The Blurry Borders of College Writing: Remediation and the Assessment of Student Readiness

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I cannot get over, however, my sense of the arbitrariness, the surrealism, of the choices represented by the sorting of students in actual basic and mainstream classes. Looking at the faces, working with the writing—the division never makes anything but institutional sense. There are cases to prove that the idea is a good one. There are cases to prove that the idea is all wrong.

—David Bartholomae, "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum."

A striking array of interest groups has, of late, invested time and energy into deciding how to increase the degree completion rates for US college students. A brief review of the news dailies of higher education illustrates the exigency of the topic. *Inside Higher Ed* reported in March 2010 on the coalition "Complete College America," an organization with backing from the Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, whose primary purpose is stated as "dramatically increasing the nation's college completion rate through state policy change" and who also focus on building "consensus for change among state leaders, higher education, and the national education policy community" (Lederman). Another high-profile nonprofit organization, Achieving the Dream, cosponsored a report released in August, 2012, "Where to Begin: The Evolving Role of Placement Exams for Students Starting College," which critiques both standardized placement exams and remedial education and endorses some of the strategies that have gained currency in recent years—mainstreaming students with support, accelerated developmental programs,

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College English, Volume 78, Number 1, September 2015

using multiple measures to place students, or directed self-placement (Burdman). More recently, the 2015 Two-Year College English Association's "White Paper on Developmental Education Reform" (Hassel et al.) outlined state-level legislative efforts to minimize remediation, efforts that have gained traction during the Obama presidency as he has prioritized degree and credential attainment. Florida's Senate Bill 1720 is one example of legislation requiring, for example, that universities provide alternatives to the sixteen-week remediation course model and mandating that specific student populations—such as high school graduates who have fulfilled certain requirements and military veterans—be exempted from all placement testing (Hassel et al. 326). The increase in institutions using the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) model emerging from the Community College of Baltimore County is additional evidence of the widespread desire from a range of stakeholders to decrease the number of students in non-degree credit coursework and decrease students' time-to-degree as well as bolster student retention and persistence (see Adams et al. for an overview of ALP).

One key strategy endorsed by some interest groups is minimizing—or eliminating altogether—remedial education. In 1978, composition studies scholar Andrea Lunsford concluded in her study of remedial writers that "putting remedial writers into traditional courses (the old sink-or-swim philosophy) not only does them little good; it actually does them harm" (52). Nearly four decades later, policymakers and administrators are proposing exactly this approach. For example, as Paul Fain reported in *Inside Higher Ed*, "The bill in Connecticut [driven by Complete College America] originally called for all students with remedial needs at the state's community colleges and public universities to be placed in regular, credit-bearing courses. But the final version of the legislation, signed into law earlier this month, allowed for one semester of noncredit remedial courses" (Fain, "Overkill"). This, despite the startling numbers that "an estimated 70 percent of students at the state's 12 community colleges take at least one remedial class during their first year of enrollment" (Fain, "How to End"). Another July 2012 *Chronicle of Higher Education* story reported on research that "about 60 percent of high school graduates who enroll at two-year colleges have to take remedial courses" (Gonzalez). Reporting on the Florida legislation, Shouping Hu has observed that the success of such radical changes to developmental education and assessment practices rely on a lot of variables, from students who are increasingly asked to self-assess their readiness to faculty who must adjust instruction to meet a wider range of student needs, to support services staff who are critical resources for students' academic success (Hu). What goes underaddressed in these conversations are the mechanisms institutions use to determine where "remediation" starts and "degree-credit" begins, with the assumption that this is a clear boundary with universally shared definitions. Data from the Community College Research Center show that standardized tests seriously misplace from one-half to one-third

of students and that test scores poorly correlate with students' ultimate success in college, particularly at campuses that rely on standardized placement tests to sort students into appropriate coursework in contrast with selective institutions that gather multiple pieces of evidence of student readiness as part of admissions (Scott-Clayton).

Of course, writing studies has been profoundly interested in questions of writing assessment and, more specifically, assessing student readiness for first-year writing, since its inception. Discipline-specific foundational work by Edward White and Brian Huot, for example, has established the need for locally directed, context-specific writing assessment measures that will match program values with student populations and local needs. Huot, in particular, argues that "in literate activity, assessment is everywhere" (166), and that "we need to begin a reflective inquiry to examine the problem with the practices we now use in assessment and to suggest practices that are more consonant with our theories" (166). Additionally, the studies and reports out of the Community College Research Center use quantitative methods to draw important conclusions about student placement on the basis of placement tests (see Belfield and Crosta, Scott-Clayton, and Hodara, Smith Jaggars, and Mechur Karp).

With this scholarship as our backdrop—discipline-specific recommendations about assessing students' readiness for college writing and national research on placement practices at open access institutions, nearly half the postsecondary institutions in the country—we offer the results of a yearlong study that examined the relationship between placement test scores (two different standardized test scores) and a close reading of fifty-four students' writing produced over their first college year as well as their academic outcomes during that time. The standardized placement test data for these participating students showed that the two sets of test scores (the ACT and the Wisconsin English Placement Test) misplaced students at nearly the same rate, although in different ways. Tracing these students from their first placement assessment, post-admission, to the end of their second semester confirms some of the existing research and advances other more discipline-specific arguments:

- The border between college-ready and not-college-ready is blurry, and standardized tests are too blunt to accurately identify students who need developmental coursework;
- Standardized tests as placement mechanisms have many limitations, six of which are discussed through a close examination of specific students' texts and academic outcomes;
- Multiple-measures placement, particularly but not only in open-admissions institutions, is of critical importance in order to more accurately assess which students will and won't benefit from non-degree credit course work (which may be writing, reading, or other non-degree credit learning support courses)

Our research suggests that if, as a discipline, we wish to better serve the learning needs of students, and if educators working in postsecondary writing wish to be able to meaningfully and knowledgeably participate in the public discourse about remedial education, we need to look carefully at the placement mechanisms we use

to sort students into their first-year courses. Not only is placement students' first contact with college English, but it is also the critical moment that has the potential to profoundly shape a student's experience in college—including whether they will be retained or lost to higher education altogether. Though we focus on the students at our own open-access institution, our results and recommendations are, we hope, of broad interest to instructors who teach first-year writing courses as well as readers who are interested in issues of access to higher education. Further, since nearly half of students start their college educations at two-year campuses, and many such students transfer on to baccalaureate-granting institutions, readiness for college writing and advanced coursework affects instructors who teach beyond the first two years of college at all but the most selective institutions.

