

Afterword

Finding the Right Note in Writing Placement

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The 2024 special issue and 2025 special section of *JWA* dedicated to methods of student self-placement (SSP) afford us a view of the various approaches—from design implementation to reflection and revision—employed by a range of universities. Led by Kate Pantelides and Erin Whittig, the contributions here offer additional evidence regarding the rapid uptake of SSP twenty years after Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles's (1998, 2003) transformational work. In these volumes, readers can trace theoretical understandings and see how undergirding concepts are re-made, adapted, and challenged across a wide range of institutions and student populations. Exploring how SSP operates here not only offers important takeaways that can be applied across spaces of divergence, but it also speaks to a prescient need to open our institutional spaces to the ways in which students understand their own relationship to their education. For those looking to reform practices at their institutions, this collection of work can provide a number of questions to consider throughout design, implementation, and evaluation, as well as offer solutions and workarounds for issues that they might not yet have seen on the horizon.

Each of us—Jessica and Kris—came into the work of writing placement because of its *consequences*. Later in this writing, we will discuss how these consequences informed our on-the-ground action. Our students came to us, confused about how they arrived in our developmental writing classes after earning straight As in high school English. Or, they confessed their fears about their ability to write well in our first-year writing classes, feeling compelled to compare themselves as returning students to the recent high school graduates around them, minimizing the power of the communications they had been part of in their workplaces, their communities, and their families for decades. As faculty, quasi-WPAs (most two-year colleges do not have writing programs or writing program administrators *per se*; see Ostman, 2013), faculty leads, and a dean, we have been troubled by the ways in which writing placement serves not only as a barrier to educational access, but often as barometer for students' sense of belonging or lack thereof, serving to uphold the systemic racism and inequities we seek to dismantle.

Edmund W. Gordon (1995; see also 1960, 1977) urged thirty years ago that going beyond the mining of data from extant tests, we might explore the development of new tests, test items, and procedures that lend themselves to descriptive and qualitative analyses of cognitive and affective adaptive functions in addition to wider specific achievements. (p. 360)

Not only across the variety of institutions and orientations in these volumes, but in its most basic function as a mechanism, SSP attempts to do just that. Teacher-scholars have turned to SSP as a way to showcase their deepest values about respect for student experiences and backgrounds and the variegated joys of writing. They have taken up the practice to redress historic wrongs by deliberately creating processes for students to assert their interests, goals, and experiences and to highlight their assets. We have seen how SSP is one form of writing placement reform that

humanizes placement assessment by marshalling resources toward student success. The question is not whether some students need additional support for their writing; rather, the question is whether we are using approaches to identify the writing capabilities of each student in a way that dignifies individual learning. (Poe, Nastal, & Elliot, 2019, §Other Roads, New Maps)

In our own contexts of two-year colleges, we have ushered in writing placement reform—including SSP—and have been supporting colleagues nationwide in their work. We still maintain “however equitable new placement processes might be, such reforms do not undo the harm

that has already been caused, with real consequences for individual students' lives, the material circumstances of their families, and entire communities" (Nastal, Poe, & Toth, 2022, p. 25).

We recognize that writing faculty and WPAs have been thrust into writing placement reform, perhaps with less preparation than they would have desired. In this afterword, we offer a context for the work done in Pantelides and Whittig's special issue and special section and identify actionable threads that readers might use to twine justice into their own work with self-placement. We additionally refer to heuristics colleagues have established to aid readers in their own efforts to validate writing placement practices in their local situations. Ultimately, we believe it is vital to look towards two-year college practices, as it is in these spaces where we bear witness to the multi-faceted complexities and the radical possibilities of SSP.

Contextualizing Writing Placement

Writing placement and admissions are inextricably connected in the United States of America's post-secondary educational landscape. Many countries have high school graduation examinations, which determine students' post-secondary educational offers and opportunities; the U.S. had a similar system in place until the late nineteenth century. The SAT and ACT, AP exams, and International Baccalaureate assessment communicate a student's educational achievements and aptitudes; however, since they are not operationalized systematically nationally, and since they function during a student's secondary education, they are necessarily distinct from exit exams. In the U.S., writing placement occurs after a student has been admitted to an institution. The history of this practice can be traced to the 19th-century Harvard University entrance exams: as more students were admitted, members of the institution found their backgrounds were more heterogeneous and ostensibly implemented the exams as a means to determine the incoming students' preparedness. This process set the stage for creating "English A" at Harvard in 1885 (Stewart, 1982), a composition course for those whose writing and rhetoric skills were seen to be lacking. This is essentially the same process most post-secondary institutions in the U.S. follow today.

