

Crippling Institutional Assessment

A New Writing Program Administrator's Questions About Institutional Practices for Placement for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract: As a new writing program director at a large R1 institution, my research focuses on ways to understand the challenges for disabled and neurodivergent students in our institutional writing placement. Since placement policies are often impacted by both internal and external factors over time, it may be hard for institutional leaders to see the consequences of our placement approaches and policies on differently abled students. To that end, I hope this brief article presents questions we may ask as writing program administrators (WPAs) in order to better facilitate access, belonging, and equity in high-stakes writing placement. Since all writing programs must align their curricular, pedagogical, and administrative purposes with institutional directives, I provide concrete questions through a disability lens that can transfer across different institutions. Since we need accountability that arises from a fundamental concern about the varying needs of the diverse students who come to our campus, I seek to help move our discipline closer towards Margaret Price's (2024) "collective accountability" (p. 169) for high-stakes assessment.

Keywords: placement, disability, assessment, equity, accountability, access

As my plane landed for the campus visit, I panicked. Carelessly, I had packed my hearing aids in the checked bag stored beneath the plane. Now I would have to meet the search committee representative picking me up at the small airport without my hearing aids—and with my ears buzzing from the loss of air pressure. I was not sure I wanted to disclose my hearing issues on a campus visit, and I was angry with myself for not keeping my aids in my ears. I walked out of the gate, still unsure of what I was going to do, and I was met almost immediately by a woman holding a sign with my name whose first comment was, “Hi, I am Cathy; I am hard of hearing.” (I have received her permission to share this story.) My heart exploded with emotion at her words, and I felt safe disclosing that I, too, was hard of hearing and needed to get my aids out of my suitcase before we got in the car. She smiled and nodded kindly. I knew I didn’t need to explain more to her. We spent lunch talking wonderfully loud to each other, making sure we were facing each other to read lips easily. My experience with Cathy represents an example of “access intimacy,” which Mia Mingus (2011) defines as that “elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else “gets” your access needs” (para. 4).

To experience access intimacy on my campus visit allowed me to imagine myself at the institution, to feel that I may belong there. Because I have genetic hearing loss, I have had to work hard for years to compensate at work. To ease my discomfort with disclosure, I have joked with my students that I went to concerts and clubs too much at their age so I needed them to speak up in class, I have shyly asked for microphones in large faculty meetings, I have learned to walk closer to quiet talkers and to try and read their lips. Hearing aids make things louder but not necessarily more clear, and I am constantly worrying about the devices losing a charge or going static on me. After a few hours of wearing them, my head aches, the world much too loud. Sometimes I must resort to reading lips or asking someone to repeat what they said (the worst), or even sometimes just nodding at mumbled comments without knowing how to correctly respond (the very worst). Disclosure at inopportune times can be the very, very worst. I know what it means for assistive technology to not really work as it is advertised and the professional and personal costs of getting through the day without my aids and with or without disclosing. Reflecting on my own experiences with ableism allows me to be more open to questioning common writing assessment practices and to better consider ways to reduce harm in institutional writing placement for neurodivergent and differently abled students.

Questioning My Positionality

Because of my personal experience as someone who uses an assistive device, I often think about our students navigating high-stakes writing work through “accessible” technology that may not really serve all their needs. In my position as a WPA and someone used to finding workarounds for my hearing loss, I think about students navigating a placement process that may require them to use costly strategies of coping. Perhaps foolishly, I wonder how I might be able to use a disability lens and provide access intimacy to our wide range of differently abled students. I consider Annika Konrad’s (2021) description of “access fatigue” in “Access Fatigue: The Rhetorical Work of Disability in Everyday Life” and appreciate her concern that “seeking access depends on the difficult and risky rhetorical work of navigating power relationships and institutional barriers” (p. 180). Some days, as a WPA, I feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped to support students who do not fit into the normative standards higher education continues to embrace. Who am I to do this work?

I am also the mother of a differently abled child named Samantha about to start her first year at college. (I have her permission to share the following experience.) Shortly after Samantha was accepted to my current institution (a surprise to her, but not to me), we joyfully attended accepted students' day. Our day turned a bit tricky when, after lunch, an admissions officer briefly introduced math and writing placement. I felt Samantha stiffen in her chair as she whispered, "I have to take a test?" Didn't I get in?" She wasn't the only one asking those questions. More arms (from parents and students) shot up in the air at that moment than on any other topic that day. The very notion of "placement" (yet another hoop to jump) created a tension in a room that had not existed before. Most new students and their parents seemed surprised and anxious, and they had more questions about placement than the young admissions officer could answer. As a parent that day, I felt concern about Samantha having to move through a process I facilitated for the university! She will be required to take her writing placement and begin navigating her own particular institutional barriers and obstacles. She will cope, perhaps sometimes in ways costly to her mental and emotional health. I care about her experience and about her fellow students with ADHD, OCD, visual and hearing impairments, dyslexia, and those on the autism spectrum—and the host of challenges they endure every day in academic institutions.

