Journal of Writing Assessment

Vidali, A. (2026). Not that we asked: Assessment, placement, and disability. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, *19*(1). **DOI**: 10.5070/W4.jwa.46594

Not That We Asked

Assessment, Placement, and Disability

Amy Vidali, University of California, Santa Cruz, US, avidali@ucsc.edu

Abstract: Assessment of writing placement systems often focuses on how specific types of students succeed in the courses they eventually take, and to date, this research has not considered disabled students. At the same time, attending to disability in assessing writing placement systems should not be limited to assessing disabled students' successes and failures. Rather than studying the outcomes for disabled students, I suggest we flip the script and assess the inclusivity and accessibility of our placement systems, and by extension our writing programs and courses, by considering the presence of disability in our placement data. To this end, I analyze a small set of disability disclosures in the reflective writing included as part of the 2024 directed self-placement (DSP) process at my institution. I begin by giving a brief overview of the placement approach at my institution, then review research on placement-related reflective writing and the placement questions students answered as part of DSP. I then briefly describe the methodology I used to identify disability disclosures in the DSP data and analyze three patterns: disclosure of dyslexia and ADHD, preference for audio versions, and disclosure of anxiety. To close, I suggest broader moves to disable writing placement.

Keywords: placement, disability, assessment, reflective writing

Scholarship on disability and writing assessment has infrequently included discussion of writing placement. This is surprising, as placement is an assessment mechanism—whether students assess their own writing readiness or are assessed by others—and there is much scholarship on disability and writing assessment (including this special issue).

Assessment of writing placement systems often focuses on how specific types of students succeed in the courses they eventually take, and to date, this research has not considered disabled students.[1] While there may be challenges in gathering placement data on disabled students—as disability is often an ignored demographic in institutional data sets—the exclusion of disability in assessing placement systems is unjustified.

At the same time, attending to disability in assessing writing placement systems should not be limited to assessing disabled students' successes and failures. Instead, I suggest we flip the script and assess the inclusivity and accessibility of our placement systems, and by extension our writing programs and courses, by considering the presence of disability in our placement data. Assessing how and whether disability appears in writing placement data can be a starting point for writing programs looking to begin or extend conversations about disability and writing placement.

To this end, I analyze a small set of disability disclosures from the 2024 directed self-placement (DSP) process at my institution. I intend this essay to begin conversations about disability, assessment, and writing placement, and I offer a limited, reflective analysis of a pilot study. The reason I proposed and produced a shorter essay for this special issue is not reflective of the importance of the topic; instead, it indicates my nascent knowledge of disability and writing placement and the almost non-existent scholarship on this topic (and on disability and placement more broadly). I wrote this essay, in part, to get my hands around how to improve disability access in the DSP system I helped build, not to showcase a very accessible placement system (though improvements are underway). My approach is intentionally, and perhaps narrowly, focused on disability, rather than on the specifics of the DSP system at my institution and placement more generally (which I explore in detail in Vidali & Michals, 2025).

This essay begins by giving a brief overview of the placement approach at my institution, then reviews research on placement-related reflective writing and the placement questions students answered as part of DSP. I then briefly describe the methodology I used to identify disability disclosures in the DSP data and analyze three patterns: disclosure of dyslexia and ADHD, preference for audio versions, and disclosure of anxiety. To close, I suggest broader moves to disable writing placement.[2]

DSP Overview & Analysis of Reflective Writing in Placement

The placement survey at the University of California, Santa Cruz has students consider and respond to sample student readings, assignments, and projects by completing a multiple-choice survey and writing reflectively. Students have two opportunities to write reflectively about the sample readings, one opportunity to write about the sample assignments, and one opportunity to write about the sample student projects. While none of the reflective writing in the survey is required, nearly all students complete it. The primary purpose of this writing is to present students

1 See Arnold et al. (2024) for an overview. See Coleman and Smith (2020) for diverse strategies in assessing writing placement systems.