Inquiry into U.S. history of writing placement and admissions testing reveals many shifts in opinion and in methodology, but one thing has remained constant: the quest to accurately determine a measure that can predict the required composition course that will productively challenge and support an incoming student. From those early written exams to multiple-choice tests of grammar, usage, and mechanics, writing placement reform has accelerated in the past decade, as we have previously discussed at some length (see Nastal et al., 2022). Prompted by the death of the COMPASS exam (Nastal, 2019) in 2015 due to its limited predictive ability, which converged with escalating calls to end systematic biases that had led institutions to disproportionately place student communities—often based on race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic class—into developmental writing classes at higher rates than their monolingual White, middle- or upper-class peers, practitioners leveraged these kairotic shifts in the industry and culture to enact changes at their institutions. These changes were designed to introduce students more accurately to the writing they would soon encounter than the COMPASS test proffered, more accurately reflect the writing faculty's values and the field's threshold concepts, and more accurately reflect students' own writing abilities and experiences. As awareness of the issues inherent in placement practices as they stood began to grow, practitioners began a search for other more promising processes. In this moment of change, the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) White Paper on Placement

Reform (Klausman et al., 2016) became central in the shift toward student self-placement in the modern era. It rejected “the one-size-fits-all high-stakes standardized assessment that many colleges have relied upon for years” (Klausman et al., 2016, p. 141) as it outlined the potential for SSP and multiple measures to better support access to educational opportunities and ultimately, student success. Klausman and colleagues’ (2016) recommendations seemed to be confirmed by the Community College Research Center (Barnett & Reddy, 2017) shortly thereafter.

While introduced in writing studies at the turn of the century (see Royer and Gilles, 1998), methods of self-placement were not widely used; most institutions at all levels instead used ACCUPLACER and COMPASS exams (Isaacs, 2018). Just two years after the TYCA White Paper, however, Christie Toth (2018, 2019) was able to find 22 two-year colleges that were using SSP (a leap from the one that had previously been reported [Tompkins, 2003]). Those numbers rapidly increased in March 2020, when the global COVID-19 pandemic forced many institutions to forgo proctored, in-person placement testing. When writing instructors were called upon to make immediate and drastic changes to their methods of writing placement, many turned to the TYCA White Paper. No other set of guidance had been issued by our professional organizations, and many writing program administrators and writing faculty across institution types needed support. We (Jessica and Kris) are currently leading efforts to review and update the White Paper in coordination with Joanne Baird Giordano, chair of the TYCA.

In response to the need for new measures—whether that need be logistical or born from a drive for equitable placement—practices that value students’ contribution to their own educational journeys and offer increased space for student action have grown across institution types in ways that can offer insight into our own needs and values as literacy educators. Over the past two years, Pantelides and Whittig have brought contributors together in the *Journal of Writing Assessment* to add to the body of scholarship of how SSP operates in a variety of institutional types (see Table 1).

Table 1

Institutional Types Represented in the Journal of Writing Assessment’s Special Issue (2024) and Special Section (2025) on Student Self-Placement

Authors	Institution Type	Year	JWA Issue
Arnold, Hassel, & Jiang	public research universities	2024	17. 1
Decker & Taormina-Barrientos	public comprehensive universities	2024	17. 1
Gaiimo & Reardon	small liberal arts colleges	2025	18.1
Johnson & Vander Bie	small liberal arts colleges	2024	17. 1

Authors	Institution Type	Year	JWA Issue
Kryger, Mitchum, & Higgins	public research universities	2024	17. 1
Stolley, Mullaly, & Hulst	public comprehensive universities	2025	18.1
Sweeney & Colombini	private Catholic universities	2024	17. 1
Tinkle, Godfrey, Hammond, & Moos	public research universities	2024	17. 1
Toth, Andrus, Onwuzuruoha, Clawson, Fraser, Fochs, & Rivera Aguilar	public research universities	2024	17. 1
Whitney & Skinner	small regional branches of research university	2024	17. 1

