

Chapter 5. Narrowing the Divide in Placement at a Hispanic- Serving Institution: The Case of Yakima Valley College

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Abstract: This chapter’s case study demonstrates how writing placement that arises from and responds to local contexts increases equitable student outcomes and supports programmatic and institutional change. In the past decade, Yakima Valley College (YVC), a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) located in Central Washington, has shifted from a predominantly White institution to a majority Latinx institution. Local demographic shifts, coupled with increased intervention in developmental education reform by policy-makers and funding entities, propelled YVC to adopt an “equity agenda.” YVC’s English department collaboratively developed innovations to ameliorate placement issues and to improve the efficacy of our developmental writing sequences, into which the majority of students and the vast majority of students of color placed prior to 2017. After COMPASS’s discontinuation (2016), English faculty seized upon the moment to develop a new placement methodology that combined alternative means of demonstrating first-year writing-readiness with a customized version of Boise State’s The Write Class. Since the change in placement procedures (effective Fall 2017), the majority of students place directly into first-year writing while maintaining high success rates. The authors argue that YVC’s placement reform plays an important role in the college’s mission as an HSI and serves as a foundation for reforms across campus toward more equitable and antiracist practices.

A College in Transition

A recent *New York Times* article, entitled “The Divide in Yakima Is the Divide in America,” examines the nation’s changing demographics and the social, economic, and political implications of these changes through the lens of the Yakima Valley, situated on the traditional homelands of the Yakama Nation:

The changes in this farming valley, known as the nation’s fruit basket, mirror demographic trends in numerous U.S. cities where the population is becoming increasingly less White. . . . In Yakima, young adults are nearly twice as likely to be Latino as older adults. (Searcey & Gebeloff, 2019)

The student body at the largest local high school, Eisenhower High School, for example, consisted of 23 percent Latinx and 70 percent White students in 1999; a decade later, Latinx students were in the demographic majority at the high school (Searcey & Gebeloff, 2019). In many ways, Yakima Valley College (YVC) also represents the changing landscape in higher education. In the past decade, YVC has transitioned from a predominantly White institution (though identified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution [HSI] since 2001) to a majority Latinx institution, a shift that has surfaced tensions and created opportunities as we try to embrace the “serving” component of our federal designation.

Across its adult basic education, workforce education, transfer, and, now, applied baccalaureate programs, YVC enrolls roughly 8,000 students—nearly 4,000 full time equivalents (FTEs)—with an average age of 27. Hispanic/Latinx students make up 60 percent of the total student population, and YVC serves the largest number of college-level DACAmented and unDACAmented students in the state. About 11 percent of YVC’s student body is composed of high school juniors and seniors taking college courses tuition-free through Washington State’s 27-year-old dual credit program, Running Start. The majority of YVC students are employed in the community, and 73 percent are identified as “low income.” Eighty-four percent of YVC students are first-generation college students, and 70 percent identify as female (2020-21 *Quick Facts*, 2021). According to the U.S. Department of Education’s *College Scorecard* (n.d.), YVC’s eight-year graduation rate is 44 percent; its three-year graduation rate (150% time) is approximately 30 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

YVC faculty and staff demographics, however, have not aligned with the changes seen in the student body. According to YVC’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness data, the percentage of YVC’s total workforce that identifies as people of color currently stands at 29.7 percent, the highest percentage in the Washington state two-year and technical college system. However, only 15 percent of YVC full-time faculty identify as people of color, and that percentage is even lower in the English department, which has only two BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) faculty members, both recent hires, among its 17 full-time faculty members. Due in part to its rural location and the lack of advanced degree-granting universities in the area, YVC is unique in that it maintains a high proportion of full-time faculty; more than 75 percent of YVC’s English department members teach full time, and that ratio is similar in other departments across the college.

YVC’s governance is also unique from many peer institutions. It has few administrative layers—a president and two vice presidents, to whom five deans of the various instructional and support divisions and the directors and supervisors of the other administrative areas report. YVC does not have a faculty senate, but faculty are unionized and collectively bargain contracts. At the department level, YVC has department heads, but these positions are minimally compensated and have limited authority. As a result, YVC’s English department is accustomed to a distributed leadership model, in which faculty members regularly rotate in and out of various

positions of responsibility, including department head, and engage in collective and informed decision-making. This model, which Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt (2011) describes as a “decentered” writing program, “enables our faculty to collaborate to create a coherent writing program while allowing space for faculty autonomy” (p. 125). This “team approach” (Taylor, 2009), enhanced by YVC’s high ratio of full-time faculty, has resulted in high levels of engagement in department work and strong faculty buy-in with department initiatives, processes, and policies.

