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Disability, Normativity, & The Agentive Promises of Placement

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Abstract: This article draws on critical disability frameworks to advance conversations on equitable placement design for writing programs in the postsecondary setting. The advantages of disability-as-insight are articulated, followed by a review of existing research on disability and directed self-placement (DSP). Finally, a heuristic informed by critical disability studies is offered to administrators to apply to placement practices in their programs. The heuristic identifies four areas for interrogation: normativity, difference fixation, ableist influence, and crip futurities. The aim of the article is to mark the presence of critical disability studies in the existing scholarship on placement and to promote analytic tools that demonstrate the methodological utility of critical disability studies in promoting social justice and ethical placement practice.

Keywords: disability, directed self-placement, normativity, social justice, equity, design, ableism

When I arrived in 2018 at my current institution in a newly created writing program administrator (WPA) position, I spent my first year auditing the program, exploring existing structures, practices, and values. During my second year, I was primed to launch several initiatives, mostly curricular in nature. Then the pandemic hit. While the initial pandemic year mostly involved moving from one fire to the next, one silver lining emerged: an opportunity to re-tool writing program pathways. Writing assessment researchers note that COVID-19 fast-tracked large-scale revisions of placement (Hirsch et al., 2024; Nastal et al., 2022, p. 5; Reifman et al., 2025, p. 424). In 2021, the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness reported that the pandemic "created opportunities for state systems to facilitate institutional adoption of multiple measures assessment" (Bickerstaff et al., 2021, p. 2) and that directed self-placement (DSP) options were created or expanded (Bickerstaff et al., 2021, pp. 5, 8, qtd. in Nastal et al., 2022). These shifts were true in my case. In 2019, I ended the timed writing diagnostic in my program. By 2020, I implemented a DSP survey. However, the DSP only provided a recommended pathway into co-requisite support. By 2022, I expanded DSP to address multiple pathways across our full writing program sequence, and I reduced reliance on standardized test scores as sole determinants for any pathway.[1] At the time, I saw these changes as a victory (and in many ways, I still do).

That said, as a reflexive administrator, I continually strive to take a critical eye to all program policies. I've been inspired by scholarship connecting WPA work and disability studies (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020; Ross & Browning, 2019; Vidali, 2015; Yergeau, 2016). This special issue provided an opportunity to critically analyze placement practices (including my own) through the lens of disability theory. Price's (2024) recent research on failures of access provides a productive frame for launching my inquiry. In sharing the findings of her disabled academics study, she writes that "access as envisioned and practiced in the contemporary university actually worsens inequity rather than mitigates it" (p. 5). I, too, am concerned about failures of access in university settings with many well-meaning initiatives and programs that center access or equity as a core value. Disability studies offers compelling analyses of how and why "access" efforts may perpetuate in-access and/or inequity.[2] For example, Kerschbaum (2014) analyzed diversity documents at "Midwestern University," and Dolmage (2017) offered critique of neoliberal co-opting of universal design for learning. In the literature on labor-based grading contracts, Carillo's (2021) critique of the inequity therein compelled a response from Inoue (2023) that accounted for a more nuanced address of normalizing conceptions of labor and time. Critical dissection of "good intentions" is a commonplace analytic exercise in disability studies. I aim to continue this exercise as applied to placement in writing programs; DSP is often touted as an agentive, empowering, student-centered tool that promotes access.

Disability scholars are especially attuned to ways in which institutions position, enable, or block students from entering places of opportunity and power. Price (2024) encourages critical evaluation of the "access" measures programs aim to implement. I am focusing on placement because it functions as high-stakes institutional positioning. In an interview with Wood (2023), disability theorist Dolmage pontificates on the future directions of disability studies and rhetoric and composition, noting that:

1 The sequence at my institution consists of three pathways: Pathway A is 7 credits and includes co-requisite support; pathway B is 6 credits of lower-division writing; and pathway C is 6 credits with a combination of lower- and upper-division writing courses. No stretch course or non-credit options are available.

2 While I am focusing in this article on placement, several scholars who have launched critiques on the faulty access promises of labor-based grading have deeply influenced my thinking. See Craig (2021) for an excellent example.

> [R]het/comp has been a sorting space. It's been a place to help students move ahead, but it's also been a place to intentionally hold students behind. So we need disability studies and we need an understanding of how disability is used and is attributed to groups to control access to privilege . . . That is going to continue to be writing studies relationship within the university. It is going to be used as a sorting gate. (p. 168)

Putting together Price's (2024) work on failure and Dolmage's (Wood, 2023) exigency above prompt me to question my role at the sorting gate. What access failures might I perpetuate as I promote my revised DSP? What normative demands, pressures, and values undergird the questions asked of students in my program's DSP?

Scholars steeped in placement research have (rightfully) zoomed in on conceptions of agency and choice. If the development of DSP aligns with the social turn in rhetoric and composition and the movement toward student-centered pedagogy and administration, critically studying the legitimacy of this assumed "choice" is paramount.[3] Attention to decision-making has led to compelling work trying to improve the power of "self" in self-placement and acknowledge the complexities of emergent agency. Various iterations of placement have evolved to account for this complexity: guided placement (White & Newell, 2022), informed placement (Bedore & Rossen-Knill, 2004; Toth et al., 2024), collaborative placement (Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Hirsch et al., 2024), rhetorical placement (Wang, 2020), and constructivist placement (Reifman et al., 2025), and most are working toward more nuanced accounting of agency.

In what follows, I draw on critical disability frameworks to contribute to the equitable advancement of placement procedures for postsecondary writing programs. I begin by marking the presence of disability, specifically the value of disability-as-insight (Browning, 2014; Brueggemann, 2001; Osorio, 2021; Vidali, 2008; Walters, 2015) and then explore assessment research that brings disability to bear on placement. I offer a four-part heuristic that draws on said research to provide a guided analytic framework for furthering equitable writing program pathways for students.[4] My intention is not to offer "promises" of access in placement design but to follow Dolmage's (2017) expression of universal design not as utopian finality but as "a form of hope, a manner of trying" (p. 116). My hope for the heuristic is to promote analytic tools that demonstrate the methodological utility of critical disability studies in promoting social justice and ethical placement practice.

Marking the Presence of Disability

Disability studies (DS) emerged from disability activism and offered disability not as deficit but as a productive means for analyzing social, political, cultural, and historical phenomena. The emergence of DS, particularly the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2017), invited scholars to interrogate the ways in which social structures create barriers and rely on normate (Garland-Thomson, 1997) ideals. This social turn rejected the medical model of disability which positioned disability as something to "fix" and instead sought to improve access, expose ableism, and empower disabled people.[5] Disability theorist Garland-Thomson (2012) argues that disability is a "generative

3 Toth (2018) notes the early 2000s saw the field of writing assessment "reexamining its own complicity in reproducing structures of social inequality" (p. 144; see also Inoue, 2009; Inoue & Poe, 2012; Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2016). In the "fourth wave" of writing assessment scholarship (Behm & Miller, 2012, qtd. in Toth, 2018, p. 144), researchers began questioning constructs of validity and racial disparity (Inoue, 2009; Inoue & Poe, 2012; Poe et al., 2014).