Throughout this short article, I hope to provide space for reflection on our disciplinary and institutional assessment practices and offer questions that may arise when we place differently abled students at the center of any heuristic about placement. For example, as my experience with my daughter's admission day illustrates, neurodivergent students and their parents have most likely already been through a maze of accommodations, helpful or otherwise, and they have all kinds of relevant questions about placement: Is it timed? Is it handwritten? What happens if you "fail?" How can you prepare? What assistive technologies can be used/allowed? Having this experience with my child makes me ask: How can I, as a WPA, improve the communication to new students with disabilities and their parents about our placement process? How can I ensure they receive timely, accurate, and compassionate responses? When institutions do not address these types of questions about placement in an open and clear fashion, students (and parents) can feel lost at an institution before they even begin.

Questioning Institutional Access

Since most institutions often don't consider the matrix of issues that the disabled and neurodivergent students they accepted will face, WPAs can use a disability lens to question their positionality and reflect on practices to move towards better institutional accountability in assessment. To use a disability studies lens requires "an intersectional and neurodivergent model of writing assessment [that] recognizes, investigates, and challenges the existence of neurological norms in the design and implementation of assessment systems at classroom program and institutional levels" (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020, p. 9). The crux of the problem lies in that fact that no one WPA can know, understand, or anticipate the varying needs of all neurodivergent and disabled students, and that lack of knowledge can be deeply troubling. I find hope, however, in what Nirmala Erevelles (2014) calls "the disruptive vulnerability" of disability (para. 1). The disruptive vulnerability I feel for myself and my child allows me a space to question normative assumptions about student success. As Christina Cedillo (2018) argues in "What Does It Mean to Move?: Race, Disability, and Critical Embodiment," "our bodies allow us to recognize the forms of social control represented by methodological checklists for what they are" (para. 20). And so,

WPAs might ask: How can neurodivergent students express the gifts their bodies and minds have given them in ways that are valued by their academic institutions? How can we reimagine and connect what our academic institution values and what we value as writing teachers and WPAs? How can we disrupt a system that doesn't serve differently abled bodies and minds?

Questioning Accountability

Disruptive thinking requires me to ask the kind of questions that avoid overly simplified perspectives on differently abled students. Of course, asking the right questions and then being able to act on the answers is not an easy task. In "Time Harms," Margaret Price (2021) illustrates how "access" can create inequity rather than mitigating it. She claims that "collective accountability" is the way to address structural inequities and that "[i]ndividual accommodations—and by extension, individual efforts—no matter how well executed or how enthusiastically put in place, will only lead us further from equity and justice" (Price, 2021, p. 272). For Price, change will come from thinking more holistically about disabled and neurodivergent student needs. Following Price's argument, I ask: What changes might come from collective accountability? What does it mean to think more holistically about disabled and neurodivergent student needs without lapsing into unhelpful generalities? The answers to these questions involve imagining beyond normative conceptions of academic strengths and weaknesses, but WPAs can begin by asking how we can evaluate whether the assessment platform/tool supports differently abled students.

Questioning Universal Design

Reflecting on the design of our placement platforms and assignments from a disability lens allows us to ask critical questions about what we are actually doing when we "do" placement. At my institution, we currently have two high-stakes writing assessments for students: writing placement for first-year writing (FYW) credit and a junior writing portfolio. For both assessments, we ask students to upload their writing to a platform called Slate that our evaluators use to assess the work and that we can use to store and analyze the student data. According to its accessibility webpage, Slate states that it is "committed to ensuring accessibility for all users" (Slate, n.d.). The platform adheres to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 Standard, a technical standard developed by the World Wide Web Consortium "for making web content more accessible for everyone" (Slate, n.d.). The platform delivers content across a variety of "browsers, screen readers and assistive devices" (Slate, n.d.). Slate ensures users that it adheres to best practices for universal design. Since WCAG 2.0 incorporated universal design, and our assessment platform, Slate is compliant with it, we might feel we are "covered" in terms of accessibility. However, I have two questions: 1) Do "approved" accessibility devices always work as we really need them to? 2) Is universal design a perfect answer for accessibility? According to Jay Dolmage (2017) in *Academic Ableism*, we can see the move towards universal design in standards such as WCAG 2.0 as "a form of hope, a manner of trying" (p. 116). Accessible platforms may not always work as we like, but if there is the ability to collect user feedback and revise and adapt, we can enter a loop of continual improvement. Since universal design must be for a very diverse group of users, not a broadly universal approach diverse disabled students must adjust to, Dolmage (2017) also argues that universal design and usability go hand in hand.

