Title

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After Implementation: Assessing Student Self-Placement in College Writing Programs

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Abstract: While a growing body of research provides instruction on how to implement methods of student self-placement (SSP), and specifically directed self-placement (DSP) for college writing courses, there is a gap in the literature about how to evaluate DSP after implementation. This article offers strategies and recommendations for assessing DSP processes based on the authors' experiences of developing a new DSP mechanism and evaluating its effectiveness over several years. This article presents statistical data from our analysis of our institution's DSP, which informs a heuristic set of questions that others can use to evaluate the effectiveness of their own SSP instrument after implementation. This analysis demonstrates the value of evaluating SSP process for writing programs as well as outlining issues that may emerge and should be considered when analyzing SSP.

Student self-placement (SSP) methods have a long history in the literature, starting with Royer and Gilles' 2003 collection on directed self-placement (DSP). However, campus-based efforts at a national level accelerated the interest in and implementation of such methods, particularly as traditional mechanisms such as the ACT/SAT or onsite institutional placement tests were disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this was received as a welcome change because of the documented history of standardized instruments as reinforcing inequities and disadvantaging marginalized students (see Ketai, 2012), the swiftness of the change has resulted in a gap in the scholarly literature on self-placement methods. Writing program administrators (WPAs) are able to access a large and growing body of research providing directive instruction on how to implement SSP, but there is little available for what to do after. That is, as new SSP models are created and launched, faculty may find themselves having to select among a range of measures and tools to learn about how the placement changes are working.

For the purposes of working toward equity, inclusion, and access, we must also assess how these changes affect stakeholders: students from various backgrounds, instructors in the program, and university staff, among others. In this article, we offer strategies and recommendations for assessing SSP processes based on the coauthors' experiences of developing a new DSP mechanism, called the English Placement Survey (EPS) at our institution, and evaluating its effectiveness through multiple methods, including surveys and statistical analysis, over several years. We first situate our process within relevant literature on the topic, then describe our process of implementing the EPS, explain several research questions we had about the results of the change, and report on select results of our assessment with the ultimate goal of offering insights and a heuristic for programs that are also undertaking an assessment of placement changes on their own campuses.

For context, we write as collaborators who all worked at the same regional public research university in the Upper Midwest during academic year 2022-23. At the time of the collaboration, one of us had previously served as the Director of First-Year Writing (FYW) for six years and led the institution's implementation of the EPS at the university in Fall 2020; another served as Director of FYW for the following two years; the third collaborator was housed in the School of Education as an Assistant Professor with research that focuses on bilingual education and educational leadership.

Supporting Students Through Self-Placement

Writing assessment has been a core focus of writing specialists throughout the development of the discipline, with position statements from national organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) (2022) aiming to articulate a shared vision for what, how, and why we use assessment practices. Since at least 2003, when Royer and Gilles published their book-length edited collection about DSP, there has been interest in the writing studies community to identify better and fairer ways of matching students' literacy needs with the curricular and other resources at colleges as they move between secondary and postsecondary coursework.

The Two-Year College English Association's (TYCA) "White Paper on Placement Reform" (2016) outlined the efforts and imposition of placement and curriculum with a specific emphasis on two-year colleges, which are most likely to experience imposed mandates at state and university levels on placement due to their open-access missions and diverse student populations. Prior special issues such as the *Journal of Writing Assessment's* 2016 issue on ethics in writing assessment

established both theoretical and moral imperative for better ways of assessing student readiness for college (Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2016). The 2019 special issue, likewise, brought together a variety of perspectives on placement methods from multiple measures to DSP within the context of two-year colleges (Toth et al., 2019). More recently, Nastal et al.'s (2022) *Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges: The Pursuit of Equity in Postsecondary Education* brings together diverse voices on placement research, theory, and practice. Notable to us from this collection is Jensen and Giordano's (2022) closing admonition in the afterword: "The literacy ecology of each college and community needs holistic reforms to meet the equity goals sought in placement changes. Placement itself does not eliminate racist, classist, ableist moments in other parts of the curriculum, in the college, or from individual instructors" (p. 285). Toth and Aull (2013), for example, in their scan of three dozen SSP instruments, take stock of the concepts and dimensions that SSP instruments assess, some of which may inequitably weigh prior learning experiences or make presumptions about students on the basis of seemingly acontextual individual choices. Like Ketai (2012), scholars of SSP wonder whether "DSP helps address inequities in composition course placement or simply rearranges them" (p. 142). In other words, the efforts to make assessment of students' literacy skills and needs more effective—whether with writing, reading, or other academic indicators—are ongoing, well-established, and in varying states of development.

What much of this literature has offered is descriptive rather than prescriptive, with heuristics or summaries of current practice. For example, the TYCA (2016) "White Paper on Placement" offers five recommendations:

TYCA recommends that all writing placement practice:

1. Be grounded in disciplinary knowledge;
2. Be developed by local faculty whose work is recognized and compensated by their institution;
3. Be sensitive to effects on diverse student populations;
4. Be assessed and validated locally;
5. Be integrated into campus-wide efforts to improve student success. (p. 136)

These recommendations reflect what much of the work in the field presents, which are broad principles rather than specific recommendations about what specific placement methods or measures should be used by programs.

Evaluating Self-Placement

Although much has been written about the benefits of SSP and how writing program administrators can approach its implementation, less is known about what to do after SSP has been implemented in a given program or institution. This section provides an overview of the scholarship that has evaluated SSP processes post-implementation, primarily focusing on DSP.