4 The development of my heuristic is indebted to several influential models (Alexander, 2024; Gallagher, 2010; Inoue, 2024).

5 I follow Osorio's (2021) rhetorical choice to alternate between person-first and identity-first language (p. 28).

resource rather than unequivocally restrictive liability" (p. 341). In a retrospective on the impact of Brueggemann's work on the field of rhetoric and composition, Brewer and Obermark (2018) point out that "the revolutionary idea that disability is critical insight, rather than lack or deficit . . . laid the groundwork for all future applications to rhetoric and composition" and they note the impact of "disability-as-insight" on a number of scholars' contributions to our discipline (e.g., Dolmage, 2006; Wood & Madden, 2013; Wood et al., 2014; Yergeau et al., 2013). Like Brueggemann, Osorio (2021) writes that "disability as insight values accessibility as an ethical stance, a rhetorical analysis, and a design framework" (p. 29). And Dolmage (2014) writes that "instead of erasing disability we can value it, allow it to be seen and experienced as generative and essential to meaning, instead of as essentially negative and negatable" (p. 96). Scholars working at this nexus of disability and rhetoric and composition share a perspective on the active, interventive nature of a DS framework, and this article aims to proceed in this vein. Rather than examining how placement might be improved for students with disabilities, I am working to illuminate how disability as a meaning-making critical design activity is a productive addition to the existing efforts for equitable placement design.

The addition of "critical" to disability studies is one more way to emphasize the applicability of disability theory to placement as an endeavor with *active intent*. Drawing on critical social theory and critical race studies, critical disability studies (CDS) links theory with praxis, analyzing "social processes and cultural meanings that impinge on social actors and restrict their ability to reflexively choose a more participatory society" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 180). As previously mentioned, much of the work in placement and writing assessment research is rightly focused on issues of agency and choice (Klausman & Lynch, 2022; Moos & Van Zanen, 2019; Tinkle et al., 2022; Toth, 2018; Wang, 2020). Engaging critical questions from contemporary disability scholars (Erevelles & Minear, 2011; Patsavas, 2013; Reddy, 2011), Minich (2016) proposes an approach to disability studies "that emphasizes its mode of analysis rather than its objects of study" (para. 5). Schalk (2017) affirms that we should "understand critical disability studies as a method, an approach, a theoretical framework and perspective—not (exclusively) a study of disabled people" (para. 1). Taken together, the CDS scholars I've highlighted provide a theoretical frame for the work I am suggesting in writing programs: applying CDS as an analytic method that can uncover ableist structures within writing programs. While I'm focusing on placement, this analytic has implications and possibilities for all areas of writing programs: policy, curriculum, structure, staffing, and more. Kryger (2023) argues that "just as there are structural and naturalized race- and class-based assumptions in assessment and placement practices, there are also able-bodied and pathologizing norms guiding conceptions of writing, reading, and rhetoric (pp. 32–33).

While the above paragraphs offer brief introduction to CDS, I also want to mark the presence of disability within placement scholarship. Doing this type of bibliographic analysis helps to identify the presence (or absence) of disability within placement scholarship, to amplify impactful work, to find opportunities for future CDS intervention in the conversation, and to enact citation justice (CCCC, 2022). The application of CDS to placement scholarship is sparse but emergent and necessary to propel social justice efforts in placement design. Dong et al. (2024) employ bibliometric methods to analyze trends in writing assessment research in the past 30 years. One result of particular interest to my work is their finding that "some research topics became less prominent or disappeared" (Dong et al., 2024, p. 7) across the time periods they studied. They identify "higher prominence" of disability from 1993–2002 followed by a notable drop during the following decade (2003–2012) and an even deeper reduction from 2013–2022 (p. 7). They

Table 1

Bibliometric Analysis of the Journal of Writing Assessment

Journal of Writing Assessment					
Time Period	Articles	Disab*	Roll Call	References or Notes	Other
2003–2013	6	13	3/13	4/13	6/13
2014–2024	23	98	14/98	24/98	60/98

Table 2

Bibliometric Analysis of Assessing Writing

Assessing Writing					
Time Period	Articles	Disab*	Roll Call	References or Notes	Other
1994–2002	6	7	1/7	3/7	3/7
2003–2013	3	20	0/20	5/20	15/20
2014–2024	20	90	14/90	56/90	48/90

speculate that the "decrease in ranks for 'disability' research may be due to the emergence and increasing attention towards other topics in writing assessment, reflecting the evolving research landscape and shifting priorities in this field" (p. 7). This trend is interesting, but I'm not sure the causal speculation quite captures the nature of the decrease. To further investigate the discursive presence of disability in writing assessment scholarship, I performed bibliometric analysis of disability presence in *Assessing Writing* (*AW*) and the *Journal of Writing Assessment* (*JWA*).[6] When searching for the presence of disability, 26 articles mention this term in some way in the *Journal of Writing Assessment* (2003–2024) and 29 in *Assessing Writing* (1994–2024); see Tables 1 and 2 for a breakdown of this analysis.

I am not surprised to see the number of articles mentioning disability increase over time in *JWA*. I am also not surprised to see a rise in "roll call" mentions of disability. In a review of T*oward a New Rhetoric of Difference* (Kerschbaum, 2014), Vidali (2014) emphasizes that "Kerschbaum makes disability theoretically, methodologically, and analytically important, yet her book avoids the tendency to either focus solely on disability or include disability in a long list of diverse identities (and then roll on by)" (para. 1). This idea of "rolling on by" is a frequent observation by rhetoricians studying disability. This might be some version of "visibility"; disability is making an

6 These two journals were selected because they are prominent journals in rhetoric and composition studies that are focused on assessment of writing. I searched each journal for truncated "disab". I included special issue introductions, book reviews, and research articles. I counted "disab" mentions in content, notes (including author notes) and references.

appearance in a list of identity markers, but this certainly doesn't indicate the presence of disability studies or disability theory to investigate a given assessment practice.

Yet another revelatory finding from this review of disability's presence in writing assessment scholarship is the significant influence of Kryger and Zimmerman's (2020) work on neurodivergence and labor-based grading. Of the 98 mentions of disability in *JWA* from 2014–2024, 54 (more than half) are within that piece alone, and several *JWA/AW* authors draw on their work from 2021–2025 (e.g., Graves, 2023; Koenig, et al., 2025; Voss et al., 2024). This brief analysis emphasizes the *kairotic* necessity of attention to disability in writing assessment research. Attention needs to focus less on individual students with disabilities and more on the critical application of disability theory to commonplace practices in writing programs, most pertinent here: placement. As Dolmage points out, this is the "sorting gate" (qtd. in Wood, 2023, p. 168).

