

Peter Dow Adams

## BASIC WRITING RECONSIDERED

**ABSTRACT:** *The author questions whether the benefits of separating basic writers into homogeneous classes continue to outweigh the disadvantages. To answer this question, he proposes that we gather data about the success rates of our current basic writing courses, revise freshman composition courses to insure they will be able to respond to a wider range of student abilities, and experiment with "mainstreaming" volunteer basic writers into freshman composition to study their success rates. His preliminary data on the success rates of students in basic writing courses at his school justify further investigation of this topic.*

Consider for a moment a comment made by a student on a teaching evaluation form. The student, whom I'll call Carla, wrote, "I'm really a bad writer, but my teacher thinks I'm a good writer, so this semester I have written good papers so that she won't find out how bad a writer I really am."<sup>1</sup> When I heard about Carla's comment at a conference recently, it immediately elevated my opinion of student evaluations and ultimately called into question my fundamental assumptions about basic writing. It is this second effect that I want to discuss in this paper.

Most of us who teach writing at the college level, and many who teach at the elementary and secondary level, have observed over the years that a widespread practice in American public schools—the tracking of students—is a dangerous one and can be justified only when the students being segregated have needs that cannot be met in a heterogeneous classroom. Imagine the effect on

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Carla if she had been placed in a basic writing course: we would have said to her, “We don’t expect you to be able to write well.” I wonder how Carla would have written in response to that message. Among the other dangers frequently pointed out, are the following:

- Students placed in lower tracks are often stigmatized in the eyes of their peers, their teachers, and themselves.
- Students placed in lower tracks may be demoralized by the experience and may perform to the expectation indicated by their placement.
- Students placed in lower tracks are often deprived of role models who are proficient at the subject matter and at the behaviors that are valued in schools; this danger is especially critical in environments using peer groups.
- Students placed in lower tracks are often then subjected to “dumbed down” materials and instructional approaches that insure they *never* catch up with their peers in other groups.
- In addition to the dangers listed above, students may be placed in lower tracks erroneously, compounding the tragedy.

While college-level teachers have generally agreed with the dangers of tracking in the public schools, we have perhaps not recognized the tracking system that most of us participate in daily: I am speaking, of course, of basic writing classes. It is a widespread practice in all but highly selective institutions to assess students’ writing abilities when they arrive on campus and to segregate them into writing classes according to those assessments. We may not think of this as tracking, but surely it is, and just as surely it involves all the dangers I listed earlier as inherent in tracking. Students placed in college-level basic writing classes frequently experience the same negative effects as their elementary and secondary school counterparts. And in many cases, they suffer these dangers in courses that *do not receive college credit*.

Despite these dangers, most colleges and universities have, over the past twenty years, developed basic writing programs that place weaker writers into programs—sometimes involving several semesters of courses—that amount to a tracking system. These programs have been designed with the best of intentions: to help basic writers become proficient college-level writers. The *dangers* associated with tracking have been seen as less compelling than the *benefits* that result from such programs, benefits such as the opportunity to tailor reading and writing assignments to the levels of the students and to address the frequency and severity of error

in these students' writing.

However, in those same twenty years, our understanding of how to teach basic writing has changed considerably. First, we have learned that most of the kinds of instruction we employed when we initially developed basic writing courses proved not very beneficial. We no longer spend semesters drilling students in grammar or requiring that they write a series of mechanical paragraphs conforming to prescriptive patterns. We have recognized the flaws of what Andrea Lunsford calls the "assembly-line" approach to teaching writing (first you master the sentence; then you work on paragraphs . . . ) (254).

Second, scholars as diverse as Patrick Hartwell and Glynda Hull have helped us recognize that error is best addressed in the context of writing and not in separate drills.

Third, work such as Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts* has demonstrated that good education occurs when "novices are asked to perform as experts" rather than when they are asked to perform simplistic or mechanistic tasks.

All these findings have gradually but consistently pushed the pedagogy of the basic writing classroom in one direction: toward that of the freshman composition classroom. As Pat Bizzell put it at the summer conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) in 1988, we are now teaching fairly much the same way whether we are teaching in a basic writing classroom, a freshman English classroom, or a senior writing seminar; students are writing, and we and they are talking about their writing. The *levels* of performance may differ but the *types* of performance demanded are quite similar.

