CHAPTER 7.

WRITING ASSESSMENT, PLACEMENT, AND THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

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Two-year colleges are experiencing rapid change, much of which is driven by reform-minded higher education researchers, philanthropists, and policymakers seeking to improve degree completion rates in the nation's open-admissions community colleges. As part of this broader push for reform, placement has come under increased scrutiny, and many two-year colleges are reevaluating and reimagining longstanding placement practices. To set the context for the 2018 special issue of Journal of Writing Assessment on Writing Placement at Two-Year Colleges, this introductory essay reviews five scholarly conversations essential for understanding the issues and stakes: 1) the distinctive histories, missions, demographics, and constraints and opportunities of open admissions two-year colleges; 2) the nature, problems, and possibilities of the reform pressures currently bearing on two-year colleges and placement; 3) the history of writing placement assessment and the theoretical debates surrounding its purposes and efficacy; 4) the recent ethical turn in writing assessment toward sociocultural models of validity and implications for writing placement at two-year colleges; and 5) emerging calls in two-year college writing studies for

> teacher-scholar-activism and critical reform that encourage faculty
> to take responsibility for challenging inequitable placement processes.

WHY TWO-YEAR COLLEGES?

Since the mid-20th century, two-year colleges—known historically as junior colleges, technical colleges, and community colleges, depending on the specific mission and programming of the institution—have served a critical function as an open-admissions pathway to postsecondary education for a wide range of students. These institutions provide several forms of local educational access, offering non-credit community education courses, "developmental" courses for those institutionally classified as "underprepared" for college coursework, vocational degrees and certificates (often with close ties to local industries), and transfer-oriented general education and associate programs for those pursuing bachelor degrees, as well as growing dual/concurrent enrollment and early college initiatives for high school students (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). In *Gateway to Opportunity?: A History of the Community College in the United States*, Beach (2012) reviewed scholarly perspectives on the function of two-year colleges and concluded that these institutions offer "a limited opportunity and a mixed blessing" (p. 128). Beach (2012) argued that the early mission of the community college was to "*limit* access to higher education in the name of social efficiency" (p. xx) but that students, faculty, and administrators galvanized by the democratic potential of open admissions "tried to refashion this institution into a tool for increased social mobility, community organization, and regional economic development" (p. xx). Tensions between these institutional missions, which reflect impulses of constraint and opportunity, have persisted through the demographic and economic upheavals of the twenty-first century, as two-year colleges became the focus of renewed scholarly debate, philanthropy-driven reform efforts, and state and federal policymaking aimed at increasing the percentage of Americans holding postsecondary credentials. These forces have been rapidly reshaping writing curricula and placement assessment at two-year colleges. At many institutions, however, neither English faculty nor the discipline of writing studies have been well-positioned to influence these reforms (Griffiths, 2017; Hassel et al., 2015; Toth, Griffiths, & Thirolf, 2013).

As a field of scholarly inquiry, writing assessment should have a significant interest in two-year colleges: In 2015, the 1,108 community colleges in the United States served 7.2 million credit-seeking students, which is 41% of all undergraduates nationwide (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). However, two-year colleges and the faculty who teach in them have long been underrepresented in writing studies scholarship (Hassel & Giordano,

2013; Lovas, 2002; Nist & Raines, 1995; Toth & Sullivan, 2016), including emerging conversations about writing assessment, fairness, and social justice. This dynamic may be shifting. A 2016 special issue of *College English* on writing assessment as social justice, edited by Poe and Inoue, featured two essays focusing on community college students (Alexander, 2016; Naynaha, 2016). Chapters in Poe, Inoue, and Elliot's collection *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* also begin to address these gaps (Moreland, 2018; Toth, 2018a; 2018b). However, many of these studies demonstrate little or no engagement with the scholarly literature in two-year college writing studies, and none were written by two-year college English faculty. While scholars at all institution types can advance this important scholarly conversation, the authors of this special issue of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* believe it is essential that two-year college faculty participate as knowledge-makers as well as beneficiaries of writing assessment research. Local context matters, and studies conducted at two-year college sites by two-year college faculty can directly inform institutional work and improve student experiences and outcomes. These studies can also make distinctive and important contributions to the broader scholarly conversation about writing assessment.

The underrepresentation of two-year colleges in the writing assessment literature is an urgent ethical issue given the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of two-year college students. Nationwide, students of color attend community colleges at disproportionately high rates: These institutions enroll 56% of Native American undergraduates, 52% of Hispanic/Latinx students, and 43% of African American students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Likewise, many "minority-serving"—or New Majority—institutions (e.g., historically or predominantly Black colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribally-controlled colleges) are primarily associate-granting. Two-year college students are more likely than students at selective-admissions institutions to come from low-income or working-class backgrounds and/or be among the first generation of their family to attend college. They are also more likely to be older/returning students, parents, veterans, immigrants or refugees, and/or students with disabilities (Cohen et al., 2014). These groups of students have long been systemically underrepresented, underserved, discouraged, and disadvantaged in postsecondary education, reflecting and reproducing broader structures of social inequality in the United States. Given these demographic realities, the scholarly conversation about writing assessment, social justice, and the advancement of opportunity must explicitly attend to two-year college contexts. Further, it must do so with an awareness of the distinctive conditions of teaching and administering writing in these settings, including the missions and student populations served, constraints on institutional resources, writing instructors' varying

disciplinary backgrounds and professional identities, limitations on faculty governance and academic freedom, and the current reform-minded policy context in which two-year college faculty are undertaking their work.