The University of Michigan writing program is one of the few that has conducted a series of long-term evaluations of their self-placement mechanism, each time using a different lens of analysis and publishing multiple studies of the results. The first study (Gere et al., 2010) evaluated the validity of DSP at the University of Michigan over a five-year period. In analyzing student test scores, DSP responses, students' course choice, course materials, final grades, as well as the results of a large one-year survey and 17 one-on-one interviews with students, they found weaknesses in the validity of DSP at their institution due to a variety of factors. Also, DSP scores could not be generalized for diverse populations, such as ELL and Generation 1.5 students. In the second

study, Gere et al. (2013) evaluated the University of Michigan's DSP mechanisms through textual analysis. After the first study (Gere et al., 2010), the program modified its DSP tool to include an essay and accompanying short reflections on the reading and writing processes employed while writing the essay. The researchers noted a dramatic rise in the number of students who followed the placement recommendation after the modification. Using a corpus-based analysis provided the authors with a clearer sense of the differences between the writing of those enrolled in the mainstream course and the writing of those who enrolled in the preparatory course, underlining the validity of the modified DSP tool as a whole. A third study (Tinkle et al., 2022) disaggregated student demographic data from DSP data and conducted statistical analyses in order to determine the impacts of the placement mechanism on different groups of students. Tinkle et al. (2022) found that the DSP, in spite of its goal of improving equity, actually resulted in what the authors suggest are inequitable placement recommendations. The results disproportionately impacted under-represented minority (URM) (defined by Tinkle et al. as Hispanic, Native American, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander) students and women students by placing them into Michigan's pre-FYW course more often than non-URM and men students. In aggregate, the results of these follow-up assessments and empirical data gathering illustrate how such analysis can lead to clear action steps for revision to the DSP in order to better serve students.

Other research studies have used statistical methods to assess the impact of the change, including Balay and Nelson (2012), who conducted quantitative statistical analyses of their institution's modified DSP tool, which had been in place for more than a decade at the time of the study. They found that at their institution, the DSP tool was less effective (as measured by final grades) in predicting student success than SAT or ACT scores. This study underlines the value of empirical evaluation of DSP, as it can uncover problematic results to inform future decisions, whether related to revising an institution's current DSP or considering other placement mechanisms.

Multiple methods studies that disaggregate or focus on particular student populations also provide insight into the value of post-implementation assessment. For example, Sinha's (2022) study of self-placement at a California State University campus analyzed longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data from students after they were placed using the institution's DSP process, finding that a variety of factors, including personal writing identity and institutional facts, impacted students' self-placement decisions. The majority of students surveyed valued having agency in the placement process, but outside factors, including past educational experiences, test scores, and stigma influenced their decisions. Similarly, Ferris and Lombardi (2020) used multiple methods to assess the effectiveness of the placement changes for multilingual writers, comparing two methods of placement. Ferris and Lombardi (2020) found that multilingual students in the pilot group were more satisfied with their placement than those who were not offered a choice. This result supports the result of an earlier study by Ferris (2018), in which multilingual students at the same institution, placed by the exam only, expressed significant dissatisfaction with the placement process. Moreover, students offered a choice were as successful in the course they enrolled in as those who were not offered a choice. Sinha's (2022) and Ferris and Lombardi's (2020) research strongly suggests that student agency in the placement process may not ultimately result in higher rates of student success, but that students themselves see it as positive. Saenkhum's (2016) longitudinal study of multilingual writers' experience with placement (though not self-placement) at Arizona State University draws similar conclusions; she argues that WPAs should

focus on creating conditions that will promote student agency and advocates for SSP/DSP as one of those conditions.

In sum, each of the studies cited above offer a range of approaches to evaluating SSP after it has been implemented. Strategic evaluations give valuable information about the effectiveness of SSP within the particular institutional context in which SSP is used. Existing scholarship suggests that SSP evaluation can highlight mismatches between the SSP tool and the expectations or values of a writing program (Gere et al., 2010). Additionally, evaluation of SSP can reveal reinforcement of existing social hierarchies and systems of power, suggesting that we need to critically evaluate our own assumptions about the power of SSP to promote equity (Balay & Nelson, 2012; Tinkle et al., 2022). Randall et al. (2022), for example, introduce what they call a "justice-oriented anti-racist validity (JAV)," with prompts for program administrators to ask across the areas of placement of construct articulation, content, consequences, response process, and internal structure in relationship to other variables. More recently, they have offered what they call "QuantCrit" principles which "advance validation processes for diverse populations in each of . . . three areas . . . construct articulation and validation, data analysis, and data interpretation/score reporting" (Randall et al., 2023, p. 4).

Similarly, SSP evaluation may expose how existing social inequities factor into students' own evaluation of their skills and readiness for college-level writing courses (Ketai, 2012; Sinha, 2022). At the same time, there may be an inherent value to offering students the option of placing themselves into writing courses, even if student success rates are unaffected (Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Saenkhum, 2016). Together, these studies, though limited in scope and breadth, underline the value and necessity of assessing SSP after implementation, particularly to test claims that SSP is more equitable and effective and that it is sufficient to move the needle on long-term student success outcomes.[1] This suggests 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.

Developing Our Institution's English Placement Survey (EPS)

Like many universities with an existing admissions process, the DSP approach we use, called the English Placement Survey (EPS), already has a *built-in* multiple measures approach because students must meet a set of minimum admission standards to enroll at the university. Prior to the launch of the EPS at our institution, students were placed into one of three writing courses based exclusively on standardized test scores.[2] The COVID-19 global pandemic created exigency and loosened system-wide policy constraints for placement that allowed us to develop the EPS we use today.