In this article, then, we interrogate essentialist definitions of "college ready" and "remediation required," exposing what we call the "blurry borders" between how we as college English instructors define the contours of first-year writing. Just as slippery, we contend, are the methods of assessment used to determine where a student fits in the continuum between (for most open-admission and nonselective institutions) non-degree credit writing courses in college and exemption from all writing requirements, with as many as three, four, or five courses along that spectrum. We map out the flaws in using standardized test measures for placing students into college writing courses, using both quantitative and qualitative data of students' academic outcomes over several semesters. This article specifically focuses on students who are either overplaced or underplaced (placed by their performance on two standardized tests into a course beyond what their writing in the first two years communicated about their college readiness). We analyze evidence from their writing in the first two years of college to explore questions about how we as a profession define "college English," as distinct from the expectations of precollege writing.[1] Ultimately, we suggest that both our profession's definitions of college-level English (particularly first-year writing) and the methods we use to assess students' preparation to meet those expectations are fuzzy, and neither is satisfactorily meeting the needs of either the majority of students entering college or the instructors who teach them, who "stand in" for the vision of college English that students experience.

Blurry Borders

> *Although continued writing development involves acquiring, through exposure and experience, the ways of thinking and communicating that define these different communities, students are obviously better prepared to do so when they have had similar experiences earlier in their education. In such experiences, students learn the relationship between their social context and the various linguistic and rhetorical decisions they must make as they write and revise to be effective. (116)*
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> — Chris Anson, "Closed Systems and Standardized Writing Tests"

At many campuses, students are placed into first-year writing courses by standardized placement tests (for example, ACT, SAT, Compass, and Accuplacer) that assess students in limited areas such as usage, grammar, and reading comprehension. (See, for example, Belfield and Crosta; Hodara, Jaggars, and Karp for research on community college placement methods.) In Irvin Peckham's survey of placement methods, conducted in March of 2010, more than half of responding institutions (67 of 129) did not require a writing sample for first-year writing placement, and as *Inside Higher Ed* reported: "Only one in five colleges uses any criteria other than standardized testing—such as high school grades or class rank—to decide which students require coursework in remedial mathematics, the study found. And just 13 percent of colleges used other measures for placement in remedial English" (Fain "Overkill"). Scholarship by Emily Isaacs and Sean Molloy and Irv Peckham have also examined the ways that placement can be linked to instruction and identified strategies for allowing students to provide additional information to change a placement based on standardized test scores or limited methods (see Isaacs and Molloy; Isaacs and Kehoane; Peckham, "Online Placement"; Peckham, "Online Challenge" for these discussions).

The authors' own statewide institution, the University of Wisconsin Colleges, has used such a test for decades, even though it doesn't adequately assess an individual student's academic preparation for achieving most of the learning outcomes for our writing program. The University of Wisconsin Placement Testing Office produces this state-specific standardized test that all UW institutions are required to pay for, whether they use it or not. Historically, most of the universities in our state have used this test to place students into writing courses. However, like many other state university systems, in response to national conversations about the effectiveness of developmental education, the University of Wisconsin System focused in 2014 on statewide initiatives to improve the academic success of students who are placed into developmental courses, and those efforts have raised questions about the effectiveness of using a stand-alone placement test as the only measure for determining readiness for college-level reading, writing, and mathematics. For example, a UW System working group spent a year examining statewide developmental education practices and recommended using multiple measures to place students into developmental courses and developing policies to support accelerating students who are close to the placement cutoff to credit-bearing courses; however, at this time there is no common standard cut score for remedial or degree-credit composition courses across any of the thirteen institutions in the system.

Placement, then, is a critical moment of contact—when students are being evaluated for the match between their prior educational experiences and their learning needs as first-semester students. Placement proves a fascinating and important moment that requires our disciplinary and institutional attention, particularly at

nonselective campuses that attract a wide range of students whose complicated academic profiles make it particularly difficult to evaluate, especially solely based on test scores, exactly where students need to start in the first-year writing sequence, what kinds of learning support they need to be successful, and whether a slower or sheltered curriculum is needed to assist that student with transitioning to the demands of a college curriculum. As we have argued elsewhere, this differentiation is especially critical for (but not unique to) institutions that do not use an admissions process as the first mechanism for determining whether students are ready for college-level coursework (Hassel and Giordano, "Occupy"; Hassel and Giordano, "FYC Placement"). At the same time, there has been a long-standing disciplinary tradition of "rating" students' writing skills as deficient to the standards set in the local context, as Kelly Ritter's study of Yale highlights—observing that "as we cannot deny the legitimate presence of basic writers in open admissions institutions . . . so, too, we cannot deny the presence of the earlier basic writers who lived and studied (and struggled) prior to the Shaughnessy-era cohort" (Ritter 14). Stratification of writers on the basis of their failure to conform to the writing expectations of their setting—whether an elite institution like Yale or an open-admission institution like Mina Shaughnessy's 1970s CUNY or our own two-year University of Wisconsin Colleges campus today—is a long-standing part of our discipline.