Usability focuses on how easily and effectively people can accomplish their goals using a product or system—to be effective it requires constant feedback from users, since platforms, populations, and contexts can change. Individual students' needs may vary greatly, but that cannot be a barrier to looking for multiple avenues of access and opportunity. According to Charlesia McKinney (2018) in "Reassessing Intersectionality: Affirming Difference in Higher Education,"

in providing different avenues to knowledge production, we must remain willing to accommodate each student individually; it can be tempting to rely on the experience of a former student to inform our path with a new student. Even if two students share the same disability, for example, they will have different needs. (para. 16)

The work becomes figuring out how to know and address the different needs of students. According to Dolmage (2017), usability studies need to be "dynamic and on-going" (p. 131). Critical questions that may help WPAs reassess their institutional practices might begin by reflecting on the most effective ways to collect data on differently abled student experience in placement: What kinds of methods work to get the type of data that may be most useful to WPAs? How can we ensure differently abled students are surveyed and their voices documented? What kinds of questions need to be asked in surveys, focus groups, or interviews to elicit the most useful feedback from disabled students about their experience with the platform? Further, what questions do we need ask about the assignment itself?

Questioning the Placement Assignment

The in-house placement assignment at my institution currently has students choose between two short articles, and they are asked to write an essay in response to the one of the articles. The students are told at the beginning of the instructions that the purpose of this activity is to identify which English writing course is best for them. The students are also told that the readers of their essay are English teachers and that they are specifically considering the following as they read their essays: reading comprehension; audience awareness; clearly reasoned position or argument; basic essay conventions (intro, body, conclusion, paragraph breaks, topic sentences, etc.); development and support (include specific details from both the reading and your own experiences and observations); and control of mechanics and usage (e.g., clear sentences, correct punctuation). The students are asked to write a 600–800-word essay in which they answer the following questions: "Do you find the author's argument convincing? Why or why not? Be sure to use details from the article and from your own personal experience."

Students are also asked to reflect about their previous writing experience before they write and are then asked to reflect on their reading and writing experience they just did for placement. According to the rubric, these reflections count 50% toward the final score. Considering evaluation criteria, however, begs the question: What criteria are best suited to support appropriate placement for disabled and neurodivergent students? What assignments are best suited to allow neurodivergent and disabled students to best meet that criteria? Although creating assignments that enhance agency might work effectively in the classroom, does our field often think of agency when we discuss institutional placement outside of directed self-placement? What would agency mean for a large-scale placement activity or assignment? What would it look like? How does the assignment work within the processes and procedures an institution uses to place students in FYW?

Questioning the Placement Process

Critical reflection on our practices is key since placement processes are often embedded so deep within an institution's practices that every iteration seems "expected" or "natural." Frankly, I have tried as many different placement strategies as my three different institutions' policies (and the slow nature of academic change) would allow. I have facilitated timed writing placement, facilitated placement via standardized test scores, and actually been forced to use a GPA combined with a deeply troubling demographic algorithm. After much research and frustration with other options, I implemented directed self-placement at my last institution. In all these different approaches, I kept seeing students fall through the cracks, and I kept seeing students try to move through processes that did not support their academic success, both upon entry to college or long term. There are, however, ways our field may still reimagine placement processes that work better for disabled students. For example, in "Collaborative Writing Placement: Partnering with Students in the Placement Process," Sarah Hirsch, Kenny Smith, and Madeline Sorapure (2024) present a model of placement at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) that combines various assessment approaches. This model may offer some ways we might improve placement to benefit differently abled and neurodivergent students. In brief, the authors (2024) note that the collaborative writing placement process at UCSB takes place through a common survey instrument and has four parts:

Part I): Students read and reflect on excerpts from assigned readings from Writing 1 and Writing 2

Part II: Students read and reflect on the writing assignments from each course

Part III: Students read and reflect on sample student writing each course

Part IV: Students read about the learning outcomes of each course from student facing documents and videos in which students who have taken each course describe their experience. (p. 6)

Most students end up in the course they choose, with about 23% differential (Hirsch et al., 2024, p. 7).

