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Informing Self-Placement: A Polyvocal Narrative Case Study

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Abstract: This article provides a polyvocal narrative of the development, initial assessment, and ongoing revision of an informed self-placement (ISP) process initially implemented during the COVID pandemic. The authors intersperse collectively narrated description of how the ISP unfolded in its first two years with individual reflections on those experiences from a variety of positions and identities. Data suggest that this ISP process narrowed but did not fully close racial equity gaps in first-year writing placement while maintaining enrollments and academic performance in the first-year writing course sequence. Persistent racial equity issues resided not only in the ISP instrument itself but the systems by which students learned about the ISP and the opportunities they had to complete it.

Keywords: self-placement, equity, first-year writing, pandemic

From the mid-1990s until 2020, the University of Utah (UU) placed students into first-year writing (FYW) courses using the Admissions Index, a number calculated through a combination of SAT or ACT scores and high school GPA. There are many compelling arguments against using such metrics for writing placement. They are not direct measures of students' capacities in most postsecondary writing situations, and they often advantage white, middle-class, continuing-generation college students. They don't take into account what students know about writing, where they gained that knowledge, or how they think about their writing abilities, learning preferences and priorities, or educational agency. Admissions Index placement also stigmatized the first course in our writing sequence and the students who were involuntarily placed into it, sending harmful messages about the institution's evaluation of their languaging and literacy practices—and, by extension, their identities—before they'd even arrived. In 2020, UU abandoned the Admissions Index and implemented informed self-placement (ISP). We did so because we recognized that students are more than a number. We used ISP from 2021 until 2024, when the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) mandated that UU align placement with other state postsecondary institutions.

UU is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) approaching Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) status located on the homelands of Ute, Shoshone, and Goshute peoples in the foothills of Salt Lake City. Considered Utah's "flagship" public research university, UU does not offer developmental writing courses. Rather, it has a version of the two-course FYW sequence required statewide, WRTG 1010: Introduction to Writing (WR1) and WRTG 2010: Intermediate Writing (WR2). Until USHE's 2024 mandate, "placement" at UU determined whether students without prior FYW credit began in WR1 or went directly to WR2. Under the Admissions Index, approximately one-third of incoming students with no prior credit were placed into WR1, and those institutionally categorized as "domestic students of color" were overrepresented. Although overall pass rates in WR2 were high (typically around 85%), they were moderately higher for domestic white students than for Latine, Black, Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander, and international students.

The student self-placement (SSP) literature suggested that enrollments in WR1 might decline with a move from mandatory placement to SSP, but this decline could be a beneficial correction for patterns of under-placement that are often raced and classed. SSP studies also demonstrated that some students would choose WR1 even if it wasn't required, and, on average, students would likely do as well or better in WR2 after the implementation of well-designed SSP (see Toth, 2018, for a review of this literature). For us, the question was not *whether* SSP works—the research shows it can and often does work in a range of institutional contexts. Rather, our central question was *how* to develop locally situated SSP that valued students' writing self-knowledge and capacities for reflection, communicated a more accurate and nuanced message about college writing, and closed equity gaps in WR1 enrollments and WR2 completions.

In this article, we present our experiences as an imperfect but generative polyvocal case study of that *how*. The story encompasses the design of our online ISP instrument, the development of a complementary human consultation process, and assessment of the initial consequences of ISP, which suggested we were closing equity gaps. Although UU's ISP came to an unanticipated halt as we were finalizing this manuscript, writing together foregrounded the complex identity negotiations that SSP demands not just of students but also of the faculty, graduate students,

undergraduates, and writing programs involved in SSP design and implementation. We hope our now-historical case study offers useful insight into these dynamics to colleagues elsewhere.

Making the Case (Study)

Two of us—Jenny Andrus and Christie Toth—are tenured faculty members in UU's Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies (WRS). Jenny had been an undergraduate at UU who was placed through the Admissions Index. In her words, *I am white and middle-class with a father and mother who both have BAs. I grew-up in a small rural town that was primarily working-class. I didn't know it then, but growing up in a rural community would put me at an institutional disadvantage when I came to the UU, despite the race and class privilege I had grown up with. I know now that it was assumed then that because of my rural background I would be less prepared for college, not quite good enough. The placement processes for writing classes, in particular, only took into account my GPA and my ACT score, numbers that the institution assumed indicated my intelligence. The university then (and in many ways still) ignored all of the real and important ways that I had been using reading and writing for most of my life. It ignored my individual accomplishments, and it ignored my own agency in setting and meeting my educational goals.* Jenny took the placement process personally. As an incoming student, she was accounted for institutionally in uncomfortable ways. Now that she is a professor with a background in rhetoric and writing studies who spent years directing FYW at UU, those ways are readily visible to her.

Christie's perspective on the need for a new placement process emerged from her scholarly engagement with SSP theory and design. *I am a white woman from a middle-class family: both my parents were military officers, and I grew up moving frequently, mostly overseas. I attended a liberal arts college where there was no such thing as first-year writing, so in more ways than one, I was never "placed." I don't have the same personal stakes in UU's placement process as Jenny, but I do care deeply about what Lederman and Warwick (2018) call "the violence of assessment." For fifteen years, I've researched SSP at a range of institution types, with a particular focus on community colleges. I was concerned about the harmful language ideologies and material inequities built into the Admissions Index. I worried about who was most disadvantaged, burdened, or deterred by this system. I was also embarrassed when colleagues at other institutions asked me how we did writing placement at UU, but for a long time I didn't have tenure or the administrative power to do much about it. It was COVID that finally created an opening Jenny and I could jump on.* As at many other colleges and universities (see Nastal et al., 2022), the pandemic disrupted entrenched writing placement practices at UU. In Spring 2020, students could no longer sit for SAT or ACT exams. Without those scores, there was no Admissions Index, and we needed a new placement process.