2 I'm drawing on my use of "disabling" to mean "the process of bringing the insights of disabled people and perspectives in order to innovate, include, and transgress expected and exclusionary norms" (Vidali, 2015, p. 33).

with opportunities to slow down and sit with their reactions to the curricular materials in the survey; the reflective writing is not assessed to determine placements (see Vidali & Michals, 2025).

Existing analyses of reflective writing and/or disability disclosure in placement processes inform my analysis. Teresa Tinkle et al. (2024) examine responses to two short-answer survey questions where "students write about their strengths as writers and what writing tasks they find most challenging" (p. 2). They perform a coded analysis of 5,000 students' responses, and like them, I am interested in how students' "self-characterizations can inform and transform local writing programs and courses" (Tinkle et al., 2024, p. 18). In "Directed Self-Placement and the Figured World of College Writing," Kristine Johnson (2022) examines students' writing about their course selections, and she notes that ten percent of students cited the impact of "external constructs," including "high school grades, standardized test scores, learning disabilities, and extended time between high school and college" (p. 108). While disability is not a primary focus of Johnson's article, she notes that "learning disabilities aligns—for students who report having dyslexia and receiving 504 plans or other learning accommodations—with a slower pace of learning" (p. 108). I also found an emphasis on dyslexia in the placement data I analyzed, though I did not find a consistent pattern of disability being linked with slower learning (see Wood, 2017). Instead, some dyslexic students identified as both slower and successful readers, and a wider range of disabilities were disclosed. Finally, in Giaimo and Reardon's (2025) examination of self-placement at small liberal arts colleges, they note that self-placement allows students to share "excitement to begin learning, learning preferences and processes, and, at least a few times a year, a disclosed but not formally diagnosed disability" (p. 9). Their process allows advisors to connect students with resources, including "educational testing for an undiagnosed disability" (p. 11), which is heartening but likely not scalable to large universities with limited advising support, like mine.[3] The broader research on disability and placement is scant in both our field and higher education more broadly.

The disability disclosures in the placement data I analyze occur in response to four reflective prompts. The first asks a specific question about one of the sample readings, which is a social science research study that students consistently identify as more difficult than the other two sample readings. The next three reflective prompts are versions of the same question, adapted to focus on readings, assignments, or student projects. The questions are ordered below as they appear in the survey.

- Please say more about what impacts your ability to complete a reading like Reading #3.
- Now that you have looked over these readings, what do you think of them? What parts feel familiar, and what feels new? Reflect on how ready you would feel if you were asked to complete such readings.
- Now that you have looked over these assignments, what do you think of them? What parts feel familiar, and what feels new? Reflect on how ready you would feel if you were asked to complete such assignments.
- Now that you have looked over these student projects, what do you think of them? What parts feel familiar, and what feels new? Reflect on how ready you would feel if you were asked to complete such student projects.

3 Giaimo and Reardon (2025) also mention developing placement survey questions based on other instruments, including an "executive functioning" questionnaire (p. 7). While the placement questions related to executive functioning are not provided, I wonder about the impacts on students with ADHD, and I'm unsure if assessment of executive functioning is germane to writing placement.

The general nature of these questions leaves room for various disclosures, including disability, though disability is not directly invoked. There is particular value in considering unsolicited disclosures of disability in placement data, as such mentions reveal how and whether students perceive disability to be relevant in discussing and determining their writing placements. At the same time, placement remains a high-stakes process for students, even when we attempt to lower the temperature. Three of the four DSP prompts above encourage students to feel "ready" as they are asked to ponder why they may not be prepared. The emphasis on being "ready" and feeling "familiar" in three of the four prompts may explain why few students disclose disability in response. Instead, students almost only disclose disability in response to the specific question about reading (which is also the first question), and this direct question arguably gives students less wiggle room in responding. That students mainly disclose disability in response to a direct question suggests, perhaps obviously, that if we want to hear what is impacting students, we must clearly ask. I return to the idea of asking disability-focused questions in placement surveys in the final section of this essay and now turn to patterns of disclosure in the data.