AN ERA OF REFORM

Community college researchers and reformers often invoke low and inequitable degree completion rates as a major motivation for enacting change (e.g., Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Barnett & Reddy, 2017; Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2014; Zaback, Carlson, Laderman, & Mann, 2016). In 2016, only 39% of students who enrolled at two-year colleges earned any kind of credential within six years, and nationally, just 16% of entering two-year college students go on to earn a bachelor's degree (Shapiro et al., 2016). There are also unjust racial disparities in these completion rates: Only 33% of Hispanic/Latinx students and 26% of African American students who enroll at two-year colleges earn a credential within six years, and just 11% of Hispanic/Latinx students and 9% of African Americans who begin at two-year colleges eventually complete bachelor degrees (Shapiro et al., 2017). Few argue that there is no need for reform; rather, debates hinge on the nature, goals, and underlying ideologies of those reforms.

As Sullivan (2008, 2017) has reminded us, measuring "student success" at open admissions institutions is a complex endeavor. Not all two-year college students aspire to transfer or even earn degrees: Many are pursuing two-year vocational, technical, or para-professional certifications, or they may be "testing the waters" to see whether college is for them; others are dual-enrollment/early college high school students or "reverse transfers" who have already attended four-year institutions and, for a variety of reasons, stopped out or changed their goals. Degree-seeking students may also shift their aspirations as they gain exposure to and experience with postsecondary education, and many students find themselves facing financial pressures, life crises, or family and community responsibilities that take priority over schooling, at least temporarily (Griffiths & Toth, 2017; Sullivan, 2008, 2017). Furthermore, longstanding federal measures of completion rates have penalized community colleges by not including part-time students or those who transfer to four-year-institutions in their success metrics. When the Department of Education revised these criteria in 2017, it found the 8-year combined graduation and transfer rate for community college students was 60% (Carey, 2017).

Although they face many limitations and constraints, local and comparatively affordable open admissions two-year colleges provide a crucial point of entry to students who would otherwise be unable to access (or re-access) public postsecondary education. Many of these students are not making "market"

choices between two- and four-year institutions, but rather between two-year colleges or no college at all, or between two-year colleges and for-profit institutions that may leave them deep in debt with unimproved employment prospects (Toth, Calhoon-Dillahunt, & Sullivan, 2016). To the extent that writing assessment—whether for placement, in the classroom, or as a requirement for exiting required course sequences—functions to support or undermine student success at two-year colleges, it plays a key role in either opening or foreclosing access to learning, credentials, and, ultimately, socioeconomic mobility for some of the least advantaged students in our postsecondary system.

Over the last few decades, calls among both state and federal policymakers to improve student retention and degree completion have increasingly been framed as a matter of institutional "accountability." As Toth et al. (2016) have observed, accountability measures often fail to acknowledge that "the academic playing field is not level. An institution's record of 'success' is largely shaped by its student demographics and resources. The performance metrics are stacked in favor of selective colleges and universities, particularly the most elite among them" (p. 401). This dynamic makes mounting pressures for performance-based funding problematic. Perversely, such policies risk punishing under-resourced institutions that serve under-resourced students by further denying them resources. They also incentivize heretofore *open* admissions institutions to begin refusing entry to students deemed unlikely to succeed (Toth et al., 2016), determinations typically made based on those students' performance on admissions or placement tests. In this situation, placement assessment and other forms of standardized testing can function to deny access—again, often the only available access to public postsecondary education—to already disadvantaged students. Thus, the stakes of writing assessment in the context of the accountability "movement" are high.

In recent years, the problem of degree completion at two-year colleges has attracted the attention of mega-philanthropies like the Lumina and Gates foundations, as well as higher education researchers who have made use of the influx of funding from such organizations. These parties have been a driving force behind many proposed policy reforms. Perhaps the most influential researchers have been those associated with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University's Teachers College. Over the last decade, the CCRC has produced a number of high-profile publications arguing that one major cause of departure prior to degree completion is the amount of time many two-year college students spend in developmental courses before they can enroll in credit-bearing college-level coursework (e.g., Bailey et al., 2010; Jaggars & Stacey, 2014): During the first decade of the twenty-first century, 68% of two-year college students enrolled in at least one developmental course (Chen, 2016). These researchers have found that, for many students, the costs of the time and resources spent in developmental courses

seem to outweigh the benefits to learning, with particularly negative impacts on students of color (Bailey & Cho, 2010; Bailey et al., 2010; Jaggars & Stacey, 2014; see also Nastal, 2019; Henson & Hern, 2019, in this special issue).