Taken together, the studies in these two volumes of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* offer more evidence of how SSP operates in universities at various stages of implementation. As they range from SSP-born writing programs to programs that have used the method for nearly two decades to programs initiating a pilot to programs with promising results shut down by external stakeholders, they proffer a view of SSP across the lifecycle of implementation and revision. While the special issues attend to a range of institution types, including access-oriented (Arnold et al., 2024; Decker & Taormina-Barrientos, 2024; Toth et al., 2024; Whitney & Skinner, 2024), there is no representation from two-year colleges, where nearly 40% of all undergraduates are enrolled. For insight into SSP at these institutions, readers can turn to *Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges: The Pursuit of Equity in Postsecondary Education* (Nastal et al., 2022). The open-access collection includes case studies of how SSP operates in five two-year colleges written by Jeffrey Klausman and Signee Lynch; Kris Messer, Jamey Gallagher, and Elizabeth Hart; Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt and Travis Margoni; Ella Melito, Erin Whittig, Cathy Sander Matthesen, and Denisse Cañez; and Sarah Elizabeth Snyder, Sara Amani, and Kevin Kato. SSP can offer more opportunities for students to assert their own interests, experiences, and will as it also enables writing programs to enact, evaluate, and understand the implications of their values. To determine whether this promise has been able to deliver on its potential, we turn to justice-oriented validation.

Validating Writing Placement

For the most part, when writing studies practitioners discuss validity today, they are referring to either predictive validity or content validity (see APA, 1952). The former is the ability to determine a future result based on an assessment activity. This is what led to the death of the COMPASS exam in 2015, in part because there was a low correlation between test-takers' scores

and grades in the classes they were placed into. Content validity refers to whether the assessment represents or can appropriately measure the content in question. The focus on content validity has been instrumental in helping writing studies shift away from using multiple-choice tests of grammar, usage, and mechanics as well as from using timed, impromptu exams to evaluate learners' writing abilities. In his contextualization of such exams, while advocating for the growth of portfolio assessments of writing, Edward M. White (1995) explained, "validity means honesty; the assessment is demonstrably measuring what it claims to measure" (p. 40). This explanation has become oversimplified in our estimation; we have seen innumerable accounts of the validity of an assessment mechanism—notably, writing placement—as if it resides within the tool and as if the only threshold to consider is if the tool is honest. "In reality," as Diane Kelly-Riley and Norbert Elliot (2014) have articulated, the field has many resources to refer to where validity is not merely "a stamp of approval" but rather, "a process . . . a tool to examine the usefulness of consensus statements in local settings" (p. 100). Kelly-Riley and Elliot (2014) identified a set of questions designed to facilitate local validation of a first-year writing program, building on Michael Kane's (2006, 2013) work, represented in Table 2, below.

Table 2

Sample Validity Questions for Local Validation of a First-Year Writing Model (Kelly-Riley & Elliot, 2014, p. 102)

	Scoring	Generalizations	Extrapolation	Implication
Basic: essential question	How are inter-rater agreement (consensus) and inter-rater reliability (consistency) established?	How does the writing model map to the curriculum in which it is embedded and assessed?	How does the writing model relate to other measures of writing, from standardized assessments to course grades?	How do results from the assessment impact instructor performance and curricular initiatives?
Operationalization: within the curriculum	Depending on assessment aim, how are acceptable levels of consensus and consistency established?	What methods can be used to demonstrate that the traits of the writing model are related to each other?	What methods can be used to examine the nature of the relationship of the given model to related ones?	In terms of equity and fairness, how does the use of the model impact student diversity in the writing program?
Expansion: beyond the curriculum	What processes are in place to support acceptable levels of consensus and consistency across time?	What methods can be used to demonstrate that the traits of the writing model can predict each other?	What methods can be used to expand the construct model so that its relationship to robust measures may be increased?	How are results from the assessment communicated and used by stakeholders beyond the institution?

Conversations in writing studies and WPA work often seem to be held in this first level of questioning, regarding whether and how an assessment tool relates to a curriculum. Consequential analysis, however, or emphasis on the implications for the very people involved with, invested in, and impacted by the process, is often missing, lending evidence to assertions that a color-blind approach works to reify systemic racism (Randall et al., 2022; Xi, 2010).