Thus, the questions we tackle in this essay are part of an ongoing disciplinary dialogue on writing assessment, college readiness, and basic writing, as well as larger institutional efforts at remediation. These disciplinary conversations about practices and policies for implementing developmental English programs have a profound effect on access to higher education because basic skills courses can simultaneously provide the only avenue for students to pursue higher education while also (sometimes unnecessarily) increasing their time to degree completion; at the same time, developmental education coursework impacts whether a student will be able to develop the advanced literacy skills needed to thrive in postsecondary courses. David Bartholomae drew attention in 1993 to these issues, characterizing basic writing as a sorting mechanism, while Ira Shor more acerbically critiqued the "BW empire" and its function to "slow down the students' progress toward the college degree which could enable them to expect higher wages on the job market" (95). Shor further critiques what he sees as economic and political motivations that restrict rather than facilitate access to higher education. More charitably, Mike Rose, in his 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay, "Colleges Need to Re-Mediate Remediation," argues for increased access to college through improving remedial education: "It is terrible that so many students—especially those from poorer backgrounds—come to college unprepared. But colleges can't fold their arms in a huff and try to pull away from the problem. Rather than marginalize remediation, they should invest more intellectual resources in it, making it as effective as it can be." In this piece, we add

our voices to existing disciplinary conversations about remediation by arguing that one of the most complex and crucial issues affecting access to higher education and the effectiveness of developmental English programs is the ways that institutions determine who is and is not ready for college reading and writing. Placement into developmental education can create unnecessary roadblocks to degree attainment for students who could be successful in first-semester credit-bearing courses while providing other students an essential second-chance opportunity to become proficient college readers and writers.

Background and Methodology

Our campus, the University of Wisconsin-Marathon County, has been using a multiple-measures placement process for eight years (see Hassel and Giordano, "FYC Placement"), emerging from an effort to identify students who would benefit from developmental learning support programs and to rectify instructor perceptions that students were misplaced into first-year writing courses based on a single placement test score. The authors developed a pilot placement process that is now used on nine University of Wisconsin two-year campuses. A team of trained English department members on each campus assesses a student's readiness for credit-bearing composition based on a writing sample, our required state system placement test, ACT reading and English scores, high school grades in relation to curriculum, and a self-assessment questionnaire. In addition to placing students into writing courses, each placement team also identifies students who would benefit from campus programs for academically at-risk students, supplemental writing instruction through small group studio classes, and developmental reading, learning skills, and English language courses. This placement process permits our statewide English department both to provide students with an individualized approach for required developmental coursework and to identify students who can be successfully accelerated to credit-bearing composition with or without co-requisite support courses. Multiple-measures placement also provides each campus with a rich set of data for tracing changing needs of students and then responding with revised curricular offerings and revisions to local developmental education programs.

Four years ago, our writing program updated placement test cut scores, and we undertook a large-scale scholarship of teaching and learning project that was intended to assess the changes to our placement process. We gathered two kinds of evidence. First, we kept detailed placement records for incoming students, including standardized test scores, high school grades, and recommended course placement. We started with two years' worth of student data (911 students), secured IRB approval, and received institutionally granted access to our student information management and registration system, PRISM. We began our research by collecting student outcomes for the first year. Essentially, we were interested in investigating and assessing

whether the revised cut scores and the new learning outcomes were aligned well with our placement process. Data collected included students' recommended course enrollment (both writing and learning support courses), their actual enrollment in first-year writing and support courses, and their enrollment in other courses their first year. Over that year, we tracked students' grades in all their courses, as well as their academic standing (probation, final probation, suspension, cleared probation, or good standing) and their GPA. With this data gathered, we could sort data and draw conclusions about, for example, students who were bumped up or bumped down to a higher or lower writing course, students who concurrently enrolled in first-year writing courses and other reading- and writing-intensive courses, or students who did not enroll in the writing and support courses recommended by the placement team.

Our second prong of research included a set of participating students whom we studied more closely. These students were invited to participate in the project both by their writing instructors (all instructors in the English department assisted us with distributing project information and informed-consent forms) and through an email sent out to students. From this invitation, sixty-seven students signed informed-consent forms and completed a survey about their prior academic experiences.[2] Collaborating with our English department colleagues, we collected those participating students' writing from their composition and developmental support courses[3] for the first two semesters. From this group of sixty-seven, we were able to collect multiple pieces of writing from fifty-four students over the course of a full college year, and we continued to collect writing into the second year for students who began college in developmental courses and took an additional year to complete our institution's core writing requirement.

Over the course of two years, we analyzed the students' written work according to the established course outcomes for our writing program sequence (developmental writing or a non-degree-credit writing course for multilingual students, first-semester composition, and a second-semester research-intensive course) with several research questions in mind. For the purposes of this essay, we examined whether a student's placement information accurately and sufficiently allowed that student to be placed into an appropriate first-semester composition course with or without developmental reading and studio writing support. We reviewed, on average, 6.6 writing samples (usually formal academic papers of some kind assigned for a writing course, but not always), with a high of 14 (from a student who retook the core writing course three times) and a low of 2 (usually for students who started in the transfer-level English course and whose instructor provided writing only from the second half of the semester to us), for a total of 359 pieces of student writing. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of participating students who began at each point in the writing sequence and the students' academic profiles as characterized by standardized test scores.

Table 1. Overview of Students in the UW System Writing Sequence

Developmental Writing (English 098) $n = 19$	• Average ACT English: 13.9 • Average ACT reading: 16.1 • Average Combined WEPT: 636
First-Semester Writing (English 101) $n = 25$	• Average ACT English: 18.9 • Average ACT reading: 20.5 • Average Combined WEPT: 811
Core Transfer Research Course (English 102) $n = 10$	• Average English ACT: 24.2 • Average ACT Reading: 27.1 • Average Combined WEPT: 1086

The Wisconsin English Placement Test (WEPT) cut score for credit-bearing English 101 at our institution is a combined reading and English score of 700, with a combined score of 1000 required for placement into the second-semester transfer research course (for those of our thirteen campuses that rely solely on the test score, though increasing numbers of our campuses use multiple measures). As of 2013, the ACT benchmark for beginning in English 101 is an English score of 18, with a reading score of 22 benchmarked as required for most reading-intensive college courses (ACT).

With all that's at stake in placement testing and the problems associated with a stand-alone, multiple choice usage and reading comprehension test, then, it's problematic that so many institutions use a single measure to assess students' college readiness. However, it's even more critical that any open-admission campus or even moderately nonselective institution—any institution with a non-degree-credit English or support curriculum—adopt a multiple-measures placement process. Data from our state shows this exigency. Table 2 outlines information collected from two of our state institutions: our own open-access two-year multicampus institution, which admits 99 percent of applicants, and the flagship selective Research 1 institution in our state, the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As the table shows, the limits of our statewide placement test are obvious when comparing the success rate of students who place into English 102, our second-semester writing course and the equivalent to UW-Madison's English 100; both courses fulfill the respective institutions' degree requirement for first-year writing.