This line of research has fueled the now-robust movement for reducing enrollment in and/or accelerating developmental instruction at two-year colleges. It has also spawned heated debates between CCRC researchers and advocates of developmental education, who have questioned reformers' analyses and the political endgame of their research (for an illustrative exchange, see Bailey, Jaggars, & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Goudas & Boylan, 2012, 2013). The Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA, n.d.), which includes most professional developmental education organizations, has responded to policy initiatives that reduce developmental education support with a statement on college access, arguing that "elimination or underfunding of learning assistance programs inevitably restricts college access in ways that lead to blatant educational disparities, very often with patterns related to race and socioeconomic status." The Council offered their own college completion plan in a white paper that the authors describe as "a call to action" for higher education institutions to provide access and support for all students through evidence-based practices (Casazza & Silverman, 2013).

While many two-year college English faculty have embraced—and, in some cases, been important leaders in—efforts to reduce the time students spend in developmental coursework (Adams, Gearhart, Miller, & Roberts, 2009; Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, & Jaggars, 2012; Hassel et al., 2015; Hern, 2012), many also share CLADEA's concern that broad-stroke critiques of developmental education are leading policymakers to cut resources and eliminate programs that provide necessary support for the most disadvantaged students, ultimately foreclosing their ability to access higher education (Hassel et al., 2015). Again, few of these faculty argue against the importance of enrolling students into college-level courses as quickly as possible. The debates center on what combination of reforms to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, professional development, and resource allocation will best achieve that goal for the diverse student groups entering two-year colleges.

This broad rethinking of developmental education has drawn increased attention to the assessment practices used by two-year colleges to place incoming students into courses. CCRC researchers have released a series of studies suggesting that the common use of high-stakes, single-score purchased placement tests has led to widespread misplacement, and particularly "underplacement"—that is, placing students who are capable of succeeding in college-level coursework into developmental courses, which can negatively impact their persistence to degree completion (Bailey et al., 2010; Barnett & Reddy, 2017; Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Hodara, Jaggars, & Karp, 2012; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011;

Scott-Clayton, 2012; Scott-Clayton & Belfield, 2015; Scott-Clayton et al., 2014; Nastal, 2019; Henson & Hern, 2019). These studies have led many two-year colleges to reconsider their reliance on commercial placement products like ACCUPLACER and the now-defunct COMPASS, and, following the recommendations of CCRC, many are adopting various forms of "multiple measures" placement that increase the range of ways that students can demonstrate readiness for college-level writing (Barnett & Reddy, 2017; Klausman et al., 2016).

The idea of multiple measures aligns with the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (CCCC) position statement on writing assessment (CCCC Executive Committee, 2009) and the Two-Year College English Association's (TYCA) "White Paper on Placement Reform" (Klausman et al., 2016). Hassel and Giordano (2011, 2015) have presented a successful two-year college model for multiple-measures placement grounded in disciplinary knowledge and values. Adopting multiple measures, however, does not automatically make a writing placement process valid, reliable, or fair. The field of writing assessment should continue to inform—and learn from—the development of new placement practices at two-year colleges. As the articles in this special issue of *JWA* demonstrate, two-year college English faculty across the country are seizing the national moment of reform as an opportunity to develop more equitable approaches to writing placement.

THEORIZING PLACEMENT

Placement is a writing assessment process unique to postsecondary education in the United States (Haswell, 2004). While other countries use proficiency testing for institutional admissions, many U.S. colleges use placement assessments once students have already been admitted. In the nation's open-admissions two-year colleges, where students enter from a wide range of academic trajectories and often have not taken any kind of admissions exam, placement assessment is nearly universal. The rationale for placement hinges on the following argument:

1. Placement testing identifies students with the weakest writing abilities.
2. In order to boost those abilities, placement tests funnel students into specific classes or sections where instruction can be more manageable and students can learn better.
3. Therefore, placement testing leads to improved student learning, retention, and completion.