Placement Reform: Converging Forces and a *Kairotic* Moment

Much like Jessica Nastal (2019) and others have described, the announcement of the COMPASS placement test’s discontinuation in 2016 marked the *kairotic* moment for YVC’s placement system—an opportunity “to disrupt the current systems of higher education and take responsibility for those aspects of inequality that are under our control” (Withem et al., 2015, p. 9). However, the beginnings of our placement and developmental education reform journey can be traced back to the early 2000s, around the time YVC was first recognized as an HSI. Like other colleges nationwide, YVC was grappling with its shifting demographics as well as increased intervention in higher education reform by policymakers and what Linda Adler-Kassner (2017) refers to as the Educational Industrial Complex: non-governmental organizations (NGOs), granting agencies, policy institutes, and corporations. State higher education funding formulas and legislation, competitive grant funding from Title V and Achieving the Dream, and accreditation processes propelled YVC’s articulation of a college “equity agenda” at the same time that the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), the body that coordinates Washington state’s system of 34 community and technical colleges, adopted a vision centering its work on “leading with racial equity” (2020). Thus, YVC’s placement system change was, ultimately, the result of parallel forces, internal and external, converging after years of groundwork. Disciplinary scholarship laid the foundation upon which we could build something new once the opportunity presented itself.

Like most other two-year colleges (Fields & Parsad, 2012), for decades, YVC relied on a single measure—in our case, the COMPASS test—to determine students’ need for developmental coursework. The COMPASS test was long viewed as an inexpensive and efficient way of determining college “readiness”; its convenience met YVC’s need for year-round, on-demand testing and supported its self-sustaining placement model, one in which placement fees fully cover testing and related administrative costs. Over time, COMPASS placements in math and English were being used for purposes beyond their intent or capacity to measure, adopted as course and program prerequisites in many departments across the college. In other words, the COMPASS placement test was high-stakes testing, determining student access and associated educational costs and time to degree. However, most incom-

ing students were unaware of the significance and consequences of placement testing (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Moreover, the process of paying for and completing YVC placement tests involved multiple steps and offices on campus, some of which were only accessible during regular business hours.

English department members had long been troubled by using placement tests focused on conventional grammar, usage, and punctuation for placement into writing courses which, for a time, included up to three levels of developmental courses prior to first-year writing. Well before department members fully understood the concept of “disparate impact,” we recognized that our editing-focused multiple-choice test did not fit well with our learning outcomes and curriculum, nor did it provide a very good rough sort of students into the writing courses they needed. Anecdotally, we noticed that Hispanic surnames dominated the rosters of our developmental writing courses. Department members often observed the wide range of abilities of students placed into the same course or noted that students placed into our lowest level of developmental writing courses may, in fact, be stronger writers than those in the higher-level courses they were teaching at the same time. Our observations were corroborated by Peter Crosta and Clive Belfield (2012), who found that COMPASS misplaced about one in three students in writing, often “severely.” A growing body of evidence, both local and national, also revealed some of the serious ramifications of misplacement. For instance, Thomas Bailey et al. (2009) found that the lower students place in a developmental sequence, the less likely they are to complete college-level coursework—results that mirrored findings by YVC’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness: YVC students who placed into developmental coursework (math and/or English), which was the majority of students—and the vast majority of students of color—were unlikely to be retained into the following academic year, let alone complete a certificate or degree. Still, despite the growing emphasis on data-driven decision-making and increasing engagement with equity at YVC, placement was not yet the focus of growing reform efforts within the college.

To ameliorate some of the problems English department members observed with COMPASS misplacement over the years, the department adopted a “jump” process, based on students’ revised writing (often a portfolio), which enabled faculty members to move students who had been under-placed or who had excelled and “accelerated” in their developmental coursework directly into college-level writing courses the following quarter. However, we didn’t have an easy way to intervene early in the quarter if a student in a course appeared to be misplaced. As per YVC policy, students were allowed to retake the COMPASS placement test once per quarter prior to enrolling in a math or English course, but doing so cost students additional money and time, and retakes rarely resulted in a higher placement. Even when students did earn higher scores, by the time the student completed the retake, it was often too late in our short ten-week academic quarter for students to find an appropriate writing course with open seats or too difficult for students to rearrange their entire schedules to add a different writing course than the one for which they had originally registered.