And if what we are doing in the basic writing classroom is no longer significantly different from what we do in college-level writing classrooms, then the justification we once had for segregating basic writers may have evaporated. If we no longer have basic writers work through pages of drill and practice, if we no longer restrict basic writers to paragraph-length writing, if we no longer require basic writers to write mechanical five-paragraph essays, then we may have much less reason than we did in the past for employing what amounts to a tracking system.

I am not prepared to recommend that we discontinue basic writing courses and "mainstream" basic writers into freshman-level writing courses. For one thing, there is plenty of evidence that many students *are* being helped in significant ways by basic writing courses. But I do think it is time we begin to question seriously whether segregated basic writing classrooms are the *best*

environment for helping basic writers develop into proficient college-level writers.

Before we can answer this question we need to do three things:

- Gather systematic data on how successful our current approaches to basic writing are.
- Reexamine our freshman composition courses to insure that they will be able to respond to a wider range of student abilities. This might mean more individualized instruction, more workshop formats, more peer response groups, more writing center support, and less lecture/discussion in which everyone is assumed to have the same needs. But this is a direction in which most of us in freshman composition are moving anyhow.

We also need to give some thought to how we respond to students who fail freshman composition on their first attempt, because more of them probably will. It may be that having them repeat the same course is not the most positive response. It may turn out, for example, that special sections for students who have failed the course are in order, sections with smaller numbers of students and more individual attention perhaps. And I would argue that such sections are probably a good idea whether basic writers are taking freshman composition or not.

- Initiate pilot programs or experiments, which are rigorously evaluated, in which volunteer basic writers are mainstreamed into freshman English classes.

Two events seem to have conspired this past summer to provide the impetus for my beginning work on the first of these three tasks. At my community college's commencement last June, the usual eight to nine hundred students graduated, but only three students I had taught were among them, and all three of them had been in sophomore-level courses. Not one of my basic writers walked across the stage. And this year was not unlike each of the fourteen other graduations I have attended at Essex Community College. The absence of my basic writers at graduation set me to thinking. I wondered just how many students who take basic writing courses actually graduate, or even make it through English 101, for that matter.

The second event has, in fact, been building for the past year. Like most states, Maryland is experiencing extreme financial strain. Vacancies are remaining vacant, broken equipment is remaining broken, and faculty are learning the meaning of furloughs. And then, this summer, talk has begun of actually eliminating pro-

grams. Much to my surprise, the lower of our two basic writing courses is being mentioned as one of the possible cuts.

I was even more surprised to learn that my good friend Gardner Pond, the division chair of Social Sciences, was among those suggesting that our lower-level basic writing course might be eliminated, so I invited him to join me for dinner at my favorite Indian restaurant. During our discussion, Gardner confessed that he *did* think the course should probably be eliminated because “it just doesn’t work; it isn’t successful.” That assertion raised an interesting question for me: just what would Gardner consider “success” in such a course. Just what would I?

Let me pause here to outline the writing program at Essex. All students are required to pass English 101, freshman English, with a C or higher to graduate. Based on an assessment of writing skills, about 35% of our students are placed in the upper-level basic writing course and another 10% are placed in a lower-level basic writing course. This latter group, once they pass the lower-level course, must also pass the upper-level one. It is this lower-level basic writing course, into which our weakest writers are placed, about which questions have been raised.

Virtually all students at Essex are required to take the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) as the first stage of the assessment process. A number of us have attempted, so far unsuccessfully, to replace this multiple-choice test of grammar skills with one or more writing samples. But the TSWE remains our primary means of assessment because it can be administered and scored easily without the intervention of the English faculty. This means that a student driving around the Baltimore beltway, if seized by a desire for enlightenment, can turn off at exit 34, walk into the Human Development Building, be assessed in writing (and in math and reading) and be registered in under two hours. Without an appointment. From eight in the morning till eight at night. Twelve months out of the year. No waiting a week for the results of a writing sample. No having to come on a particular day when the writing assessment is being conducted. None of that. Instant gratification; instant registration. And, at a school where ease of access is a primary goal, it is extremely difficult to convince the community that we should change to a writing assessment that either takes several days to evaluate or that requires that students come on a particular day when a writing sample is being administered.

So we work around the TSWE. We assess virtually all students a second time by asking for a writing sample at the first class

meeting of each writing class so any errors in placement can be corrected. In addition, students who score within four points of our cutoff score for English 101 on the TSWE are urged to complete a writing sample, to insure that they are placed correctly, and any student who requests it, is allowed to complete a writing sample.