Applying critical disability studies to placement practice encourages a productive focus on systemic, rather than individualistic, approaches to potential ableist ideologies that position students into different institutional pathways. In a review essay synthesizing Dolmage (2017) and Inoue (2015), McKinney (2018) observes that

> most approaches to writing assessment reveal how easily institutional practices and values trickle into the writing classroom and remain unchallenged—thereby welcoming racist standards. Accepting our role within racist and ableist institutions means accepting that our pedagogies and therefore assessment practices are steeped in racist and ableist markers of success and failure. (para. 7)

McKinney's (2018) insight here is made possible vis-à-vis the fusion of critical race theory (Inoue, 2015) and critical disability studies (Dolmage, 2017). McKinney (2018) goes on to note that both Inoue and Dolmage are less interested in "individual interactions" and instead "emphasize the institutional nature of systemic oppression, specifically ableism and racism" (para. 12). CDS enables critical investigation of our "promises" of access at the systemic level, evaluating the institutional reality of whether those assurances are realized. In what follows, I articulate four components of an analytic CDS heuristic that provides a theoretical frame and guiding questions to help administrators advance equitable and anti-ableist placement design.[7]

#1. Designing-Against-Normativity

The first element of the heuristic questions the normative values that may be lurking in self-placement design (see Table 3).

According to Nastal et al. (2022), "placement testing does more than direct students into certain courses . . . it communicates specific cultural values, language ideologies, and expectations to test-takers and participants" (p. 8; see also Gallagher, 2007). Are there ableist values communicated in DSP? Are there ways for WPAs to trouble inequitable social structures perpetuated by DSP? Nastal et al. (2022) urge assessment scholars to "consider how writing assessments are shaped by dominant epistemological assumptions, values, and language ideologies that are raced, classed, gendered, colonial/ imperialistic, and often predicated on normativities regarding physical abilities, sensory processing, and neurotypicality" (p. 14). I am interested in their connection between placement and power and their association between placement and normativity. Toth and Aull (2014) studied a corpus of 30 DSPs and identified a number of concepts (e.g., reading practices/ abilities, study habits, pace/time) and measured dimensions of those concepts (e.g., attitudes,

7 I have also provided an abbreviated heuristic as a table in the supplemental materials.

Table 3

CDS Heuristic for Writing Program Placement: Normativity

CDS Heuristic for Writing Program Placement				
	Guiding Questions	Goal	Key Words	Suggested Readings
Normativity	In what ways does my institution's writing program placement mechanism rely on normativity and/or normative dimensions in design?	Identify and interrogate potentially ableist values, ideologies, and expectations inherent in placement design/ instrument	*normal, anxiety, confidence, time, up-placing, down-placing*	Dolmage (2017) McRuer (2017) Saunders (2017) Kryger & Zimmerman (2020) Van Der Weele (2024) Wood (2017a)

behaviors, extracurricular literacy experiences, self-assessed ability), questioning the "widespread use (80%) of feelings and attitudes as a key dimension" in DSPs (p. 10). They speculate that "while writing anxiety can sure influence students' writing abilities . . . less subjective dimensions are likely to yield better measurements" (Toth & Aull, 2014, p. 10). DSP designer attitudes about the productive/unproductive relationship between anxiety and writing is one example of where normativity may be infiltrating question design. Yet another, of course, is the concept of pace/ time (Wood 2017a). Wood (2017a) notes that ideas about "temporal conditions of production" allow "normative assumptions to go unchecked" and that "[s]uch omission may disenfranchise students whose bodies and minds don't adhere to expectations for commonplace pace" (p. 261). In short, DSPs are laden with ideologies of ability. Drawing on CDS's interrogation of normativity can reduce ableist design practices in placement.

One dimension warranting critical analysis is the notion of confidence. Balay and Nelson (2012) write, "as educators, we need to consider whether students' placement decisions reflect ability and skill, or whether they measure confidence and comfort with academic settings instead, which are uncomfortably close to gender, race, and class identifications" (para. 8). I would add that DSPs (particularly those questions that invite students to report confidence) may hinge on ableist notions of self-hood, connecting "capability" and learning potential. If capability is the means or ability to do something, but we are crafting questions to gauge the dimension of confidence or anxiety, it's worth asking what we are really measuring and by what standard. Balay and Nelson (2012) caution that "confidence is elusive, subjective, and very hard to quantify or study" (para. 31). Citing the work of Lundeberg et al. (1994), Balay and Nelson (2012) warn that men can report more confidence than women so we "can't assume a relationship between confidence and ability" (para. 31). We could replace "gender" with disability and question these same tacit connections when it comes to DSP design. Moreover, the connection between one's proximity to the "norm" may likewise impact confidence levels. As Davis (2017) notes, "the concept of the norm . . . implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm" (p. 3). Confidence, as

a measurable quality, runs the danger of being considered an a priori good associated with future performance.

Toth and Aull (2014), however, have suggested that these important ethical concerns should shape rather than dissuade DSP development. And I'm in agreement. Toth (2019) references the work of Naynaha (2016), who critiques the "'paternalistic' disregard for the decision-making capacities of the racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students who attend these institutions (p. 199, qtd. in Toth, 2019). Even as I offer a heuristic for interrogating DSP design via critical disability studies, I am not interested in abandoning a tool that advocates for student agency and resists program dependency on standardized assessment scores (e.g., timed tests). Toth (2018, 2019) provides compelling evidence that DSP is fairer than such standardized tests but cautions that achieving the equitable promises of DSP depends heavily on critical design of the instrument. Toth's research makes a strong case regarding DSP as an improvement on past reliance on standardized test scores, and I agree with Toth that "careful, critical design" is key to moving DSP practices closer to their equitable goals and addressing the powerful critiques launched by scholars attuned to issues of oppressed groups (e.g., Ketai, 2012).

To that end, the robust body of research on DSP offers numerous lines of inquiry ripe for disability-centered analysis, particularly any design element that may rely on a normative center. Dolmage (2017) writes:

> As students and teachers critique spaces and interfaces, lessons from disability studies offer ways to prioritize and value disability, while developing the critical tools to intervene in the production of cultural space . . . Disability studies points up the interestedness of categories of disability, and the material and social practices that inscribe, codify, and enforce both normalcy and abnormalcy—the programs and uses of normativity. Disability studies scholars show that disability as an invented category serves primarily to reify or reinforce a fictional norm, organizing classifications of difference around an unexamined, privileged, and normative center. (p. 130)

In what ways do the dimensions from Toth and Aull's (2014) study uphold that normative center? How do the classifications of difference present in our placement design reify the privileged and fictional norm? These are CDS-invoked questions useful to placement evaluation. Dolmage (2017) draws on the concept of "design[ing] against normativity" (Joost & Bieling, 2012) to argue for "consciously work[ing] against the values and habits and biases of mainstream design practices" (p. 130). Normative placement design might rely on an "underlying ideology of ability" and "compulsory able-bodiedness demands that the disabled subject do whatever possible to overcome bodily limitations and approach normalcy, all while disguising these actions as an admirable personal choice rather than a requirement for survival in an ableist world" (Saunders, 2017, p. 75; see also McRuer, 2017; Siebers, 2008).

Perhaps one of the most compelling examples of this line of inquiry comes from Kryger and Zimmerman's (2020) application of neurodivergence to inequities in labor-based contract grading. Influenced by CDS scholars such as Brueggemann (2001), Price (2011), Dolmage (2017), Kafer (2013), and Wood (2017a), Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) argue that

> these seemingly value-positive interventions may actually further marginalize the neurodivergent student population; we must interrogate and uncover the neurological norms inherent in these systems, so we may better center the needs of all our students when constructing and implementing grading contracts. (p. 2)

My work here aims to provide this heuristic as a tool for examining the norms inherent in placement systems. Kryger and Zimmerman's (2020) critique of the "value-positive intervention" draws back to mind Price's (2024) study on the experiences of disabled academics, namely that the very same access efforts espoused by the university may perpetuate inequity rather than promote access.