In Fall 2020, our institution's Vice Provost for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management asked us to explore options for an alternate way to place students into writing courses, since many students were unable to take standardized tests due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. In response, we gathered a subgroup of our standing FYW committee which included faculty,

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1 See, for example, "Informed Student Placement Today," which reported that "there is little indication that equity gaps in college-level course completions have become smaller since ISP's [Informed Student Placement's] introduction. On average, about the same proportion of students from each demographic category are completing college-level courses after ISP as before" (Brathwaite et al., 2022, p. 6).

2 The three courses are College Writing Preparation II (CWP2), which is offered at a nearby community college but not at the university; College Composition I (CC1); and College Composition II (CC2).

lecturer, and graduate student representation. We reviewed scholarship, looked at examples of other DSP tools, and conducted the fact-finding and source review in tandem with assessing our FYW curriculum sequence. The FYW curriculum at our institution is comprised of two courses: College Composition I (CC1) and College Composition II (CC2). We also offer multilingual sections of CC1 (MCC1) and CC2 (MCC2); these sections are joined with mainstream sections using the same curriculum (see Matsuda & Silva, 1999).

We ultimately chose to implement DSP because we wanted to offer choices to students who we would characterize as "in between" two levels (i.e., CC1 and CC2) based on their educational background and sense of readiness, or what in the SSP literature has been referred to as *self-efficacy*. For this reason, students who we would characterize as "in between" two levels are offered a choice between two courses, whereas other students whose background suggests a clearer placement receive only one recommendation. Ultimately, students make a final decision (even if not offered a choice) on their own placement.

Our institution's EPS is comprised of a series of questions that are structured in two parts (see Appendix for the full list of questions). The survey opens with a question asking students to self-identify as multilingual or not. In the first part, which has between 7 and 11 questions (depending on students' linguistic self-identification), students self-report any standardized test scores they have along with their high school GPA, grades in high school English Language Arts courses, educational history (including gaps between secondary and postsecondary enrollment), and linguistic background. Students who self-identify as multilingual are also asked if they speak another language at home or consider themselves fluent in another language through schooling, if they were educated outside of the U.S. (but graduated from a U.S. high school), and for how many years.[3]

The second section, which is the same for all students, begins with a question asking students to self-describe their level of motivation in academic environments. Then, the section continues with 28 multiple choice self-assessment questions that ask students to select a series of responses that best describe how they have approached (or whether they have encountered) a series of writing, reading, and research tasks of varying levels of difficulty. Questions ask students to describe their perception of difficulty of a given task, such as reading a long investigative news report, using three or more sources to develop an understanding of a research topic, and writing a short (2-3 page) argumentative paper.

Numerical scores are attached on the back-end of the survey, and each question is weighted to reflect what the information suggests about a student's readiness for college-level writing courses. For example, in the second section of the survey, if students indicate they have previous experience reading a lengthy academic article, they are given a lesser or higher score depending on how easy they found the task. The two parts of the survey are combined into a single score, which is linked to a recommendation about the course(s) that is the most suitable match for the student's needs.

Based on the EPS results, students can receive any one of the following course recommendations:

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3 Students are asked to self-identify as multilingual; if they do so, they take a slightly different version of the first part of the survey. This modified version of the survey allows us to capture the linguistic background of students who are not officially "international" but may be recent immigrants or children of immigrants to the U.S. T his data is otherwise not captured by the institution. International students are placed into CC1 based on an initial cutoff score for standardized English language proficiency tests (IELTS and TOEFL, among others). International students who achieve the necessary score for CC1 then take a different version of the SSP that places them into CC1 or CC2 or allows them a choice.

- College Writing Preparation II (CWP2)[4]
- CWP2 or CC1/MCC1 (choice)
- CC1/MCC1
- CC1/MCC1 or CC2/MCC2 (choice)
- CC2/MCC2
- CC2/MCC2 or Course Challenge[5]

Upon completion of the survey, students receive an email notification of their placement recommendation with descriptions of the course(s) that they are recommended to take, and a score linked to placement is added to the students' academic record. Students discuss course enrollment with their academic advisor.

We piloted the EPS for Spring 2021 admits and analyzed the results of the pilot in mid-Spring 2021. We identified trends in survey placement compared to where the students would have been placed using standardized test scores. We did not make any changes to the survey at that time since the sample size was extremely small (fewer than 50), and we did not notice major discrepancies. Since Summer 2021, all newly admitted students planning to enroll have been required to take the survey. To date, more than 7,000 students have taken the survey (not all have matriculated to the institution).

Evaluating Our Institution's DSP Process

Like the placement literature cited above, we do not aim in this article to recommend a single method or measure of assessing SSP outcomes. Instead, we describe data we collected, how we approached analyzing it, and what questions we asked of ourselves and the collected data. We also address how we are approaching the assessment of the placement changes in an ongoing and recursive way for the purposes of continuous improvement and to inform curriculum and instructional changes.

In our earliest phases of assessing the change, we determined that several kinds of information would be useful to us as we set up an assessment plan. Some of these involved gathering data and responses from a wide range of stakeholders:

- Responses to our placement survey questions. We were able to gather this independently because the survey lives in Qualtrics (our university-supported survey tool), and we have access to the responses.
- Rates of DFW (grade of D, F, or withdrawal) in each of the courses into which students placed and for which we were responsible.[6] This was possible because, as a research-intensive institution, we have a sufficiently staffed and responsive Office of Institutional Research, which fields requests for institutional data and can provide information within a relatively short time frame.