Our colleagues Darin Jensen and Joanne Baird Giordano (2022) have offered a principled line of inquiry to begin investigating how well a method of writing placement serves local goals and support the validation process:

- What measures are used to place students into English literacy courses and programs? How were existing placement processes developed? What are the reasons for using those measures?
- Which literacy courses and programs need to be included in assessing the effectiveness and equity of existing placement process(es)? What are the purposes of those local programs in relation to the literacy and learning needs of the student communities that the institution serves?
- To what extent are placement measures consistently used across all English literacy programs (first-year writing, developmental writing, reading, ESOL, corequisite support, dual-credit high school programs, bridge programs, adult basic education, etc.)?
- What systematically collected evidence is available for assessing the effectiveness of existing placement measures in supporting college success for the student communities the institution serves?
- What systematically collected evidence is available for assessing students' experiences, outcomes, and literacy development in existing programs?
- When available placement and assessment data is disaggregated by student communities, what do they reveal about inequities in how students are placed into writing courses and available literacy programs?
- What do systematically collected data show about the need for change in placement processes?
- What do data show about why and how available courses and programs might change to support the literacy development and college success of the student communities those programs serve? (Jensen & Giordano, 2022, p. 283)

These questions are oriented toward an assessment ecology (White, Elliot, & Peckham, 2015) where instruments are carefully designed, reviewed, critiqued, and fine-tuned. Those of us in two-year colleges know well the speed with which we must conduct such analyses of our writing placement practices, often based on legislative or system-wide demands. We regularly inhabit a landscape where our reforms are alternately stalled indeterminately only to be rushed into implementation.

Despite, or perhaps because of these conditions, we are constantly questioning, enacting, and thinking through programmatic and curricular policies on the ground in order to be ready to implement change. We recognize the significance of the work, as it is lived out in the experiences of our students. When students are unsuccessful in first-year writing, they are unlikely to persist in higher education at all. Jessica found, for instance, when examining the consequences of the historic (not-SSP) writing placement practice at her past institution, African American and Black students were placed into the lowest level of developmental writing courses at disproportionately

higher rates than their White and Hispanic and Latine peers (Nastal, 2019). The diversity of the first-year writing course was significantly impacted by the practice as Black students were barred from accessing it. Furthermore, Black students did not proceed through the writing sequence, either by receiving a D, F, or W grade or by stopping their literacy education in the program. The archival data showed students' course grades in the sequence reached medium to high statistically significant correlations with their GPA, with lower correlations in the lowest developmental writing class and moderate gains as the sequence progressed. In essence, the course grades correlated more strongly with GPAs as the student population became less diverse. For a faculty in a federally-recognized Predominantly Black Institution and Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution, these results were unacceptable. Evidence regarding the impact of writing placement was what led her department to conclude it was an invalid method for the institution.

Fairness

If we return to the origins of writing placement and review through a sociocultural lens, we can see that the practice was never really about providing students with an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. They already did that through the admissions process. It was about finding a means to exclude a widening pool of applicants; as Gordon (1995) explained, “it is not by accident that existing approaches to the standardized assessment of educational achievement are insufficiently sensitive to the diversity of the student populations served and to the pluralism of society” (p. 360). The racist, eugenicist origins and perpetuation of such testing and biases has been well-documented by Black scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), Robert L. Williams (1971), and Brenda L. Townsend (2002). The early modern testing enterprise was built on biases. It was designed to justify the reprehensible treatment of Black communities and to exclude individuals from opportunities (see Elliot [2005] for a comprehensive account; Karabel [2005] regarding anti-Semitism in the early Ivy League admission system). Biased gatekeeping methods through admissions and writing placement have continued in the ensuing years every time admissions are broadened to include more (and more diverse) individuals. That is, each time educational access is broadened and democratized—for instance, when the GI Bill was introduced post-World War II and during the Open Admissions movement in the Civil Rights Era—a vocal contingent of stakeholders raises questions about rigor and works to maintain the status quo through valorizing curricular models that naturalize systemic bias and exclusion. As the ebb and flow of access crashes into the rocks of systemic preservation, practices like SSP hold some promise for erosion, offering students an opportunity to act upon their own needs and desires and enter into a writing program that collaborates across institutional spaces enlisting colleagues throughout the institution to support students' success, as well as to recreate what “success” is through a more culturally inclusive and asset-minded lens. That promise, however, can only be realized through intentional, systematic, and principled design with attention to consequences.