One additional recent study on equity and placement analyzed data from two constructivist placement iterations at a large public university (Reifman et al., 2025), ultimately revealing three themes that emerged from their data, two of might be productively analyzed via CDS. The theme "playing it safe" might be interpreted as risk management for students with disabilities. Wood's (2017b) qualitative study of the risk management strategies disabled students employ to manage the perils of disclosure in the postsecondary context likewise elucidates this theme. The theme of "socioeconomic and cultural impacts" connects most directly to normativity: "Trends in student reflective writing reveal that some students would have under-placed themselves due to perceptions about their educational pasts in terms of socioeconomic status or cultural normativity [emphasis added]" (Reifman et al., 2025, p. 441). We could ask two questions in response to this data reflection: 1) How might students with disabilities show up in this data, up- or down-placing themselves based on past experiences or normativity tacit in the questions/materials; 2) How might disability—as a theoretical lens—help revise this process such that these inequities might be decreased?

As one final example of the theoretical utility of CDS, let's take up Inoue's (2023) comments about all grading being normative and thus vulnerable to critiques of ableism:

> Most guidelines and criteria will be vulnerable to the criticism of promoting a normative, ableist, and neurotypical standard, particularly if those designing the grading ecology are oriented as able-bodied and neurotypical . . . In other words, the clearer and more explicit we are about what we want and how we want it, the more ableist and neurotypical the assignment could be. (p. 30)

Inoue (2023) points out the parallels between transparent standardization in assessment and normativity as a property or characteristic of that approach. However, scholars in CDS offer more nuanced analyses of normativity. Van der Weele (2024), for example, traces three ways of "doing" normativity among CDS scholars and identifies problems with each approach, ultimately offering some nuanced improvements (see also Vehman & Watson, 2016). One solution useful to conversations about placement equity (and grading equity for that matter) is connected to the second problem identified by Van der Weele (2024), which "resides in the separation of 'fact' and 'values'. . . the problem is that scholars are insufficiently aware that normativity is always already a part of the empirical reality we observe—a point that, if we want to 'do' normativity right, ought to be explicated and explored" (p. 535). Van der Weele (2024) argues that "one way to address this lacuna is to turn normativity into an object of research, by investigating normativity as it is expressed in practice" (p. 539). This always already norm aligns with Inoue's (2023) observations about the presence of normativity as a critique in standardizing grading, but the nuanced articulation of how we might "do" normativity in CDS allows for theoretical movement beyond this observation. It invites interrogation of how normativity might be an object of research (in this case, normativity as practiced in placement design). Writing assessment scholars should look to disability theorists, who hold considerable expertise in parsing out the cultural, empirical, historical, social, and political realities and consequences of normativity. Drawing on CDS can help assessment scholars to address these vulnerabilities of normativity and ableism.

My Application of Heuristic Element #1

For each heuristic element, I share my own application as a case study of sorts, hoping to offer my own experience to bridge theory with practice. With this first element, I have three interventions to share: 1) survey question analysis and revision; 2) enhanced advisor training; 3) focused professional development. I reviewed all questions in my DSP survey through the lens of normativity (specifically drawing on CDS). As a result of this exercise, I have revised several survey questions (questions are primarily attitudinal and most use a Likert scale for response collection). For example, one DSP prompt states, "I complete writing assignments on time." The phrase "on time" may rely on normative constructions of one's ability to meet an assigned deadline and to complete the task in a normative construct of time. A simple revision of this sample prompt might be "I complete writing assignments on time to the best of my ability." That small prepositional revision accounts for the variance in temporal experiences while still acknowledging effort to attend to structural time constraints (e.g., a class deadline).

Another prompt states, "I feel confident that I can overcome any challenges I confront in a writing project." The following revision reduces reliance on subjective notions of confidence: "When confronted with challenges in a writing project, I have strategies to work through these challenges." I also enhanced our advisor training to account for potential up-placing or down-placing concerns (Reifman et al., 2025). The student-advisor conversation can and should critically account for the dangerous cultural values that may privilege those students with more confidence and/or those identifying closer to the "normative center" (Dolmage, 2017, p. 130). Finally, I am facilitating professional development for a faculty reading group with two CDS sources focused on normativity (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020; Van der Weele, 2024).[8] We'll discuss and analyze all elements of the writing program that may perpetuate ableist normativity (placement, policy, curriculum, and more).

#2. Fixed Difference, Universal Students, & Emergent-Relational Agency

The next element of the heuristic I propose involves creating more space for emergent, flexible, and relational notions of identity and difference through an examination of how placement design may be *fixing* difference (see Table 4).

To place something is to fix it to a certain spot, to position it locationally. This practice of fixing difference is both practically and democratically motivated: we want students to position themselves in an educational pathway that they believe (and we believe?) is the most appropriate environment for learning. The "appropriateness" of the pathway hinges considerably on the effectiveness of decision-making and the conditions of informed engagement with placement instruments (Tinkle et al., 2022; Toth, 2018, 2019).

Recent work on placement, social justice, and agency highlights this need for attention to the instrument and the discursive moment of exchange between entering students and writing programs/faculty. Wang (2020) proposes a rhetorical DSP model drawing on theories of rhetorical agency as emergent (pp. 51–52; see also Cooper, 2011) and avoids fixing agency as property (something an individual has or does not have). The rhetorical model provides a "rhetorical rehearsal" for students that works to distribute agency and responsibility among students and various stakeholders in the placement process (Wang, 2020, p. 53). Hirsch et al.

8 Toth (2018) recounts a workshop which might serve as a model for this type of work, describing a moment where student experiences with placement were shared with participants to elucidate distressing instances of shame, dissatisfaction, and frustration (p. 139).

Table 4

CDS Heuristic for Writing Program Placement: Fixed Difference

CDS Heuristic for Writing Program Placement				
	Guiding Questions	Goal	Key Words	Suggested Readings
Fixed Difference	In what ways does my institution's writing program placement mechanism fix difference and deny complexities of identity?	Identify and interrogate elements of placement that deny differences and/or falsely promise agency	*identity, diversity, agency, difference, collaboration, negotiation*	Kerschbaum (2014) McRuer (2017) Smilges (2021) Reifman et al. (2025)

(2024) offer collaborative writing placement as a means of enhancing student agency and reducing experiences of feeling "deficient" when placed (p. 16). This collaborative model allows for exposure of students to local writing constructs (e.g., sample reading and writing from program courses) and faculty review of student reflections. With similar motivations in mind, Reifman et al. (2025) propose constructivist writing placement to enhance student agency and reduce inequity. Like the collaborative model, in the constructivist model, placement is determined through dialogic exchange between student self-reflection and faculty input (Reifman et al., 2025, p. 431). In each of these models, the researcher-designers aim to acknowledge the complexity and emergent nature of agency and identity. And they are promising examples of this heuristic element at work.