Now back to the question my friend Gardner Pond raised: what would we consider success for the basic writing course?

Let's assume that success for a student placed in the lower-level basic writing course is defined as passing both of the basic writing courses and passing English 101 with a C or higher. With that definition in mind, it's still not easy to answer Gardner's question. Think about it for a minute. These are students who have scored the lowest possible score on the TSWE. They are likely to be students attending college against very long odds. They are unlikely to have experienced much success in education. Their confidence and their motivation may be extremely shaky. Their personal lives often include job and family situations that compete with school for their attention. They may know little about how to "go about" being a student. Many of them have full-time jobs and/or are single parents.

And we are asking them to succeed in two semester-long basic writing courses, for which they receive no college credit, before they even attempt English 101. Further, many of them do not succeed in the basic writing courses on their first try, so it can be three, four, or even five semesters before they qualify for English 101.

With all this in mind, what percentage of these students would have to succeed—that is, pass the two basic writing courses and achieve a C or higher in English 101—to consider the lower-level basic writing course successful?

At the Indian restaurant that night, Gardner opined that surely 50% of the students should succeed. After some discussion, he was down to 25%, but that was about as low as he was going.

And, frankly, I don't know the answer myself. In fact, I don't even know how one would come up with the right answer. At dinner, I proposed a minimum of 10%. We teach about 200 students a year in the lower-level course. If 10% of them pass, I argued, that's 20 students who can actually succeed in college—who, without our basic writing course, would not have had a chance. Of course, we would like the rate to be higher, but, I argued, running ten sections a year to "save" 20 students a year is not unreasonable (you can tell I was getting worked up when I

started talking about “saving” students.) But I do know that this is a question the writing program at Essex is going to need to answer, and I would like to suggest, it is a question all of us in basic writing should be prepared to answer.

And of course, there is a second question. What percentage of our students *do* succeed in our basic writing programs? This, at least, is a question I know how to answer. It is a question that can be addressed by that old standby: data.

I'd like to suggest that we need to develop this kind of data and to share it with each other and with our colleagues in basic reading and math programs, so that we have some way of beginning to convince our well-meaning colleagues in other disciplines that expecting 50% of the bottom tier of basic writers to succeed is unrealistic. And I suggest that more and more of us are going to need to answer these questions as these budget difficulties continue. Most importantly, we are going to have to demonstrate our successes to our colleagues, to administrators, to government officials, and to taxpayers.

It may be that, at some schools, writing instructors can call up a computer center, tell someone what data they need, and a few days later receive a crisp, green and white printout with just the data they requested. If you have never tried to acquire data like this, let me warn you, it may be more difficult than you think. At my school, such data is extremely difficult to come by, if we get it at all, taking as long as six weeks. And when the data finally arrives, we usually find out we didn't ask exactly the right questions. So, we must revise our request and wait another six weeks for a second printout, which is likely also, not to tell us exactly what we want. What writing instructors need is to be able to sit down at the computer and ask it questions and then revise the questions depending on what we find out. And most mainframe computer operations just don't allow that, even if we knew how to do it.

So one thing I'd like to recommend is that we start collecting our own data on our own IBM, Apple, or Macintosh computers. In 1982, using an Apple IIe with an amazing 55K of memory, we began to collect data on the assessment and the grades of every student who was assessed or who took a writing course at Essex. What I want to convey here is how *easy* this is to do; every writing program in the country should, in my opinion, be collecting this kind of data. All that's required is a fairly standard data base—a program that is easy to learn and of which there are dozens for every kind of microcomputer—and a little effort. For each student you open a computer file and record that student's name, social

security number, assessment results, and the semester and grade for each writing course he or she takes. Once the system is set up, a work-study student can enter this data from photocopies of the grade rosters we all turn in at the end of each semester.

In 1982 we started such a data base because our mainframe computer could not help us enforce our assessment and placement system. We wanted to be able to look students up in the computer and determine which writing course they should be in. But shortly after setting the system up, we found we had a powerful tool on our hands, one that we could use to answer questions about how well our program was working.

Back in the eighties, answering such questions seemed interesting but not essential. Now, in the nineties, we'll need to come up with such answers as our programs, just like lots of others, undergo scrutiny from those charged with finding ways to save money.