This rationale is predicated on the algorithmic, decision-tree approach to placement advanced by Willingham (1974) more than four decades ago (Figure 7.1). This binaristic, decontextualized model has become the tacit theory undergirding most writing placement.
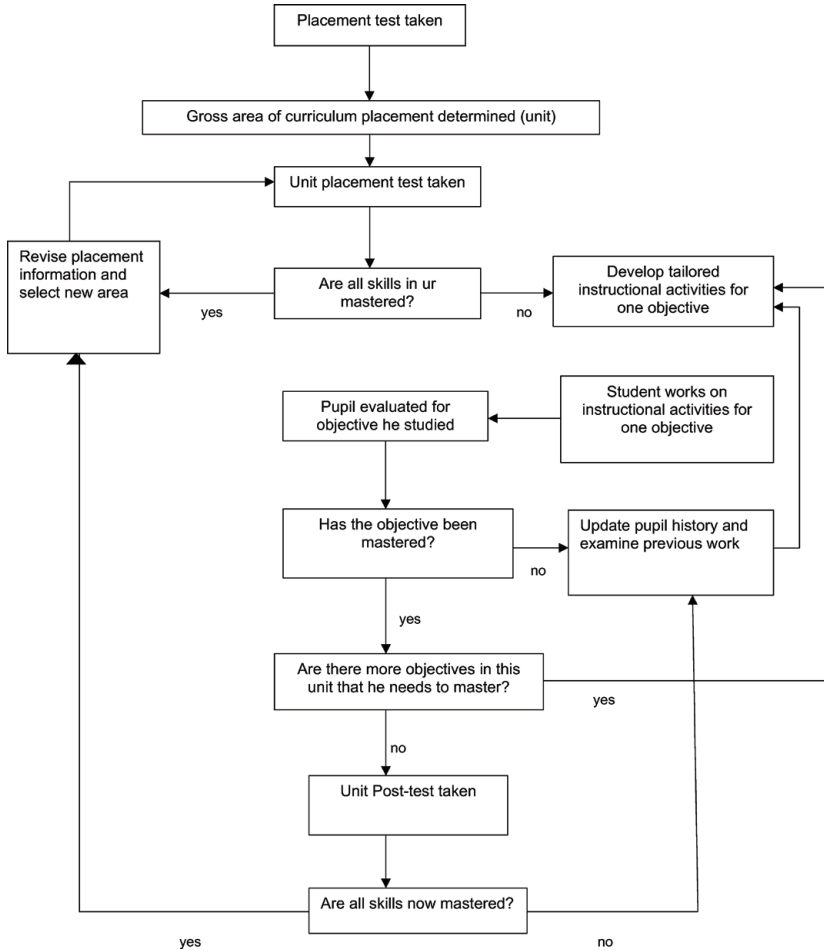
Figure 7.1. Willingham's placement model. Republished from College placement and exemption by W. W. Willingham, 1974, College Entrance Examination Board.

The logic of this algorithmic model is often taken for granted. As Kane (1990) has discussed, the model relies on a linear, clearly-defined progression of attainable and demonstrable skills: Students demonstrate mastery of Skill A; they are then tested on Skill A; those who succeed on test of Skill A progress to Skill B (which relies on Skill A); those who fail on test of Skill A return to the beginning of the unit. One assumption of the algorithm is that the course is based on a series of discrete skills that can be mastered and that build on each other. Another is "that performance on the placement test is relevant to readiness for the . . . course" (Kane, 1990, p. 11). Over the last several decades, however, we have learned much about the recursive nature of writing. We know, for instance, that decontextualized

grammar-usage-mechanics instruction does not necessarily lead to improved writing; as a result, continuing to use placement assessments that rely on outdated notions of the writing construct are often neither valid, reliable, nor fair.

Thirty years ago, Morante (1987) argued that placement tests and their corresponding cut scores "play important roles in access, retention, and quality" (p. 63), asserting, "To dump everyone in the same level of course is significantly to increase the probability of lowering standards or of failing many students" (p. 63). A decade later, White (1995) claimed placement testing "[serves] to help underprepared students succeed instead of washing them out . . . [T]hese are the students for whom required placement and the required freshman course are necessary, for they are most in need of guidance and support" (pp. 76–77). At most institutions offering multiple levels of writing courses, including two-year colleges, which often offer two or more levels of "pre-college" developmental writing, these assumptions have gone largely unchallenged.

Indeed, placement has long been viewed as necessary to increase the productivity of both instructors and students in writing classes. Some institutions, for instance, segregate students who score highest on placement tests or entrance exams into honors-level courses where they receive more advanced instruction than a typical college writing course offers, benefit from smaller class sizes, and are surrounded by exceptional peers. In other contexts, they are exempted entirely from a college writing requirement. Students sorted in this way are, in the view of advocates, alleviated of the "burden" of assisting their peers who may have less preparation, and instructors are rewarded with teaching the best prepared and most motivated students. The "gateway" college writing courses (i.e., English 101 or Composition I) are then filled with students who are "average," and developmental courses are filled with students who need the most instruction, so teachers can target their lessons, assignments, and assistance appropriately for each group of students. While such sorting processes are not employed at every institution, when they are used, they are typically perceived as being necessary to "efficiently" shuttle students through their required writing courses. The perceived value of such efficiency relates directly to the material conditions of postsecondary writing instruction. Many composition programs nationwide face increasing class sizes while relying on often underprepared graduate student instructors and, particularly at two-year colleges, undercompensated and not-always-well-supported adjunct faculty. In these settings, sorting based on abilities is presumed to help ease the labor of teaching.