Patterns of Disclosure: Dyslexia, ADHD, Use of Audio, and Anxiety

For the past four years (2020–2024), I have reviewed the reflective writing students produce in response to the placement survey at my university. Each summer, I've glazed my eyes over the reflections of about 4,500 students, and I've noticed an "ADHD" here and a "dyslexia" there as well as references to anxiety. These noticings led to this project, and my experiences informally reading thousands of students' reflective writings helped me determine the keywords I used to identify disability content in the reflections of 4,590 students for the primary cycle of DSP in 2024.[4] My keywords included: disability, disabled, dyslexic, dyslexia, ADHD, attention span, autistic, autism, mental, anxiety, audio, and 504. Each of these terms resulted in at least one result. (I also searched blind, deaf, hearing, mobility, physical, ADA, and other keywords, but these did not appear in the data.)

By the numbers, the appearance of disability in the survey data is both meaningful and minimal. There are 77 students who explicitly identify as disabled (by sharing their diagnoses or using the terms "disabled" or "disability") as well as 136 additional students who note their use of audio versions of readings, issues with their "attention span," and/or significant anxieties about the curricular materials in the placement survey. Thus, disability and disability-adjacent disclosures total 213 students, which is about 4.5% of incoming students. This does not reflect actual disability numbers at my university, where roughly 25% of students identify as disabled.[5] The reasons disability is or is not disclosed are always complex (Kerschbaum, 2014; Kerschbaum et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2021; Moriña, 2024), and I suspect that some disabilities were not deemed relevant to mention in the context of placement, as they were not imagined to impact reading and writing tasks. Still, while a small percentage of students mentioning disability in their reflections does not indicate a placement system that isn't accessible or inclusive, my sense is that there is some distance to go in fully including and welcoming disabled students in our placement survey, given the small number of disclosures.

4 My study was approved by the IRB at the University of California, Santa Cruz, #HS-FY2025-56.
5 See UC Santa Cruz DRC data and admissions data.

Disclosing Dyslexia and ADHD

The two most common disabilities named in the corpus are dyslexia and ADHD. These disabilities are known to impact reading, and at the national level, ADHD is the largest category of disabled undergraduates (NCES, 2017). Twenty-nine students disclose that they are dyslexic, and in some cases, little or no detail is provided beyond diagnoses. In other cases, students provide details; for example, one student notes: "I am dyslexic so naturally it takes me a little longer to process reading materials in general." Students are very matter-of-fact in identifying dyslexia's impact; there is no self-shaming and students typically report confidence in their abilities. For example, one student notes, "I have dyslexia so I often take a really long time to read things and it can be frustrating, but in the end, my comprehension is really good." Another student identifies their struggles and then claims: "However, given the correct time and resources, I rarely have trouble with texts like these."

Thirty-four students identify as having ADHD, including five who identify as having ADHD and dyslexia. In some cases, students' disclosures of ADHD are similar to dyslexia disclosures, as students state the impacts without self-judgement. For example, one student notes: "I don't like to blame the way my brain works, but I feel that my difficulty with certain texts comes from my ADHD and just how my brain works." However, compared to the dyslexia disclosures, more self-blaming occurs by students who disclose ADHD. For example, one student states: "I have difficulties focusing for long periods of time and if I don't find it interesting I might have a hard time completing it, but it's not really something I can get help with, it has to do with executive dysfunction from my ADHD that I got to get through myself." While disabled people can feel ambivalent about their disabilities (Tacke, 2024), this self-blaming troubles me, because any student might be disinterested in assigned readings and struggle to stay focused (see Miller, 2024).