We now maintain our data base on a Macintosh with a hard disk drive. Using this equipment, in one weekend I was able to learn a considerable amount about the success of our lower-level basic writing course. Table 1 shows the percentage of students placed in each of the three levels of writing courses in calendar years 1988 and 1989.

**Table 1**  
**Results of Assessment, January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**

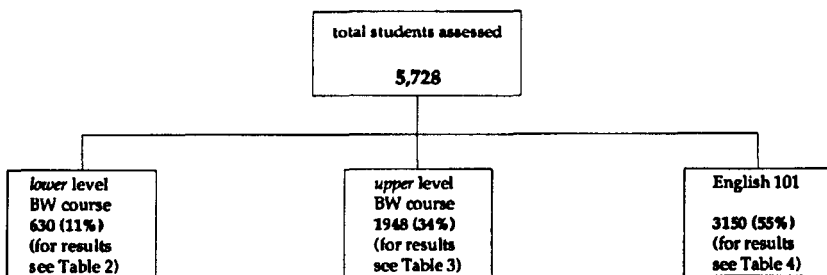
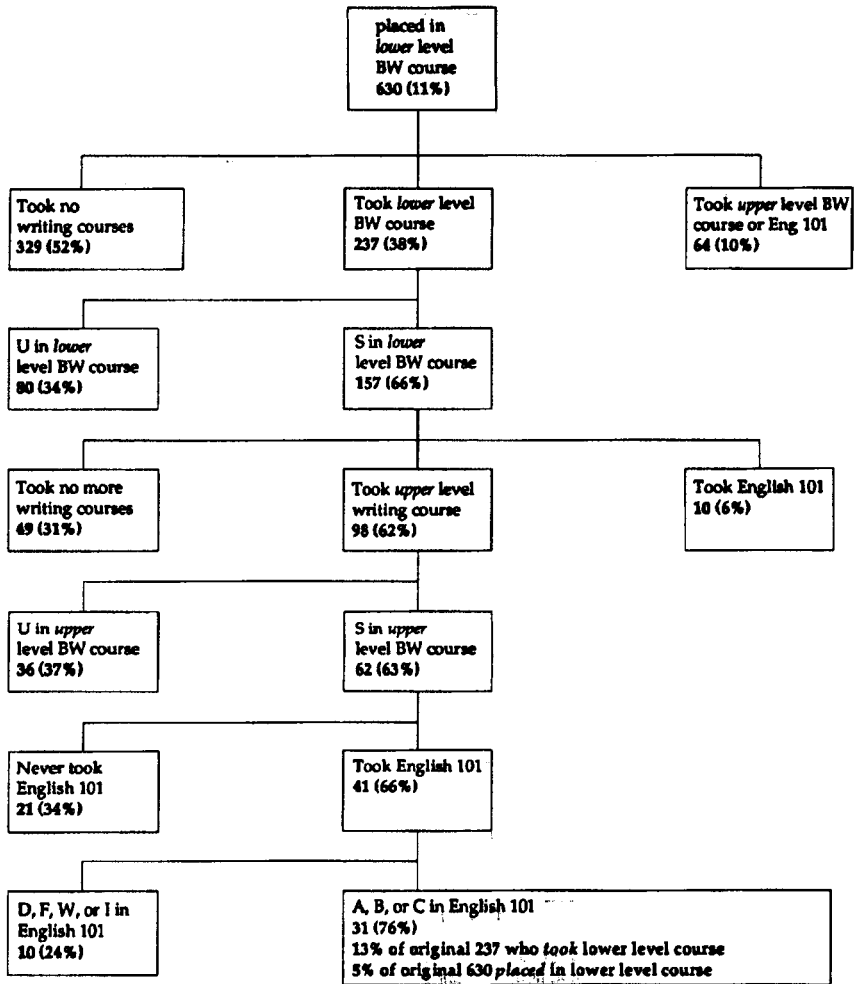


Table 2 provides a breakdown of the experience of those students placed in the lower-level basic writing course. We were startled to find that 329 of the 630 (52%) students assessed and placed in the lower-level writing course never took any writing course at Essex. We don't, of course, know why these students never took a writing course, but it seems likely that discovering they needed to take two noncredit courses before they would be



**Table 2**  
**Results for Students Placed in Lower-Level BW Course,**  
**January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**