Historically—and, as Williamson (1994) has observed, problematically—writing assessment has often been driven by such questions of efficiency, or, as Yancey (1999) put it, "Which measure can do the best and fairest job of prediction with the least amount of work and the lowest cost?" (p. 489). This orientation treats composition courses as necessary but burdensome for both students and

the institution. In recent decades, writing program administrators and writing studies teacher-scholars have made headway in shifting the conversation about college composition from teaching "basic skills" to engaging students around disciplinarily-informed insights that help prime them for life-long development as critical readers and writers. However, at many institutions—and particularly at two-year colleges, where writing faculty often have less disciplinary authority over assessment—placement into composition courses is still viewed not as a pivotal educational moment for introducing students to local pedagogical orientations and the valued construct of writing, but rather a mechanism for putting students in their "proper" seats quickly, easily, and inexpensively. This perspective has led to the proliferation of methods that sort students cheaply and "accurately," often leaving unaddressed critical questions about what accuracy means, how it might shift depending on the stakeholder, and what messages placement conveys.

However, the placement processes employed by an institution do send powerful messages to incoming students, local high schools, and other concerned stakeholders. If high schools desire their graduating seniors to score well on the placement test used by their area community college, they almost inevitably will steer their curricula toward that test. Thus, for example, two-year college placement tests that require no writing will almost certainly encourage local high schools to emphasize multiple-choice testing and de-emphasize the difficult and often messy practice of teaching writing within purposeful rhetorical contexts. As Harrington (2005) argued, placement also plays a central role in representing our campuses and writing programs to students:

> Placement is more than a decision about coursework for students. It is most students' first contact with the theory and practice of first-year writing programs, and we would do well to make that first contact as inviting and theoretically sound as possible. To do so, we need to think less about placement as mechanism and more about placement as an opportunity to communicate. (p. 12)

Placement is an introduction to the institution and how it conceives of writing. It is not a neutral action. It communicates specific cultural values, language ideologies, expectations to test-takers and participants: In short, it communicates power. It can replicate or trouble inequitable social structures; it can support or challenge the current era of testing and assessment despair (Gallagher, 2007). Because students' encounters with placement are so central to their entry into postsecondary education, writing studies scholars argue that we should take that opportunity to communicate our most central values: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and composing; writing processes; and knowledge of—and capacity to challenge—conventions (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2014).

Unfortunately, decontextualized algorithmic approaches to placement typically offer little helpful information about the ways most institutions and teacher-scholars conceive of writing. The widespread reliance on commercially produced tests that measure a very limited construct of writing has prioritized knowledge of Edited American English conventions at the expense of any other outcome, primarily because these are the skills that can be easily measured through multiple-choice tests (Huddleston, 1954; Stein, 2016; Williamson, 1994), quickly written paragraphs (Bereiter, 2003; Faigley, Cherry, Jolliffe, & Skinner, 1985), and automated writing evaluation (AWE) software (Burstein, 2012; Herrington & Moran, 2001, 2012; Perelman, 2012). Multiple-choice usage tests primarily reward familiarity with the conventions of a privileged written English variety most closely associated with White, middle-class, monolingual literacy practices. Even tests with an actual writing component assessed by AWE primarily measure length, an easily identifiable structure, and few linguistic or mechanical "errors," rather than meaning or rhetorical effectiveness; Perelman (2012) described these tests as "bullshit" (p. 427) because students may be rewarded when they include irrelevant or inaccurate information to answer short essay questions that have nothing to do with their knowledge or experience domains. In most actual college writing situations, students are expected to demonstrate knowledge based on course texts, assignments, and discussions or professional expertise. Placement assessments with such limited construct representation might work to shunt students into writing classes and allow them to check the box and finish their writing requirements. They do little, however, to expand the narrow conceptions of writing that many students bring with them based on prior assessment experiences or to prepare students for longer-term rhetorical awareness and writing knowledge transfer.

Despite writing placement's perceived necessity, Haswell (2004, 2005) has offered an astute critique of its efficacy: He claims reliability and predictability are poor enough to call into question the ubiquitous and long-standing use of placement testing. Most students have been found to change their score significantly the second time they took the test (Haswell, 2004). Furthermore, Haswell (2004) demonstrated that research conducted since placement testing began with the 1874 Harvard entrance exams shows that both indirect and direct methods of testing do little in the way of predicting student success. His analysis of studies from 1906, 1927, 1954, 1992, 1999, and 2004 suggested "that for decades college writing placements have been made on scores that leave unexplained, at best, two thirds of the variance in future course performance, and, on average, nine-tenths of it" (Haswell, 2004). Likewise, Smith (1993) analyzed the locally-designed test at University of Pittsburgh, which used a robust scoring method that relied on its expert teachers, and found 14% of students were under-placed. While this

may seem like a "good enough" number for some, Smith (1993) argued, "For the students and for the teachers, 'very few' is too many" (p. 192). This may be particularly true at open admissions two-year colleges, where underplacement into developmental courses can lengthen time to degree or discourage students from persisting or even enrolling (Adams, 1993; Bailey, 2009; Bailey et al., 2010; Henson & Hern, 2019; Nastal, 2019), while overplacement might increase the possibility of student failure, costing them time and tuition dollars and potentially resulting in academic probation or suspension.