To add to this good work, a key critical lens that CDS might provide is an exposure of the illusion of choice. Writing assessment scholars rightly focus on agency and decision-making; in this high-stakes moment is the "promise" of empowerment, access, agency, and social justice. But if there are problematic constraints on that choice, no hopeful intentions will save us. This brings to mind—once again—work in disability studies that exposes the inaccessibility of promised access measures (Dolmage, 2017, pp. 138–140; Hubrig, 2023; Kerschbaum, 2014, pp. 29–55; Price, 2024). McRuer (2017) posited the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness and (significantly to my work here) aligns this compulsion with agentive choice (or lack thereof). He writes, "compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice" (McRuer, 2017, p. 399). With all the attention to confidence in ethical critiques of DSP (Aull, 2021, p. 5; Eckstein & Ferris, 2018; Ferris & Eckstein, 2020; Hirsh et al., 2024, p. 16; Johnson, 2022, p. 105), McRuer's (2017) notion of compulsory able-*bodiedness* elucidates the need to question how DSP might be grounded in compulsory able-*mindedness*. Kerschbaum (2014) notes this illusion of choice, writing that "categorical identification [gets] imposed upon a situation rather than on differences that emerge over the course of interpersonal interaction (p. 9). She writes that "differences are frequently called out as singular or unusual, but they are not always

examined alongside the (sometimes unstated or assumed) norms against which those differences are often cast (Kerschbaum, 2014, p. 1). Kerschbaum's (2014) work on agency and difference is a productive parallel to amplify the necessity of work by Hirsch et al. (2024), Wang (2020), and Reifman et al. (2025), particularly in terms of promoting agency among marginalized students during dialogic exchange in placement decision-making.

Critical disability studies, then, provides a useful methodology to examine the "norms" inherent in DSP design and/or writing program constructs, specifically in terms of how a fixed universal is positioned against difference or deviation from that normed center. Kerschbaum (2014) critiques the *difference fixation* in her work advocating for more relational considerations of student agency:

> When teachers learn with their students, they situate what they know from personal experience and professional training alongside interpersonal interactions that enrich, complicate, and challenge those forms of knowing. And while writing teachers generally realize they cannot assume that the students in front of them are exactly like the other students they know personally or have encountered in the scholarly literatures, such comparisons remain a central strategy for responding to issues of difference in classrooms. (p. 57)

While Kerschbaum (2014) is focusing here on classrooms, the same might apply to the comparative nature of a placement metric. Kerschbaum (2014) suggests that to "avoid this difference fixation . . . [we need] an orientation to difference as rhetorically negotiated (p. 57). She claims that "difference is never fully knowable, and teachers should not aim to know their students as much as willingly participate with them in processes of coming to know one another in the writing classroom (p. 59). Kerschbaum's (2014) emphasis on emergence and relationality echoes arguments made by Hirsch et al. (2024), Wang (2020), and others working on placement, and her critique of "fixing" difference is also very helpful to analyses of normate design of placement structures.

Johnson (2022) seems to provide an example of this "fixing" of difference:

> When students encounter the figured world of college writing, their identity and agency have almost certainly been constructed by their previous experience in the world of school . . . Self identified bad students have difficulty accessing the world of school, and material feedback reinforces their identity as low status characters in these worlds. When students enter college, they have positioned themselves (and have been positioned) in the figure world of school based on test scores, grades, and experiences. And they carry this identity as they attempt to learn the figured worlds of college and college writing. (p. 102)

They are fixed. Positioned. Placed. In what ways might placement practice avoid this fixation and instead allow for rhetorically negotiated difference? Like many assessment scholars I've highlighted in this piece, I suggest focusing on the instrument (and concomitant materials) in an effort to avoid fixing difference, casting a universal student, or promoting compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. The influence of race, class, gender, and disability on self-assessment is noted by several writing assessment scholars (Johnson, 2022, p. 219; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999), and Ketai (2012) argues that self-placement materials often promote individualistic, white values and literacy practices (pp. 247–48). Placement materials may perpetuate self-fulfilling prophecy in which students are positioned as underprepared writers even before they are asked to position themselves.

Collaborative negotiation seems to offer the best antidote to universalist constructions of students in DSP design. Reifman et al. (2025) note that "DSP may assume a universal construction of a student (Lewiecki-Wilson et al., 2000), in part by presuming that students enter placement opportunities with the same educational experiences and abilities to self-assess (Nicolay, 2002; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999).[9] Placement administrators should question how DSP materials rely on this "universal" student, most importantly when this reliance focuses on what capacities or abilities students do not have compared to what they should (Heilker & Yergeau, 2011, p. 496, qtd. in Kerschbaum, 2014, p. 63). Kerschbaum (2014) emphasizes a notion of agency that is dynamic, relational, and emergent, writing that "taken together these three elements . . . constitute a rhetorical presentation of difference in their emphasis on how individuals call attention to or suppress difference as well as how they respond to differences displayed by others" (p. 71). Her response to fixing difference is answerable engagement, which she defines as "situating dialogic practice within a nexus of morally weighty, responsible, and responsive ties to other humans, all centered on a commitment to articulating difference" (Kerschbaum, 2014, p. 76). While Kerschbaum (2014) is focusing on student-teacher and student-student dialogue, if research on DSP is doubling down on the vital significance of the collaborative dialogue in the decision-making moment, answerable engagement provides a means for articulating difference and avoiding assumptions of a normate, universal student-subject upon which much of DSP might hinge. Hirsch et al. (2024) and Kerschbaum's (2014) arguments are quite similar. The collaboration "recasts placement as a conversation" (Estrem et al., 2018, p. 63, qtd. in Hirsch et al., 2024, p. 3), valuing both faculty involvement in students' academic pathways and placement design that is both responsive and flexible. Reifman et al. (2025), too, promote the constructivist framework as an alternative to fixed difference (pp. 430–431), accomplished via collaboration and dialogue between faculty and students.

For this element of the heuristic, I invite WPAs and placement coordinators to zoom in on the assumed universal, able-minded student that DSP design/materials might construct and work toward answerable engagement instead (and as a complimentary concept alongside more recent models). I also offer this element to amplify the agentive work coming from writing assessment scholars such as Wang (2020), Hirsch et al. (2024), Johnson (2022), and Reifman et al. (2025). Kerschbaum's (2014) work on difference fixation and McRuer's (2017) notion of compulsory able-bodiedness are useful parallels to support the potential of more well-developed constructions of agency, dialogue, and relational collaboration in DSP design. All that said, Hirsch et al. (2024) are right to devote time to thinking through compensation. Collaboration and dialogue take time and labor. If more schools move to this model, who pays the collaborators? Are more student fees tacked on to pay for this labor? How does that shape the shifting burden that some writing assessment researchers have noted as potentially ethically problematic?