Jenny and Christie seized the opportunity to push for SSP. We spent Fall 2020 making the case to our department. Jenny made the local argument from her position as Director of First-Year Writing, while Christie contextualized SSP within the field's recent turn to antiracism (Inoue, 2009, 2015; Inoue & Poe, 2012), studies of disparate impact (Poe et al., 2014; Poe & Cogan, 2016), ethics (Elliot, 2016; Elliot et al., 2016; Slomp, 2016), and social justice (Naynaha, 2016; Poe & Inoue, 2016; Poe et al., 2018). This body of research informed the rationale for and design of our ISP process. Some colleagues expressed fears that allowing students to choose their own FYW placement would gut enrollments in WR1, reduce WR2 course completions, and/or undercut our department's disciplinary authority with the larger university. To allay those fears, we agreed to pilot ISP with one-third of incoming students the first year.

Feminist methodologies also informed the development and implementation of our ISP as well as our approach to writing this article (Hindman, 1999; Lykke, 2010). In *Ethical Dilemmas* (1999), Kirsch lists seven tenets of feminist methodologies, several of which resonate with our approach to ISP. Those tenets are primarily attuned to identifying the ways that history, culture, and research can privilege white, male, cis, urban, continuing-generation, straight, able-bodied college students. She argues that we must find ways to validate the embodied experiences and material realities of diverse student bodies (Kirsch, 1999. p. 5). Our ISP work takes Kirsch's ideals seriously. We actively and purposely developed the ISP in an attempt to counteract historical and cultural exclusions and validate the experiences and agencies of *all* students. We included undergraduate and graduate students as well as associate instructors, career-line, and tenure-line faculty in the development, implementation, and assessment of the ISP. We have constructed this article polyvocally, narrating the material experiences of redesigning writing placement and the effects of this process intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and physically on the ISP development and implementation teams.

This article was co-authored by Christie, Jenny, four WRS graduate students—Nkenna Onwuzuruoha (now an Assistant Professor of Africana Studies at California State University, Fresno), Nicole Clawson, Pietera Fraser, and Aubrey Fochs—and an undergraduate WRS major, Samuel Rivera Aguilar. Nkenna is the daughter of Nigerian immigrants who came to the US for college and earned their degrees at an HBCU. Sam is a first-generation college student who immigrated from Mexico as a child. Christie, Jenny, Nicole, Pietera, and Aubrey are all US-born and white, and all were continuing-generation college students. Four of us have LGBTQIA+ identities, and four identify as disabled and/or neurodivergent. These diverse histories, associated experiences, and social and personal identities impacted the design and implementation of the ISP. Though Christie and Jenny took the lead on drafting the broad description of institutional and programmatic events as well as the outcomes data, all members of the team brought to the project their own positions, perspectives, and experiences, not all of which are aligned or neatly reconcilable. Throughout this article, we regularly move between first-person plural and individual narrative, observation, and reflection—signaled through italic typeface—to foreground the vantage points of different team members.

JWA has increasingly made space for multi-author polyvocal texts that break from traditional article formats (e.g., Elliot et al., 2016; Gilman et al., 2019; Gomes et al., 2020; Tinoco et al., 2020). Tinoco and colleagues (2020) offer a particularly powerful rationale for a polyvocal approach, asserting that it acknowledges the diversity and merit of all involved in reimagining assessment while creating space for nuanced, emergent identities and voices. Like Tinoco et al. (2020), we follow Inoue (2019) in using polyvocality and narrative to disrupt the white, Eurocentric “standards and conventions of . . . traditional academic argument” (p. 1). All faculty colleagues, graduate students, and undergraduates involved in developing ISP were invited to contribute to this article; one persistent and inequitable limitation on our knowledge-making is that only those colleagues with academic incentives for publication were able to take on the labor of writing.

Designing ISP

In the pilot study approved by WRS faculty, one-third of incoming students would complete ISP prior to New Student Orientation (NSO). The remaining two-thirds would be invited to complete an at-home Writing Placement Exam (WPE) evaluated by a team of experienced faculty

riters—a process adapted from UU’s long-standing challenge exam for students who did not have a qualifying Admissions Index score but wanted to enroll directly in WR2 (see Zanders & Wilson, 2019). Incoming students were assigned to either ISP or the WPE based on which NSO session they attended. A total of nine NSO sessions were held in Summer 2021. Three were designated ISP orientations: one in June, one in July, and one in August.

We spent Spring 2021 developing ISP in two phases. Phase One involved designing and building the ISP instrument in Canvas, a learning management system used in high schools and colleges statewide. The ISP Committee that undertook this work included Jenny, Christie, and Jon Stone (tenure-track WRS faculty), Samah Elbelazi and Zeb Pischnotte (career-line WRS faculty), Nkenna and Nicole (graduate students), and Sam and Sabita Bastakoti (undergraduate WRS majors). Phase Two involved working with campus offices—Orientation and Transition, Teaching and Learning Technologies, University Information Technology, the Registrar, and Admissions—to relay ISP information to students before NSO and connect the ISP to the Registrar’s data system so students could enroll in their preferred course.

The ISP Committee decided to structure ISP with an introduction page followed by five modules. Students would move through these modules at their own pace and were instructed to input their course decision at least five days prior to NSO. We worked in three subcommittees: video production, questionnaire development, and instructions copywriting. Readers can access the full Spring 2024 ISP instrument at <https://tinyurl.com/4asur9eh>.