At the same time, the English department also examined other possibilities for improving placement validity within the constraints of our self-sustaining, on-demand placement system. At one point, inspired by a peer college in our system (Highline Community College), we pushed for combining reading and writing COMPASS scores, but local data did not show that combined cut scores were more predictive of success than writing cut scores alone. YVC's math department had found a correlation between writing placement and math success and used English placement to determine whether the lowest placing math students should begin math in our adult basic education program (non-credit bearing) or in our credit-bearing developmental math sequence. However, the English department did not find the reverse to be true: math placement was not a predictive indicator of success in English courses at any level. In 2006, we even investigated the COMPASS eWrite Essay Writing Test, an automated writing evaluation, only to discover in our in-house pilot of it that our own "placements" based on the students' eWrite writing samples correlated more strongly with students' original COMPASS writing skills test scores (see *TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform* [Klausman et al., 2016] for a list of sources critiquing machine-scored writing exams). Although we longed for a more authentic and valid alternative, no one was ready to give up placement entirely, so we were "stuck" with COMPASS.

Without a better placement alternative, the English department focused its attention on making its developmental writing sequence a productive one for students, given that about 60 percent of enrolled students—and two-thirds of enrolled Latinx students—placed into developmental writing courses. Our efforts were facilitated by department members' engagement with disciplinary scholarship and professional organizations, such as the Two-Year College English Association of the Pacific Northwest (TYCA-PNW), as well as YVC's participation in the national Achieving the Dream initiative from 2006 to 2013. More than 15 years ago, the department removed traditional letter grades from courses below college level, replacing letter grades with a variation of a pass/fail system, to focus attention on learning and to reduce the negative effects letter grades can have on students' motivation, self-esteem, GPA, and financial aid (see, among others, Kohn, 2011). Developmental writing courses were (and are) taught almost exclusively by full-time faculty. When the department engaged in end-of-program assessment, we used what we learned from student performance at the end of the first-year writing series to align course outcomes at all levels so that all courses in the writing sequence reinforced and built on prior learning and emphasized the development of academic writing and reading strategies.

In addition to improving our developmental courses themselves, we also shortened the developmental sequence, eliminating the lowest developmental writing course (Bailey et al., 2013), and we worked closely with our adult basic education program, now named College and Career Readiness (CCR), to develop pathways from GED, ESL, and other skill-development programs into college writing classes (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. YVC Writing Sequence

Course/Title	Brief Description
ENGL 90T, English Essentials I	Students use a recursive process to develop short focused and organized compositions; students also engage in reading processes and are introduced to MLA documentation. Students can expect direct instruction in grammar, editing, and proofreading strategies.
ENGL 95, English Essentials II	Students use a recursive process to write focused, organized, and developed essays that incorporate cited evidence; students engage in active reading and practice with editing and proofreading strategies, and they reflect on their learning and writing processes.
ENGL& 101, English Composition I	In the first of two college-level writing courses, students use a recursive process to write focused, organized, and developed essays of increasing complexity; students learn to integrate and analyze cited evidence in support of their ideas, and they reflect on their rhetorical choices.

After learning about the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC; “What is ALP?,” n.d.) and a couple of variations of ALP adopted by peer colleges in our state, we developed accelerated options for both of our remaining developmental offerings. In 2013–2014, we piloted an integrated reading and writing learning community for students who placed into the lowest level of our developmental sequence, ENGL 90T, and a corequisite ALP course (based on CCBC’s “mainstreaming” model) combining ENGL 95 and ENGL& 101 (first-year writing). Both ALP courses have had strong success rates and have increased the numbers of students completing first-year writing. Additionally, borrowing from one of our peer colleges in the state system, Whatcom Community College, with whom we had a strong connection through our shared engagement in the Two-Year College English Association of the Pacific Northwest (TYCA-PNW), we developed a writing-intensive Introduction to Literature course (ENGL 135) as a college-level alternative to developmental writing coursework (see *TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform*). This humanities course is open to students who placed into ENGL 95 or higher; earning a C or higher in this course provided students another means of demonstrating eligibility for ENGL& 101. Still, all this work to improve our developmental writing program was essentially a work-around for the problems with COMPASS placement.

Serendipitously, several YVC English department members attending the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Convention in Tampa Bay were introduced to Boise State University’s “evidence-based” placement process (“The Write Class”)—and Asao B. Inoue’s labor contracts—at the Council on Basic Writing Preconvention Workshop, “Risky Relationships in Placement, Teaching, and the Professional Organization,” just months before the June 2015 announcement of COMPASS’s discontinuation. After years of engage-

ment with department and college-wide initiatives and attention to disciplinary innovations, the time was finally ripe for a systemic change at YVC; the English department seized the moment, immediately contacting key administrators to express our interest in placement reform and to offer research-based alternatives that may help YVC advance its equity agenda.