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4 CWP2 is offered at a nearby community college but is not part of the university curriculum.

5 Students can opt to "challenge" a course at our institution by enrolling in a "course challenge" (at half of a regular course's tuition). If they succeed in the "challenge," they are given credit for the course and are not required to take it. Our writing program requires that students work closely with the program director to compose a portfolio that achieves the program's learning outcomes. The portfolio is evaluated by members of the FYW committee.

6 The two courses included in our evaluation are College Composition I and College Composition II. Some students are enrolled in multilingual sections of these courses, but these sections are combined with "mainstream" sections (along the lines suggested by Matsuda & Silva, 1999). We want to note here that though our survey allowed for a student to receive another result, College Writing Preparation II (CWP2), this is a course that is not offered on our campus. If they are placed into this course, students enroll and take the course off campus at a nearby satellite campus of a two-year college.

- Responses to questionnaires distributed to those staff and instructors affected by the placement changes: FYW instructors and advisors. These data were modestly useful but had limitations. For example, feedback from advisors helped us get a sense of whether the new process was clear and whether advisors and students understood the placement recommendation. Feedback from instructors had mixed value because the vast majority of our FYW sections are taught by graduate teaching assistants with limited experience, and they were not as able to provide comparative assessments of how or whether the placement method had changed the degree of students' preparation to do the work in the course because they had less experience teaching FYW (sometimes zero or one prior semester).

Over the first year of the transition, reviewing this data helped us get a sense of how "on track" the implementation of the EPS was. Most significantly, we wanted to know whether implementation of the EPS was having any negative effect on students, instructors, or advisors. Our initial assessment of the data showed that the transition to the EPS was not introducing any harmful consequences and was placing more students into the second-semester course than previously without increasing DFW rates.

During the 2022-23 academic year, we wanted to develop a finer-grained understanding of the data, in part to seek answers to some questions that were more complex than we could answer with the information and skills available to us. First, we sought and received IRB approval (#0004548) for use of all collected data for research purposes. Then, we posed a series of research questions (discussed fully in the next section) focused on issues such as the relationship between our previous and new placement method, the impact of the pandemic on student success, and what choices students made when they were given an option of selecting between two courses. We also wanted to know more about the alignment between the "back-end" numerical values attached to questions in the survey and the courses in which students ultimately enrolled.

Methods

In this section, we describe the process of evaluating the effectiveness of our institution's EPS at a deeper level as well as some of the findings from our evaluation in relation to the data we collected and the research questions we asked. Though the results are specific to our instrument and our institution, later in this essay we offer a heuristic that can help readers develop their own assessment process, one aligned with the tool(s) in use and the needs of their students.

The purpose of our research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the recently implemented EPS at the institution where we all worked at the time. We sought to determine the differences between previous placement measures (standardized test scores) and the EPS and compare those differences to student success in the FYW courses students enrolled in.

As we began determining the best way forward for data analysis, we maintained a focus on social justice and equity, asking ourselves the kinds of questions that Randall et al. (2022) suggest in their JAV framework, such as, "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?" and "are Eurocentric ways of knowing and processing information being privileged over other ways of knowing and processing information?" (p. 175). At a basic level, we wanted to confirm our initial findings that the EPS was not creating harmful consequences for our students, particularly those from historically marginalized groups. Additionally, we wanted to understand whether any

questions asked on the EPS were predictive of student success or failure, and if so, how might we make use of this information to revise the EPS in the future.

For these reasons, in our analysis, we considered the impact of factors such as gender, race, linguistic background, Pell Grant eligibility, and transfer status on placement and student success. We compared student success in FYW before and after implementation of the EPS, collecting data on all students enrolled in FYW courses at our institution for all semesters between Fall 2017 and Fall 2022.

The EPS was piloted in Spring 2021, with full implementation beginning in Summer 2021. This coincided with changes occurring on campus (and around the world) as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic.[7] For this reason, we analyzed some data through the lens of the pandemic era in which it occurred. For our purposes, *pre-pandemic* included all semesters from Fall 2017 through Fall 2019, *pandemic* included Spring 2020 through Spring 2022, and *post-pandemic* began in Summer 2022. In an effort to further account for the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on student success, we also compared trends in student success in FYW courses to trends in Communication 110 (a comparable required university-wide general education requirement).

After the data cleaning process, we conducted descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. We primarily used generalized linear models to understand how different factors impacted students' English placement survey results and their course performance.

The collection of data and its analysis was a fundamentally recursive process. As a research team, we met regularly throughout AY 2022-23 to seek IRB approval for the study, discuss the data we had access to already and the data we needed, identify research questions, and discuss the results. Our regular discussions were productive, especially since they helped us articulate and refine our goals in conducting the research. Additionally, as we found results for initial questions, more questions emerged. Key questions that we asked and investigated included:

- What is the relationship between the EPS results and the ACT score?
- What is the relationship between students' demographic background and EPS results?
- What is the relationship between students' demographic background and grade after enrolling in the first writing course?
- What is the relationship between students' EPS results and the course they actually enrolled in?
- How does the DFW rate (grade of D, F, or withdrawal) in FYW courses compare to the required Communication course, in general?
- What was the impact of the pandemic on student success?
- What is the DFW rate in FYW in different modes (online asynchronous vs in-person)?
- How many students were presented with a choice between different writing courses, and what did they choose?
- What is the relationship between the EPS numerical score and DFW rates?
- Do any questions on the EPS predict success or failure?
- How successful are the students who placed in the lowest quartile?