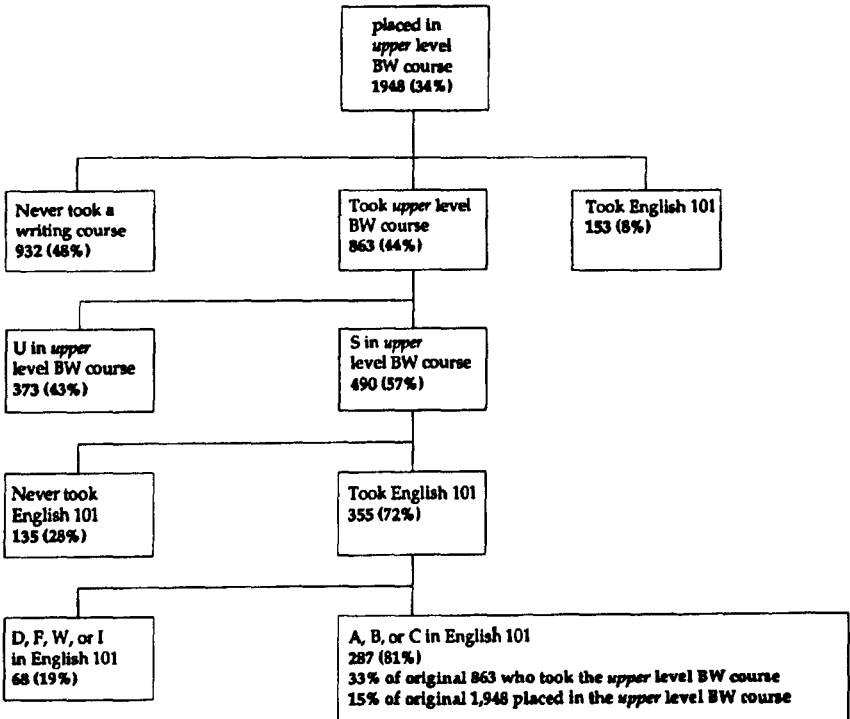


allowed even to attempt freshman English was an important factor in their decisions. This percentage drops to 48% for students who were initially placed in the upper-level basic writing courses (Table 3) and to 38% for those placed directly into freshman English (Table 4). All these percentages were much larger than we expected and certainly deserve further investigation, but it is clear that the lower the placement, the greater the chance that a student who came to be assessed in writing would never even attempt a writing course.

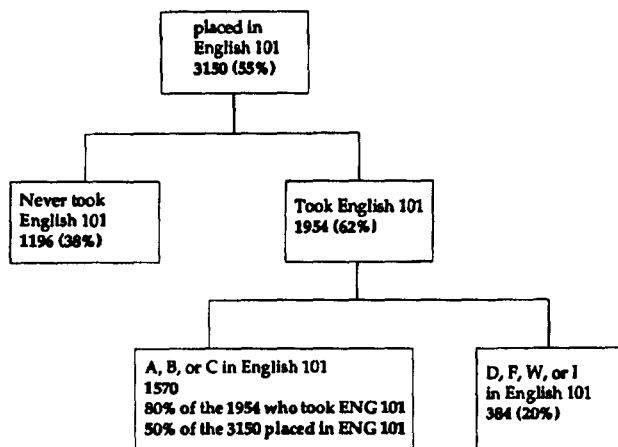
Table 2 also answers most directly our original question about the success rate of students placed in the lower-level basic writing course. Of the 41 students who took freshman composition, 31 (76%) passed, which suggests that students who pass the two basic writing courses *are* prepared for college-level writing. However, these 31 students are a mere 5% of the original 630 placed in the lower-level course and only 13% of those who actually *took* the lower-level course. These success rates are certainly not a ringing endorsement of the program, but just how to interpret them requires data on the success rates of other students for comparison.