The Problem with Single Placement Measures

What the numbers in Table 2 show is that by placing students based on this cut score, the test is significantly more likely to predict or measure student readiness for a transfer-level course at selective UW-Madison than it is at our open-admission

Table 2. English Placement Systemwide vs UW-Madison

Grade Earned 2008 to 2009	UW Colleges Students	UW-Madison Students
	WEPT score 420–470 *n* = 1724	WEPT score of 420–470 *n* = 275 students
DWFI	34%	.4%
	WEPT score 470–500 *n* = 2764	WEPT score 470–500 *n* = 1900 students
DWFI	26%	.5%

institution. There are several reasons for this. UW-Madison uses a multiple-measures selective admission process. With average ACT scores of 28.3 and no students from the bottom quartile of their high school class (University of Wisconsin System), UW-Madison's student population is already "sorted" by admission before they even take the placement test. Students at our institution, as noted, come in with a wide range of academic and nonacademic needs that a single placement test measure cannot assess. By contrast, the average ACT composite score for the UW Colleges is 20.3; on our own campus in the 2009-2010 academic year, ACT English scores ranged from 6 to 33 and ACT reading scores ranged from 6 to 36. Further, approximately half of the students at two-year University of Wisconsin campuses come from the bottom half of their high school classes, with approximately 17 percent from the bottom quartile. By using multiple measures to assess student needs, our statewide access institution is better positioned to evaluate whether a student's performance on a grammar test actually measures their academic readiness, rhetorical knowledge, and nonacademic factors that make students more or less likely to be academically successful in the first year.

A Closer Look at Student Starting Points: Assessment of Student Readiness

Clearly, and this is hardly a debatable statement, standardized tests have limitations, but in this essay, an analysis of the quantitative dimensions of placement and students' development as college writers over the course of multiple semesters shows what standardized tests can and can't measure. The border between degree-credit and remedial coursework is fuzzy, and standardized test scores, by virtue of what they don't tell us, are too blunt an instrument to make a decision as important as whether a student belongs in college-credit English or remedial coursework. Specifically, a close look at these fifty-four students' writing emphasizes that standardized tests do not:

1. Assess rhetorical knowledge (meeting the needs of an audience, fulfilling a rhetorical purpose, understanding conventions of genre)
2. Assess knowledge of the writing process
3. Demonstrate proficiency in the ability to produce error-free prose
4. Measure experience with academic writing
5. Assess critical reading skills (for some students)
6. Provide specific insight into students' individual learning needs

Each of these readiness indicators is critical to success in first-year writing courses, and yet standardized tests are ill-equipped to communicate to either students or program faculty and administrators whether first-year students possess these abilities. Further, for two-year colleges and other open-access institutions—especially public institutions—who may be facing budget cuts and lean times, ever-increasing pressure to sort and assess students more efficiently may mean that efforts to learn more about whether students possess these readiness indicators may not be supported, particularly if they involve large-scale human and fiscal resources.

Underplacement

We drew from several pieces of information when determining the accuracy of participating students' placements—the formal academic writing they produced their first year, their success in writing courses, their overall academic outcomes, any reflective writing received from instructors, and a survey that students filled out when consenting to participate in the project. For all but three students, we had two sets of test scores—the ACT and the Wisconsin English Placement Test (WEPT).

The two tests had varying rates of over- and underplacing students, with the ACT significantly more likely to underplace students than the WEPT, particularly into remedial writing. Using the national ACT benchmark score of 18 as a cutoff, eight of the fifty-one student participants (for whom we had an ACT score) would have been placed into a lower course than their writing ultimately suggested they could be successful in, had placement been based solely on that test score. In five of those cases, students would have been placed into remedial writing (the other three would have been placed into first-semester composition rather than second-semester composition based on our institutional cut score of 25 for the ACT English test). The WEPT was less likely to underplace than the ACT, with 3 of 53 students (who had WEPT scores) being misplaced into a lower course (two into developmental writing, one into English 101). As we discuss later, the WEPT is substantially more likely to overplace students than to underplace, and the reverse is true for the ACT in relation to the learning outcomes for our writing program. We should note here that both tests were about equally accurate:

Overplaced by WEPT:	17%
Underplaced by WEPT:	6%
Overplaced by ACT:	8%
Underplaced by ACT:	16%
Accurately Placed by WEPT	77%
Accurately Placed by ACT:	76%

Even students with low test scores or other indicators that they should enroll in non-degree-credit courses can, with support, move into degree credit, though we should acknowledge that academic and rhetorical readiness does not always translate into academic success, because lack of success in writing courses can sometimes be tied to other, nonacademic factors.

As a case study, one of our participant students, Ariel[4] serves to illustrate the potential consequences of underplacement based on standardized test scores. With an ACT English score of 19, Ariel would have been placed into degree-credit writing at most institutions; however, the historical placement measure for our institution has been the WEPT (the state-specific test), and Ariel scored 80 points below the cutoff on that test. Her ACT reading score of 14, in addition, was well below the recommended benchmark of 21 for college-level reading-intensive courses. Under our previous, single-measure placement approach, Ariel would have been placed into a non-degree-credit writing course; however, a review of her full placement profile including a writing sample, high school grades, and survey suggested that first-semester writing with a non-degree-credit academic reading support course would be the best match for her learning needs. In Ariel's self-assessment writing for academic reading, she wrote, "I love to read! I like to take my time when reading but I think I take too long to read a book. I love to read Jodi Picoult books and it usually takes me at least two to three months to read the whole book," illustrating that despite her enthusiasm for popular fiction reading, she was a struggling reader.