My Application of Heuristic Element #2

Perhaps my biggest takeaway from this element of the heuristic is the importance of dialogic exchange somewhere within the self-placement design. My own DSP is exclusively attitudinal and results in a quantified recommendation for a pathway. The student then discusses

9 I am not surprised to see Reifman et al. (2025) draw on the work of Lewiecki-Wilson et al. (2000) to critique the dangers of universalizing students. Lewiecki-Wilson's early influence on disability in rhetoric/composition studies is significant (e.g., see Lewiecki-Wilson & Brueggemann, 2007). This is just one more example of how scholars working in disability are especially helpful in moving assessment conversations forward.

that recommendation with their assigned advisor. Advisors on my campus are staff and neither myself as WPA or any writing faculty discuss pathways with students who are making decisions about placement. In reflecting on the importance of collaboration-negotiation in the recent work of Wang (2020) and Reifman et al. (2025), I am compelled to focus attention on post-survey conversation. Drawing on Kerschbaum's (2014) answerable engagement, my plan is to propose two options for re-design: Option 1) Position writing faculty in placement conversations with students (via reflective addition to survey and faculty input à la Reifman et al., 2025); Option 2) Re-design advisor training with guiding questions for students, questions focused on the influence of past experiences with writing how that might be influencing their placement decision (Johnson, 2022). Option 1 accounts for Kerschbaum's (2014) insistence on the value of interpersonal interactions that challenge static (fixed) understanding of student identity and ability while also employing contemporary research on enhancing agency in self-placement design (Reifman et al., 2025). Similarly, option 2 works to acknowledge how past experiences might be impacting their placement decision in ways that "fix" their identity (i.e., "bad" writer) but would require less infrastructural change (no addition of reflective component and no re-routing of staffing labor/resources). In sum, this element of the heuristic invites analysis of the DSP instrument (should it involve more than just the survey?) and prompts analysis of how the post-survey conversation might be enhanced to promote more authentic student agency (rather than just propagating an "illusion of choice").

#3. Ableist Rhetorical Creep

If the field is moving toward a more relational DSP model, critical attention to prejudice among interlocutors is necessary. This element of the heuristic asks placement administrators to analyze ableist influences in the decision-making process (see Table 5).

Faculty attitudes remain one of the largest barriers to access in higher education. Sniatecki et al. (2015) note this is especially true for students with mental disabilities. If agency is emergent and relational (Cooper, 2011; Kerschbaum, 2014; Wang, 2020) and agency is critical to the socially just agenda of DSP design, we must account for the discriminatory attitudinal influence among administrators, faculty, and staff involved in placement negotiation. I will call this ableist rhetorical

Table 5

CDS Heuristic for Writing Program Placement: Ableist Creep

CDS Heuristic for Writing Program Placement				
	Guiding Questions	Goal	Key Words	Suggested Readings
Ableist Creep	In what ways does my institution's writing program placement mechanism allow for ableist influence in the placement decision-making process and in what ways might our program mitigate such influence?	Identify and reduce ableism among stakeholders	*ableism, prejudice, interlocutors, rhetoric, collective access, intersectionality, agency, choice*	Ketai (2012) Nario-Redmond et al. (2019) Goodley (2014) Konrad (2021) Hubrig (2023)

creep. If my component on normativity focuses on broad framing of DSP institutionally and my component on fixed selves focuses on the instrument-mechanism design, this third component focuses on the interlocutors in the rhetorical negotiation of placement. Considering Ketai's (2012) argument that self-placement materials often promote white values (pp. 247–48), ableist values are likely present as well. How so? And if so, these might also creep into the conversations that advisors or faculty have with students who are making placement decisions.

DSP models are widely varied, but I will assume that the following stakeholders may be involved in the rhetorical ecology of placement: students, advisors, administrators, friends, family, and faculty. Faculty, as those with the most curricular expertise, are arguably best positioned to provide guidance on decision-making. However, they are not free from bias, prejudice, and ableist attitudes about performance, skills, work habits, and so on. Hirsch et al. (2024) report findings that privileged groups tend to get "up-placed" while under-represented minorities were more likely to be "down-placed" (p. 13), and they argue that we should "work with faculty readers on understanding where biases may be influencing their determinations as they read students' responses and decide on placements in edge cases" (p. 13).This work may suggest ableist creep in the dialogic exchange between students and faculty. In their recent study on inequities in DSP, Tinkle et al. (2022) observe that:

> DSP recommendations are not necessarily well understood by all the various program and academic or non-academic advisors with whom students meet as they put their course schedules together–indeed, advisors may well disagree with the recommendations, and their influence on students' choices may not align with DSP values. (p. 7)

A given writing program, for instance, may value labor-based or engagement-based participation, but an advisor's lack of understanding this value may negatively influence a student's placement choice. This, too, might be understood as ableist rhetorical creep.

This creep demands critical attention to the rhetorical influence various institutional interlocutors have on the moment of student choice. Saenkhum (2018) conducted a study of multilingual students, ultimately identifying influential conditions that impact student agency in placement decision-making. Inoue's (2023) work on cripping labor-based grading (largely a response to disability-centered critique from Carillo (2021), reflects on the trickiness of student choice:

> Student choice seems so right, so democratic, so student-centered, but classrooms are always determined places . . . Grading ecologies also create boundaries and pressures in particular directions, even when a teacher says, "you choose. It's your education. What will engage you most? Do that." A student cannot choose just anything to do. And they certainly cannot choose to do nothing. They also have their histories of other classrooms and teachers working on them, sometimes tacitly, other times overtly. When a student makes any choice, we can consider how much of that choice was determined in the system, was coerced, or was a product of conditions that led to the student consenting to something they would not have under other conditions and influences. Keep in mind that we are always in determined conditions, that is, conditions that both limit our choices and direct us toward particular decisions. Such determined conditions do not make student choice bad, nor even "false consciousness," but they do call into question student agency as an exercise in freedom, control, or student interest and engagement. We cannot fully avoid these determined conditions in our courses, but knowing them, I think,

> helps us understand that student choice is not a 100% good thing, untainted from teacher expectations or influence, nor from the normative, ableist, and neurotypical world outside of the classroom. (p. 98)

Inoue's (2023) hope for awareness encourages attention to interlocutors' attitudes and values in the rhetorical collaboration of placement. Recent work on placement offers compelling arguments for relational-collaborative agentive work in placement design (Hirsch et al., 2024; Reifman et al., 2025; Wang, 2020), but what of the attitudes and values of the other various interlocutors? What recourse do WPAs/placement directors have to combat such infiltration? Not only does the instrument design and program design merit attention but WPAs should also forward a campus narrative to individuals who might influence a student's placement choice. To reduce bias, interlocutors should be well versed in the values of both DSP and the writing program itself. In my own context, I've secured a speaking slot at the annual professional advisors' orientation at my institution. This is a key opportunity to share our program values and train advisors on holding these conversations with students during the placement process.

WPAs should intentionally plan professional development for placement influencers to promote anti-racism and anti-ableism as core program values. Once again, disability studies provides frameworks useful to this work. Disability researchers Nario-Redmond et al. (2019) analyze contemporary experiences of ableism, identifying hostile, benevolent, and ambivalent categories. Of these categories, paternalizing experiences rose to the top, as reported by the disabled people in their study (N = 135). The concept of benevolent ableism can "manifest as pity, paternalistic protection, and unprovoked praise for everyday activities" and "normative pressures seem to dictate the extension of charitable kindness" (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019, p. 729). They go on to say that this "'positivity' bias does not necessarily equate to truly positive appraisals. Sometimes, low expectations for a group drive perceptions of astonishment toward members for simply accomplishing routine events like . . . getting a college education" (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019, p. 729; see also Glick & Fiske, 2001; Lynch & Finkelstein, 2015; Pruett & Chan, 2006; Nario-Redmond & Anderson, 2014). Disability theorist Goodley (2014) connects benevolence to neoliberal intent, arguing that "notions of autonomy and rationality are not . . . benevolent offerings of a progressive society but ideological hooks required for the 'efficient running of capitalism' (Erevelles, 2002, p. 13, qtd. in Goodley, 2014, p. 10). How might this paternalism show up in placement design or placement rhetorical exchange? Disability researcher Konrad (2021) draws attention to the ways in which students may experience "access fatigue" when engaging in rhetorical situations about their abilities, noting that "projecting a comfortable, friendly disabled self, even in the face of paternalism, is often a requirement for engaging audiences in access" (p. 189). Research exclusively focused on these ableist dimensions will productively move DSP scholarship closer to the student-centered, socially just principles upon which it is so often adopted.