Creating Change in Context: Opportunities and Constraints

Although the college's initial impulse was to replace the COMPASS test with a similar commercial product—and we did briefly adopt ACCUPLACER as our interim placement tool—YVC created a placement taskforce in Fall 2015 with key stakeholders, including math and English department representatives, to think through options, with the caveat that whatever placement methodology we chose would have to remain self-supporting and easily administered year-round. The COMPASS test would be available through November 2016, so our time frame to develop a replacement tool was limited.

Because the majority of two-year colleges in the state system were in the same situation as YVC, needing to quickly adopt new placement methods, the Washington State Board of Community for Technical Colleges (SBCTC) held a placement workshop in Fall 2015 with invited speakers, both folks doing innovative work within our state system, including directed self-placement (DSP), and assessment experts from the field of writing studies, including Christie Toth (two-year college writing assessment) and Asao Inoue (antiracist assessment). Several YVC placement task force members, including our arts and sciences division dean. Disciplinary scholarship laid the foundation upon which we could build something new once the opportunity presented itself. The take-aways from this SBCTC workshop reinforced the English department's message: that placement reform was essential to improving student outcomes and reducing equity gaps at YVC. According to SBCTC data dashboards, from 2010–2016, all racial/ethnic groups except Asian lagged behind White students in three-year completion rates.

Given our initiative, professional engagement, and in-house expertise, the YVC English department was granted latitude by administration to select its new placement methodology. We sought a placement process that would reduce student over-placement into developmental writing courses, particularly for Latinx students. We wanted a tool that utilized multiple measures to determine a student's placement, both because Washington State Senate Bill 5712 (Wash. 2013) encouraged its use in community college placement and because a growing body of research demonstrated that multiple measures assessment was more effective and ethical (see Klausman et al., 2016). Since students had long been successful in our composition courses (generally upwards of 75% success rates at all levels), we

wanted to ensure success rates remained high under our new placement methodology, and we wanted to ensure equitable student success rates in English. We also needed a placement tool that didn't require much time or labor—for students or for faculty and staff—and that was affordable. Interestingly, although the English department had long been dissatisfied with our placement tool, campus student satisfaction surveys consistently found a large majority of students, around 80 percent, were generally happy with their placement, which may be an expression of the relative ease of placement testing for students or of students' subsequent satisfaction with their writing courses.

In a series of meetings, starting in the fall of 2015, the English department reviewed a range of placement tools and methods that we felt reflected our curriculum and learning outcomes and better matched writing courses to students' learning needs. Several department members favored a directed self-placement (DSP) model (see Royer & Gilles, 1998). There was a growing body of evidence about its efficacy (see Toth, 2019), and we valued the student self-reflection at the heart of DSP. However, the two-year college examples we had at the time were fairly labor intensive, both in creating some sort of self-assessment questionnaire from scratch that would enable students to make informed decisions about course selection and in administering the questionnaire and accompanying advising conversations. Our college had just begun a process of implementing "pathway advising" (advising duties are part of the regular faculty contract), a process that was met with some early resistance, and we were concerned that these advising-intensive initiatives may compete with rather than complement each other. The peer colleges that were beginning to implement DSP in our state were doing so in limited ways, often targeting specific student groups, and, without a writing program administrator (WPA) to advocate for and direct changes or the promise of long-term support for this placement reform work, we needed a full replacement tool within a year if we hoped to truly transform our placement system.

We were familiar with—and chose to adopt immediately (starting Spring 2016)—multiple means of demonstrating ENGL& 101-readiness, all borrowed from Whatcom Community College, which included high school Smarter Balanced scores (part of a system-wide SBCTC agreement), high school GPA, AP test scores, SAT/ACT scores, and, for the time being, ACCUPLACER scores. Later, we added other forms of evidence to demonstrate ENGL& 101-readiness, including "Bridge to College" grades (high school courses designed to develop college-readiness) and GED Reasoning through Language Arts test scores. This placement method reduced barriers to accessing first-year writing and honored students' high school work, and it worked especially well for our growing dual credit student population. In fact, for English, the placement method most predictive of success is high school GPA (93% success rate, overall and for Latinx students specifically). Nearly 39 percent of all students—and approximately 38 percent of Latinx students—use high school GPA for placement into ENGL& 101. However, we recognized that these alternative means of demonstrating college-level readiness also did not break us

from standardized testing, as a larger portion of students, those who were more than two years out of high school and those who did not have evidence suggesting college-readiness, were still reliant on ACCUPLACER scores.