Throughout her first semester developmental reading course, Ariel worked on her critical reading skills concurrently with her enrollment in a first-semester credit-bearing writing course. At the end of the semester, she wrote in a self-assessment essay:

> When you look at my journals from beginning to end you will notice that my writing skills have grown since the beginning of the semester. My writing skills were very weak because I would just throw quotes into my journal without supporting details and information. I also struggled with analyzing and I still continue to. You will also

> notice my essays have become more specific and this is because I was able to practice on my journals. My evaluations show how I improved as a writer by setting goals for myself. There are a few things I would like you to notice when assessing my portfolio.
>
> First, evaluations of myself started in bulleted and listed formation and grew into full paragraphs. My goals also became more specific as the semester continued. Another thing I would like you to notice is that my *Complications* essay did not have very good support. I never knew where to include quotes to support my information. In my second essay, *Stiff*, I learned where to include quotes with supporting details before and after quotes. Lastly, I would like you to notice how my journals have improved throughout the semester. My journals in the beginning of the semester consisted of summarizing rather than analyzing. I did not really notice important parts of the chapters like I should have.

As part of the research project, Ariel responded to a survey about her placement in her first college semester. Two years into her college career, Ariel wrote: "English 101 was a good match for me. I was also recommended to take LEA 101 [a non-degree-credit academic reading course] and I had [instructor x]. I really learned a lot of writing and reading skills in LEA 101."

As a student from a small, rural high school with limited access to rigorous college-prep coursework, Ariel's placement profile, if based solely on a standardized test score, would present an inaccurate picture of her needs in several ways. First, though her ACT English score placed her into degree-credit writing, our institution previously only used WEPT score, which would have placed her into basic writing. Further, Ariel's real learning needs were for coursework to help her develop her critical reading skills; however, without looking at subscores in either or both of the standardized tests, this would not have been apparent. Further, despite her overall low test scores, Ariel had strong high school grades and motivation levels and eventually went on to complete 64 college credits in a variety of demanding disciplines with a 3.6 GPA, including As and Bs in her composition courses.

A second case study illustrates the blurry border of college writing as distinguished by blunt measures like placement tests, particularly in assessing students' previous experience with academic writing, their rhetorical knowledge, and their knowledge of the writing process. The experience of Xang[5] also illustrates the advantages of a placement process based around a flexible approach to remediation that doesn't make an absolute (and artificial) distinction between basic skills and degree-credit coursework and that could get at three of the six areas that standardized tests cannot measure. Xang had test scores that placed him well below the cutoff for basic writing at most institutions, an ACT English score of 13 and an ACT reading score of 16, with scores on the WEPT that were 20 points below the placement cutoff for English 101. He was born in the United States and took ELL courses in elementary school. These parts of his placement file suggested that he was unprepared to begin college in the degree-credit curriculum.

However, Xang had strong high school grades with a challenging senior year curriculum that included literature and advanced composition. Those two pieces of evidence suggested that he might be successful in degree-credit composition despite his test scores (which were significantly lower than the scores of most students placed into English 101). Xang's placement writing sample also indicated that he possessed rhetorical and academic skills that would prepare him for the demands of first-year writing. Though the placement essay was timed, notations showed that Xang had reread, edited, and added references to the text included in the writing prompt, along with subordinating clauses that added texture to his claim, demonstrating his comfort and proficiency with a process approach to writing. For example, he rewrote "Statistics show that not very much students are prepared for college or just don't do well" as "even though statistics like mentioned by Michael Kirst show that not very much students are prepared for college or just don't do well, I believe my school did awesome in preparing me for college." The essay also included complex syntax and demonstrated his competence in advancing a thesis and supporting it with specific evidence.

The only features of Xang's essay that suggested a placement in basic writing or a course for multilingual writers were sentence-level errors that reflected his linguistic background as a speaker of Hmong. The essay showed that Xang had already achieved most learning outcomes for our developmental writing course, so the placement team judged that the grammatical issues in Xang's essay were relatively minor (and to be expected in an unrevised, timed writing sample) in comparison to his overall proficiency in academic writing. Though the placement team required an individualized writing center studio course and critical reading support class, they placed Xang in degree-credit English. An analysis of his first-semester writing for composition and reading courses shows that Xang was able to produce final drafts of formal writing assignments that were almost error free, and his ability to edit his own writing improved substantially over the course of his first year. As he wrote in a portfolio cover letter for his academic reading course at the end of this first-semester in college,

> As a freshmen student at [our campus], I believe my ability to read at a college level has improved. From the beginning when I first came to [our campus], I lacked a lot of reading skills. There were many huge and difficult words that I was not aware of. The level was so much harder, such that it was sometimes very complicated to understand. Sometimes when I read, I would get lost and have no idea what I was reading. Things I have read sometimes didn't even stick to one topic. Jumping back and forth here and there occurred a lot in my college readings."

Xang earned an A grade in his fall writing course, completed the core writing requirement with a B, and went on to receive solid grades for most sophomore courses. If Xang had enrolled at an institution that places US-educated students in composition

based on stand-alone multiple choice exams (or in a program that structures placement to emphasize sentence-level errors over other academic writing proficiencies), then he would have been required to take at least one or more semesters of remedial composition or second language writing, based on his standardized test scores.

Evidence from our quantitative data collection also illustrates this blurriness and how multiple measures can better predict which students require remediation and which can be successful in credit-bearing composition with, or without, learning support coursework. As we tracked an aggregate group of 911 students who began at our campus in Fall 2009, Spring 2010, and Fall 2010, our placement team bumped up 20 students from developmental to degree-credit coursework or from first-semester to second-semester composition on the basis of this multiple-measures placement—sometimes with substantial support coursework such as a composition tutorial/studio course or a non-degree-credit academic reading course. At the end of the 2010-2011 academic year, 80 percent of those students were in good standing—and they were no more likely than the general student population to be on academic probation. Following these students over multiple semesters of writing courses showed that of the 30 sections of first-semester composition these students enrolled in collectively, students earned a passing grade (C or higher) in 27 of them (90%). Further, in the first-semester courses into which this group of students was bumped, students earned passing grades in 18 of 20 (90%). And interestingly, 16 out of 20 of those students earned an A or a B in the "bumped up" course (80%). Only 2 students who were accelerated to credit-bearing composition through multiple-measures placement were not successful in the higher level course. One did not complete recommended support coursework. The other was in the group of 54 students who submitted writing samples, and an analysis of his writing reveals that the student was appropriately placed in the degree-credit course but did not complete all of his assigned coursework.