Table 3 provides comparable data for students initially placed in the upper-level basic writing course. At the bottom of this table, we find that 33% of the students who took the upper-level course ultimately achieved a C or higher in English 101 (compared to 13% of those placed in the lower-level course). These 287 stu-

**Table 3**  
**Results for Students Placed in Upper-Level BW Course,**  
**January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**



**Table 4**  
**Results for Students Placed in Freshman English Course,**  
**January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**

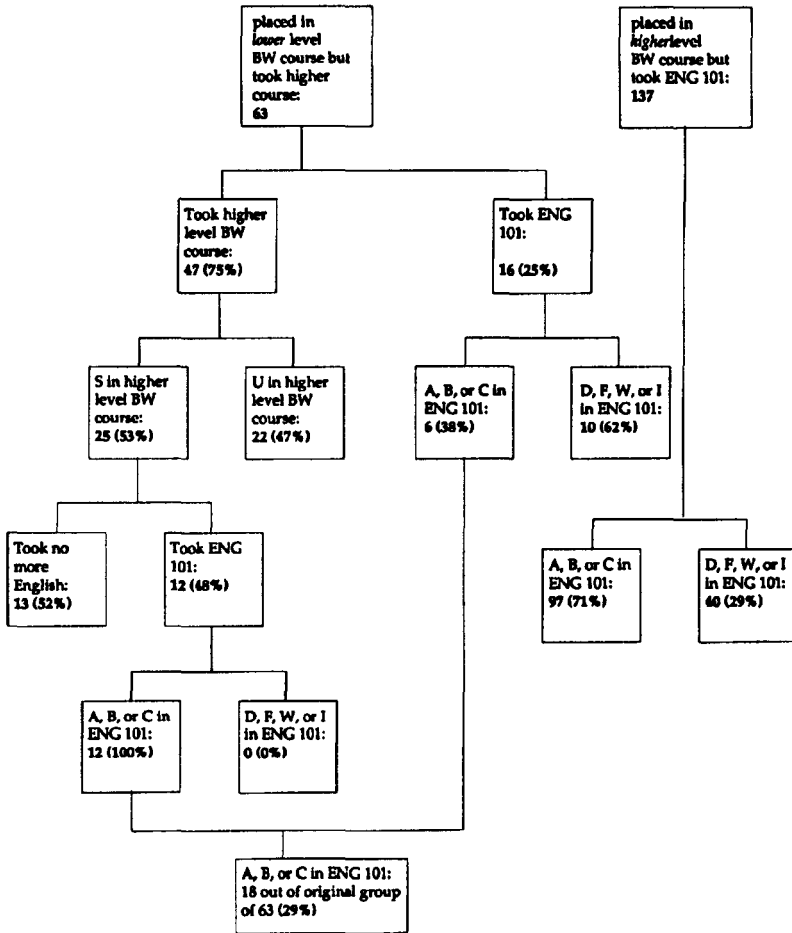


dents constituted 15% of the original group who were placed in the upper-level course. These students succeeded at close to three times the rate of those placed originally in the lower-level course, but, of course, they did arrive with higher level writing skills.

Table 4 shows comparable data for students initially placed in freshman composition. Eighty percent of those who took English 101 achieved a C or higher, which constituted 50% of those who were originally placed in the course.

These comparisons make the success rates for the lower-level course look fairly disappointing, but then we are comparing apples and oranges; we're comparing the weakest writers with those who have been assessed as better writers. However, until we begin to allow basic writers directly into freshman composition, it will be difficult to find similar groups of students to compare with. Difficult but not altogether impossible. A small number of students, originally placed in basic writing courses, found a way to evade our placement system and take higher-level courses, for which we had declared them unqualified. Table 5 provides a look at the success rates of these students. Of those students placed in the lower-level basic writing course but who took the *higher*-level course anyhow, 18 out of 63 (29%) ultimately succeeded in ENG 101, more than double the success rate for students who were placed in the lower-level course and took it. Of those students placed in the upper-level basic writing course but who took freshman composition despite their placement, 97 out of 137 (71%)

**Table 5**  
**Results for Students Who Took a Course Higher Than the One**  
**They Were Placed In, January 1, 1988–December 31, 1989**