The benevolent version of ableism is a good starting place for anti-ableist DSP analysis. Hubrig (2023) offers the concept of favor access to elucidate processes where access is offered to marginalized individuals, "making the institution appear benevolent" (p. 120), but ultimately favor access "expects gratitude: that we should be thankful for partial access (or even inaccess) because the self-described benevolent institution tried" (p. 121). Hubrig (2023) offers collective access as a deliberate alternative:

> Collective access understands that we can't rely on our institutions to provide access when it's their very values that create inaccess and inequities. While favor access is rooted in

> academia's capitalist, colonialist values of independence, competition, and meritocracy, collective access centers interdependence, collaboration, and care. (p. 124)

Collective access might be useful as a counterpart rationale for the suggestions for collaboration and dialogue in several recent iterations of placement design (Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Hirsch et al., 2024; Reifman et al., 2025). Kryger (2023) echoes Hubrig, arguing that "it is imperative that we attend to what disability justice advocates have to say about collective access and collective care" (p. 33). However, this argument for recognition of collective care and operationalizing collective access must acknowledge the ableist rhetorical creep among interlocutors in rhetorical moments of negotiated placement. Inoue et al. (2011) were early identifiers of the necessity of this line of inquiry, asking "how is agency distributed differently among students, or student groups, in high-stakes assessment like course placements" (p. 20)? If agency is emergent and negotiated among stakeholders, identifying ableist creep and engaging collective access becomes paramount if the socially just promises of placement aim to fully realize.

My Application of Heuristic Element #3

Application of this element prompted me to identify places and spaces where ableism might creep: Who are the stakeholders and what are the spaces of their rhetorical interventions in the placement process? I began by identifying all interlocutors in the DSP process: students, professional advising staff, writing program faculty/staff, students and their friends and family, institutional administration, and data engineers. I then mapped the moment of rhetorical inventions and ranked those according to impact. For example, the survey itself and the student-advisor conversation ranked at the top of my list, but I also identified data reports on DSP and our writing program website (which describes the purpose of the DSP). As a result of this heuristic analysis, my action steps include additional training for advisors and efforts to improve campus narrative for writing program placement. For the advisor training, I will focus specifically on CDS research on neoliberal benevolence (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019) and favor access (Hubrig, 2023). Advisors may exercise such benevolence when they push a recommendation for co-requisite support even if/when students may be expressing a desire to avoid such placement. For the campus narrative, I have identified three web spaces that communicate DSP purpose and values. The Writing Program Committee will revise our communication in ways that intentionally promote anti-ableism, anti-racism, and neurodivergence. Taken together, these two efforts promote informed interlocutors and more intentional campus discourse surrounding placement.

#4. Creating Crip Futurity

The final element of the heuristic asks placement administrators to investigate the temporality of DSP (see Table 6).

How (and for how long) do students engage in the process of DSP? What are the steps and pathways through the DSP process? Why are they sequenced in the way they are? Are there alternate pathways and possibilities (for challenges, see, e.g., Reifman et al., 2025, p. 425)? What types of production are privileged in the DSP? Writing spontaneously? Speaking to folks? Navigating technology? Reading complex texts in short amounts of time? This investigatory suggestion draws on universal design to enhance the inclusive intentionality behind the placement mechanism.[10] Are there multiple means of representation, providing users "various ways of acquiring information"

10 I remain mindful of the problematic nature of calling this "universal" (Dolmage, 2017, pp. 134–135).

Table 6

CDS Heuristic for Writing Program Placement: Crip Futurity

CDS Heuristic for Writing Program Placement				
	Guiding Questions	Goal	Key Words	Suggested Readings
Crip Futurity	In what ways does my institution's writing program placement dictate a particular futurity for students (and deny other futurities)?	Identify temporality within DSP and promote multiple/ alternate temporalities	*time, sequence, universal design, internalized bias*	Dolmage (2015) Kryger & Mitchum, (2024) Kafer (2013) Johnson (2022) Price (2024)

(Dolmage, 2015, para. 3)? Does the DSP allow for multiple means of expression, providing users with alternatives for demonstrating what they know" (Dolmage, 2015, para. 3)? Soliciting student feedback on user-experience with placement instruments is an excellent place to start (see Kryger & Mitchum, 2024). Dolmage (2017) suggests focusing on the verb—design (p. 122) because the "futurity of Universal Design . . . makes space for different disability futures that we know are close to impossible to imagine in an ableist society, and particularly in one of its most ableist institutions, the university" (p. 123).

Imagining disability futurity is informed by understanding disability experience. The transformative nature of this emphasis on design and user experience is a promising step forward in ethical DSP design. "DSP can be—but isn't automatically—a form of advocacy" (Kryger et al., 2024, p. 6). This is the danger of a promise of access. Yes, the roots of DSP are firmly planted in an ethos of critical pedagogy, the social turn, and empowering student voice. But good intentions are never enough. To continue improving the explicit connection between DSP design and our social justice aims, we will benefit from applying CDS frames to our surveys, reflective tasks, timing, faculty-student interaction, challenge opportunities, and program constructs. And we must supplement that work with collection of user-feedback.

In many ways, DSP has evolved as a response to the challenges rhetoric/composition studies has launched against the effectiveness of timed writing as an effective measure of writing abilities (see debates about timed writing, including Huot 1996; O'Neill, 2003; Reifman, 2024, pp.1–4; Yancey, 1999). That's certainly why I have moved toward DSP at my own institution. However, critically analyzing the timing, linearity, and determinism of placement (especially drawing on CDS) is productive. Constructions of time pervade even the most current discussions of DSP. Time to graduation. Time spent completing the DSP (Reifman et al. 2025, p. 436). Time to decide. If time is understood as the progression toward futurity, what types of futures does DSP make possible? Impossible? There are multiple choices for students, but in what ways does the DSP predetermine those futures and which students might select which futures?

Applying disability theory such as Dolmage (2017), Price (2024), and Kafer (2013) to the mechanism of placement, an institutional tool that determines futures (cast as student "choice"),

we can ask how our design forecloses potential futures and how it invites others. We can ask how certain questions may be so deeply connected to past negative educational or personal experiences that we unwittingly shuffle students toward a futurity that relies on an undercurrent of ableism. Reifman (2024) recommends "reimagining the use of the questionnaire as a fundamental tool and considering how time and timing factors into self-placement" (p. 41). This recommendation aligns with critical disruptive theory about time that is coming from disability scholars. Reifman (2024) observes the influence of critical pedagogy as well, which provides a means of resisting the replication of the current structure and instead 'entering into a critical dialogue with history and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present'" (Giroux, 2011, p. 715, qtd. in Reifman, 2024, p. 166). Reifman's engagement with both time and futurity is ripe for synthesis with disability theorists such as Price (2024) and Kafer (2013).