There are also 66 students who do *not* mention ADHD and identify their "attention spans" as significantly impacting their reading abilities. These students are particularly critical of themselves; for example, one student notes that they "severely lack an adequate attention span," and another states that they have "a terrible attention span." While some of this self-blaming matches the tone of those with ADHD, overall, those who mention attention span but do not mention ADHD seem harder on themselves, and these may be students who experience ADHD symptoms but do not have access to diagnoses.[6]

Students' Use of Audio

I also noticed students' embrace of audio versions of readings. While use of audio when reading is noted by some disabled students in their reflective responses, it is also mentioned by 46 students who do not state that they are disabled.[7] Some students note that audio versions are essential, while others identify their preference for audio. For example, one student claims that "audio reading is necessary for me to stay on track," while another notes, "I find that it helps me to use as many of my senses when reading complex materials, such as a physical copy of the text, highlighters to annotate, writing in the margins, and an auditory reader/audiobook if available."

While some students state that audio versions help them digest complex content, I was surprised by multiple mentions of needing audio because of an article's formatting. For example, when commenting on a traditional research article laid out in two columns, three different students

6 I am grateful to an editorial reviewer who made this point.

7 Mentioning "audio" may be partly informed by another survey question that asks students to identify various strategies they might use while reading; one option lists "an audio, read-aloud, and/or screen-reader option."

note that it is "formatted in a very traditional way which can be a bit difficult"; that "the way the paragraphs are placed can make it hard to focus without an audio playing as well"; and that "due to my ADHD I tend to get distracted when all the words are so close together." I noticed these comments as our DSP team was completing survey revisions for 2025. As such, we decided to add audio versions for the sample student readings in the placement survey, both to provide access for those who need it, and to more broadly signal that we recognize students are reading this way.

Placing Anxiety

In reviewing students' survey reflections, I noticed a subset of students who became quite distressed when reviewing the curricular samples in the survey, despite survey language indicating that some or all of the materials in the survey should feel new. While mental health and diagnosed anxiety are infrequently mentioned in the reflective writing, informal references to anxiety and other heightened emotions, including fear and panic, are a small but concerning pattern. Such mentions are consistent with research indicating rising student anxiety, especially after the pandemic (Haikalis et al., 2022), and if we want to make our placement systems more accessible, we need to pay attention to the anxiety, stress, and/or fear that placement surveys may invite for some students.

In the placement data I analyzed, the terms "anxiety" and "anxious" appear 11 and 31 times, respectively, and there are roughly 25 students who disclose significant distress in response to the curricular samples in the survey. A sample of these responses is provided below, with keywords highlighted:

- I believe that I would feel **incredibly anxious** trying to complete assignments such as these samples with this much complexity.
- I'd feel very **anxious and a bit helpless** if I were asked to complete writings at this level, but I'm hoping to improve.
- Just reading some of the requirements for these assignments gives me **anxiety** and already makes me feel behind.
- I would immediately feel **overwhelmed and panicked** because I would worry about whether I could understand all the information.
- If asked to produce such a writing right now I would probably **panic** and it most definitely would not come out on the same level as the writing shown here.
- I think that many of these assignments seem **terrifying and scary** as they are super long.
- Going through this placement tool has made me somewhat **scared and nervous** . . . I do not feel that high school prepared me at all.
- I feel **highly inadequate** if asked to complete an assignment like this due to my inexperience with such complicated projects . . . I think that doing such large projects solo is a scary thought for me and I would **stress often**, but I believe that with support from college resources I can learn to complete such tasks with less stress.

I am troubled by students noting they are or would be "incredibly anxious," "helpless," "scared," "highly inadequate," "overwhelmed," and "panicked" by what they see in the survey, and that they experienced the curricular samples as "terrifying" and "scary." I would hope, of course, that students might feel challenged without feeling scared, and some of these students also express an ability and/or willingness to face such difficult emotions and experiences. My sense is that when designing placement surveys, we need to more directly account for possible negative emotional

reactions, explain that these are okay, and directly indicate the support that will be available to students while taking writing courses. While our DSP survey does all these things, it does them in three different places in the survey, which clearly did not land for these anxious students.