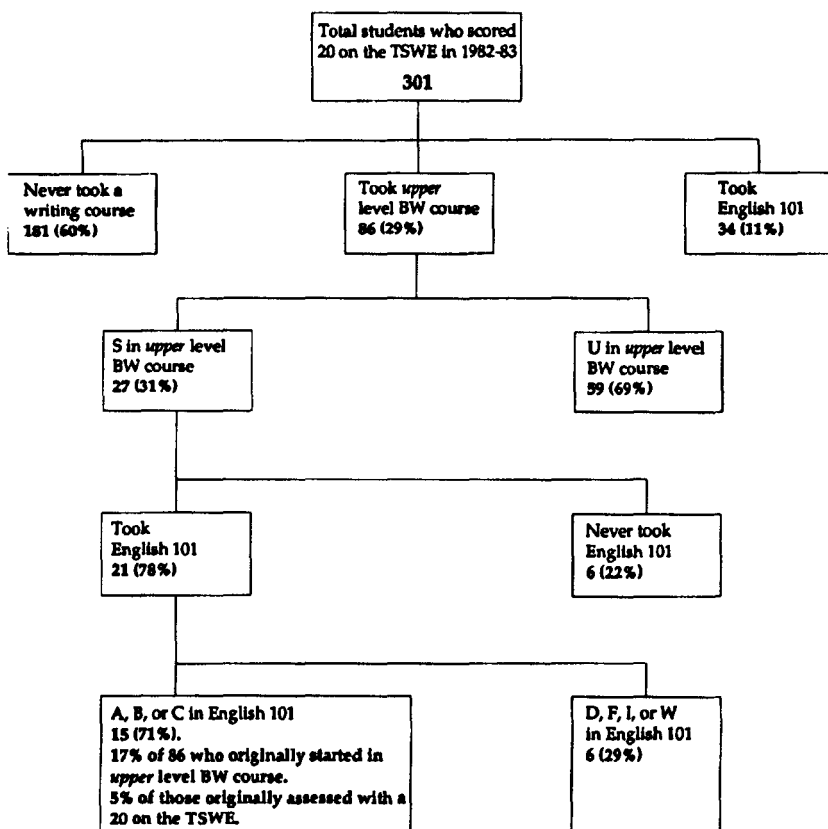
succeeded in freshman composition, again more than double the success rate of those placed in the course who took it (33%).

These data would seem to indicate that students' chances of succeeding in the writing program are actually reduced by taking basic writing courses in which they are placed. However, a word of caution is in order. The students who managed to evade the placement system and take courses for which we had determined they were not qualified were not necessarily typical of students placed in basic writing courses. They may well have had much

stronger self-esteem than the typical basic writing student; they may have known that they had not made much effort on the placement exam; or they may have been atypical in other ways. So we cannot assume that this small sample represents what would happen if all basic writers were mainstreamed in freshman composition. Nevertheless, their success rates do raise questions which need to be answered before we decide that separating weak writers into basic writing classes is in their best interest.

We were fortunate to have data on one other group of students who could be compared with the students placed in the lower-level basic writing course. Until 1984, Essex did not offer a lower-level basic writing course, so all basic writers were placed in the

**Table 6**  
**Results for Students Who Scored 20 on TSWE Before**  
**Lower-Level BW Course Existed and So Were Placed in**  
**Upper-Level Writing Course**



upper-level course. We did, however, maintain a data base on all students even then. Table 6 reports the results of students who scored 20 on the TSWE, and hence would have been placed in the lower-level course had it existed, but who were placed in the upper-level course because that was all that was offered.

These students are the most similar to students placed in the lower-level course today. In fact, a larger percentage of them—17% as compared to 13% of today's students, who had to take the lower-level course—actually succeeded in passing freshman composition with a C or higher. As with the other comparisons, these data are not conclusive but they certainly raise questions about the effectiveness of our basic writing courses, in this case, the lower-level course.

All too often, research raises more questions than it answers, and this is certainly the case with this study. We would like to know what happened to that enormous group of students who dropped out without ever taking a course at all? Did most of them drop out of college altogether? Or did most of them end up in some other school? Is there anything we can and should do to reduce the size of this group? And what about the successful students who take courses above those they are placed in? Are they unusual in significant ways?

But most important, we need to know whether more basic writers would ultimately succeed in freshman composition if they were mainstreamed into it? This question can only be answered through an extensive research effort in which, under rigorous experimental conditions, we allow basic writers who volunteer, to move directly into freshman-level writing courses and study how they do. The results of this preliminary investigation would seem to justify such further studies.

So let's return to Carla for a minute—the student whose teacher thought she was a good writer. Think about the message we are sending to Carla and her classmates when we place them in basic writing courses: they may logically interpret our actions as saying that we do not expect "good writing" from them. Surely it is worth some investigation to see if sending a different message by letting Carla and her classmates directly into freshman composition might not give them the confidence and the challenge they need to produce "good writing."

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Reported anonymously at the annual conference of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) at Austin, Texas, on May 23, 1989.

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