Introduction: Welcome Video

The introduction was important to ISP. We wanted to communicate that we were a community of real humans eager to welcome students to campus and support their transitions to college reading and writing. We opened with a short video in which Jenny introduced WR1 and WR2 and provided an overview of the ISP process. The introduction sought to counter the stigmatization of WR1, framing both courses as positive college-level experiences.

Modules 1 and 2: Video Testimonials from Students and Faculty

Toward the goal of humanizing FYW, the ISP’s first and second modules presented videos featuring students and faculty talking about their experiences in WR1 and WR2. These videos were created by the ISP Video Subcommittee, which conducted Zoom interviews with students and faculty who were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, language background, gender, age, and religious presentation. The videos were organized around core concepts central to the local construct of writing (Gere et al., 2010; Toth & Aull, 2014) that anchored the ISP questionnaire (Module 3, discussed below). They framed both courses positively.

Christie reflects, *I learned the importance of SSP videos from community college colleagues, particularly Kris Messner, Jamey Gallagher, and Elizabeth Hart’s (2022) work on self-directed placement at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). Their videos seemed to offer students a way to start imagining themselves in their college classes in a positive, engaged way.* Nicole agrees, writing, *the videos worked to show that university professors/instructors are people who care deeply about the work they do and the students they teach. In fact, I imagine it was a fantastic introduction to the university as a whole.* Nkenna used her time in the videos to assure students that *they already possessed a lot of knowledge, and the course would be a good way of having writing be or continue to be a part of their daily practice.* Videos thus played a key part in communicating the

values and pedagogical orientations of the FYW Program. We also hoped the videos would help students understand that the program was made up of real, embodied humans—a community we were inviting them to join.

It is important to recognize that this effort to present ourselves as fully embodied asked more of team members who were visibly marked as part of marginalized communities. Nkenna writes, *the video component of the ISP was also a pulling back the curtain to reveal some of us involved in ISP and FYC. As a Black female PhD student and FYC instructor, these sorts of unveilings are often mixed with anxieties of having to prove or perform white standards of the professional and professorial that often mean leaving parts of identities behind the curtain. I feel that this is different challenge than others who do not have visible or otherwise recognizable markers of being a part of a minoritized community within the discipline. Identity comes to the forefront and I move from the initial “raceless” marker of instructor to a Black instructor for many incoming students watching the recording. I do, however, believe my courage to be visible results in some sense of reassurance, for students who need this, that there are members of the campus community from diverse racial backgrounds on a predominantly white campus.*

Module 3: Reflective Questionnaire

Most SSP processes include some kind of questionnaire in which student responses are tabulated to yield a placement recommendation. Reflecting on her evolving research on SSP design, Christie writes, *a lot of folks I talk with around the country assume that providing a placement recommendation is an essential component of “directed” or “guided” self-placement, but I’ve grown skeptical of this approach. Most SSPs calculate placement recommendations based on algorithmic scoring thresholds that seem to me to be guesswork. Maybe questionnaire-based recommendations present SSP as sufficiently “scientific” to appease technocratic institutional stakeholders (and reduce the perceived threat of ceding course decision-making power to students). Maybe they hedge what Naynaha (2016) calls “paternalistic” doubts about the capacities of students—particularly first-gen BIPOC students—to make choices about their own education (p. 199). By the time we were designing UU’s ISP, my friend Jessica Nastal’s critiques of algorithmic approaches to writing placement (Toth et al., 2019) and the antiracist placement work of colleagues at Whatcom Community College (Klausman & Lynch, 2022) and CCBC (Messer et al., 2022) had persuaded me we should dispense with placement recommendations entirely.*

In their discussion of ISP at Whatcom Community College, Klausman and Lynch (2022) invoke Bedore and Rosenknill’s (2004) call for “informed” rather than “directed” self-placement. Informed self-placement foregrounds the importance of engaging students in information-rich dialogue about the curricular and institutional context they are entering. This emphasis on information wrests the focus away from “direction,” which centers the institution’s authority to evaluate students’ responses and communicates potentially harmful judgments of their languaging, literacies, and identities (Sinha, 2022). An ISP process that does not yield a placement recommendation also defuses the risk that advisors will treat questionnaire-generated recommendations as requirements, another well-documented threat to the principle of student choice (Toth, 2019).

We constructed a questionnaire that would support students’ reflection on their prior writing experiences in relation to the curricula, pedagogical approaches, and pacing of WR1 and WR2. However, none of those questions would require a response, and the questionnaire would

not generate a placement recommendation. We hoped students would learn what we valued—and how much we valued the literacy practices and experiences they were bringing with them—based on what we asked and how we asked it.

The Questionnaire Subcommittee analyzed the learning outcomes, syllabi, and Canvas shells for WR1 and WR2. They triangulated this analysis with a Zoom-based interview with Jenny to (a) identify core concepts central to the local construct of FYW at UU and (b) clarify the key distinctions between WR1 and WR2 that should inform students' choice. Nicole describes the subcommittee's goals and intentions: *In the introduction to the questionnaire, we worked hard to make it clear there were no wrong or right answers. It was very important to us that the students understood we were not suggesting one option as better than another, or that professors/instructors held one course in higher esteem than another.* An initial draft of the questionnaire and reflective writing prompt (discussed below) were reviewed by SSP consultant Laura Aull. Her feedback helped the subcommittee further disambiguate the core concepts and dimensions each question measured (Toth & Aull, 2014).