Perhaps these sorts of panicked statements are inevitable responses to placement surveys, as some students are going to feel less prepared, and maybe their anxious responses will motivate them to take writing courses seriously. However, students experiencing significant distress while completing placement surveys counters the idea of placement as a supportive and welcoming introduction to college writing courses (Vidali & Michals, 2025). The idea of fear as motivation is fraught (Inoue, 2019, p. 213), and the goals of placement might mirror the goals of equitable assessment, particularly various forms of ungrading, which focus on creating less fearful learning environments that foster better mental health (Larson, 2024, p. 443; O'Meara, 2024, pp. 381–383).

One option to lessen anxiety is to remove the curricular samples and only offer descriptions of each course. I am concerned, however, that without seeing any sample curricular materials, students are choosing among course options they little understand, and many students note that reviewing the curricular materials in our survey made them excited about college writing courses. Perhaps the real answer is increased institutional funding to support interdependent placement discussions in interactive advising contexts (Giaimo & Reardon, 2025), rather than hosting placement surveys through comparatively low-cost online surveys that students complete on their own. At my university, where the writing program has largely shouldered the cost of placement, this is unlikely. Thus, while the disability disclosures in my data set indicate issues to be resolved, there aren't easy solutions.

Disabling Writing Placement: Paths Forward

Analyzing the appearance of disability in placement data is a fairly easy step in disabling writing placement. It is, however, only a starting point, and I want to offer additional approaches, some of which are relatively easy to implement, while others require reflection and long-term change. (Indeed, some of these approaches are aspirational for the DSP process at my university.) My brief list is necessarily partial, and I hope other scholars will expand, correct, and complicate it.

- **Make placement surveys (more) accessible to respondents**. For online materials, this means following the basic principles of web accessibility (see Web Content Accessibility Guidelines [WCAG], 2025) as well as offering audio versions. Making placement accessible also means clearly offering disability accommodations and recognizing the ways that disability may impact required and optional advising.
- **Include disability in demographic questions and assessments of placement processes**. If a placement survey already collects demographic data, include disability. Like all demographic questions, responses to disability questions can be optional. (If there is concern about pressure to disclose in response to a single question about disability, the survey could include a "check all that apply" question that includes disability among other options, followed by optional brief reflection.) If placement is assessed by gathering data on students (reflections, grades, etc.), include disability alongside other demographic variables.
- **Ask students how and whether disability impacts their experiences as readers and writers**. Questions can be crafted that ask students about what impacts their reading and writing, with disability offered among other examples (such as access to technology and work

schedules). This information may or may not be directly useful in determining placements, but it is important programmatic data.

- **Gather feedback from disabled students and faculty about placement processes and surveys**. As Kathleen Kryger et al. (2024) note, "in design and iteration phases of any student-facing system, especially one as vital as placement, student insights about accessibility and usability is crucial" (p. 68). As such, targeted surveys and/or focus groups centered on disabled students' experiences of placement can provide important insights, as can feedback from disabled faculty.
- **Assess how disability is represented in placement surveys and related materials**. If sample curricular materials are provided as part of placement surveys, disability can be included in these materials, as students look to how those with institutional power position disability before sharing their own experiences (Simpkins, 2018). At the same time, if disability is not consistently engaged in a writing program's curricula and pedagogy, representing it in placement materials may be disingenuous.
- **Resist retrofitting and engage placement scholarship produced by those with disability expertise (Dolmage, 2008)**. Existing scholarship on writing placement scarcely mentions disability, and we should avoid simply retrofitting that scholarship (or our placement approaches). I hope to see those with disability expertise producing scholarly work on disability and placement that can be taken up by a range of writing program administrators.

*

While I have offered some practical approaches to disabling writing placement, disability is not simply a pragmatic issue to contend with when designing and assessing placement systems. Instead, disability presents a recursive opportunity to consider what it means to place students, and ask students to place themselves, within institutions, programs, and courses that may be hostile, inhospitable, or indifferent to disability. Considering disability in writing placement is about expanding and complicating the ways we invite disabled students to see themselves, both within our surveys and in our courses.