Overplacement

An equally serious problem for placement based on standardized test scores is the number of students who are placed in a course in the writing sequence beyond which their past academic and writing experiences have prepared them. Sometimes the outcomes were dismal. Other times the outcomes on the surface were fine—for example, students received a passing grade—but the students' individual experiences in that course and the pressure it placed on them and support services strongly suggest that such overplaced students' start to the college experience was stressful and uncomfortable in ways that could have been avoided had those students' learning needs been better matched with their course enrollment.

Our numerical assessment suggested that both standardized tests were likely to overplace students but at different rates. The ACT was less likely to do so, with

fewer than 10 percent of students likely to end up in a course beyond their writing development; however, the WEPT was most likely (17%) to place students into degree-credit writing instead of basic writing. What this meant for us is that, for campuses using the WEPT, a significant number of students were being inappropriately placed in our degree-credit course instead of basic writing.

Overplaced by WEPT: 9/53	17%
Overplaced by ACT: 4/51	8%

Three case studies with varying outcomes illustrate the implications of placement assessment methods that do not assess the full range of students' learning needs as college writers: Derek, Julia, and Kevin.

Derek attended a local rural high school and entered his first year with a spotty academic record: with a 15 on the ACT English test and a 13 in Reading, his high school English grades were Cs and Ds, and his new student placement survey indicated he completed his high school English requirements by taking courses in oral communication and introduction to film, classes that did not require reading or academic writing. His placement essay, in response to a short textual excerpt from a *Chronicle of Higher Education* about student readiness, consisted of a single paragraph:

> Throughout my high school career I have been told, "If you meet these standures you will be ready for college," and even though I have not alway [sic] met them to the best of my ability I have alway [sic] met them and I still don't feel ready. Maybe its because I'm lazy, or maybe it is because I never had to push my self to get thing done because I've always had my teachs, there to kind of babysit me through high school because because if I didn't get something done on time some how the due date would be extended or I would get a minor deduction on point for it being late. Plus I always had a teacher by my side showing me step by step how to get things done and not letting me figure thing out on my own. That's why I believe that 60% of freshman are in remediation classes after the first year/semester. They are adjustin [sic] to being held through projects and papers. That why when I take our first step into college and many people full it just like the first step as a baby without being held, you fall and if your not smart enough to catch yourself it hurts and I [sic] harder to get up.

Because our online registration system is keyed to a student's placement test score, Derek's placement test score of 710 was sufficient to allow him to enroll in first-semester English, contrary to the recommendation of the placement team and despite our use of the multiple-measures placement process.

Though Derek enrolled concurrently in a non-degree-credit academic reading course, he struggled to adapt to the expectations of college-level writing. He was able to successfully complete the first course assignment, a literacy narrative, by drawing

largely from personal experience, but as the course demanded more critical reading skills, Derek began to struggle. As his writing progressed over the course of the semester, he continued to employ the strategy of using personal experience and narrative, even as assignments asked him to focus primarily on assigned course readings. While he was able to read and summarize texts for his developmental reading course, he was not able to achieve the course learning outcomes, partly because he was unable to consistently submit the course work. His skills developed over the course of the semester. As he wrote in a reading self-assessment at the end of his reading course:

> Over this year I have grown and learned a lot some I will never use again others will be the corner stone to the rest of my life. Often I was considered bad and poor at English even still to this day I do not think that I'm that good, but to see how much I have grown in these couple of months and that is beyond what I could of hoped for in my first semester as a college student. Plus as I read I more and more its becoming easier and my speed has improved to a level I could imagine in the first week of class let alone my for years of high school. I don't think that me and English will ever become friends, however, my new found skills and attributes will make the relationship less futile. Within this portfolio there are several signs of unimproved work alone with improved work to show the difference that can do after this semester in both English 101 and [the reading course]. I have also learned that writing a paper is more then just righting down ideas and trying to proof read it yourself. This has lead me to take advantage of the writing lab in the library and other students willing to help me they often give me new views and/or catch mistake that I could not. This helps me to become a better writer and fix mistakes in future papers.

The consequences for Derek's placement were serious. Because the online registration system did not register the "R" (or retake) he received in English 101, he was allowed to stay enrolled in the second-semester course until an advisor review showed he had not met the prerequisite. With grades of F in a biology and math course in the second semester, Derek was on final probation and did not return for a third semester, and he never completed even the first-semester writing course.

A second case study reveals the limitations of standardized tests in accurately assessing a student's learning needs and writing abilities, particularly his reading comprehension abilities and lack of experience with academic writing. Karl attended a small, rural high school in a town with a population 1,100. With ACT English and reading scores of 19, Karl would have been placed in most any institution's writing program into degree-credit composition; however, his WEPT score was 80 points short of the cutoff for English 101. Reviewing multiple measures of Karl's readiness, the placement team recommended he start in developmental writing, and Karl's progress as a writer over three semesters shows that he continued to struggle as a reader and writer with courses beyond the first semester. Karl illustrates clearly the recommendations by the National Council of Teachers of English in "White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities" that "[w]riting assessment

should use multiple measures and engage multiple perspectives to make decisions that improve teaching and learning. These multiple measures and perspectives can include the use of several readers and the perspectives they bring to student texts. *A single off-the-shelf or standardized test should never be used to make important decisions about students, teachers, or curriculum.*" An analysis of Karl's writing over the writing sequence reveals that it was important that he start in basic writing because he required three semesters to develop his critical reading and writing skills sufficiently to be successful in the core, transfer-level research skills. However, he continued to struggle to meet the demands of additional discipline-specific reading- and writing-intensive courses as he continued into his second and third year, even though he was able to maintain academic good standing.