We heeded Gere et al.'s (2010) argument that valid SSP processes should provide students with accurate representations of the literacy practices and genres they will encounter in FYW. Toward that end, our ISP questionnaire included a sample reading from WR2 that showed students what we meant by "complex texts:" Vershawn Ashanti Young's (2010) "Should Writers Use They Own English?" We hoped this piece would communicate to students that our local construct of writing valued diverse language and literacy practices, thought critically about language and power, and challenged white language supremacy.

The questionnaire also included links to mid-semester and end-of-semester assignments from WR1 and WR2. These sample assignments were intended to help students gauge their familiarity with these genres of college writing relative to what they have encountered in previous educational settings. We crafted the questions with an explicit anti-deficit orientation aimed at recognizing and validating students' prior writing knowledge and experiences. The question response dimensions—what the question measures in relation to its underlying concept (Toth & Aull, 2014)—emphasize contextualized literacy experiences and self-assessed learning preferences:

- how much *experience* students have with a particular practice or genre,
- whether they would benefit from spending more *time* gaining experience with that practice or genre, and
- how they *learn best* in relation to the pedagogical orientations of WR1 and WR2.

We avoided using dimensions like *self-belief* and *feeling/attitude* (e.g., confidence, comfort, or enjoyment), because such dimensions rely more on students' domain-specific knowledge than *experience* and are less contextualized than task-based *self-assessment* (Toth & Aull, 2014). We also suspected those dimensions might be more likely to reinscribe racist, classist, gendered, and ableist experiences with school-based writing instruction and assessment (Schendel & O'Neill, 1999), privilege white, middle-class dispositions (Ketai, 2012), and reinforce stigmatizing ideas about student identities associated with WR1 (Sinha, 2022).

Module 4: Reflective Writing

Many institutions have developed versions of SSP that ask students to engage in some form of writing. Several emphasize the value of incorporating actual reading and writing tasks that provide students with direct experiences of locally valued literacy practices and genres as a

basis for self-assessment and course decision-making (Gere et al., 2010; Gere et al., 2013; Jones, 2008; Kenner, 2016; Pinter & Sims, 2003; Toth & Aull, 2014). Some invite students to compose a personal writing history, self-reflection, and/or argument for their course decision in relation to the SSP materials (Johnson, 2022; Leweicki-Wilson et al., 2000; Messer et al., 2022; Wang, 2020). We believed it was important for ISP to include a writing task that bore directly on students' course decision-making. We value writing as a form of reflection, and we wanted to communicate that value as part of our local construct of writing.

Influenced by Wang's (2020) rhetorical model for SSP, we asked students to compose a written rationale for their course decision. Unlike Wang, we wanted full course decision-making power to remain with the student, but we shared his sense that students needed a real audience and genre with real stakes to motivate deep reflection and engagement. We decided to ask students to draw on what they had learned through the ISP materials, reflect on their prior literacy experiences and knowledge of their learning preferences, and compose a message to their FYW instructor introducing themselves and explaining why they had decided to enroll in either WR1 or WR2. Beginning in 2022, these messages were delivered to instructors' email one week before the semester began.

Module 5: Course Decision

In the final step, students were given the option of logging their course decision or requesting a consultation with a WRS instructor. Christie had recently reviewed the University of Arizona's SSP, which allowed students to send questions or request an advisory meeting with a graduate student employed by the writing program. We borrowed this idea, building in an opportunity for students to request an ISP consultation before making their course decision. This created a mechanism for having a human conversation with a member of our department if students were confused about ISP, had questions about the courses, or were struggling with their decision. We discuss the evolution of ISP consultation in the Consulting with Students section below.

Critical Reflections

Our individual reflective writing for this article surfaced mixed feelings about the experience of designing the ISP that offer insight into the politics and notions of authority built into the university system—power dynamics we were not able to adequately attend to. For example, Nkenna and Sam worked together on the Copywriting Subcommittee. Nkenna noticed she and Sam had different ideas about what needed to be communicated in the ISP copy. Nkenna writes, *when reviewing his contributions to the modules, I noticed how we differed in communicating important information to incoming students. His message generally reinforced the known institutional expectations undergirding the college experience—the instructor is the authority and meeting their standard they set in the classroom is key. My message, on the other hand, focused on validating the skills as learners and communicators that students already possessed coming into the classroom.*

As a first-generation college student working a full-time job, Sam's experience of these negotiations was different. He said, *having no experience working on a project like this, I approached my contributions the way I knew how: an undergraduate completing an assignment. I know now as a result of collaborating with Jenny and Nkenna, that was not necessarily the best approach. Due to our deadlines and other commitments, I was not always available to discuss what I produced, and as a result generally accepted the group's changes. While some of my original work was reflected in the final*

product, I do admit that in respecting the expertise of those who outranked me, I may have conceded more changes than I would have otherwise. In retrospect, our efforts at a collaborative ISP design process would have benefited from the more substantive discussions of identities, positionality, and labor we have engaged in through writing this article.

Christie and Jenny's concession to starting ISP as pilot study also had unintended consequences. Each year, about two-thirds of incoming UU students have no prior FYW credit. Under the Admissions Index, those students' placement into WR1 or WR2 had been involuntary and automatic. Now, if those students did not complete either ISP or WPE, their default placement was WR1. All NSOs in Summer 2021 were fully online, which contributed to challenges communicating with students about writing placement. By early July, only 12% of students assigned to the WPE NSO groups were submitting essays, resulting in a high number of default placements into WR1—far higher than we could handle with our usual number of WR1 sections. Students in the ISP NSOs were completing placement at more than four times the rate of the WPE groups, but about 45% of those who completed ISP were choosing to enroll in WR1, a higher percentage than were mandatorily placed in the course using the Admissions Index.