References

Arnold, L. R., Hassel, H., & Jiang. L. (2024) After implementation: Assessing student self-placement in college writing programs. *Journal of Writing Assessment, 17*(1). https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3pc0n4dz

Coleman, D. R., & Smith, D. A. (2020) Beyond predictive validity: A mixed method study of self-directed developmental education placement at a small community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 45*(6), 403–422. tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10668926.2020.1719938

Dolmage, J. (2008). Mapping composition: Inviting disability in the front door. In C. Lewiecki Wilson & B. J. Brueggemann (Eds.), *Disability and the teaching of writing: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 14–27). Bedford/St. Martin's.

Giaimo, G., & Reardon, K. (2025). Beyond writing placement: Implementing wraparound self-placement at small liberal arts colleges (SLACs) and beyond. *Journal of Writing Assessment, 18*(1). https://escholarship.org/uc/item/62k3q7kp

Haikalis, M., Doucette, H., Meisel, M. K., Birch, K., & Barnett, N. P. (2022). Changes in college student anxiety and depression from pre- to during-COVID-19: Perceived stress, academic challenges, loneliness, and positive perceptions. *Emerging Adulthood, 10*(2), 534–545. https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968211058516

Inoue, A. B. (2019) *Labor-based grading contracts: Building equity and inclusion in the compassionate writing classroom*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2019.0216.0

Johnson, K. (2022) Directed self-placement and the figured world of college writing. *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 46*(1), 97–116.

Kerschbaum, S. L. (2014). On rhetorical agency and disclosing disability in academic writing. *Rhetoric Review, 33*(1), 55–71.

Kerschbaum, S. L., Eisenman, L. T., & Jones, J. M. (Eds.). (2017). *Negotiating disability: Disclosure and higher education.* University of Michigan Press.

Kryger, K., Mitchum, C., & Higgins, A. (2024). Localizing directed self-placement: UX stories and methods. *Journal of Writing Assessment, 17*(2). https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9sm4851w

Larson, K. K. (2024). Navigating labor-based grading contracts: Impacts on student attitudes and equity in writing assessment. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture, 24*(3), 441–455.

Miller, L. K. (2024). I'm a bad writer: How students' mindsets influence their writing processes and performances. In S. J. Corbett (Ed.), *If at first you don't succeed? Writing, rhetoric, and the question of failure* (pp. 105–123). The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2024.2494.2.05

Moriña, A. (2024). When what is unseen does not exist: Disclosure, barriers and supports for students with invisible disabilities in higher education. *Disability & Society, 39*(4), 914–932. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2113038

National Council for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2017). *Characteristics and outcomes of undergraduates with disabilities*. U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018432.pdf

O'Meara, K. D. (2024). 'In absolute control of my own grading destiny': Student reflections on engagement-based grading contracts. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture, 24*(3), 373–388.

Simpkins, N. (2018). Towards an understanding of accommodation transfer: Disabled students' strategies for navigating classroom accommodations. *Composition Forum, 39*. https://compositionforum.com/issue/39/accommodation-transfer.php

Smith, S. A., Woodhead, E., & Chin-Newman, C. (2021). Disclosing accommodation needs: Exploring experiences of higher education students with disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 25*(12), 1358–1374. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1610087

Tacke, E. (2024). On ambivalence: Disclosure, disability, trauma, and precarious affects. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies, 13*(3), 141–67.

Tinkle, T., Godfrey, J., Hammond, J. W., & Moos, A. (2024). Self-characterization in the self-placement assessment ecology. *Journal of Writing Assessment, 17*(1). https://escholarship.org/uc/item/07c5j8tp

Vidali, Amy. (2025). Disabling writing program administration. *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 38*(2), 32–55.

Vidali, A., & Michals, S. (2015). Beyond appendices: Equity and directed self-placement. *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 49*(1), 111–140. https://associationdatabase.co/archives/38n2/38n2vidali.pdf

Wood, T. (2017). Cripping time in the composition classroom. *College Composition and Communication, 69*(2), 260–286. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44783615