

Collaboratively Building Our SSP Scholarship (Because Placement Is Still Everyone's Business)

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We had been working together for quite a while on student self-placement (SSP) when we put out the call for the *JWA* 2024 special issue (Pantelides & Whittig, 2024). Although we had scholarship to support us, and excellent regional communities, we had been so focused on our own tools and their various idiosyncrasies that when the many excellent proposals came in, it was the balm that we had long needed. Placement reform was definitely in the air. So many different kinds of institutions were using SSP, and they each had their own compelling narratives, and they each had their own frustrating paths, and they each had their own labor, data collection, and deadline challenges to contend with. We wanted to capture all of their stories because we really need them: stories from community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, HBCUs, southern comprehensives, R2s, HSIs, and more across the country. We are still missing so many of these stories. Only a year later, we fear there is a turning away from SSP and, for a variety of reasons (state mandates, ease), a returning to single measure standardized tests for placement. The winds are changing. Although there may be a shared feeling among advocates that SSP is here to stay, the approach is often still articulated as an alternative to more *traditional* placement methods. Many of us work with colleagues who remain skeptical (or even fearful) of SSP, and some public institutions in Utah with successful DSP models have had to rethink their approach as state policies have undercut their ability to use their well-researched empirically effective tool.

Last year, when we wrote that “placement is everyone’s business,” we were being somewhat metaphorical, perhaps even a little hyperbolic (Pantelides & Whittig, 2024). But in the last year as we both moved into short-term Student Affairs roles, somewhat distant from our previous up-close, hands-on work with writing placement, we realized how literal the writing placement ecology is (in that there are so many important stakeholders impacting and impacted by the process across the university), how true our maxim was, and how much work we have to do in the future to better articulate placement ecology connections across the university, particularly in ways that effectively bridge Academic and Student Affairs. We marveled at how many of our respective colleagues in Student Affairs and Academic Affairs were unaware of related practices across our own campuses. Ruecker and colleagues (2017) helpfully explore how writing programs (and WPAs, and, we would argue, all folks involved in placement broadly) can increase our visibility and actively assert our role in student success and retention; placement may be an effective space for this, positioned as it is at the intersection of different institutional interests and activities. Increasing visibility means being able to articulate to people outside of writing studies what we know about placement. So, we reaffirm this statement with perhaps more fervor than we offered it before: Placement is everyone’s business! And because it is, the more hands, the better.

We know—from years of studying placement mechanisms—the ripple effects that different practices can have on an incoming student, on entire populations of students. We know that placement into developmental courses can delay a student’s persistence and time to graduation (Bailey et al., 2010; Jaggars & Stacey, 2014; Nastal et al., 2022), but also that some student groups may benefit from these courses (Jaggars & Stacey, 2014); we know from our own experiences that students are often disheartened and confused by placements generated based on their SAT or ACT scores alone; we know that students who choose their placements are more satisfied with their courses than students who do not (Ferris et al., 2017; Ferris & Lombardi, 2020); we know that placement can be handled as a rhetorical opportunity to welcome, invite, and embrace students, rather than shut them out (Toth et al., 2024); we know that, given our changing understanding of validity, many of our previous placement mechanisms were based on flawed cognitive models of

student ability (Gross, 2024). We know quite a bit about placement, yet we also have the tendency as a field to overgeneralize some of our knowledge, relying on one or two influential studies to direct our placement practices across institution types, often regardless of region, demographics, and curriculum. In short, we sometimes treat individual findings about placement the way that previous placement models have treated test scores, as if they're telling us something broadly true about the field and we can adopt it wholesale. This is rarely the case. Thus, we also need to be attuned to what we don't know about placement and actively seek it out, particularly as it relates intersectionally across authors, institutions, regions, students, programs, and years.