WRS made a midsummer decision to offer students who had not completed WPE the opportunity to do ISP, expanding the pilot on the fly. The department scrambled to add several additional sections of WR1 to the fall schedule, reassigning instructors who were slated to teach WR2. That shift put additional pressure on WR2 enrollments in Spring and Summer 2022. In the years after the pilot, the consequences of this spike in WR1 demand converged with several other institutional factors (e.g., enrollment increases, new USHE policies limiting AP credit) to create an unexpected bottleneck in FYW. Large numbers of students were unable to enroll in WR2 during their first year, and many had to wait until their sophomore or even junior year to take the course. Christie reflects, *for all our efforts to develop a well-theorized ISP instrument, by early summer I suspected the greatest challenge—and potentially the most significant equity issue—in our approach to ISP was ensuring students heard about and completed it. Perhaps the next most pressing equity issue was which students were able to get a seat in the course they'd selected. Contending with these ecological, often policy-related factors was as important as the theory and practice of designing the ISP instrument.*

Based on the Summer 2021 pilot, WRS decided to take ISP full-scale. We made several changes to the instrument and the processes by which we distributed it to students. We moved ISP to a Qualtrics survey reconceptualized as Writing Pre-Orientation for *all* incoming students, whether or not they needed to make a WR1/WR2 course decision. Writing Pre-Orientation included information about a variety of on-campus writing supports like the writing center, library research assistance, and additional writing courses and degree options—institution-specific information transfer students often miss because they take FYW elsewhere (Gere et al., 2017; Toth et al., 2023). It also included information about sections of WR2 focusing on multilingual writing. Writing Pre-Orientation added a separate ISP track for students in the Honors College, who fulfill the WR2 requirement with HONOR 2211 rather than WRTG 2010. The questionnaire and writing prompt remained the same. We relocated the consultation request opportunity to come after the questionnaire but before students wrote the message to their instructor.

Consulting with Students

While the consultation opportunity was part of ISP from its inception, the staffing model evolved over time. As we prepared for the 2021 pilot, we had no idea how many students might request a consultation. In order to ensure we could meet students at times that worked for them, we converted the ISP Committee into a paid team of seven consultants. Team members provided their availability, and Christie monitored the consultation requests daily, communicated with students about preferred meeting times, and paired them with consultants. After each meeting, consultants filled out a log that included a summary of the conversation, any questions or confusions students had about ISP, and their course decision. We used this log to make ongoing revisions to the ISP instrument.

The success of SSP often hinges on whether those working with students in an advising capacity fully understand and embrace the principle of student choice. Toward this end, Christie and Jenny drafted a statement of principles for ISP consultations, which the team discussed and revised during our first summer meeting:

- We take an asset-based approach to students and their writing.
- We frame all course options in positive terms.
- We do not evaluate student writing.
- We do not form judgments about which course is “right” for a student.
- We do not tell students which course to take.
- We operate from an ethic of generosity and care.

We learned several key lessons about consultations during the Summer 2021 pilot. First, we should give students the option of consulting with us by email, phone, text, or Zoom to accommodate a range of communication preferences. About a third of students who requested consultations had questions that could be resolved without a real-time meeting—for example, about credit articulation, AP scores, or requirements for the Honors College. Nicole writes, *letting students choose their preferred mode was another indication that the department works hard to accommodate students’ needs*. Second, we learned we needed to consolidate logistics. As we took ISP full-scale in 2022, we replaced the consultation team with a single consultant: the ISP Fellow.

The ISP Fellowship was held by a WRS PhD student who received summer funding and one course release during the regular academic year to fulfill the following duties:

- Send ISP invitation emails and reminders prior to each NSO.
- Monitor requests for ISP consultation.
- Respond to questions that could be answered via email or text.
- Consult with students who wanted meetings via phone or Zoom.
- Document student interactions in the ISP consulting log.
- Table at NSO sessions to answer ISP-related questions.
- Work with the Director of First-Year Writing and First-Year Writing Committee to assess and make improvements to ISP.

Pietera served as the inaugural ISP Fellow in Summer 2022. She writes, *when I was first asked to be the ISP Fellow, I was thrilled. I had been hoping for an ISP approach for a long time—dating back to when I first felt the pressures of placement gatekeeping while entering community college. As the first to hold the role as sole ISP consultant, I was eager to be a guide to students who would now have their own placement agency, and I was so excited to see how we would shape and implement ISP*. Over the next year, Pietera built the ISP Fellow role, carving out space for conversations about

first-year writing that had not previously been part of the NSO experience: *Initially, I had difficulty creating a strong ISP presence at the NSOs. ISP was deprioritized—likely due to my identity as a graduate student, in addition to the reality that first-year writing courses tend to get pushed aside as less significant. Over time, though, we were able to establish our presence and importance at the NSOs, so I could make my assistance known and students could be reminded about ISP.*

One of Pietera's most important innovations was redesigning ISP to direct students to a scheduling app so they could sign up for a meeting time. This single change to the Writing Pre-Orientation instrument dramatically reduced the workload for the ISP Fellow: *initially, the job was completely overwhelming. There was a lot of redundant data recording, back-and-forth scheduling, and confusion at the NSOs. Because I was the only person tracking, organizing, and holding the consultations, it seemed like I spent much more time working with logistics than I did actually meeting with students. Eventually, I developed a more streamlined process—with much appreciated assistance from our department's executive secretary Katya Pilkington—which allowed me to spend more one-on-one time with students and less time trying to make that time happen.* Pietera passed the ISP Fellowship to Aubrey in Summer 2023.