Fairness is “the first virtue of writing assessment” (Elliot, 2016, §1.0). It is the principle that guides all of our work. Validity and reliability (which we haven't touched upon in this afterword; it generally refers to the precision of an assessment instrument [AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014]) are necessary but irrelevant if the instrument results in unfair, inequitable, and unjust outcomes. One heuristic to validate writing assessment through the lens of fairness is David Slomp's (2016) Integrated Design and Appraisal Framework (IDAF) (see Oliveri, Nastal, & Slomp, 2020; Slomp, 2024; Slomp, Corrigan, & Sugimoto, 2014; Slomp & Elliot, 2021), which is represented in Table 3.

Table 3

Phases and Key Questions of the Integrated Design and Appraisal Framework (Slomp & Elliot, 2021, p. 469, Figure 1)

Phases	Key Questions
Phase 1: Identify Aims	<p>What purpose is the proposed assessment designed to achieve?</p> <p>What are the potential consequences that could result from the implementation of this assessment program?</p> <p>Who are the stakeholders who will be impacted by this proposed assessment?</p> <p>How will the development and use of this assessment promote equity of opportunity for impacted populations?</p>
Phase 2: Identify Target Domain	<p>What constructs are targeted in the assessment?</p> <p>Does narrowing the construct to its sampling in the assessment either imperil achievement of intended outcomes or introduce potential unintended outcomes?</p>
Phase 3: Analyze Assessment Design	<p>How completely do assessment items capture the construct sample?</p> <p>In what ways do the assessment items introduce construct irrelevant variance to the assessment data?</p> <p>How will the assessment framework and item design impact achievement of intended outcomes?</p> <p>How will the assessment framework and item design support equity and fairness? How can score reports be designed to support the intended outcomes?</p>
Phase 4: Analyze Scoring System	<p>How do the scoring criteria ensure construct coverage?</p> <p>How will scoring procedures support the achievement of intended outcomes?</p> <p>How will scoring procedures support equity and fairness?</p> <p>What unintended outcomes might result from implementation of the scoring procedures?</p>

Phases	Key Questions
Phase 5: Analyze Assessment Results	<p>Has each link in the chain of inferences (scoring, generalization, extrapolation, decision) been tested for each intended use and has each link been supported by empirical evidence?</p> <p>Within the population being assessed, have the populations who might be disparately impacted by the assessment been identified?</p> <p>In cases where differences in performance across populations have been identified, does evidence based on test content, text context, test response, and opportunity to learn indicate that the assessment is measuring the same construct across populations?</p>
Phase 6: Analyze Consequences	<p>Taken collectively, does the evidence gathered indicate that the assessment has achieved, for each population, the purpose or goals for which it was designed?</p> <p>Taken collectively, does the evidence provide an understanding of unintended impact, whether positive, negative, or unknown?</p> <p>How do intrapersonal, interpersonal, and ecological factors contribute to intended and unintended outcomes?</p>

The IDAF articulates a principled course of action to facilitate the validation process. It is built on a robust understanding of the situated nature of writing and of writing assessment. It draws on sociocultural and sociocognitive theory (see Mislevy, 2018) and ecological understandings of writing assessment to advance a person-first approach. The IDAF requires practitioners to deliberately construct an instrument and consider multiple phases and consequences of implementation, particularly consequences that differ among communities. Here, we can see that the validity of an assessment instrument—a writing placement practice, for instance—does not reside within the instrument itself.

Justice-Oriented Validation

A focus in the scholarship on validity alone, however, even through a fairness orientation, has not been enough to redress the continuing, systemic inequities thrust upon far too many of our students and our communities (see Poe, Oliveri, & Elliot, 2023). While we support informed efforts to decentralize or end writing placement within institutions (Poe et al., 2019), we recognize that is not always feasible or preferable. We also recognize the fear of continuing to enact harm on individuals has, at times, led to inaction or has led to using methods of writing placement that appear to work “well enough” (see Smith, 1992). In these instances, the hope appears to be that an asset-based curriculum facilitated by a caring and informed instructors can support students’

learning even after a harmful introduction via writing placement. This hope is misplaced as it leaves solutions to systemic inequities in the hands of individuals. A just curriculum must be carefully designed from the start and must be designed with room to respond to specific learners and their needs.