A customized version of The Write Class (TWC) seemed particularly promising and is ultimately the method we selected, accompanied by allowing students other means of demonstrating college-level writing course readiness. Heidi Estrem, Dawn Shepherd, and Samantha Sturman (2018) describe the TWC placement process as “one of reflection and projection” (p. 66). The Write Class’s evidence-based “course matching” incorporated multiple measures, including student self-reflection on prior reading and writing experiences and confidence, to determine placement, and TWC also communicated course information and expectations for college students and asked students to reflect on their own situations and needs before selecting their writing course (Estrem et al., 2018). We were drawn to the fact that the components of TWC’s placement process were derived from current research in the field and that the tool had already been tested and implemented in various contexts, including a customized version for an Idaho community college. At Boise State University, TWC placement had increased the number of college-level placements, increased success rates (over single measures), and improved student retention (Estrem, 2015), all goals the YVC English department had for its new placement tool. More importantly, this tool could be developed and maintained at a similar cost to other single-measure commercial placement products and could be administered fully online (though our current method of collecting payment prior to enabling students access required that students continued to take their placement on site, at least until the pandemic moved us online).

For the English department, we felt TWC could serve as sort of a hybrid version of DSP. Students responded to questions similar to many DSP protocols, and the students essentially “chose” their placement through their responses, and then were able to select from courses within that placement category. Our placement categories aligned with our pre-existing levels of placement, two developmental levels and one college level, and each category below college level offered students three course options to choose from, including an accelerated option (Table 5.2).

Table 5.2. Placement Levels

Developmental	Transitional	College-Ready
CCR: College and Career Readiness (non-credit and non-tuition bearing) ENGL 90T (5 credits) ENGL 90T/ENGL 81T: Integrated Writing and Reading (10 credits, ALP)	ENGL 95 (5 credits) ENGL& 101/95 ALP (10 credits) ENGL 135: Introduction to Literature (5 credits, writing-intensive humanities course)	ENGL& 101 (5 credits)

The “developmental” cluster offered students the choice of non-credit-bearing coursework in our CCR (adult basic education) division (which doesn’t charge for tuition or books), a stand-alone ENGL 90T course, or the ten-credit intensive reading and writing acceleration option. The “transitional” cluster offered students the choice of stand-alone ENGL 95, the writing-intensive “Introduction to Literature” course (for college-level humanities credits), or our corequisite ENGL& 101/95 ALP course.

Offering developmental students course options from already established courses enabled us to create our placement tool without having to quickly revise or create new courses first; it enabled us to preserve—and promote—the innovative courses that we had recently developed and that were demonstrating success but were not in as high of demand as stand-alone versions of developmental courses. Importantly, having multiple developmental writing course options enabled us to maximize flexibility for students to select a course that served their particular needs and preferences, which is essential for students who attend part-time or have to schedule around work and other commitments as well as those who are preparing for workforce programs that may not require a first-year writing transfer course.

We began our work developing a customized TWC for YVC in Spring 2016, under the guidance of Samantha Sturman, Heidi Estrem, and Dawn Shepherd. The process of development provided the department as a whole an opportunity to reflect on our curriculum and expectations for each course in our writing sequences and also to include local considerations that our collective experience taught us were important to student success and retention. For example, we agreed that students’ ability to keyboard and perform basic computer functions is essential to their success in college-level coursework—and this ability, or even access to technology and Wi-Fi, is not universal among our student population—so we requested that a question about students’ confidence with word processing be included, and we also articulated these expectations in our course information. Additionally, in reviewing the version of TWC adopted by College of Western Idaho, a two-year college, we were attracted to its inclusion of a reading comprehension and reflection section, as we felt reading ability better correlated with student success than editing skills. Plus, all of our writing courses included at least one reading-related learning outcome. We knew that YVC’s student population was predominantly first generation, and recognizing that few students likely arrived having had access to “college prep” work—at 73 percent, local high school graduation rates for 18–25-year-olds lag behind the state averages (Retka, 2019)—we also chose to include a satisfactory college-level student sample essay for students to reflect on, to show students what type of writing they can expect to do in their college writing courses. Although, anecdotally, we are aware that we have a significant number of English language learners and Gen 1.5 writers at YVC, YVC doesn’t, at present, collect information on students’ linguistic backgrounds, and the department no longer offers any credit-bearing ESL writing courses. Without a significant international student population, the courses were

persistently under-enrolled, and COMPASS typically placed ELL students directly into developmental writing. Therefore, we did not opt to include questions about multilingualism in the placement tool.