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7 On our campus, all classes in mid-Spring 2020 transitioned to online synchronous. Instructors had the choice to offer synchronous courses online or in person (with a hybrid option required) from Summer 2020 through Spring 2021. Course options returned to "normal" in Summer 2021, with many instructors continuing to offer hybrid options informally because the equipment installed in our classrooms made this relatively easy. Masks were required in all in-person environments on campus between mid-Spring 2020 and mid-Spring 2022.

Our Own Choices: Findings and Analysis

We sought to answer these key questions by analyzing the data through a series of statistical methods. We then examined the statistical results, proposed interpretations, and discussed implications for our future practice. While our key questions aimed to understand the process, outcome, and impact of the EPS from different perspectives, we are not able to present all our efforts and results in this study due to the limited scope of this paper. Therefore, we selected some representative approaches and findings to showcase our work and generate discussion on assessing the implementation of SSP tools. The data that we used to answer the representative questions in this section are from the school years after the implementation of EPS (i.e., from Summer 2021 to Fall 2022).

What is the Relationship between the EPS Results and the ACT Score?

We started by examining the relationship between the EPS scores and the ACT scores. Based on the correlation analysis, we found that students' EPS scores have moderately positive correlations with both their ACT composite score (Pearson's $r = 0.4351$) and ACT English score (Pearson's $r = 0.4175$). The results indicate that the EPS scores are consistent with ACT in terms of evaluating students' knowledge and skills in reading and writing. In other words, they are evaluating the same skills and knowledge, but we note that the ACT is not clearly aligned with the knowledge and skills required for college writing (see Hassel & Giordano, 2015).[8]

What is the Relationship Between Students' Demographic Background and Placement Scores?

In line with the recommendations of Randall et al.'s (2022) "Disrupting White Supremacy," we gathered data that would help us understand whether our placement changes would create a disparate impact on students from marginalized groups. When we built an estimated linear regression model treating the EPS score as the response variables and students' demographic background (i.e., race, gender, Pell Grant eligibility, academic level, whether first-year at the institution, and whether a transfer student) as explanatory variables, we identified the following results (see Table 1).

To summarize the outcomes from the estimated models, we found that on average:

- White students had higher scores in the EPS than students of color, including Asian, Black, and Hispanic students and students of two or more races;
- Compared to female students, male students had a lower EPS score;
- Being Pell-Eligible is negatively associated with a student's EPS score;
- Compared to first-year students, sophomores had higher EPS scores while seniors had lower EPS scores;
- Students who studied at this institution in their first year had higher placement scores compared to those of other students.

These results show that students who are underrepresented, minoritized, and/or underserved are more likely to be placed in lower-level college composition courses, which is consistent with published research and most modes of placement.

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8 Prior to implementing the EPS, a small percentage of students were required to take CWP2 (College Writing Preparation II) at a local community college based on standardized test scores. However, the EPS did not result in recommendations for any students to take CWP2.

Table 1

Estimated Model: Students' Demographic Background and EPS Scores

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	36.594	0.237	36.130	37.058	< 0.001
Race/Ethnicity: American Indian	-2.582	1.600	-5.720	0.557	0.107
Race/Ethnicity: Asian	-3.595	0.650	-4.870	-2.321	< 0.001
Race/Ethnicity: Black	-2.588	0.522	-3.613	-1.564	< 0.001
Race/Ethnicity: Hawaiian	-0.090	3.381	-6.719	6.539	0.979
Race/Ethnicity: Hispanic	-2.604	0.481	-3.547	-1.662	< 0.001
Race/Ethnicity: Two or more races	-0.977	0.445	-1.850	-0.104	0.028
Race/Ethnicity: Not Specified	1.396	1.164	-0.887	3.678	0.231
Gender: Male	-0.478	0.189	-0.848	-0.108	0.011
Academic Level: Sophomore	2.539	0.273	2.004	3.074	< 0.001
Academic Level: Junior	1.039	0.755	-0.441	2.518	0.169
Academic Level: Senior	-2.273	1.094	-4.417	-0.128	0.038
Pell-Eligible: Yes	-1.293	0.244	-1.772	-0.815	< 0.001
Full-Time Transfer: Yes	-0.765	0.513	-1.770	0.240	0.136
First-Time, Full-Time: Yes	0.747	0.224	0.307	1.187	0.001

Note. Total *N* =2603. Multiple R-Squared: 0.095. Adjusted R-Squared: 0.090. CI = confidence interval. LL = lower limit. UL = upper limit. *SE* = standard error. A reference category is chosen for each categorical variable in the statistical modeling so that different levels are comparable. These reference categories are 1. Race/Ethnicity: White; 2. Gender: Female; 3. Academic level: Freshman; 4. Pell-Eligible: Not eligible; 5. Full-Time Transfer Student: No; 6. First-Time, Full-Time Student: No.

How Many Students Were Presented with a Choice Between Different Writing Courses, and What Did They Choose?

Based on the placement scores students get from the DSP, they will be offered two possible types of suggestions: a recommendation to take a course of a certain level (e.g., "College

Composition I") or a recommendation to choose a course between two different levels (e.g., "College Composition I or College Composition II").