We have found the justice-oriented anti-racist validation (JAV) framework advanced by Jennifer Randall, David Slomp, Mya Poe, and Maria Elena Oliveri (2022) as an exemplary heuristic, represented in Table 4. They asserted “how the validation process, arguably the most important process in educational measurement, has served as one of measurement’s primary weapons of racist oppression and marginalization” (Randall et al., 2022, p. 171) primarily because it is positioned as being color-blind and neutral, but is used to penalize individuals who stray from White supremacist conventions. Writing assessment—including writing placement—has been used to maintain racist and oppressive educational structures. By limiting analysis of practices to examining whether it can predict a student’s success in the placed course or affirming that it measures the necessary content, and by eliding analysis of impact and consequences of these practices, our field has continued to harm far too many of our students and communities.

Table 4

Heuristic for a Justice-Oriented, Antiracist Approach to Building a Validity Argument (Randall, Slomp, Poe, & Oliveri, 2022, p. 175)

Criteria Element	Traditional Validity Arguments Ask:	Antiracist Validity Arguments Ask:
Construct Articulation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are marginalized stakeholders involved at every stage of the construct definition and refinement stage? • How well understood is the construct being measured for all including minoritized learners? • Whose values, perspectives, ways of knowing, and experiences does the construct reflect, normalize, or marginalize? • How stable is the construct across social, cultural, and racial contexts? • Is the construct explicitly antiracist? Does it articulate the specific false and oppressive narratives it seeks to disrupt?
Content	Do the test items represent the targeted domain of interest?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the test items reflect/reify negative stereotypes of minoritized populations? • Are there test items that actively disrupt negative stereotypes about minoritized populations? • Does the content/language of the items privilege a particular linguistic or cultural way of thinking/making sense of the world?

Criteria Element	Traditional Validity Arguments Ask:	Antiracist Validity Arguments Ask:
Consequences	Do items function differently across student groups?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do test/assessment results serve to further marginalize already minoritized populations? What groups may be advantaged and disadvantaged by the administration of this assessment? In the short term? The long term? How does/can structural racism impact the results of this assessment? What groups will be privileged by this assessment? In the short term? The long term? What systems would have to be in place for a student to be successful on this assessment? Are those systems rooted in white supremacist values?
Response Process	Are the test takers interpreting the tasks as intended?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have we considered/interrogated whether...the assessment requires responses that are in alignment with the dominant white discourse? Have a wide range of interpretations been considered that acknowledge the different ways of knowing, thinking, and experiencing of Black students? What historical logics of testing and racism are students bringing to the test situation? Are the items written in such a way that assumes only one “right” way of getting a correct response? Do the items allow for multiple ways of thinking and knowing? Are Eurocentric ways of knowing and processing information being privileged over other ways of knowing and processing information?
Internal Structure	Does the relationship among test items and test components conform to the construct?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How have values shown up in the items/tasks? And which social identity groups do these values reflect?
Relation to Other Variables	Does the observed relationship between the test results and external variables match the predicted relationship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do test-criterion relations generalize across historically marginalized populations? How are criterion variables selected? Does this selection process consider the history/impact/legacy of white supremacist hegemonic practices? Does the process of this criterion selection seek to disrupt these hegemonic practices? Have alternative criterion variables—those that center and reflect the values of nonwhite students—been considered/examined?

Randall and colleagues' (2022) JAV framework explicitly requires practitioners to examine “what characteristics of the assessment, the assessment design process, and/or the inferences drawn from the assessment provide evidence of antiracism?” (p. 174). It demands baseline competencies from any of us involved in writing assessment (echoing calls made by Banks et al., 2018, p. 382); that is, we must all ensure our assessments reflect a robust understanding of the writing construct, do not operate differently for different communities of learners, are interpreted effectively for all student communities, and foster constructive relationships between assessment items and inferences. We must go beyond these fundamentals and interrogate how our methods of writing assessment and writing placement affect the individuals who entrust us with their education—and we must disrupt the practice when we find it devalues their ways of knowing or replicates systemic violence.