According to Scott-Clayton (2012), high-stakes, single-score placement tests were being used by 92% of two-year colleges at the beginning of the decade. As the articles in this special issue of *JWA* demonstrate, we are only beginning to attend to what Messick (1989) called the *social consequences* of these longstanding placement practices. From the perspective of racial and socioeconomic equity, those consequences are often profoundly troubling. As Morris, Greve, Knowles, and Huot (2015) noted in their recent overview of book-length studies of writing assessment:

> While there is little or no scholarship focused specifically on two-year college writing assessment, it is important to recognize the important influence writing assessment can have for students' educational opportunities, especially at two-year colleges, which enroll the majority of postsecondary under-resourced students. (p. 120)

Furthermore, they argued, "Writing assessment can also be a critical issue for two-year college identity and legitimacy" (Morris et al., 2015, pp. 120–121). Over the course of our own careers, we have heard university-based colleagues speak dismissively of community colleges on the basis of their purportedly uncritical placement and "remediation" practices. Thus, the visible disconnect between writing assessment theory and on-the-ground placement practice has consequences for the reputations of two-year colleges, their instructors' professional status within the discipline, and the perceived value of the education their students receive.

In sum, we know the consequences of writing placement based on decontextualized algorithmic thinking and limited construct representation can be dire. It sends inaccurate and counter-productive messages about what we value in college writing; it appears to misplace students at unacceptable and often inequitable rates; it fails to assess key capacities necessary for college success; and it does not provide information about what kinds of supplementary supports might benefit students—something that contextualized, nonbinaristic measures with broader construct representation can offer (Hassel & Giordano, 2015). At two-year institutions, the consequences of poor placement practices are not simply a matter of how many credit-bearing writing courses a student will need to complete. In an

unreformed two-year college curriculum, misplacement can mean taking as many as three non-credit developmental courses before entering into credit-bearing composition (Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, & Thomas-Spiegel, 2005; Nastal, 2019). Many students will not have the time, money, or motivation to persist through a year of additional writing coursework—more if they do not pass a class. These barriers to educational access are a function of placement tests that sacrifice validity to reliability and underrepresent the writing construct; however, such barriers can be reduced or eliminated if we develop placement assessment processes that prioritize fairness.

THE ETHICS OF PLACEMENT

Over the last decade, writing studies scholars have been reexamining the ethics of assessment. Poe and Inoue (2016) have identified this theoretical movement as a turn toward "sociocultural model[s] of validity" (p. 118) that "provide a useful reworking of validity theory for the purposes of social justice" (p. 118). Scholars in this turn have drawn insights from a number of transdisciplinary critical fields, including:

- Critical race theory, whiteness studies, and anti-racism (e.g., Behm & Miller, 2012; Burns, Cream, & Dougherty, 2018; Hammond, 2018; Inoue, 2009a, 2009b, 2012, 2015, Inoue & Poe, 2012a, 2012b; Naynaha, 2016; Poe & Cogan, 2016; Poe, Elliot, Cogan, & Nurudeen, 2014)
- Decolonial theory (Cushman, 2016; Gomes, 2018)
- Translingual theory (Poe & Inoue, 2016)
- Queer theory (Alexander, 2016; Caswell, 2018)
- Philosophical work on ethics and social justice (e.g., Elliot, 2016; Poe & Inoue, 2016; Slomp, 2016b; Stein, 2016)

These scholars ask us to consider how writing assessments are shaped by dominant epistemological assumptions, values, and language ideologies that are raced, classed, gendered, and/or colonial/imperialistic, and often predicated on normativities regarding physical abilities, sensory processing, and neurotypicality. Such critical interrogation is essential even for assessments that appear on the surface to be neutrally "meritocratic." These assessment practices may still be enacting what Behm and Miller (2012), following Bonilla-Silva (2006), have called a "color-blind racist" assessment paradigm that continues to reproduce structures of social inequality. As we have noted, there is mounting evidence that longstanding writing placement practices at two-year colleges—institutions that are the major point of access to postsecondary education for many structurally disadvantaged groups—have been performing

precisely these inequitable functions. It is thus imperative that we bring the insights of this ethical turn in writing assessment to bear on the question of placement at two-year colleges.

New critical frameworks challenge algorithmic assessment models like Willingham's (1974). They offer valuable conceptual tools for analyzing the social consequences of two-year college assessment practices and ontological options for imagining fairer alternatives. These tools include *racial validity inquiry* (Inoue, 2012, 2015) and *disparate impact analysis* (Poe & Cogan, 2016; Poe et al., 2014), which encourage disaggregating assessment data by race and other legally protected categories. Extending these concepts, Slomp (2016b) has argued for "disaggregation of data so score interpretation can be clearly understood for all groups and each individual within those groups" (Slomp, 2016a), with particular attention to what Elliot (2016) has called the "least advantaged," to determine whether assessment practices are having an adverse impact on some groups. If so, these assessment practices can and should be redesigned to achieve more equitable outcomes. Such redesigns may require not only revising assessment processes and instruments, but a "fundamental rethinking" (Slomp, 2016b) of the values, goals, and practices driving writing assessment in the context of what Inoue (2015) calls our "local diversities" (p. 68). Both Cushman's (2016) argument for decolonizing the concept of validity and Alexander's (2016) suggestions for queering writing assessment ask us to question the epistemological universalism and normativities built into why and how we measure writing performance. They encourage us to develop assessments that value the plurality and diversity of our students' languages, literacies, and rhetorics. Such local re-valuation is particularly pressing at two-year colleges, given their diverse students, institutional missions, and community contexts.