The results of this question are reported in Table 2. We found that when presented with a choice between College Composition I (CC1) and College Composition II (CC2), 38.21% of students (*n*=94) chose CC1, while 61.84% of students (*n*=152) chose CC2. When presented with a

Table 2

A Comparison between the EPS Suggestions and the Courses Chosen

Placement options	Courses Students Took			
	CC1	MCC1	CC2	MCC2
CWP2	0	0	0	0
CWP2 OR MCC1 (choice; CC1 if MCC1 not offered)	0	0	0	0
CWP2 OR CC1 (choice)	0	0	1	0
MCC1 (CC1 if MCC1 not offered)	1	2	0	0
CC1	33	0	2	0
MCC1 or MCC2 (choice; CC1 or CC2 if not offered)	4	3	8	4
CC1 or CC2 (choice)	94	0	152	0
MCC2 (CC2 if MCC2 not offered)	7	1	33	15
CC2	142	0	1831	0
MCC2 OR Course Challenge (choice; CC2 if MCC2 not offered)	0	0	0	0
CC2 OR Course Challenge (choice)	7	0	267	1
Total	288	6	2294	20

Note. CWP2 stands for College Writing Preparation II; CC1 stands for College Composition I; CC2 stands for College Composition II; MCC1 stands for Multilingual College Composition I; MCC2 stands for Multilingual College Composition II.

choice between Multilingual College Composition I (MCC1) and II (MCC2), 36.84% of students (*n*=7) chose MCC1, while 63.16% students (*n*=12) chose MCC2. These results suggest that when presented with a choice, more students choose a higher-level course.

What Are Students' Success Rates in Relation to their Placement Scores?

The results of this question are presented in Table 3. The results show that, for student groups who took the course of the same level, those who were recommended to take a lower course level had a higher DFW percentage. For example, for those who took CC1, the group of students who received the EPS suggestions of CC1 had the highest DFW percentage (45.45% of 33 students). Different from the relatively low DFW percentage in other courses that have larger numbers of students, this seemingly high DFW percentage is partly due to the small number of students (15 students in five semesters). Despite that, rather than merely assuming that this student group is not academically successful, we need to take multifaceted contexts and factors into consideration (e.g., socioeconomic status, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, traditional underrepresented and minoritized identities), and provide more equitable, culturally and linguistically responsive scaffolding both before and during the semester. In comparison, the group of students who received the placement suggestions of CC2 or Course Challenge but who took CC1 instead had the lowest DFW percentage (14.29% of 7 students).[9]

Table 3

Students' DFW Rates in Relation to Their Placement Scores

Placement Suggestions	DFW % in Courses Students Took			
	CC1	MCC1	CC2	MCC2
CWP2				
CWP2 OR MCC1 (choice; CC1 if MCC1 not offered)				
CWP2 OR CC1 (choice)			0	
MCC1 (110 if MCC1 not offered)	0	0		
CC1	45.45		0	
MCC1 or MCC2 (choice; CC1 or CC2 if not offered)	0	0	12.50	0
CC1 or CC2 (choice)	21.28		25.66	
MCC2 (CC2 if MCC2 not offered)	0	0	9.09	20.00
CC2	20.42		15.02	
MCC2 OR Course Challenge (choice; CC2 if MCC2 not offered)				
CC2 OR Course Challenge (choice)	14.29		6.37	0

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9 In the future, we would like to explore why students with such high placement recommendations decided to take CC1 instead.

Similarly, for those who took CC2, the group of students who received the EPS suggestions of "CC1 or CC2 (choice)" had the highest DFW percentage (25.66% of 152 students). In comparison, the group of students who received the placement suggestions of CC2 or Course Challenge but who took CC2 instead had the lowest DFW percentage (6.37% of 267 students). These statistics highlight the significance of the EPS beyond the role of placement: it could also be potentially associated with students' in-class performance. When providing individualized scaffolding for students, instructors may benefit from referring to students' EPS results to better understand their background, needs, and learning preferences.

Are There Specific Questions on the EPS that Were More Predictive of Success or Failure? Were There Specific Questions on the EPS that Aligned with Other Aspects of Students' Academic Performance?

We compared the EPS responses between those students who received DFW grades ("fail") and those who received other grades ("success") at the levels of CC1 and CC2 separately.[10] We calculated the mean of the responses for each student group and conducted t-tests for each question to understand the statistical significance in the differences. For the t-test, we tested the alternative hypothesis that students who received a grade other than DFW self-rated higher in the EPS. Tables 4 and 5 (see Appendix) show the results of the comparison.

To synthesize the tables, we found that for both courses, the differences in students' responses are statistically significant for the question items where students reported their overall high school GPA, approximate grades in high school English/language arts classes, and their learning motivations.

Additionally, for students who took CC2, the following question items also have differences in students' responses that are statistically significant:

- levels of previous English/language arts coursework;
- levels of other coursework;
- test scores;
- experience reading a three-page biographical or profile article about a person, place, or event;
- experience reading a 15-page academic article;
- experience with integrating direct quotes or paraphrases from a source into writing;
- experience writing a Works Cited or References page.

For these question items, we rejected the null hypothesis that there is no difference in their responses between students who received DFW grades and those who received other grades, and accepted the alternative hypothesis that students who received a grade other than DFW self-rated higher in the EPS than those who received a grade of DFW.

Compared to most of the other question items that survey students' self-ratings of their reading and writing skills, students' academic backgrounds and learning motivations significantly differentiated the responses from students of passing grades and DFW grades for both course levels. Therefore, more emphasis may need to be placed on these aspects for the design, implementation, and evaluation of the EPS. For example, instead of simply asking students to evaluate their

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10 Because no students received DFW grades in Multilingual College Composition I and the number of students who received DFW grades is very small (3) in Multilingual College Composition II, we cannot conduct robust statistical analysis to compare the responses for these two courses.

experience and proficiency in reading and writing different types of essays, we may also include or revise the questions to understand their motivations and affect in engaging in these tasks.