In Fall 2016, about half of the department engaged in piloting YVC's customized TWC in their ENGL 90T, ENGL 95, and ENGL& 101 classes, approximately three or four sections (75–100 students) per course level. Department members noted how long the process took and reported any issues that arose when they administered the TWC in their classes. Additionally, post-placement, students were asked to reflect anonymously on their experiences with TWC. On the whole, the pilot went smoothly. Faculty reported that few students needed more than 30 minutes to complete the entire questionnaire. Overall, students responded positively to YVC's The Write Class. Most participants found TWC "easy," and some explicitly indicated they preferred it to the COMPASS test. Many observed, often with surprise, that they were basically "evaluating themselves" and "placing themselves." Although some students resisted the idea of self-placement, explicitly wishing that they would be evaluated "objectively" on their "skills," most enjoyed the self-reflection and appreciated the ease of the TWC questionnaire. While the students' placements on the TWC pilot did not always correspond to the class in which they were enrolled (based on COMPASS placement scores), more often than not, students placed at or above their current course level. When students did place lower, there was often an explanation. For instance, in almost every pilot class section, a few students admitted they rushed through or skipped elements of the TWC. Several instructors also noted that some of the students who placed below their current course level lacked confidence or had been struggling in their course, which likely affected the students' self-assessments on the TWC.

Rollout and Reactions

In 2017–2018, the year of our new placement system rollout, a YVC team, including one of the authors, participated in the SBCTC's Placement360 program, which provided workshops and coaching to ensure a smooth transition into our new placement systems in math and English. Placement reform was generally accepted across campus, with administrators supportive of evidence-based reforms that lead to more equitable student outcomes. For our information technology department, The Write Class was both inexpensive and relatively easy to implement, and, for the testing center, the English department's combination of TWC and multiple pathways into ENGL& 101 was easy to administer on both campuses and to use with high school students applying for the Running Start program. The testing center director commented that students seemed satisfied, which is corroborated by YVC fall student satisfaction surveys. Rates of satisfaction with English placement increased from about 80 percent to 86.5 percent after implementing our new placement methodology. And, as an added benefit, students only completed the placement process once: no retesting.

Anecdotally, some English department faculty expressed occasional concern about a perceived lack of preparedness of some students in their classes, especially English language learners, though these concerns were not widely or consistently shared, seemingly attributable to the usual variations in groups of students rather than an actual placement problem. Some faculty members outside of the department, particularly those whose classes list ENGL& 101 as a prerequisite, initially grumbled that the new placement system did not provide the traditional gatekeeping function to which they had become accustomed; they preferred to teach students who “already knew how to write.”

Increasing College-Level Access and Closing Equity Gaps

Currently, among over 3,200 placements since Fall 2017, 42.2 percent of all students who enroll after taking the placement exam identify as Latinx, 29.9 percent identify as White, and 20.7 percent identify as multiracial (a recently added classification category, which likely includes many students who formerly may have identified as Latinx); the remaining 7.5 percent reflects all other ethnic groups—African American, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander—and “other” (which includes “prefer not to answer”). Because of the small numbers in racial/ethnic groups besides Latinx, White, and multiracial, data for those groups are not included below. Although some groups of BIPOC students appear to be overrepresented in developmental placement, college level represents the majority placement for all racial/ethnic groups, and success rates in English also appear fairly comparable across all groups.

One significant and unanticipated outcome of our change from COMPASS placement to TWC and alternate means of demonstrating ENGL& 101-readiness is an increased number of students who enroll in college after completing their placement (Table 5.3).

Table 5.3. Placement vs. Enrollment: Pre-/Post-Placement Intervention

Placement	2012–2013 Academic Year <i>n</i> =1,560	2018–2019 Academic Year <i>n</i> =1,546
ENGL 90T	50.1% enrolled (of 461 placed)	63.9% enrolled (of 180 placed)
ENGL 95	51% enrolled (of 431 placed)	63.4% enrolled (of 331 placed)
ENGL& 101	56.9% enrolled (of 668 placed)	65.5% enrolled (of 1,035 placed)

Latinx students, who make up the largest proportion of placements and enrollees, further increased their enrollment percentages post-placement shift, from 67.6 percent (343/509 overall) in 2012–2013 to 70.9 percent (390/550 overall) in 2018–2019.

Perhaps the most important outcome of our new placement methodology has been the increased number of college-ready placements among enrollees. In a

placement snapshot of the 2012–2013 enrollees (prior to any changes in placement or implementation of ALP), more than half of all students (54.4%), including close to two-thirds of our majority Latinx population (65.3%), placed below college level (Table 5.4). Among those who placed into developmental writing using the COMPASS test, 27.8 percent of all students—and 37.6 percent of Latinx students—placed two or more levels below college level.