In this follow-up special section, we feature three articles that, in addition to offering close analysis of SSP within programs, invite us to think outside our programs, across the university, and to the larger ecologies, contexts, and histories onto which our placement processes map. The articles in this section effectively invite wide-angle, long-term thinking about SSP, and they also acknowledge the simultaneous difficulty and necessity of writing about SSP. First, Amy Ferdinandt Stolley, Dauvan Mulally, and Craig Hulst offer a 30-year retrospective from Grand Valley State University, including recent interviews with Dan Royer and Roger Gilles, the originators of DSP. They write candidly and compellingly about their work valuing their program's directed self-placement (DSP) origins while simultaneously addressing inequitable practices in their program across their institution's broader writing ecology. Next, Genie Giaimo and Kristina Reardon write from the perspective of SLACs, celebrating their successes in using SSP for "wrap-around placement" into the larger writing ecologies of their colleges while similarly noting the numerous challenges in their attempts to use placement reform to confront inequity in writing classes. Finally, Jessica Nastal and Kris Messer offer an Afterword that addresses validity with nuance and mastery, drawing on their extensive experiences with placement reform within two-year colleges and their expertise in placement writ large. They close with a gesture that echoes our deeply held values regarding placement scholarship: that it needs to be a collaborative building project. We all need to contribute, whether we've completed ten years of assessment or not, whether we consider ourselves assessment scholars or not, whether our tool is perfect or not (it's not :))—we just need to keep contextual awareness at the forefront.

Thus, this special section doesn't close down any conversations. It attempts to make the work of the special issue and section as accessible as possible for the busy people doing the work of SSP. We are eager to know what others are doing, to learn from them, and to work towards stronger coalitions with continued open-access publishing support (thank you to the many wonderful people at *JWA*), non-judgmental consults, and perhaps a shared database? It's an invitation for more. Because even after 30 years, and especially given our current landscape, there is so much we don't know about what actually works with placement. We need greater access to each other's programmatic data, and journals are only one of these venues, which, though positive and expansive, are a limited space. We need a third space.

In this introduction, we offer three artifacts intended as invitations for others to take up, a potential foundation for a third space. First, a listicle in the tradition of Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle (2015), which highlights what we *think* we know about placement, based on last year's special issue and this year's special section. Next, we include an SSP Writing Context Map (see Figure 1) and an SSP Data Types Matrix (see Figure 2) based on the ten studies that make up these SSP articles. We offer these matrices as both an invitation and a suggestion to further contextualize our understandings about what we know in placement, highlighting spaces

for voices we still need to hear from to help us round out the broader picture about SSP cross-institutionally.

Naming What We Know* About SSP (h/t Linda Adler-Kassner & Elizabeth Wardle)

The following is a non-exhaustive list of components of SSP building projects in which we feel confident. We highlight how the contributors to the 2024 special issue and 2025 special section help us understand these fundamental aspects of SSP work. They're not the only scholars who have suggested these ideas, and they don't stand alone, but we offer these ideas as reminders of why SSP is an effective approach to placement and how they're made manifest in these studies.

*We use an asterisk because of what we "know" about knowledge in writing studies given our anti-positivist awareness of the changing nature of knowledge. Further, we're persuaded by Daniel Gross's (2024) useful gloss of Adler-Kassner and Wardle in his recent *JWA* article, acknowledging how, even in their work to name what we know regarding threshold concepts, Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) warn wisely against assessment regimes (p. 8) tied to some rigid understanding of how threshold concepts work as transformative, reversible, integrative, and troublesome (p. 2). They would instead emphasize the qualifying language about what is generally, not absolutely, the case when it comes to something like threshold concepts and the ontological transformations they enable. (Gross, 2024, p. 2).

With these prefaces in mind, we "know":

1. We Need Access to Disaggregated Student Data

In "[After Implementation: Assessing Student Self-Placement in College Writing Programs](#)," Lisa Arnold, Holly Hassel, and Lei Jiang (2024) demonstrate the need for long-term, iterative evaluation plans for our placement protocols, ideally before, during, and in an ongoing, consistent cycle after implementation. This means we need access to data and not just simple demographics and pass rates—detailed, disaggregated data. Further, we need to know how to make sense of that data. However, Arnold et al.'s (2024) collaborative approach reminds us that we don't need to know how to make sense of all of this knowledge alone; we can and should work with stakeholders across the university to remind ourselves and our university colleagues that placement is everyone's business. Their work also underscores the importance of not asking data to tell larger, more generalized stories than it should. Seek out robust data, and don't make more of it than it offers. They remind us that SSP is not a cure-all, noting that "while SSP models could be considered necessary to increasing access to degree-credit courses, they are not sufficient on their own in increasing college retention and graduation rates" (Arnold et al., 2024, p. 5).

