach to writing placement, demonstrating the potential of student partnerships in shaping placement processes. JWA 17.2 concludes with Julie Prebel and Justin Li’s (2024) critique of a first-year writing assessment through lenses of curricular design, performance, and reliability; their mixed methods study offers a multifaceted perspective on fairness and effectiveness that should drive forward conversations about both of those issues within the field of writing assessment. These five articles highlight the ways in which writing assessment researchers are wrestling with the implications of developing writing assessment systems that value fairness when assessing student writing, programmatic learning outcomes, and the performance of writing programs in achieving their institutional goals.

I want to spend a few moments in this Editor’s Introduction looking at each of these five articles in a little more detail, because I believe they speak to each other and to our moment in time in important ways. Gross’s “Construct Validity and the Demise of the Analytical Writing Placement Examination (AWPE) at the University of California: A Tale of Social Mobility” is a compelling examination of the historical and philosophical shifts that culminated in the University of California’s Academic Senate’s decision to end its longstanding AWPE. By situating the demise of this timed writing assessment within a broader context, Gross skillfully traces the evolution from a universalizing cognitive development model to an approach that prioritizes social mobility and fairness in educational practices. His analysis of the social mobility index as a reimagined measure of student success offers a thought-provoking lens through which to view institutional change. Furthermore, he critiques the way in which the University of California system had relied for decades on dated writing assessment instruments to shape its discourse on preparatory education and proficiency levels. Gross champions the UC system’s shift toward embracing the assessment practices that have emerged from a number of campus writing programs in the University of California system (see the forthcoming Burke Reifman et al., in press; Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Hirsch et al., 2024, this issue). These locally designed assessments reflect the importance of valuing

equity and inclusivity. Gross's work not only sheds light on the sociohistorical factors influencing the UC system's decision but also raises important questions about the future of writing assessment in higher education.

Voss, Pfeiffer, and Branch's "Assessment Is Constructed and Contextual: Identity, Information Literacy, and Interview-Based Methodologies in the First-Year Writing Classroom" continues this conversation about how new measures of students' writing and information literacy skills might shift our understanding of student performances. By using multiple contextualized measures instead of relying on only decontextualized writing exams, Voss and colleagues sketch out how a programmatic assessment of student learning outcomes can move away from focusing on students' perceived deficits. Voss, Pfeiffer, and Branch's work has particularly pressing implications when we consider how minoritized students have often been described as lacking the writing and information literacy skills needed to succeed without additional remedial or developmental instruction in college. Comstock's "The Strange Loop of Self-Efficacy and the Value of Focus Groups in Writing Program Assessment" develops our understanding of how programmatic assessment and self-efficacy intersect when evaluating writing programs. Emphasizing the value of qualitative methods, Comstock's work furthers both Gross's and Voss et al.'s advocacy for methods of writing assessment that prioritize how fairness plays out in educational practices. His work on focus groups complements Voss et al.'s arguments in favor of using student interviews along with artifact analysis when conducting programmatic learning outcomes assessments.

As you can tell, the articles that have found their way into *JWA* 17.2 are deeply engaged with the question of how fairness plays out in the practices of writing assessment systems. Hirsch, Smith, and Sorapure's "Collaborative Writing Placement: Partnering with Students in the Placement Process" applies a similar approach when considering writing placement. In fact, their work is a more in-depth analysis of one of the campus-based placement systems that has been created because of the discontinuation of the AWPE that Gross examines in his article. Hirsch, Smith, and Sorapure explore how a collaborative approach to writing placement can include student perspectives in a writing placement process. In the Collaborative Writing Placement (CWP) developed at UC Santa Barbara, students work with writing faculty in choosing their first-year writing courses. Hirsch et al.'s article examines the first two years of CWP's implementation at UCSB and offers a test case for the sorts of writing placement that Gross advocates for in his article.

In interesting ways, Hirsch, Smith, and Sorapure's article is not only in conversation with moves towards changing writing assessment and placement systems in California to increase equity and inclusivity but also in conversation with the writing assessment work on student self-placement (SSP) that *JWA* has featured in two special issues (17.1 and the forthcoming 18.1). While Hirsch, Smith, and Sorapure's article is not about SSP, it does address the issues of student agency and generating more equitable placement outcomes that are at the center of the SSP special issues. There is additional work to be done within writing assessment circles on how SSP and CWP work to enhance student agency, increase fairness in educational practice, and create more equitable placement outcomes. These additional inquiries could consider CWP as a broader approach like SSP with a number of early instances developed within the UC-system (e.g., at UCD, UCI, UCSB, and UCSC; see Burke Reifman et al., in press; Ferris & Lombardi, 2020). CWP and SSP may be fellow travelers in our post-directed self-placement (DSP) world. They may be divergent paths—with even radically different epistemologies about student agency—when we get down to

examining the writing placement systems that are created with each in mind. The relationships among CWP and SSP feel like an emerging area with writing assessment and placement research. I would encourage readers interested in how these approaches are similar and different to submit articles to *JWA*. It is an important conversation to have.