Table 5.4. Placement Level Snapshots: Pre-/Post-Placement Intervention

Placement	2012–2013 (COMPASS)	2018–2019 (TWC+)
ENGL 90T	231/832 (27.8%)/37.6% Latinx	115/1,001 (11.5%)/16.4% Latinx
ENGL 95	221/832 (26.6%)/27.7% Latinx	210/1,001 (21%)/28.1% Latinx
ENGL& 101	380/832 (45.7%)/24.7% Latinx	676/1,001 (67.5%)/60.5% Latinx

After full implementation of TWC and multiple methods of demonstrating college-level readiness, a snapshot of the 2018–2019 academic year reveals that 67.5 percent of all enrolled students, including 60.5 percent of students who identify as Latinx and 66 percent of students who identify as multiracial, placed directly into college-level writing. While Latinx and multiracial students are still overrepresented in developmental writing courses and underrepresented in college-level writing, the placement gaps have closed considerably under our new placement methodology.

When considering this same snapshot looking at age demographics, a similar trend can be seen, as shown in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5. Placement Level Snapshots by Age: Pre-/Post-Placement Intervention

Course Placement	2012–2013 (COMPASS)			2018–2019 (TWC+)		
	Under 20 <i>n</i> =542	20–29 <i>n</i> =140	30+ <i>n</i> =60	Under 20 <i>n</i> =681	20–29 <i>n</i> =148	30+ <i>n</i> =57
ENGL 90T	26%	36.4%	33.3%	9%	17.6%	19.3%
ENGL 95	22.5%	23.6%	30%	16.3%	35.8%	45.6%
ENGL& 101	51.5%	40.7%	36.7%	74.7%	46.6%	35.1%

Students under 20, which includes a growing Running Start (dual credit) population, make up the largest proportion of placements, and in that group, students had almost 50 percent fewer developmental placements and significantly increased college-ready placements, which is likely attributable to our adoption of multiple means of demonstrating ENGL& 101-readiness, most based on high school GPA or other high school assessments and coursework. Students in the 20–29 age bracket also decreased their developmental placements sig-

nificantly (by more than half in the lowest developmental placement category) and increased their college-ready placements using TWC placement. Although those over 30 years old did not increase their college-level placements, fewer placed at the lowest level of developmental writing, which suggests that the tool is working to match students to courses that fit their needs. Those who have been out of school for more than a decade often do benefit from developmental coursework to help them brush up their skills, re-establish academic routines, and build confidence.

Historically, English courses have enjoyed high success rates at YVC, and our goal was to maintain high success rates while ensuring equitable success rates. Since the new placement methods were fully implemented three years ago, students continue to succeed in the courses into which they place, even as more students place into college-level writing courses. See Table 5.6 for success rates across demographic categories.

Table 5.6. Success Rates (C or Higher) in Placement Writing Course, Fall 2017–Fall 2020

Placement Category	Overall <i>n</i> =3,262	White <i>n</i> =976	Latinx <i>n</i> =1,366	Multiracial <i>n</i> =244	Female <i>n</i> =2,009	Male <i>n</i> =1,214
Developmental	76%	73%	76.1%	85%	80.4%	67.5%
Transitional	71%	68.3%	71.5%	74.5%	74%	67.1%
College-level	84.2%	85.4%	85.5%	81.7%	86.8%	80%

Our majority-Latinx student population performs slightly better than the overall success averages in all placement levels, and our majority-female population significantly outperforms their male counterparts as well as the overall success averages. While still mostly successful in their English coursework, male students have the lowest success rates at YVC, which corresponds to national data about male student academic performance: male students complete at lower rates than female students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Our transitional English courses (ENGL 95, ENGL& 101/95 ALP, and ENGL 135), which serve the largest number of pre-college-level-placing students, have the lowest success rates overall and across demographic groups.

While Latinx students remain proportionally overrepresented in developmental coursework (approximately 38% place below college level as compared to the 33.3% overall average), they outperform their White peers in those developmental courses. Latinx students also perform slightly above the overall average in their first-year writing course, suggesting that success rates are generally equitable. Additionally, according to the Washington SBCTC, on statewide developmental education outcomes, YVC surpasses peer colleges in measurements of the rate at which students complete developmental writing sequences and gate-

way college-level English courses. Since reforming our placement system, 66–67 percent of students now complete this milestone within their first year, which is more than 11 points higher than the state system average. This may in part be due to the fact that few colleges in Washington have implemented a tool such as TWC to allow for self-guided or self-directed English placement; most departments in the system currently use multiple measures to place students into the first-year composition (FYC) sequence.