Application

In the context of placement reform at Kris's institution, a justice-oriented antiracist validation process influenced not only the impacts of placement processes on curriculum and faculty perspective of students, but the ways placement structures students' experiences and educational futures. Kris and colleagues were inspired to take action after seeing, on the ground and in the data, the racial divide of the developmental versus non-developmental sections that comprised their co-requisite classes (see Messer, Gallagher, & Hart, 2022). Despite noticing this disparity for years, there had been little institutional support to change methods. ACCUPLACER's shift to NextGen in 2016 enabled them to act on the data that showed students of color were placed disproportionately in courses that did not bear credit. After more than two years of research and planning, the department was able to implement a pilot of SSP practices the semester that COVID-19 hit, where they found students in the pilot performed at the same level as students placed via ACCUPLACER, but enrolled at higher rates. During that time, access to credit-level classes for African American and Black students increased by more than 40%. While success rates went down overall across the college during the COVID shutdown semesters (a trend seen at many institutions nationwide), currently, success rates are rising to pre-pandemic levels and have been significantly higher in standalone credit-level classes than in the co-requisite model. There is no question that SSP increased educational access at their institution.

The issue that self-placement brought to light was in the curriculum and how the institution came to understand students' needs. Kris and colleagues had to listen to not only the why, but the what of student needs (Messer & Gallagher, 2022, 2024)—they couldn't keep teaching business as usual. The actuality of students choosing support on their own necessitated faculty having to rethink how they individually and programmatically conceive of the writing courses, as well as how they teach. This led to more conversations with students about what academic support looked like to them and what would support their success. Through this experience, it became abundantly clear that SSP can encourage students to advocate for the literacy support they need—which is hardly the marker of an individual who is “developmental” or “below” anything (see Gordon, 1995). It has required both a curricular and systemic mindshift that is starting to offer valuable feedback to restructure the framework from one that culls into one that cares. SSP provides a critical space to interact with students' needs, hearing from students who previously might not have been present in the space to share (or who may not have been primed to think there was room for their needs) before SSP. Additionally, SSP has been instrumental in facilitating shifts

away from standalone developmental coursework and fostering deeper relationships between Gateway faculty and advising. As a practice, SSP offers a new environment in which to act—one based on centering student voice and attempting not only to ask for and listen to student voices, but to make room for them within the experience itself.

Onward

It is all too easy to get caught up in designing the perfect writing placement tool. In SSP, for instance, there are many variables to consider: how to present information to students, what role student choice will play in the course selection and registration process, to what extent campus and external stakeholders will be involved, and so on. In the 2024 special issue, Arnold, Hassel, and Jiang; Kryger, Mitchum, and Higgins; and Toth, Andrus, Onwuzuruoha, Clawson, Fraser, Fochs, and Rivera Aguilar offered thoughtful, helpful guideposts for design. While taking a considered approach to design is important—in that design will play a role in how the instrument frames the experience for students—there is no way to design for all learners and all situations. We must, as Ellen Cushman (2016) has urged in her “Decolonizing Validity,”

dwell in borders, to think of ways in which social equity and pluriversal understandings can be achieved in everyday knowledge work of assessment design and research on assessment. The important thing is to actively seeking out pluriversal (rather than universal) understandings, multiple and varied (rather than singular and narrow) ways of expression, integrated (rather than siloed) exercises in validity and reliability, whole and active (rather than atomized and static) language uses in an effort to name and respect a range of ontological, axiological, and epistemological perspectives. (§3.0)

From Cushman’s decolonial methods to West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks’s (2023) queering of writing assessment, we want to encourage readers to embrace the messiness and chaos (West-Puckett & Banks, 2024) that exists when working to understand how writing placement—an incredibly complex practice—represents the writing construct, welcomes students into our learning environments, and does not harm communities of learners. One of the most useful strategies to enact meaningful, sustainable writing placement practices is to create a pliable instrument that will allow for adaptation as institutional needs change, information about students’ responses is uncovered, and consequences are analyzed.

Writing placement can mean the difference between a supported and agentic start to college writing or a series of hurdles in an already challenging obstacle course, resulting in inequitable outcomes for far too many individuals and communities. Through our placement practices, we can positively influence and gather information about how students feel about education and their relationship to it, their perceptions of their own readiness for it and belonging to it, as well as offer them ways to better apprehend and navigate the system they are entering. As we craft and study our placement mechanisms we can and should ask how well these practices align with an institution or a writing program’s goals. How well do they uphold the writing faculty’s values? How well do they uphold the dignity of the individual learner we are welcoming into our institution? How well do they disrupt systemic inequities? In a two-year context, we know the diversity in our learners and the parameters of our resources. If we wait for the instrument to be perfectly tuned, we would never play a note.

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