*JWA* 17.2 concludes with Julie Prebel and Justin Li's "Multifaceted Equity: Critiquing a First-Year Writing Assessment Through Curricular, Performance, and Reliability Lenses." Their article explores how issues of fairness and equity are playing out in a portfolio-based first-year writing assessment at a private liberal arts college in California. Like Voss et al. and Comstock, Prebel and Li argue that equity must be assessed through multiple facets. They consider curriculum, student performance, and reliability as they examine the impacts of the new portfolio-based, first-year writing assessment on campus. Their work is significant because they take a deeply situated and contextualized approach. They acknowledge how institutional structures and process elements constrain the portfolio-based, first-year writing assessment in ways that ultimately prevent it from being truly antiracist even though it is "fairer and more equitable for most students." Prebel and Li's article like Hirsch, Smith, and Sorapure's work addresses issues of fairness and equity; however, Prebel and Li use reliability as an important additional measure to show how differences in faculty members' interpret the assessment criteria impact the portfolio-based first-year writing assessment system. Prebel and Li's approach differs from Voss et al.'s and Comstock's emphases on student self-efficiency and agency, in part, because Prebel and Li are interested in questions that include the role of faculty readers and inter-rater reliability in the assessment system. Like Hirsch, Smith, and Sorapure's work on CWP and Gross's examination of construct validity in the AWPE, Prebel and Li want us to understand how a writing assessment system works when situated in a context that includes faculty input.

All five of the articles that appear in *JWA* 17.2 are committed to exploring writing assessment systems in higher education contexts. They value the careful analysis of empirical data as well as close readings of institutional policy materials and assessment practices. They remind us that we need to question how fairness, validity, and reliability are operationalized in the practices of writing placement and assessment systems. These assessment concepts are valuable only inasmuch as they impact students' lived experiences. Gross; Voss, Pfeiffer, and Branch; Comstock; Hirsch, Smith, and Sorapure; and Prebel and Li show us how these ideals are playing out within actual writing assessment and placement practices. Gross's critique of the UC's AWPE construct validity and his tracing of its decline presents an institutional history that reminds us that writing assessments, especially system-wide ones, can have a long historical reach. They impact many students' lives over that time. Voss, Pfeiffer, and Branch chart out a new course in programmatic writing assessment; they advocate for the inclusion of student interviews along with the analysis of student writing when evaluating student learning outcomes; their work suggests changes in methods that could value minoritized students' experiential knowledge rather than devaluing it. Comstock's work also insists on valuing student perspectives; he advocates for the value of focus groups in programmatic assessment. Hirsch, Smith, and Sorapure advance the idea of CWP. In part, their article puts into practice the ideas for change presented in Gross's article; their work also advances ideas about CWP developed in earlier *JWA* issues (i.e., Ferris & Lombardi, 2020) as well as having the potential to engage with conversations around student agency being developed in SSP (see *JWA* 17.1 and 18.1). Prebel and Li's work reminds us that portfolio-based writing assessment systems as well as the concept of reliability still play valuable roles in writing assessment practices. Their work, like

the other four articles in *JWA* 17.2, digs into how equity and fairness are playing out in real-world writing assessment practices.

Taken together, these five articles represent some of the most pressing issues in writing assessment. Four of the five articles may be from researchers in California; however, this issue of *JWA* is anything but an issue about only what is happening on the western most “edge” of the United States. All of us working in higher education should find these questions pressing: How do statewide writing assessment systems maintain their construct validity over time? What happens when statewide writing assessment systems need to change? How do we develop practical methods to include student perspectives in programmatic assessments? How do we operationalize practical methods that engage in dialogue with students and increase students’ agency around their placement into writing courses? And how can fairness, equity, and reliability among readers offer us lenses for considering how writing assessment systems are working on our campuses?

As always, this editor’s introduction is not an ending but a beginning—not only for this particular issue of *JWA* but also for conversations about writing assessment. If you read one of these articles and think you have a response, please reach out. If you read these articles and realize that you have a project you are working on which could find a home in *JWA*, send it along. If you see me or members of the Editorial Team at the Conference on College Communication and Composition or at other conferences, stop by, say “hello,” and talk with us about your ideas.

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