Despite the positive outcomes of writing placement reform, there is still work to be done, both at the course level and institutional level. Increasing the number of students who place at college level and maintaining equitable success rates in writing courses is important, but it's not sufficient. Ultimately, placement is only one assessment, one piece of our writing ecology. Changing student outcomes requires examining and transforming all department and college policies, processes, and practices so that they enact “servingsness.”

Stepping Toward Equity, Collaboratively

As development of The Write Class has both paralleled and helped initiate campus-wide racial equity initiatives and awareness, English department faculty have come to serve key roles in equity initiatives at YVC. English faculty members are participating in statewide first-year writing outcomes working groups (“(De) Composing ENGL& 101”), developing a writing across the curriculum program, leading institutional assessment work (with an equity focus), and instituting Guided Pathways. Recognizing that our next steps in closing equity gaps involve curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, nearly all English department faculty members have completed certifications for teaching at an HSI from Escala Education, LLC, a national program grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy that has been woven into professional development at YVC, and several, including the authors, serve in peer coaching and other leadership roles in the program.

Moreover, in Fall 2020, YVC's English department was awarded College Spark funding via the Washington SBCTC to begin working alongside six other departments as state leaders build an antiracist writing assessment ecology (AWAE) for first-year composition with the support of Asao Inoue and other antiracist educators. YVC's work on placement reform was noted by AWAE grant directors as the type of systemic reform needed across Washington state, serving as the foundation or entryway to a future antiracist ecology for students in YVC English courses. Building on what they are learning through their AWAE work, YVC's AWAE team is developing a reflective tool designed to help department members self-assess their use of culturally responsive pedagogy and antiracist assessment practices in their own classrooms, with a longer-term goal of collaboratively revising course outcomes throughout the writing sequence to minimize outcomes that privilege what Inoue (2015) described as a “White racial habitus” in writing and assessing writing.

At the same time that YVC engages in the statewide AWAE project, writing across the curriculum (WAC) development is taking place as new assessment measures and innovative teaching are being promoted across departments and academic divisions. Antiracist assessment and curriculum development is informing WAC in new ways at YVC and elsewhere. To date, seeds of a more traditional WAC program have been planted, and the vision is evolving. In the past two years, faculty across the curriculum have participated in workshops on a range of WAC strategies from developing writing assignments to using low-stakes writing-to-learn exercises in their classrooms. Additional professional development around equitable assessment is planned for the coming year. A campus-wide cultural shift toward equity, antiracist assessment, and culturally responsive pedagogy may be a long journey, but these goals are worthy of deep investment and pursuit.

Educators often face systemic challenges that seem—and sometimes are—insurmountable from the positions into which they are hired. For example, an English instructor alone might not find support in a meeting for a policy or curriculum change, even one grounded in convincing evidence. However, reflecting on the implementation of TWC is a reminder that change does not and typically cannot happen in isolation at YVC or at any college or university, for that matter, and improvements toward equitable outcomes and antiracist education require coalitions and collaboration. Jeffrey Klausman and others have argued that two-year college writing programs are and must be “collaborative, needs based, and decentered” (qtd. in Spiegel et al., 2020, p. 10).

To be needs-based requires continual review of disaggregated data. Where data reveals inequitable outcomes, racism is embedded, and we have focused on one stop in students’ academic paths. As Tia Brown McNair and colleagues (2020) explained, “the most pernicious form of racism is routinely created and reinforced through everyday practices such as hiring, program review, what gets included in strategic plans, what data gets reported, tenure and promotion reviews, syllabi and curriculum, the agendas of boards of trustees,” and more (p. 40). YVC faculty and staff include placement as a key everyday practice.

If two-year colleges are indeed “access intensive institution[s] meant to serve communities” (Spiegel et al., 2020), their critical placement tools and practices help guide students into the courses where they are most likely to succeed. Christine Busser (2020) recently argued that “Offering students’ greater agency through transparency, finally, calls on WPAs to examine programmatic and institutional initiatives that presume students’ needs, goals, and lived experiences,” and that doing so may call for “a reexamination of placement procedures (Brunk-Chavez & Fredericksen), an adoption of antiracist assessment practices (Inoue), and greater scrutiny of initiatives that promote a single college lifestyle: inflexible class scheduling, credit limits, and out-of-class requirements” (p. 105). We believe The Write Class is an example of examination and collaboration that leads to more equitable student outcomes, and it serves as a key foundation for ongoing antiracist and racial equity work at Yakima Valley College, where the institution

must continue striving to learn from and respond to the oft divided community in which it is located.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge our Yakima Valley College English department colleagues who have collaborated on this and all other department initiatives and who work tirelessly on behalf of YVC students.

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