Heuristic for Evaluating SSP Processes

Based on our own experience in evaluating our newly implemented EPS, we offer here a set of questions for readers to ask themselves as they are designing their own assessments of SSP. For most programs, the key question is: "How is the selected method of SSP working after implementation?" Other questions—for example, about "effectiveness" of SSP or the "effects" of SSP—may be related, but such framing can potentially narrow the findings and their value. Likewise, some assessment scholars shy away from terms like "accuracy" or "accurate placement" because of the complex and subjective alignments of students' academic background, literacy skills, and motivation with course options. What is accurate for one student may not be "accurate" in the way a program is designed or defined. Some aspects of a SSP process may not be "effective," but it may be instructive or informative for program coordinators in relation to their student populations and their needs, courses, or instructional approaches.

Below, we offer some potential questions that could frame an assessment of SSP methods after implementation, along with the types of evidence that might be gathered and used.

Is this placement approach aligning students' learning needs and skills with the appropriate course?
- Increases or decreases in student success, as measured by course grades.
- Increases or decreases in student success, as measured by selective review of student writing or systematically gathered from instructors.
- Feedback from students (through surveys or focus groups).
- Increase or decrease in course withdrawals.
- Focused statistical analysis of particular score bands. For example, those students who score on the edge of different recommended courses and the choices they make in terms of course level.
- Disparate impact, as measured by disaggregated data that can signal whether the success of students from historically marginalized groups has increased or decreased.
- Relationship among different questions asked–for example, the relationship between responses to a writing and research inventory and student success as measured by writing assessment or grades in courses.
- Success rate of students in multiple courses (such as a first- and second–semester writing course sequence) or in selected, writing-intensive courses taken by students after their first year of college.
- College retention rates and the relationship to grades earned in writing-intensive courses.

Is this placement approach accessible and useful for students, advisors, instructors, and program coordinators?
- Response rate to selected SSP tool, including survey dropout.
- Satisfaction surveys and forums with an opportunity for stakeholders affected by the placement change to identify issues and offer suggestions.

- Results of student surveys (online) or first-week questionnaires distributed in class to clarify students' understanding of the placement process and whether their current course meets their needs.

Are the measures in our SSP approach aligning student responses with course competencies and outcomes? Or are there aspects of our SSP that may be especially predictive of student success and are valued appropriately by the process?

- Statistical relationships between particular questions on a SSP tool and student outcomes (as measured by grades).
- Statistical relationships between particular questions on a SSP tool and student outcomes as measured by departmental assessment of student writing.
- Correlations between survey questions (for example high school GPA or ELA secondary GPA and responses to particular reading, writing, and research questions on the instrument).

What are the implications of implementing a particular SSP method for our program, curriculum, and department staffing?

- Increase or decrease of placement into particular courses in a sequence (non-degree credit writing courses, for example, or direct placement into a transfer-level/degree-fulfilling course).
- Increases or decreases in the numbers of sections of writing courses, corequisite support courses, or writing studio classes.
- Results from workload surveys of instructors on whether the placement changes have increased or decreased the level of support needed by students in their classes or impressions of students' preparation for the writing tasks assigned in the course.

In sum, we discovered through our data analysis several preliminary and important answers to questions and concerns that we and other campus stakeholders had about the change: there was no clear negative effect of switching to the EPS. Moving to the EPS did not have a large effect on student success rates, for example, contradicting concerns from our registrar that students might inflate or misrepresent parts of their placement survey response to place into a higher class that they were not prepared for. Our statistical analyses, as well, showed that the statistically significant measures on our placement survey were high school GPA and a question related to student motivation, all consistent with prior literature on the topic. Though consistent with prior published findings, the results led us to reflect on how we might revise the current instrument to attach a greater weight to those questions that were more significantly correlated with success (grades in the writing course) or embed responses that get at learning strategies and management of obstacles into the multiple-choice responses to specific writing tasks. We continue to consider these modifications for upcoming semesters.

While advocating for adopting this heuristic, we acknowledge that not all faculty working with SSPs may have previous experience in using quantitative methods for the design and analysis of assessment data. Consequently, we offer the following recommendations to support this process:

1. Faculty can initiate their assessment design and data analysis process by employing descriptive statistics (e.g., means, percentages, medians). Utilizing simple charts and

tables can often yield valuable insights before delving into more advanced statistical techniques.

2. Faculty have the option to collaborate with statisticians and/or social scientists who are well-versed in quantitative research and evaluation methods. These experts can be found within their own academic institutions and/or through external channels. Many colleges and universities house specialized centers or offices, often under names such as "Statistical Consulting Center" or "Office of Institutional Research" that provide consulting services to faculty members, whether affiliated with the institution or not.

3. It's also worth noting that all colleges and universities undergoing the accreditation process are mandated to conduct institutional assessments. As a result, educational institutions often have dedicated offices, centers, or personnel responsible for overseeing these assessments. Faculty can explore these opportunities and leverage available resources or assistance to support assessment projects within their writing programs.

By implementing these practices, faculty working with SSPs can make evidence-based decisions and improve the quality of their program assessments, even if they are new to the realm of statistical data analysis.