Karl presents an interesting case study because he showed a command of the surface features of college writing even as he struggled to engage with complex ideas and understand difficult texts. For example, in his first-semester self-assessment writing, he could accurately identify his challenges—"I believe that my high school needs to make significant changes to better prepare students for college learning"—and he could understand the nature of a thesis statement, as in this essay focused on a response to the book *Class Matters*: "Work gives full time students some obstacles that they may overcome or may cause them to drop out of college." Early in the sequence, he understood some of the important "building blocks" of writing an academic essay—writing a topic sentence, producing a thesis that has a point, etc. However, he really should have been in an academic reading course in his first year, because he had difficulty with assignments that required him to write about reading. Karl could accurately identify the limitations of his high school preparation and his own choices, observing of himself what we also observed in reviewing his writing: "Spelling, grammar, and punctuation were always stressed so that my writing would be clean instead of sloppy which my strong point was always." As he admitted, "Coming into my senior year, I had to decide if I wanted an easy class or a hard college based class. I decided to take the easy class because it was my final year of high school. I wanted to enjoy it more instead of wanting to work harder. I deeply missed a crucial opportunity to get better knowledge in writing."

Karl successfully completed English 098 (developmental writing) with an A, and English 101 showed him continuing to develop his thinking and reading skills. For example, his first essay asked him to engage with writing prompts based on the *Hunger Games*. His instructor used a draft-feedback-portfolio system, which was critical for him to adapt to the expectations of college writing. His revision of his thesis in essay 1 illustrates his shift from writing for information, where it's a factual statement, "Television may show the Hunger Games as entertaining to watch, but for the tributes, it is no game but to try to survive," that Karl revises into "America's sports to have some similarities with the Hunger Games such as many people watch,

there is betting involved, and violence is present. But for the most part, our sports are entertaining but clean, but the Hunger Games are dirty entertainment." Karl's real trouble—rhetorical knowledge—is illustrated in this same revision. His intro in the first version begins with no context for readers; his first reference to the *Hunger Games*, "The Capitol controls Katniss and the other tributes in the arena." The revision is, "In The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins, the Capitol controls Katniss and the other tributes in the arena." What Karl struggled with as a student into his third year was engaging with complex ideas and recognizing and acknowledging complexity.

By the core transfer research course (English 102), he continued to build on his strengths in a command of some of the surface features of academic writing, including an essay on a popular local restaurant where he incorporates outside sources that he found himself, he wrote about a topic that was interesting to him, he narrowed his thesis appropriately, but he also wrote in a way that did not align his view with the evidence he found and used. For example, his thesis for this essay is "The wings of Buffalo Wild Wings are unhealthy that can lead to health issues such as obesity and diabetes; however, I will still eat them for the taste, social aspects, and table gating." Much of the essay draws from marketing language to endorse the chain and its menu: "Spicy garlic is tasty, spicy, and garlicky making it a good sauce. Asian zing contains a chili pepper, soy, and ginger sauce combining sweet with heat," etc. Though Karl was in his third semester of college-level writing, he continued to struggle to identify college-level writing topics, appropriate tone and diction for a specific audience, and the formality expected in research-based academic writing.

Additionally, Karl often resorted to sweeping generalizations rather than specific, targeted issues within his selected essay topic: "Health-care is a controversial matter that is constantly debated every day" for example, and, in another essay on organic agriculture, "Time are changing, and these days people seem to think what they want." Though Karl completed six semesters of coursework at our campus in good academic standing with a 2.46 GPA, he earned low grades in courses such as reading-intensive introductory courses in disciplines like psychology, history, religious studies, philosophy, and sociology. Despite his scores on the ACT that would suggest sufficient preparation to begin college-level reading and writing, Karl's college path would have been significantly more difficult had he not completed a three-semester course sequence in first-year writing that gradually introduced him to rhetorical and critical reading strategies that enabled him to maintain good academic standing despite challenging coursework. Karl's experience illustrates that effective first-semester placement requires careful consideration of the time required for a student to become a proficient college reader and writer in relation to the learning outcomes for an entire writing program—not just for the first credit-bearing course.

A last case study provides insights about the complexity of assessing the readiness of underprepared students. For Jessica, a weak high school curriculum coupled

with poor rhetorical knowledge and process knowledge skills presented barriers to her academic success. Though her writing also had weaknesses in sentence-level correctness and knowledge of conventions, the biggest challenges she faced were the ability to effectively revise. Despite her low standardized test scores, Jessica's strong verbal communication abilities and reading skills allowed her to maintain academic good standing for her first two years.

Her placement profile reveals the complexity of Jessica's readiness. Her ACT and Wisconsin English Placement Test both reflected a gap between her reading and writing abilities. With a 320 (out of the English subscore total of 850) on the WEPT and 15 on the ACT English subscore, Jennifer would place into non-degree-credit writing on almost any standardized measure. However, her higher reading score (390 on the WEPT—putting her combined score above the 700 placement test cutoff for English 101) and 19 on the ACT are more in line with the expectations for degree-credit English courses. With high school English grades ranging from Ds to Bs, Jessica's academic background suggested she was not prepared for the rigors of college writing.

Jessica's lack of academic preparation became apparent through her comments in a series of self-assessment essay texts. As she wrote, "The ways that I am not prepared for college is not having the skills to write a college paper, or the right knowledge to make a well written paper." In a separate paper, she asserted, "The writing styles that I was taught in high school were not the best tools to use in college writing." She was able to accurately assess her preparation, noting, "My writing skills are not up to college level," but she ultimately found it difficult to articulate what it was about her previous experiences that were not a good match for the expectations of college writing. She elaborated: "What I mean by that is I sat down and started writing on what the subject was." In a separate assignment, she explained, "I can get the information of on the same paragraph most of the time the way I was taught in high school is very different then what a college professor want me to write," and recalled about her high school writing experiences, "I remember I always wrote essays on are self, family, or place that I cared about. I didn't do any research papers, or papers I had to write after I read a book." Over the course of her first semester in a non-degree-credit writing course, Jessica did not effectively revise her work and did not actually officially pass the course. However, settings in our automated registration system which are keyed to the standardized placement test allowed her to enroll in degree-credit writing because she technically had achieved the minimum placement score of 700.