2. Student Language Use Is Complex and Often Defies Institutional Categories

Kristine Johnson and Sara Vander Bie (2024) demonstrate how institutional categories often tell stories about students that aren't true in "[Directed Self-Placement for Multilingual, Multicultural International Students](#)." Students' realities are often much more nuanced, complex, and interesting than categories such as "international student," "L2," and "first-generation" allow. In particular, Johnson and Vander Bie (2024) focus their study on third culture kids, students whose cultural and linguistic experiences aren't neatly captured by their institutional demographics. By drawing on student narrative and placement data, they make a case for setting up students to succeed by relying on culturally responsive DSP as a listening mechanism. They usefully reiterate:

“DSP *can* be a vehicle for more equitable, socially just writing placement for multilingual, multicultural writers,” though it is not transformational on its own (Johnson & Vander Bie, 2024, p. 16, emphasis added).

3. SSP Usefully Challenges Power Dynamics Between Students and the Institution

As Whitney and Skinner (2024) posit in “[It Takes a Campus: Agility in the Development of Directed Self-Placement](#),” SSP is usefully destabilizing in that it calls attention to power relations across the university, particularly to those who organize student bodies supposedly for their best interests, without their input. Whitney and Skinner (2024) call this condescension in the name of student best interests “academic paternalism.” Instead, they argue that DSP requires a significant shift in attitude about our roles as advisors, administrators, and instructors in students’ course/academic decisions, away from “academic paternalism.” Further, implementation of DSP requires a reimagining of stakeholder roles and who is ultimately involved in placement decisions, a shift that they call role-agility, “both a means of navigating uncertainty and a source of uncertainty itself, as we, instructors, advisors, and students . . . sometimes grappled with the ambiguity of new roles (what does instructor or advisor expertise and experience count for in the context of DSP?)” (Whitney & Skinner, 2024, p. 3).

4. Placement Should Foreground Localized Accessibility and Student-Driven Usability

Brian Huot’s (2003) call for localized assessment finds perhaps its most clearly realized incarnation in SSP, and, in particular in Kathleen Kryger, Catrina Mitchum, and Aly Higgins’s (2024) involvement of students in designing placement mechanisms, drawing on UX design and DSP as technical communication. In “[Localizing Directed Self-Placement: UX Stories and Methods](#),” they argue that “WPAs should foreground localized accessibility and student-driven usability in their placement processes from the beginning” (p. 2). Further, “localization is a type of contextualization, a means of attuning to the local and communal” (p. 6), an orientation that supports more “localized, accessible, and usable designs (not just localized content)” (p. 11). Their consideration of the local helps us think outside of the writing program as boundaries for the local, reminding us to look across our institutions, regions, and peers.

5. Placement Processes Should Be Transparent to all Stakeholders

In “[Multilingual Student Autonomy in Directed Self-Placement: Providing Student Choice Through Linguistic Domains Using Qualtrics Scoring](#),” Laura Decker and Brianne Taormina-Barrientos (2024) posit that in order to serve students from an asset perspective, writing placement needs to be transparent and center student autonomy. They write from the context of working closely with multilingual writers and linguistic domains in DSP, noting how many decisions are often made *for* multilingual students without their input and in conflict with the values that undergird SSP. Instead, SSP forces a reckoning, requiring those of us involved with placement to be honest with ourselves and examine ugly truths long taken for granted.

6. The Writing Constructs Students Bring with Them to College Affect Placement

In “[Self-Characterization in the Self-Placement Assessment Ecology: Complicating the Stories We Tell About DSP’s Effects and Effectiveness](#),” Theresa Tinkle, Jason Godfrey, J.W. Hammond, and Andrew Moos (2024) draw on a large-scale qualitative study of students’ conceptions of themselves as writers to demonstrate how students’ perceptions of writing and

themselves as writers *matter* in the context of their SSP choices. How we perceive student literacy experiences has to be figured into how we design SSP. Further, we must be cautious about the assumptions we make given the limited data we have about students. The authors remind us, “the ethical promise (and peril) of SSP methods such as DSP has, from its earliest days, been partly anchored in their potential for broader ecological impacts within writing programs . . . including self-placement’s potential impacts on students’ orientations to themselves as writers” (p. 2).

7. Reflection Is Central to Effective Placement Mechanisms (for Students, Faculty, and Staff)

Meghan Sweeney and Crystal Colombini (2024) underscore the importance of reflection in SSP cross-institutionally in “[\(Re\)Placing Personalis: A Study of Placement Reform and Self-Construction in Mission-Driven Contexts.](#)” They argue that reflection on course choice is central to effective placement tools since “course choice reflections tell stories behind DSP decisions, revealing a rich tapestry of rationales... [there are] a multitude of reasons students may want more [or less] time or support in FYW” (p. 18). Drawing on a large corpus of student reflections, Sweeney and Colombini (2024) provide extensive data to support the common-sense conclusion that if we want to know how students feel about something, we need to ask them. There isn’t a faster, more accurate way to understand student preference or need.