In synthesizing Price's (2024) work on disability futurity and Reifman's (2024) work on the future of placement research, temporality emerges as a key concern. Reifman (2024) writes, "placement could be not just a means of looking in the past for understanding the future, but also looking to the past to understand the past and how heavily certain belief systems were stressed" (p. 172). How might a DSP question reflect Reifman's hypothetical? Perhaps instead of asking questions about the assumed "good" practices of reading and/or writing, we ask a question that challenges those ideas or asks students to identify what types of literacy practices were most valued (privileged) in their past educational experiences (instead of simply ascertaining to what extent they themselves have successfully adopted those practices/belief systems)? Johnson (2022) writes:

> DSP requires students to imagine the future and, as Richard Haswell notes, that future—even with good information—ultimately involves an unknown course taught by an unknown teacher. The method further requires students to assess their present (and past selves). If students do not or cannot assess themselves accurately, Haswell contends, self-placement runs the danger of becoming directed self-fulfilling prophecy. Especially troubling is the idea that self-placement decisions are manifestations of internalized racial and linguistic bias. (p. 100)

Equally troubling is the idea these decisions may also be laden with internalized ableism (see Campbell, 2008, for an exploration of the connections between internalized racism-ableism).

In addition to the concerns about internalized ableism present in student's imaginings, ableist assumptions about pace of learning are likewise a temporal concern. When we ask students to assess their past selves, we have the advantage of empowering their agency, but we need to couple this empowerment with attention to the selves our DSP makes possible. For example, do DSP questions position students into identifying as "slow" learners who need more time to complete tasks than their peers? If constructs of time/pacing are often most applicable when stretch options are available, what is the function of such constructs when stretch is not available (as is the case at my own institution where students choose between six credit hours of lower-division writing courses or three credits of lower-division and three credits of upper-division writing courses)? Toth and Aull's (2014) study of 30 DSP questionnaires identifies pace/time as one key concept present in their corpus. Johnson (2022) analyzed the DSP at their institution during a revision process and identified pace of learning as one of the three constructs expressed in their system. Likewise, Kryger and Mitchum's (2024) study on user-experience and placement design revealed time as a prominent code in their analysis (p. 78). Again, the import of temporality emerges in deep analysis of the constructs undergirding DSP design. Analyzing the pervasive presence of

this construct and what selves and futures it makes possible is a productive exercise for WPAs aiming to intentionally develop anti-ableist placement. Do students need a slower pace or does the curriculum privilege a particular able-bodied pace? Are there re-orientations to time in the program itself that might necessitate alterations to DSP constructs?

Furthermore, considering how the construct of time may coerce students into adopting curative futurities, analyzing the linearity of pathways itself may also be beneficial. Isaacs (2018) conducted a study of 106 comprehensive universities and proposes a handful of "next steps" for WPA work. She writes:

> Another local-level action I suggest is to interrogate what tests are used for placement and exemption . . . Consider options for correcting initial assessment: boost programs that make it possible for successful basic writing students to skip over that next requirement, allow mid-semester switches for strong students or provide mid-semester or subsequent semester additional support for weak students. (pp. 163–164)

The suggestion here of pathway jumping and bumping offers an intriguing consideration for WPAs to disrupt normate constructions of time for students in their completion of writing requirements, disruptions that are grounded in both student agency and a recognition of non-linear/non-normate constructions of time.

My Application of Heuristic Element #4

This final element of the heuristic prompts analysis of temporality and sequencing in my program's directed self-placement and curriculum design. Applying this heuristic resulted in several ongoing interventions: post-placement conversation follow-up email, designing a user-experience survey, collecting data on high school grade point average (HSGPA) and DSP scores, and identifying possibilities for placement challenge. The timing of the student-advisor placement conversation is spontaneous, limited, and strained, enmeshed among several additional decisions during new student orientation. To alleviate such constraint, I designed an email template from me personally to all students who register for a writing program course, inviting them to talk with me about their choice (should they like to) prior to the drop deadline. While a small effort, this provides an opportunity for follow-up conversation with students who may have felt constrained at their advising appointment. I also tasked members of the writing program committee with designing a user-experience survey or our DSP process. Thinking through Johnson's (2022) argument about foregone conclusions, I am working with my institutional research office to collect data on student HSGPA and DSP scores to determine concomitant occurrence of thresholds for each, specifically compared to our co-requisite pathway enrollment. This will allow me to investigate the self-fulfilling prophecy effect that scholars such as Inoue (2023), Kafer (2013), and Johnson (2022) caution against. Finally, I am considering the "jumping and bumping" across pathways suggested by Isaac (2018), working to identify possibilities for students to challenge placement and/or sequence requirements, as well as possibilities for late-start co-requisite support.

Conclusion

Critical disability studies can make positive contributions to advancing the equitable improvement of directed self-placement, and the heuristic offered in this article hopes to provide analytic tools for WPAs and/or placement directors to interrogate their own placement design. In my review of scholarship connecting disability and placement, I aim to mark the presence and

necessity of engagement with disability in future assessment research. I share my own experiences with the heuristic not to prescribe any sort of action among readers but rather to demonstrate how my engagement with these critical (and complex) questions about access, equity, and placement can yield tangible change and practical revision informed by disability theory.

Even as we endeavor toward social justice in our programs, larger systemic structures constrain our efforts. Timed testing is a persistent challenge. While I may have ended program reliance on timed testing for writing placement, compliance with state mandates tie my hands with the ever-increasing influx of prior learning credits, which also function as a "placing" of sorts for students. These tests—AP, CLEP, IB, and the like—function as a de facto placement mechanism regardless of my attitude toward the problematic nature of timed testing for determining how students can/should/will engage with required writing course work at my institution. The rise of prior learning credits dominates my own institutional data, and experiences with such timed writing evaluations can profoundly influence students' approach to DSP (potential for ableist rhetorical creep here). Reifman (2024) mentions this in their study of a writing placement survey, noting students' high reports of the influence of AP test scores on their survey responses, using them as an "assessment reference where students used their experience with AP to understand the Writing Placement Exam, relying on this previous assessment experience as an authority for their own self- assessment" (p. 81).

Regardless of the challenges we face as administrators, efforts for the continual pursuit of equity and access in our program design is paramount. In a universal design workshop I recently attended, one participant mentioned feeling overwhelmed when trying to create the *perfectly* accessible writing classroom. Another attendee offered the solution of "plus one," suggesting that teachers work to add just one additional accessible practice per semester, one effort toward universal design, rather than trying to reach some utopian space where all bodies and minds move freely. As I struggle to design an accessible, agentive, and equitable placement process, Dolmage's advice to focus on the verb comes to mind. Access efforts are active and invite continual effort toward equity rather than folding under the tremendous weight of this responsibility. Drawing on critical disability studies to analyze and improve placement practice is the plus one of this article.

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