Members of the original ISP consulting team and the ISP Fellows observed recurring themes in their conversations with students. Pietera writes, *I was often the first point of contact incoming students had with an actual face from UU, so our conversations often ended up being about their concerns about university in general. I found that many students either just wanted to hear me reiterate the differences between WR1 and WR2, or they had already made a decision and just wanted to convey and validate their decision-making process.* As Aubrey observes, *sometimes, students have reached out less because they want help deciding which writing course to take and more so because they are worried about professors and how strict they will be. I think many students are concerned about making connections with faculty and feel more comfortable after discussing with someone who is an instructor but also available to them before they take the course(s).* In some cases, students reached out because of doubts or misgivings about their writing abilities. As Pietera recalls, *sometimes students' questions were more emotional and personal—worries about whether they were a "good enough writer" to take WR2, or discussing previous trauma from high school writing classes. Sometimes their questions were more logistical—wondering exactly how many assignments and pages would be written, wondering about the types of genres that would be written, wondering if an exact class they took in the past was "good enough" for them to go straight into WR2. I witnessed a lot of deficit discourse in these consultations—students feeling inadequate about their writing capabilities, or feeling unable to be a successful student in general.*

Feelings of inadequacy sometimes seemed related to students' language background. Nkenna writes, *during the pilot year, students who already received first-year writing credit from dual enrollment were enrolled in the ISP modules even though they did not have to take a writing course, and some requested consultations. I met with a number of incoming students who fell under this category who were also raised in a Spanish-speaking household, and they would often ask what other avenues they had to improve their writing skills in English beyond WR1 and WR2. Despite the fact that these incoming students were among an elite class—high school students coming in with college credit—inadequacies over language loomed in a way different from how native English speakers experience imposterism. I felt reluctant to suggest that students who had already taken the required courses to fulfill the writing requirement take more courses that would not count toward their degree. At the same time, I didn't consider engaging in a conversation that challenged their*

belief in their own writing abilities. I felt this would be out of the scope of this project and somewhat dismissive, especially without knowing anything about the students' literacy and writing practices outside of the courses they took in high school.

As Aubrey observes, however, multilingual students' engagements with ISP are diverse. During several consultations, some multilingual students have automatically placed themselves in WR1 because of fear or anxiety related to their writing abilities. I do sometimes worry that other factors might be influencing these students' decisions, such as previous teachers, family members, or even advisors. I've also met with other multilingual students who are interested in taking WR2 but fear that the course may be too advanced. I have noticed, though, that these students often are particularly interested in knowing more about other assistance the university offers, such as the writing center. Several students have ultimately chosen WR2 after hearing about resources available to them on campus that they were previously unaware of. I've also experienced interactions with students who are especially interested in writing courses beyond first-year writing, and I do make an effort to inform them of other course options and let them know they will eventually need to take an upper-division writing course.

Some consultations require negotiating students' expectation of or desire for a clear placement recommendation. As Pietera experienced, more often than not, students wanted me to explicitly tell them which course to take, which defeats the purpose of ISP, so that was definitely a challenge I often had to navigate during consultations. Likewise, Nkenna writes, though the goal of ISP was that students would have control over their own decision to join WR1 or WR2 and the modules were created to instill this idea, I have a feeling that some students did not feel comfortable making such an important decision. While they had some understanding of their writing strengths and weaknesses, consultants were still the gatekeepers and representatives of institutional knowledge. Knowing how UU operated was important to those who chose to meet with us. Often, students who wanted a consultation felt that the stakes were too high for them to be informed rather than directed.

The ISP Fellowship became an important finger on the pulse of incoming students' experiences of ISP and the choices presented to them, including unresolved tensions between some students' desire for direction and our reluctance to direct. We foregrounded the human dimension of the consultation option by embedding the ISP Fellow's photo, pronouns, and contact information into the ISP instrument. For some students, the opportunity to make a personal connection and have a supportive conversation was as or even more important than the questionnaire or reflective writing prompt.

Assessing the Consequences

Our ISP process was predicated on the recognition that students are more than a number—they are all complex people bringing diverse experiences and varying, often inequitable material conditions of their college transitions. While many aspects of these identity negotiations can only be understood through qualitative research methods, we knew we needed to begin by examining quantitative data on the consequences of using our ISP in local context, and that examination needed to include disaggregating data demographically to see whether and how groups of students, particularly groups who had been harmed by the Admissions Index, might be differentially impacted (Elliot, 2016; Inoue, 2009a, 2009b, 2015; Ketai, 2012; Poe et al., 2014; Poe & Cogan, 2016; Toth, 2018). Our initial quantitative inquiry was a far cry from the multi-method assessment of SSP exemplified by Inoue's (2008, 2009a, 2015) work at California State University, Fresno. This

inquiry was meant to be the first step in an ongoing, multi-method process of what Christie has called “validation for social justice” (Toth, 2018, p. 145).

In Summer 2023, we took stock of the initial data on ISP’s consequences for the FYW program and for students. We focused on four key metrics: Writing Pre-Orientation survey completion, ISP course decisions, enrollments in WR1, and course grades in WR2. We were able to access the survey data in Qualtrics and gather aggregate course enrollment and grade information through publicly accessible dashboards created by University Analytics and Institutional Reporting (UAIR). We shared Qualtrics survey data with UAIR staff, and they provided additional reports disaggregated by institutional categories for race/ethnicity and gender. They were unable to fulfill our request for data disaggregation by college-going generation, Pell eligibility, or disability status. UAIR releases data for internal use only, so we cannot publish exact numbers from its reports. However, we can describe trends that inform our understanding of the consequences of ISP.