8. Placement via Standardized College Entrance Exam Score Alone Is a Flawed Method

The collaborative author-student team of Christie Toth, Jennifer Andrus, Knenna Onwuzuruoha, Nicole Clawson, Pietra Fraser, Aubrey Fochs, and Samuel Rivera Aguilar (2024) address how SSP has helped their program meet equity goals in “[Informing Self-Placement: A Polyvocal Narrative Case Study.](#)” The authors assert the “many compelling arguments against using” standardized tests as the primary “metrics for writing placement” since “[they] are not direct measures of students’ capacities in most postsecondary writing situations, and they often advantage white, middle-class, continuing- generation college students” (p. 2). Such measures “don’t take into account what students know about writing, where they gained that knowledge, or how they think about their writing abilities, learning preferences and priorities, or educational agency” (p. 2). The authors argue that it is no longer useful to ask *whether* or not to use SSP—instead, they focus on *how* SSP can be used to accomplish a number of equity goals. SSP is “valid” inasmuch as it appears to be widely used, studied for its impacts, and is gaining traction as a less harmful placement method than historically used ones like standardized tests, one-off written exams, and academic indices like GPA.

9. Despite Its Apparent Elegance as a Placement Solution (and Perhaps Because), SSP Requires Iterative Assessment and Revision

In “[Everything Old Is New Again: Reconsidering DSP Amid the Changing Academic Landscape at Grand Valley State University.](#)” Amy Ferdinand Stolley, Dauvan Mulally, and Craig Hulst (2025) draw on a historical review of their program, reflecting on the elegance of the original “design” to reckoning with DSP’s position in a complex web of institutional priorities. Because SSP is (or should be) designed locally, taking into account our specific student populations and their writing needs, as well as our own writing ecologies, it is perhaps far more sensitive to the dynamic nature of the local. So much can be hidden within a single SAT or ACT score, and trends

like higher or lower scores for incoming cohorts may contain a host of mitigating factors within a single up- or down-pointing arrow.

10. SSP Can, When We Let It, Usefully Reorganize Institutional Writing Ecologies

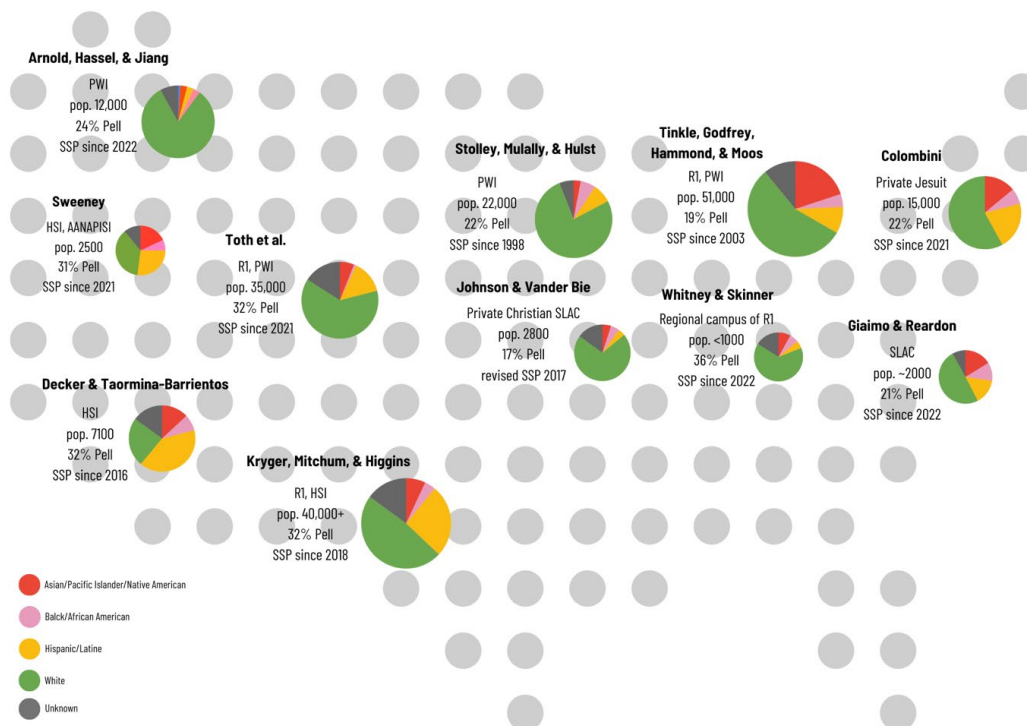
Genie Giaimo and Kristina Reardon (2025) describe their process of using SSP to develop wrap-around support through mechanisms at SLACS in their article, “[Beyond Writing Placement: Implementing Wraparound Directed Self-Placement at Small Liberal Arts Colleges \(SLACs\) and Beyond](#).” DSP recommendations at SLACs operate in an environment without required writing courses, where writing and writing instruction are still highly valued, and emphasize the importance of wraparound support to “persistence and success of diverse students.” In their construction, SSP repositions placement as a “matching up” of a student with writing support, rather than a single course. SSP, done well, demands that we examine the writing ecologies at our institutions.