Limitations

We recognize that readers of this essay come from a diverse range of institutions, with greater or more limited resources than those we were able to utilize. For example, two of the co-authors had limited training in statistical analysis, and we brought on our third co-author, housed in a different department but with similar research interests, when we decided to delve more deeply into questions that required training in statistics. The size and structure of our mid-sized regional university allowed us to identify and partner with a colleague from another department on this work. At a much smaller institution, these kinds of collegial partnerships might be unavailable; at a much larger institution, they may be more difficult to find.

As we continued our assessment work, our institutional context also afforded some opportunities that other kinds of campuses might not have immediately available, or which would require a partnership with other campuses, colleagues, or programs. We have a well-staffed and responsive Office of Institutional Research that provides needed data within weeks. This expedited our analysis, as we were able to request and receive additional institutional data or disaggregated numbers in relation to our curriculum in a timely way. Likewise, our campus has a functional and responsive Institutional Review Board that smoothly and swiftly approved our data collection and analysis for research purposes.

Implications and Conclusions

Implementing SSP at any institution is a complex process involving many different factors and parties for success. But it is important to resist assumptions that SSP will work smoothly after implementation or easily address the problems it is meant to fix. As our analysis illustrates, implementing SSP comes with the responsibility of evaluating how SSP is working after it has been administered. Our analysis shows the value of evaluation, as well as the issues that may emerge and should be considered when analyzing SSP.

Assessment of SSP is especially valuable in that it can inform changes to the process to ensure that the SSP mechanism is working in the best possible way to support student success. For

example, while we found that our EPS was not creating problems in terms of student success overall, we were able to identify two questions on the placement survey that seemed to predict student success. Identifying these two questions–related to high school GPA and student motivation–as significant led us to have a broader discussion about how the other questions about students' past experiences with reading, writing, and research might be reframed. This discussion will lead to some modification of the EPS that we plan to test (and assess) in the future.

While the goal of implementing any SSP method is to ensure that students enroll in writing courses that will best support their learning and development as writers, evaluating SSP methods after implementation may produce results that challenge positivist assumptions about the value of SSP. For example, longitudinal evaluation of the University of Michigan's self-placement process eventually showed that DSP did not predict student success, as most students were likely to succeed in FYW regardless of whether or not they were placed into a remedial class (Tinkle et al., 2022). In the case of our institution, we found that the EPS did not fully predict student success, though it also did not impede student progress or success.

Other factors, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, seem to have affected student success in FYW at our institution that complicate straightforward conclusions about the effectiveness of our method of SSP. Longitudinal study of factors such as the pandemic and students' writing identity (Sinha, 2022) can help us better understand the relationship of these factors for student success, as well as SSP's role in this relationship. This last point highlights the essential value of ongoing assessment: Evaluating SSP may not answer all questions related to student success in writing courses, but it can provide direction for further inquiry.

Another important takeaway from this study and others that have evaluated SSP is the recognition that each SSP process and its effects are unique to the institution and the writing program in which it is implemented. Our findings, in tandem with Balay and Nelson's (2012), Sinha's (2022), Ferris and Lombardi's (2020), and the University of Michigan's (Gere et al., 2010; Gere et al., 2013; Tinkle et al., 2022) studies, all demonstrate the variety of approaches to SSP that institutions can take, as well as the different results that occurred as a result of implementing SSP. While DSP seemed to have a positive "placebo" effect on Ferris and Lombardi's (2020) multilingual students at the University of California-Davis, in that students offered a choice in placement felt more satisfied with their choices than those who were not, Tinkle et al. (2022) concluded that DSP made no difference in the ultimate success of University of Michigan students. We note that while both of these research institutions are selective, UC-Davis is less selective (with a 49% acceptance rate) compared to UM (with a 20% acceptance rate). Balay and Nelson (2012) found, in contrast, that at their less-selective regional public university, DSP may have created barriers to student success. In the case of the institution studied here, a public research university with a 95% acceptance rate, our findings suggest that the EPS is an appropriate alternative to the standardized test scores previously used—an alternative that saves students money and time, and reduces the risks associated with a reliance on test scores as measures of student ability. However, our EPS does not yet predict student success in a way that is satisfying for us as researchers, suggesting that we may continue to modify the tool to make it more effective in accomplishing our goal of supporting students through appropriate placement.

Additionally, it remains important to remember that SSP does not exist outside of, and may not be able to resolve, existing social inequities. In fact, as in the case of Tinkle et al's (2022) analysis, DSP may actually reinforce systemic inequities. Our own analysis suggests that our

institution's EPS does not reduce the social inequities that students already face when entering higher education, but it also does not exacerbate them. Sinha's (2022) study, too, demonstrates that outside factors, including students' own self-perception of their abilities based on years of schooling and societal bias, still hold a strong influence over placement results and students' own understanding of what those results mean. This reality underlines the necessity of evaluating any SSP method after it has been integrated into institutional structures; we must investigate the effect that SSP has on historically marginalized groups of students. Of course, SSP should be understood as just one piece of the puzzle of developing more equitable processes within our writing programs.

Ultimately, we call for additional scholarship that evaluates SSP methods, because existing scholarship, including this article, does not adequately reflect the diversity of institutions in which SSP methods have been implemented. This is particularly important in our current context, in which many institutions dropped their standardized test requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic and moved to alternative placement methods, some very rapidly, as in the case of our own implementation. We note that many institutions of higher education do not plan to return to their previous reliance on standardized tests. Therefore, it is increasingly important to share the results of SSP processes and assessment with each other, in forums such as this, so that we can draw from and build upon already existing practices and research, and design, implement, and assess SSP tools at our own institutions more productively and effectively. It is our hope that this article provides valuable evidence upon which others can build.

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