Writing Pre-Orientation Completion

Between June 1, 2022, and May 31, 2023, 4630 students began the Writing Pre-Orientation survey. 76.7% of those students completed the survey, and 51% of completers submitted a course decision. (The remaining 49% already had FYW credit and therefore did not need to make a course decision: the survey routed these respondents to information about campus-based writing resources rather than ISP). Forty percent of incoming first-year students during the 2022-2023 academic year never started the survey. UAIR was not able to identify how many of these students already had FYW credit and therefore did not need to complete ISP. However, UAIR data did show gender and race disparities in survey completion rates. Students institutionally identified as female were more likely than those identified as male to complete the Writing Pre-Orientation survey. Asian, multiracial, and white students were most likely to complete Writing Pre-Orientation, with Black and Latine students slightly less likely to complete, followed by international students. Native American and Pacific Islander students were less likely to complete Writing Pre-Orientation than other groups, although the small number of students in those groups makes the findings difficult to interpret. These data confirm that some of the most significant inequities in our ISP process related to *which* students were not receiving, understanding, and/or completing Writing Pre-Orientation and might therefore have higher rates of default placement into WR1.

Course Decisions

Students who submitted an ISP decision between June 2022 and May 2023 chose courses at the following rates:

- WR1: 657 (36.3%)
- WRTG 2010: 1038 (57.4%)
- HONOR 2211: 113 (6.3%)

Thus, just more than one-third of students who completed ISP chose to enroll in WR1, a decline from the pilot year but similar to the percentage of incoming students placed into WR1 using the Admissions Index.

Those institutionally identified as female chose WR2 courses at higher rates than those institutionally identified as male. The racial/ethnic groups that chose WR2 courses at the highest rates were international, multiracial, white, and Asian students. Black and Latine students chose WR1 at somewhat higher rates than the preceding groups, although the majority of students in

these groups still chose WR2. The small number of Native American and Pacific Islander students who completed ISP chose WR1 at higher rates than other groups. If ISP had not been halted, we would have undertaken additional research to determine whether these racial disparities in course selection emerged from the ISP instrument itself, from other aspects of the ISP distribution and/or consulting process, from potentially biased interactions with academic advisors, and/or from other aspects of students' prior schooling experiences, material conditions, and college-going generation that shaped their educational access and decision-making.

WR1 Enrollments

Between the last year of the Admissions Index (2019-2020) and the first year of full-scale ISP (2022-2023), annual enrollments in WR1 increased from 1043 to 1603 students. Some of this growth reflected UU's year-to-year increases in first-year admissions, but it was also the result of incoming students opting or defaulting into WR1. Under ISP, WR1 was not required of any student, but it was in no danger of disappearing.

Despite gender and racial disparities in students' course choices, moving from the Admissions Index to ISP narrowed—but did not fully close—equity gaps in WR1 placement. Although the percentage of incoming first-year UU students institutionally identified as female reached parity with those identified as male for the first time in Fall 2022, the gender ratios in WR1 were identical to the percentages in Fall 2019: 46% female and 54% male. Some have suggested that women may be more likely to place themselves into lower-level courses than men because of differences in gender socialization (Schendel & O'Neill, 1999; Toth, 2018), but at UU, adopting ISP did not result in increasing percentages of women enrolling in WR1; rather, men became slightly *more* overrepresented relative to the makeup of the incoming class, perhaps in part because they were less likely to complete Writing Pre-Orientation and therefore more likely to default into WR1. In Fall 2019, the group UAIR identifies as “domestic students of color” were 29% of incoming first-year students but 41% of those enrolled in WR1. In Fall 2022, domestic students of color were 30% of the incoming first-year students and 34% of those enrolled in WR1. Thus, while domestic students of color were still overrepresented in WR1, the gap closed from 12% to 4% after the implementation of ISP.

WRTG 2010 Grades

Some colleagues worried that allowing students to bypass WR1 would harm their academic success. While we don't have data about students' long-term academic outcomes, we can look at WRTG 2010 course grades and completion rates as early indicators. UU students must earn a grade of C- or higher in their WR2 course. Grades of D, W (withdrawal), E (failure), or I (incomplete) do not fulfill the requirement. During the last three years of the Admissions Index, DWEI rates in WRTG 2010 ranged from a low of 11% (Fall 2019) to a high of 21% (Spring 2020, the semester disrupted by the onset of the pandemic). The average DWEI rate in those pre-pandemic semesters was 14%. The introduction of ISP did not result in significant changes. The DWEI rate was 14% in Fall 2022 and 11% in Spring 2023. Likewise, ISP did not result in significant changes to average student grades in WRTG 2010. During the last three years of the Admissions Index, the semester GPA for all sections of WRTG 2010 ranged from 2.94 to 3.26, averaging 3.16. After ISP went full-scale, the GPA was 3.14 in Fall 2022 and 3.38 in Spring 2023.

UAIR provided demographically disaggregated data on DWEI rates in WRTG 2010 in 2018-2019, the last full academic year before the pandemic, and for 2022-2023, the first year of full-scale ISP. DWEI rates in WRTG 2010 increased most for Native American and Pacific Islander students, although, again, the small number of students in these groups makes it difficult to interpret that change. Multiracial students saw small increases in DWEI rates. DWEI rates held steady for Asian and white students, and decreased for international students, Latine students, and especially Black students, who had the highest DWEI rate in 2018-2019 and saw notable WRTG 2010 completion gains in 2022-2023. Clearly, more work needed to be done, both to ISP and in FYW courses, to ensure all students were succeeding. However, adopting ISP was associated with WR2 completion gains for some of the groups most disadvantaged by the Admissions Index.