Mapping SSP Writing Contexts

Across two issues dedicated to critical, detailed attention to SSP, we’re struck both by how much we know as a field (articulated in just a small part in the listicle above), but also how much we don’t know, particularly given how significantly institutions differ from each other. Thus, in Figure 1, we offer an SSP Writing Context Map: a different view of the ten studies that constitute

Figure 1

SSP Writing Context Map



Note. This map uses pie charts to represent the 11 institutions where the SSP special issue articles were conducted.

these special issues, particularly attending to the institution type and demographics. The map features demographic pie charts roughly aligned with the region where each study was conducted. The size of the pie charts differs depending on the size of the institution. We also note the type of institution where the study was conducted, Pell grant eligibility, and how long SSP has been in use. We think it's a useful starting place, particularly in helping us see the places where we don't have stories about SSP in the issues. In Figure 2, we share a snapshot of the kinds of data that each study examines.

Of course, these figures don't begin to offer a complete picture of a particular program or SSP tool, but like the theory undergirding the beliefs about students at the core of SSP, more awareness of context can help us tell better stories about the *use* of our study findings to colleagues. We hope others will consider foregrounding these aspects of their institution in their manuscripts because we think we could usefully shift the way we build scholarship about placement in the discipline in line with recent calls for ethical, intersectional awareness and BIPOC citational justice (Cagle et al., 2021; Itchuaqiyag & Frith, 2022; Jones, 2021; Sano-Franchini et al., 2022). We argue for a more constitutive, elemental view of scholarship, rather than performative. Jaqueline Jones Royster (2003) refers to citation as "disciplinary landscaping," which points to the material realities of citation. Itchuaqiyag and Frith (2022) further underscore the worldmaking citation invites, referring to it as "discursive infrastructure" within the context of "unjust and unrepresentative politics of citation" (p. 11). Like infrastructure, citation is similarly often invisible until it isn't, until we see that something is broken, or someone draws our attention to how it is in need of repair.

Thus, we ask that we treat placement scholarship like a collaborative puzzle, one in which we're honest about the pieces we have and don't and consider how we might find those missing pieces coalitionally, as folks invested in building inclusive, effective, equitable placement mechanisms that welcome students to the university rather than punishing or confusing them. Within this context, then, we must be especially thoughtful and careful in our reading and citation of each other's work in our continued efforts to recognize the legitimacy of SSP. Careful consideration of institutional context in terms of student demographics, geographic location, and SSP tool design must be coupled with attention to methodology, types of data assessed, author subjectivities, and conclusions drawn by researchers (and especially to how conclusions are qualified). Further, we need to acknowledge when tools don't fall under the SSP umbrella—for instance, those tools that don't rely on student choice for placement. This is not intended as an admonishment—both of us know well the expectation to signal our familiarity with scholarship/disciplinary knowledge via citational canons—but rather a reminder to our SSP coalition that who and how we cite and what our placement tools do *matters*.

To underscore the importance of *how* we cite, the "CCCC Position Statement on Citation Justice" notes how "citation practices affect our material realities, how people are sustained and promoted, what knowledge is honored in the discipline, and who we see as knowledge producers" (Sano-Franchini et al., 2022). Yes! But also: it's important to think of ourselves not just as knowledge producers, but as knowledge *users*; this is certainly a concern for those of us drawing on placement scholarship to build SSP tools. For instance, we think of Tinkle et al.'s (2022) excellent study in which they note the following:

Figure 2

SSP Data Types

	Quantitative Student Response	Qualitative Student Response	SSP Evaluation	Faculty Input	Advisor Input	Grade Data
Arnold, Hassel, & Jiang	★	★	★	★	★	★
Sweeney & Colombini	★	★	★	★		★
Decker & Taormino-Barrientos	★	★	★			★
Gaiamo & Reardon	★	★	★	★		★
Johnson & Vander Bie	★	★	★	★		★
Kryger, Mitchum, & Higgins	★	★	★	★		★
Stolley, Mulally, Hulst	★		★	★		★
Tinkle et al.	★	★	★	★		★
Toth et al.	★	★	★	★		★
Whitney & Skinner	★	★	★	★	★	★

Note. Figure 2 shows what types of data each of the studies in the SSP special issue and special section use, including the following: quantitative/qualitative student responses, SSP evaluation, faculty/advisor input, and grade data.

any observed inequities in student outcomes should not be interpreted as being necessarily caused by the DSP tool; a number of factors are at play in the effects shown. While this study does not pinpoint one particular cause of inequity, it does find unintended negative outcomes that signal the need for revisions in the instrument. (p. 3)

Tinkle et al. (2022) are concerted and precise in the analysis of their findings, but we've seen this study taken up in other places to suggest that this demonstrates the inequity of SSP. Rather, it uses rigorous methodology to pinpoint the way the recommendation component of their SSP tool impacts students across demographics at their midwestern R1. It also underscores how often we mean different things when we say SSP (for the placement: do students reflect on their writing after composing? in collaboration with faculty or advisors? are test scores and GPA taken into account in providing recommendations?), and the details *matter*.

Explicitly offering rhetorical context for our studies on placement at the outset of our work invites some reading practices that reflect the needs of our current disciplinary environment, including the following:

- **Contextual comparison.** Depending on your institutional type, it might be helpful to search for scholarship developed at peer institutions since context often dictates what we have access to;
- **Creating visibility.** Circulating knowledge within our discipline is helpful, but for assessment work it is as important to make our scholarship visible outside the discipline, for student affairs colleagues, and influential national voices, such as EAB;
- **Program reflection.** What we're calling "matrix knowledge"—the information provided in Figures 1 and 2—is a starting point for effective assessment; you need to know your institution and be able to look at it alongside "the canon" with your own institutional (and personal) subjectivities in mind;
- **Mercenary reading POV.** Many people tasked with developing assessment tools aren't always assessment "experts" (yet); as such we need cliff notes for those stakeholders who don't have the time to "catch up" on all of the scholarship before making meaningful decisions about SSP at their institutions. Itchuaqiyaq and Frith (2022) offer a useful aside in thinking about this approach: "researchers know that 'catching up' on the conversation means, at best, becoming familiar with just one small corner of the giant room where the conversation is taking place" (p. 10). As such, "the best we can hope for is to be able to sound smart enough to the right group of people at the right time" (p. 10). How can we purposely structure our placement scholarship such that we can make this "giant room" easier to access, without asking generative AI to summarize everything for us (and potentially missing salient details and context)?

Conclusion

SSP is the midpoint between institutional system contexts (Figure 1) and recognizing student individual needs (as represented by data types in Figure 2). Effective development, use, and evaluation of SSP consistently reminds us that students don't fit into easy categories, and they have different, often surprising reasons for the choices they make. Thus, big data analytics are mostly good *starting places* for understanding trends in placement, student course choice, etc. Sometimes, lots of data about students is worse than no data because it can make us think that we know things about students without asking them. Assumptions often get us into trouble with our

placement mechanisms and their relative fairness and validity. No matter how much data we have access to, we always need to ask students—because it’s pedagogically sound and institutionally effective. Further, we are persuaded by Genie Giaimo and Kristen Reardon’s reminder in this issue that “wrap-around” SSP can be an opportunity to introduce students to institutional writing ecologies—to give them a heads up about what we value, and to start bridging some of the local gaps we find. Such work can help us know more about how writing is being taken up across writing programs, in Student Affairs, in Academic Affairs, in the university, in the region.

Our work in SSP temporarily brought us both to Student Affairs, and doing access audits in Students Affairs cycled us back to focusing on access in Academic Affairs. Thus, the broader writing context ecologies in which we all work are yoked together through persistence (what students do) and retention (what the university does) (Ruecker et al., 2017). Instead of treating placement as doors students must figure out how to open when they first come to the university (we’re reminded of how Sarah Ahmed theorizes how students “come up against” closed doors), SSP is invested and curious about student potential. What could students do if we asked them sincere questions to which we don’t think we know the answer, and then provided supportive conditions to fulfill that potential?

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