The urgency of such rethinking is evident in *JWA*'s recent special issue on the ethics of writing assessment (Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2016). This special issue responds, in part, to the 2014 *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* articulated by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME, 2014)), which defined *fairness* in assessment as:

> The validity of test score interpretations for intended use(s) for individuals from all relevant subgroups. A test is fair that minimizes the construct-irrelevant variance associated with individual characteristics and testing contexts that otherwise would compromise the validity of scores for some individuals. (p. 219)

While the *Standards* document focused on subgroup difference, it framed fairness in service of validity (Elliot, 2015). As Slomp (2016b) has asserted, "cultural bias—such as subgroup differences being related to undemonstrated

assumptions about students rather than from reflective latent variable models validated under field-test conditions" was not explicitly attended to in the *Standards*, and as a result, students and practitioners may encounter technically sound assessment practices whose social consequences have been ignored.

The 2016 special issue contributors drew on foundational texts in social science, education, and assessment to arrive at their call to use writing assessment as a means of achieving social justice "as a principle of fairness so opportunities do not merely exist, but rather, so each individual has a fair chance to secure such opportunities" (Slomp, 2016b). Elliot (2016) identified "fairness" in writing assessment as "the identification of opportunity structures created through maximum construct representation under conditions of constraint—and the toleration of constraint only to the extent to which benefits are realized for the least advantaged." This rethinking of fairness in terms of opportunity structures has powerful implications for two-year colleges, which have a mission to provide access to educational opportunity for the "least advantaged."

As we have discussed, the commercial exams that have long dominated two-year college writing placement typically offer inadequate representation of local constructs of college writing. They also reproduce language and literacy ideologies that advantage students from White, middle-class communities. While we have long tolerated such constraints in the name of efficiency at often under-resourced open admissions institutions, it is now clear that those constraints have, in fact, harmed the least advantaged. Through systematic misplacement, particularly underplacement that delays enrollment in college-level courses, we have reduced those students' likelihood of degree completion. In the process, we have also sent them negative, destructive messages about their capacities as writers and learners and about the value of the rhetorical and literacy practices in their out-of-school communities. These disparate, adverse impacts are neither fair nor, in many cases, legal (Klausman et al., 2016; Poe & Cogan, 2016; Poe et al., 2014). The educational policy shifts of the last decade have created an opportunity to rethink "business as usual" (Klausman et al., 2016, p. 139) in two-year college writing placement. We will need all of the critical tools emerging from the field of writing assessment to reform these processes in ways that advance opportunity and social justice.

PLACEMENT REFORM AS TEACHER-SCHOLAR-ACTIVISM

In a recent special issue of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* on academic freedom, Warnke and Higgins (2018) called on two-year college English faculty to become *critical reformers*. Critical reformers remain clear-eyed about the dangers of the neoliberal agenda that motivates some higher education reformers but take seriously the evidence higher education researchers have produced that

business-as-usual at community colleges is producing harmful and unjust inequities. "As critical reformers," Warnke and Higgins (2018) asserted:

> We are tasked with linking what we know empirically with our values and vision for the community college. When interests converge, we are responsible for reframing and reimagining ostensibly apolitical reform research . . . When our interests overlap partially with those in power, we may stand a chance of achieving progress through careful, structurally aware engagement. (p. 368)

We hope this special issue serves as a resource for two-year college faculty engaging in critical placement reform. We also hope it encourages the university-based writing assessment community to support two-year faculty in their critical reform efforts. Hassel and Giordano (2013) have called on writing studies to produce more scholarship that accounts for and responds to the needs of what they call the field's "teaching majority." Likewise, Toth (2018b) has urged writing assessment scholars to attend to the professional positioning of two-year college English faculty and produce scholarship these faculty can use to influence policy and practice at their institutions. Thus, this special issue both responds to and amplifies calls for cross-sector disciplinary "alliance" in our current era of reform (Toth, Sullivan, & Calhoon-Dillahunt, 2019).

Over the last five years, as reform pressures have spurred rapid change at community colleges across the country, two-year college writing studies has been undergoing a turn toward what Andelora (2013) and Sullivan (2015) have called *teacher-scholar-activism*. This turn is premised on "a conception of professional identity that foregrounds faculty members' responsibility to be public intellectuals and agents of change" (Toth et al., 2017, p. 31). Indeed, Warnke and Higgins (2018) explicitly situated their discussion of critical reform within the teacher-scholar-activist turn. TYCA, an organization within the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) with close ties to CCCC, is one important organization cultivating a professional community that fosters teacher-scholar-activism. Over the last decade, TYCA has become increasing engaged with policy-making and providing two-year college faculty with resources to be critical agents of change amid ongoing reform (Calhoon-Dillahunt, 2015; Toth et al., 2016).