Our examination of institutional data suggests that full-scale ISP helped reduce but not fully close racial disparities in WR1 placement. It did so without reducing overall WR1 enrollment rates. Student academic performance WR2 held steady, although we knew we needed to keep working with partners across campus to develop an ISP process, advising ecology, and FYW curricula that better supported BIPOC students. For example, in Fall 2023, we began partnering with UU's American Indian Resource Center to offer an Indigenous-centering cohort-based WR1/WR2 sequence, a curriculum designed and taught by WRS master's student Jessica Begay (Diné), who discussed her work on a recent episode of Shane Wood's *Pedagogue* podcast. The fate of this initiative and other efforts to advance equity in FYW have been imperiled by the January 2024 passage of Utah's House Bill 261, which bans equity, diversity, and inclusion programs in public postsecondary institutions. Four days before that bill was signed into law, USHE ordered UU to replace ISP with an institutionally administered "challenge exam" for WR1 credit that students must pay \$50 to complete.

Concluding

Reflecting on UU's ISP journey, we are struck by how much *work* this has all been. We mean work in terms of the volume of labor—the time and the energy involved in making the case for ISP, designing and assessing the ISP process, and ensuring all incoming students had access to real human dialogue regarding their FYW decision if they wanted it. We believe that labor was worth it, despite the recent intervention of the state. The Admissions Index would not have been in compliance with USHE's new mandate, either, and we think we can adapt a version of ISP as our "challenge exam." This work was not wasted.

However, we are also struck by the complex *identity* work SSP demands. Our ISP involved layers of interaction. The development team interacted, ISP consultants existed to interact, and, through video and text, the ISP instrument created a space of interaction between instructors and students. All this interaction meant that we were always doing identity work (Andrus, 2020). Students in particular were developing and deploying identities as they entered into a largely unknown institutional context, writing themselves into college student identities in direct address to an as-yet unmet instructor. Their educational agency emerged through this identity work: Saenkhum (2016) defines agency as "the capacity to act or not act, contingent upon various conditions" (p. 11), and, as Johnson (2022) asserts, agency is "the outgrowth of identity in a figured world rather than the exercise of individual power" (p. 99). Indeed, Wang (2020) argues that we should understand SSP as "rhetorically distributed work that reflects collectively shaped agency within and beyond the immediate assessment ecology" (p. 47). Students' agency in ISP

depended on a degree of autonomy and corresponding responsibility some were reluctant to take on. Identities were constantly emerging in response to the requirements of interactions in and around the ISP.

We have also been trying to enact an identity for FYW, for our team, and for ourselves individually. The development of the ISP instrument was a vehicle for identity emergence and performance for all involved. This happened in collaboration between individuals on the development team, through communications with units across campus whose cooperation was essential for implementing and sustaining ISP, and through individual conversations and consultations with incoming students. Those of us still involved with writing placement at UU are feeling the struggle of identities constantly in flux, impacted by forces in and beyond the writing program, the institution, and the state. The work of managing these identities is ongoing—the local construct of writing is never static, our disciplinary discourses can be outlawed—and so “ISP” is in continuous (re)development, like the identities that interact with, around, and through it.

The ISP design process required all of us to negotiate multiple identities that were sometimes in tension amid power dynamics we did not fully acknowledge, attend to, or agree with. Those identities included our respective administrative, teaching, and student roles, our diverse methodological and disciplinary groundings relative to writing assessment, our racial, linguistic, and gender identities, and our class backgrounds, material resources, and labor conditions. We recognize such identity work was especially demanding for members of the design team who are BIPOC. This article demonstrates some of the challenges of these racialized identity negotiations, but also highlights the essential contributions BIPOC graduate students and undergraduates make in efforts to design, enact, assess, and reflect on SSP processes. We believe a diverse development team that intentionally involves BIPOC students should always be an explicit dimension of SSP design.

Sam's reflections, drafted in response to an early version of this manuscript, offer a powerful argument for why this imperfect, ongoing work matters. His words motivate those of us still at UU to persist—and to be cunning—with the identity work the coming years will demand. He writes, *participating in ISP development as an undergraduate underpins a pivotal change in how I viewed my fields of study. While Kinesiology was my initial discipline, it was WRS that helped me understand the institutional structures that dictated how I progressed through academia as an undocumented first-generation college student. My entire educational experience up until the last two years as an undergraduate was characterized by an internalized belief that I was to respect the status quo. To accept what I was given. Accept where I was placed. ISP represents a deviation from that ideology. I can't help but wonder how different my undergraduate experience would have been if something like ISP existed beyond first year writing courses. During my undergraduate tenure there were times when I knew I had the capacity to succeed in upper division courses without the prerequisites set by the university. I felt like I had to sacrifice my agency to the institution when my petitions to waive requirements were unsuccessful.*

The ISP process we developed seeks to empower students by eliminating some institutional authority in exchange for student agency. While ISP is not a panacea to all inequality and unjust outcomes, I think it is a step in the right direction. It provides students the opportunity to decide how first year writing fits within their skills and educational goals without questioning their capacity to succeed. Even against the external pressures WRS faces, I encourage them to continue the work of ISP. The ideology and framework of ISP has the potential to change the way a student's pathway in higher

education unfolds. In my opinion ISP plants the seed that a student's skill, identity, and agency matter in and beyond first year writing courses.

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