Over the course of her first year, Jessica developed in some significant ways—for example, she produced a multiparagraph essay on college and social class at the end of her developmental courses, drawing from textual evidence and reflecting a writing process that included revision and editing. She reflected in her second-semester

writing course (English 101), "When I took English 098, it was great because it gave me a great path to follow in English and to succeed....When I entered English 101, I knew that I could succeed in this class because I had a better understanding of what college writing was all about." She also wrote about using feedback from her instructors and tutor to improve her use of transitional sentences and thesis statements and documents her growth by reporting, "On the second paper I got a better handle on citations." At the same time, in this second-semester course, Jessica was still developing an understanding of source use, for example incorporating information from "answer.com" into a formal paper along with outdated books from the 1950s and 1960s in an annotated bibliography project. However, Jessica showed progress that required multiple semesters, semesters she would not have had using a single-measure assessment of her readiness, because her past experiences with academic writing, her ability to revise using feedback, and her ability to read critically were not reflected in her test scores.

Strategies and Recommendations

Without measures beyond standardized testing, institutions are doing a tremendous disservice to multiple constituencies: a) students, whose misplacement can have serious consequences for the first-year experience, their learning, their academic standing, and their retention to higher education; b) instructors, who in managing and responding to the needs of misplaced students use time and energy that could be dedicated to improving overall instructional effectiveness; and c) writing center staff and other academic support specialists, who are taxed by students whose misplacement requires them to engage in a level of stressful "make-up work" to bridge the gap between their prior learning experiences and the expectations of college. Our discipline is also affected negatively by not clearly and accurately identifying what markers of knowledge and skills are required for precollege, first-semester, second-semester, and more advanced writing courses in a consistent way that we can adequately measure.

Though many teachers of first-year writing and college English more broadly have an intuitive sense that single-measure testing does not adequately assess student readiness to do college-level reading and writing, we need a stronger and more substantive body of evidence that will illustrate this to policymakers, our academic leadership, and institutional stakeholders. As such, we make the following recommendations, particularly to institutions of access, but also to any English educator who hopes to make higher education accessible to a broad range of students:

1. *Use multiple measures to assess student readiness for college writing.* As we have shown, standardized tests do not sufficiently or accurately assess student placement into first-year writing, nor are they capable of adequately evaluating student needs for developmental

support courses. Further, standardized tests are not up to the task of assessing students' overall learning needs as writers and college students. Multiple-measures placement is critical to gathering that information both for student success and for campus programs and program assessment.

2. *In response to placement data, create a curriculum that prepares students for degree-credit writing.* Data collected during multiple-measures assessment of student readiness provides a rich foundation for revolutionizing curricular development and faculty development so that a program is aligned with student and instructor needs. For our access institution, we have developed a curriculum intended to better transition our underprepared students from remedial to degree-credit writing and then to the credit-bearing curriculum more broadly.
3. *Implement an accelerated curriculum alongside multiple-measures placement assessment.* The most effective way to accelerate some students from remedial to credit-bearing coursework is to identify more accurately the students who have the reading and writing skills to start in degree-credit composition with or without co-requisite support courses, but standardized test scores will misidentify such students at an unacceptably high rate. Efforts to accelerate students into credit-bearing courses that rely on single standardized test scores are missing an opportunity to accelerate students through more accurate placement assessment.
4. *Maintain access to higher education by providing developmental coursework for students who truly need it.* Our research clearly shows that some students enter college without the ability to successfully complete credit-bearing coursework in their first semester. Methods that accelerate or eliminate remediation will not magically make such students prepared for college work. What a multiple-measures approach does at the open-access institution is to more precisely identify students who do and to not belong in developmental writing courses. However, even multiple measures cannot infallibly predict which students will succeed in higher education and which won't, even when their academic profiles look the same. For many of the students we studied, college was very, very hard, even when they didn't look worse or different than other students who succeeded or failed. Access and support are critical, and eliminating programs that provide that access to our most vulnerable student populations might reduce enrollments in non-degree courses, but it won't improve our students' lives or increase degree attainment rates for significantly underprepared students.

In February 2013, Kristine Johnson addressed the national imperative to quantify and measure student readiness in "Beyond Standards: Disciplinary and National Perspectives on Habits of Mind," observing that the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* "focuses attention on the civic and ethical agency of student writers" and that college readiness is defined by the document as "intellectual behaviors and experiences" (523). Like Johnson, who argues for a measurement system, a curriculum, and instruction that "inherently teaches students ways of being in the world" (536), we argue for a placement process that respects and reflects all of our nation's students' rights to be treated with potentiality that uses assessment measures that recognize that potential.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the UW System Office of Professional and Instructional Development for Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Grant funding from 2010-2012 to support this research. We are also grateful to the participating instructors in the UW-Marathon County English Department who helped us collect student work and shared their assignments with us. Lastly, we thank the anonymous *College English* reviewers for their careful reading and constructive feedback.

Notes

1. Particularly notable efforts to define college-level writing include the two volumes, *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* edited by Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg as well as *What Is "College-Level" Writing?*, volume 2, edited by Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau; both volumes bring together contributors who explore the *features* of and raise questions about the qualities that college-level writing has. However, the books do not necessarily address the mechanisms by which we assess whether students are prepared to demonstrate those features in their writing for college, nor is the topic of assessing students through placement part of the scope of the two books.

2. We believe the high number of participating students and large data collection warrants generalizability of our findings. For example, Tinberg and Nadeau's *The Community College Writer* focused on a close study of sixteen students but, like many studies in writing assessment, it takes for granted the placement and categorization of students as basic or college-level writers without specifying the mechanism by which students receive that assessment. Other recent studies such as Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest's "Conversing in Marginal Spaces" studied how developmental writers use instructor feedback; the article, however, treats "developmental writers" as a stable identity category and doesn't discuss how students were placed into developmental courses or identified as needing remediation. Other recent studies tracing students' development as college writers have undertaken a relatively intense examination of a small number of writers, from single digits to two dozen (see, for example, Ruecker; Leonard).

3. Our core writing sequence includes two options for fulfilling the developmental writing requirement (LEA 106: Multilingual Writers Workshop and English 098: Introduction to College Writing), and Composition 1: College Writing and Critical Reading, followed by English 102: Critical Writing, Reading, and Research. Support courses include non-degree-credit courses in academic reading, learning skills and study strategies, and small group writing studio courses.

4. All student names are pseudonyms.

5. This participating student was part of an initial pilot study in 2009-2010 that assessed multiple-measures placement specifically for multilingual students. This project led to our larger-scale project the following year.

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