These resources include two influential TYCA white papers (Hassel et al., 2015; Klausman et al., 2016) that have stated the importance of two-year college English instructors asserting disciplinarily-grounded professional authority in institutional processes that are increasingly being regulated by legislative mandates. Of particular relevance is the 2016 "White Paper on Writing Placement Reform" (Klausman et al., 2016), a document intended to provide an overview of the existing writing placement practices used across two-year colleges and to inform readers about the

disciplinary, professional, and political movements reshaping those practices. The white paper presents a synthesis of research on placement emerging from higher education reformers at the CCRC, as well as from writing studies.

The statement offers case studies of two promising approaches to two-year college writing placement—multiple measures and directed self-placement (DSP)—and articulates several key principles for designing, administering, and assessing placement practices. Those principles include (1) grounding in disciplinary knowledge, (2) involvement of English faculty in the development of placement processes, (3) sensitivity to the effects of placement processes on diverse groups of students, (4) ongoing local validation, and (5) integration of placement reform with other campus-wide efforts to support student success (Klausman et al., 2016, p. 126). The influence of this white paper is evident in several of the articles in this special issue of *JWA*.

These articles present critical discussions of a range of issues and options for two-year college writing placement in an era of reform. The first two pieces focus on theoretical issues. In "Beyond Tradition: Fairness, Placement, and Success at a Two-Year College," Nastal uses archival institutional data to interrogate long-standing approaches to writing placement at two-year colleges through emerging ethical conceptions of fairness. Based on evidence of racial disparities in her survival analysis of student persistence through her college's developmental writing course sequence, she critiques inherited placement traditions and calls for practices that better align with the commitments to democratic access that two-year colleges espouse. In "Are We Who We Claim to Be? A Case Study of Language Policy in Community College Writing Placement Practices," Gilman extends this line of critique through an examination of the tacit language policies embedded in her community college's placement assessment, policies that contradict the institution's stated commitment to diversity. Gilman calls for greater attention to the underlying language ideologies that drive two-year college writing placement.

The next two articles examine placement options in two-year colleges. In "Let Them In: Increasing Access, Completion, and Equity in English Placement Policies at a Two-Year College in California," Henson and Hern present a disparate impact analysis evaluating the effect of lowering placement cut scores on a purchased multiple-choice usage test at Henson's institution. They found strong evidence that the higher cut scores resulted in significant and inequitable underplacement that reduced the likelihood of persistence to degree completion for students of color. Based on these findings, they advocate for multiple measures placement that enables as many students as possible to enroll directly into credit-bearing college composition courses. Next, in "Directed-Self Placement in Two-Year Colleges: A Kairotic Moment," Toth presents findings from an interview-based study of DSP implementation in 12 two-year colleges, demonstrating that there is a

more extensive track record for DSP in open admissions settings than the scholarly literature has suggested. She finds that DSP offers a promising alternative to mandatory placement at two-year colleges, but that it also presents distinctive considerations for implementation that warrant deeper theorization and further research.

The special issue concludes with a collaboratively authored "Forum" that discusses how contributors see the special issue affirming, extending, and/or complicating the principles articulated in the 2016 TYCA white paper. This polyvocal conversation surfaces shared convictions as well as points of contention and unresolved questions that suggest areas for future activism, policy-making, and research. Informed by the articles in this special issue and critical questions raised in the body of the forum, Elliot, Poe, and Nastal offer a roadmap for two-year college placement reform that synthesizes the principles of the TYCA white paper with additional theoretical insights from the writing assessment and educational measurement literature. This document is designed to help facilitate local conversations about placement reform among faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders at two-year colleges. With this critical and theoretically-grounded yet practical resource for making institutional change, Elliot et al. offer a milestone example of cross-sector alliance in writing assessment that helps equip two-year college English faculty to assert professional authority in local policy decisions.

Taken together, the pieces in this special issue model the kind of critical reformer role that two-year college faculty can take on. We believe faculty at open admissions institutions need to be participants in conversations about writing assessment and social justice, and these articles demonstrate that two-year college faculty have much to offer those discussions. In addition to contributing to disciplinary knowledge, their efforts can provide colleagues at other two-year colleges with valuable insight and precedent for pursuing reform at their own institutions. Finally, these articles suggest that cross-sector scholarly alliances can strengthen our collective efforts to pursue more equitable approaches to writing assessment: approaches that honor open admissions students and the rhetorical resources of our communities. In sum, we hope this special issue persuades readers at *all* institution types that two-year colleges are important sites for making knowledge about writing assessment and for putting that knowledge to work as social justice-oriented praxis.

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