Although I have greatly simplified their approach, and urge readers to learn more about their collaborative placement system at UCSB, the main takeaway for me is that a combination of self-placement approaches, with more guided "qualitative" support in some cases, could be a useful way forward for reducing the standard "universal" frameworks of more traditional placement. I also appreciate that all of the writing scored in the UCSB model is reflective which provides students with a more equitable assignment genre. Although our placement system already uses 50% reflection on student writing as a standard for scoring, the reflection is more generalized to a student's former writing experience and not directly tied to the course they will be placed into, which is, I think a crucial distinction. I can imagine that a similar collaborative placement system, adapted for our courses and student population, might be a way forward for us, one that allows for more opportunities for students to be more equitably assessed. As we move towards a vision of Price's (2021) collective accountability, I am looking to delineate the institutional values that guide day-to-day placement practices. Considering approaches from classroom-based alternative assessment research may allow us to better create strategies for harm reduction for institutional writing placement. For example, in Megan Von Bergen's (2025) "On Neurodivergence and Labor-Based Grading: A Response to Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021)" and in Maggie Fernandes's, Emily Brier's and Megan McIntyre's (2025) "The Trouble with Ungrading: Toward

Disciplinary Specificity in Alternative Assessment,” the authors push us to reflect on our own obligations to reduce harm for disabled and neurodivergent students. Their alternative classroom assessment experiences can help us use a disability lens to ask hard questions about our institutional placement policies: What does equitable placement policy language look like in our discipline? What would an equitable placement practice actually look, sound, and “feel” like to students whose social and cultural experiences position them as outsiders in placement assessment? What are the consequences of an institution’s placement traditions, habits, routines, and language—and what is the impact they have on student efficacy?

Crippling Placement

Crippling placement represents a mix of difficult endeavors, ones that will require multiple approaches, perspectives, and more in-depth studies listening to student feedback. I am hopeful about a future in which our discipline can embrace such complexities for our students. Asking the questions throughout this brief article has helped me understand where I can start to improve the placement experience for students at my institution. For example, in addition to simply collecting quantitative data about our students’ success with placement, I have initiated a qualitative study to better understand students with disabilities’ experience using the platform and taking the assignment so I can hear their voices and perspectives. I have begun to improve communication about placement at new student orientations so that the first time students hear about it comes directly from the writing program office, and I have reached out to our accommodations office to begin conversations about how we can partner to improve student experience in writing assessment.

In exploring assessment models that may work for all bodies and abilities, I am also discovering methodologies that may help us move away from our traditional methods in our institutional assessments—a long process requiring much stakeholder input, but one that might help us to see what we are not seeing about the limitations of qualitative rubrics we currently use. For example, in *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*, West-Puckett, Nicole Caswell and William Banks (2023) argue that traditional assessment models are limiting, often excluding dimensions of writing and learning that matter most: identity, affect, materiality, and possibility:

As WPAs and classroom teachers ourselves—researchers and practitioners who are working at the intersections of queer rhetorics, writing studies, and assessment—we propose questions in this book that challenge norm-based writing assessments, such as a contextual rubrics and standardized cut-off scores for placement. (p. 25)

The authors introduce QVI (queer validity inquiry) as an alternative assessment paradigm. It intentionally values failure, emotional experience, and embodied identity instead of only aiming for objective “valid” outcomes and challenges assumptions about reliability, efficiency, and linear progress in learning. I look forward to the richness of conversations we might have about assessment if we really try to imagine innovative ways, as the authors of *Failing Sideways* do “for communicating expectations and effectively assessing student work” beyond the pervasive “Quality Matters” type of rubrics for writing (West-Puckett et al., 2023, pp. 56–57).

Finally, although I can ask questions and work to provide better access to a more effective assessment process for students, I recognize there will always be things to improve. And so, I also make space for hope, which is absolutely necessary for me to continue working in a higher

education landscape that has been, and continues to be, challenging for differently abled bodies. In “Prioritizing Crip Futures,” Emily Abrams, Colleen Floyd, and Elisa Abes (2024) observe, “just as disability is fluid, so must be praxis, and praxis will be imperfect as it navigates working within and against ableism” (p. 8). WPAs can acknowledge the complications of placement assessment for differently abled students while also moving forward with informed conversations that help create a meaningful culture of access at our institutions. I am invigorated about re-inventing our institutional practices to encourage and embrace difference and the wide range of gifts that neurodivergent and disabled students can bring to their academic journeys. And so, I return to Mingus’s notion of “access intimacy”: to the idea that those of us who design and facilitate and rate placement essays can do better with a deeper understanding of what access really means and how we can create it. This is not an easy thing to do: it requires painful personal and professional reflections for WPAs (as well as institutions) that bend towards a more diverse view of students and their varying abilities. It requires a move towards a non-normative understanding of students as whole and what they may need from higher education in the twenty-first century.

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