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### Recognizing Institutional Diversity, Supporting Latinx Students: First-Year Writing Placement and Success at a Small Community Four-Year HSI

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#### ABSTRACT

As the number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) increases, Latinx students still lag behind peers in degree completion. This essay focuses on the role of writing programs at HSIs in supporting Latinx students toward graduation, starting with first-year writing (FYW). The purpose of this study is to examine how developmental writing placement and curricula impacts student success at a private, nonprofit HSI. I examine eight years of FYW placement data, disaggregated by race (Latinx and White), Pell grant eligibility, and first-generation college student status. I also examine FYW pass rate data over the same period, as an area of measurable success. My findings show that deficit narratives surrounding low-income, first-generation Latinx students are baseless, as Latinx students have the lowest placement into developmental writing at the study site. My findings also show that a data-driven, assets-based approach to placement and curriculum results in fewer students, from all racial and economic backgrounds, placing into developmental writing. Likewise, more students complete FYW within one year, a positive step toward degree completion. Research on writing programs at diverse HSIs is needed to understand the various student populations that these campuses serve, and what helps them persist and succeed through FYW, and until graduation.

#### When Access Means More than Enrolling Students

For faculty and administrative staff who coordinate first-year college programs, talk about “access” often refers to a *lack* of access for students of color and students of

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## Recognizing Institutional Diversity, Supporting Latinx Students

lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Typically, we want to change this underrepresentation by enrolling more underserved students and offering them the opportunities afforded by a college education. The increasing enrollment of Latinx<sup>1</sup> students at U.S. colleges and universities illustrates these efforts. Although Latinx students represent 25% of K-12 students nationwide, they represent only 16% of college students (Excelencia in Education “Pathway Programs” 1). Yet more and more colleges and universities are qualifying for federal recognition as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).<sup>2</sup> The number of HSIs has doubled in the past decade to 523 schools, with several hundred others being identified as “emerging” HSIs throughout the United States (Excelencia in Education “Latinos in Higher Education”). Increased Latinx enrollment in higher education is good news. But access means more than just getting students through the front door. Latinx students also need curricular and faculty support that reflect their diverse identities and experiences. In order to recognize diverse Latinx identities and experiences, we must also recognize the diversity of HSIs that enroll and educate Latinx undergraduates, including private, nonprofit four-year universities.

Of course, all students need support and resources to complete their undergraduate degrees. However, Latinx students face a challenge particular to historically underserved groups: low graduation rates in comparison to their peers. Lately, the focus has shifted from access to the lagging undergraduate completion rates nationwide, for all students. According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education,<sup>3</sup> Latinx students have a 30% completion rate at public two-year institutions, where many begin their degrees. At public four-year institutions nationwide, the six-year completion rate for Latinx students is 54%, lower than the 59% completion rate for all students. At private nonprofit four-year institutions, 62% of Latinx students complete their degrees within six years, lower than the 66%

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<sup>1</sup> On the usage of Hispanic, Latino/a, and Latinx in this essay: The term Hispanic, as used in Hispanic-Serving Institution, is a designation used by the U.S. federal government. The term Latino/a is the designation used by the study site’s Office of Institutional Research; usage of this term reflects corresponding statistics published by this office in their Fact Book. The term Latinx is used by the author of this study as a gender-inclusive term, reflecting its adoption in higher education institutions, organizations, and publications (Cuellar).

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of Education grants federal designation as Hispanic-Serving Institution to institutions with at least 25% of full-time students identifying as Hispanic (Excelencia in Education).

<sup>3</sup> National data on post-secondary institutions is collected by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which is maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

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completion rate overall (National Center for Education Statistics). These gaps in degree completion between Latinx students and their peers at both public and private colleges and universities indicate that although more under-represented students now readily have access to higher education, many students do not complete their undergraduate degrees within six years, let alone within the normal timeline of four years.

Though there are many reasons for why students drop out of college, this essay focuses on the role of placement and developmental education in English composition, or first-year writing (FYW), in student retention and success. The study that I present in this essay focuses on a private, nonprofit four-year HSI and its efforts to support students' degree completion by revising FYW. I contextualize the study within current movements to reform FYW placement and curricula, based on research illustrating the harmful impact of deficit narratives on Latinx students. I then discuss how deficit narratives have been shaped by traditional models of developmental writing placement and curriculum, which are currently being revised in California public higher education to improve access and retention. My findings show that at the study site, an HSI, deficit narratives surrounding low-income, first-generation Latinx students are baseless, as institutional data collected over an eight-year period show that Latinx students have the lowest placement into developmental writing. My findings also show that a data-driven, assets-based approach to placement and curriculum results in fewer students, from all racial backgrounds, placing into developmental writing. Furthermore, revised placement and curriculum resulted in more students of all socioeconomic backgrounds completing FYW within one year – a positive step for students toward completing their degrees on time. Research on writing programs at HSIs increases access *and* success for the many diverse communities of Latinx students.

### **Countering Deficit Narratives with Data Collection**

While HSIs represent the wide spectrum of colleges and universities, faculty at HSIs often describe prevalent deficit narratives that homogenize Latinx students on their campuses, despite the various and distinct home communities, languages, and backgrounds they represent (Araiza, Cárdenas Jr., & Garza; Kirklighter, Murphy, & Cárdenas; McCracken and Ortiz). A more complete, research-driven—that is, evidence-based—portrait of students helps to redefine success beyond monolingual and monocultural measures, so that success is informed by what works in the diverse settings of HSIs, and by the lived experiences and cultural capital that Latinx students

bring with them. The dominant “underprepared” or deficit narratives that might influence faculty perceptions of Latinx students negatively impact student success (Bunch and Kibler 23; Cuellar, “Latina/o Student Characteristics” 104; Razfar and Simon 600). To counter harmful deficit narratives, researchers at HSIs call for faculty and administrative staff to “know” students through data collection, particularly paying attention to data about reading, writing, and multilingual literacies. They contend that data-based information about students challenges prevalent stereotypes, including of Latinx students as at-risk, resistant to education, and overwhelmed with ESL difficulties (Araiza, Cárdenas Jr., & Garza; Kirklighter, Murphy, & Cárdenas). Data collection also revises negative deficit narratives with an assets-based mindset, recognizing that low-income students and students of color enter college rich in cultural assets that they draw upon from their communities and experiences in order to transcend socioeconomic challenges and oppressions (Cuellar 104; Rendon, et al. 5). By emphasizing these assets, faculty can help students see themselves positively, a contributing factor to persistence through college. An assets-based mindset helps faculty and administrators to support diverse student populations through many different pathways to academic success, beginning with placement into FYW courses.

### **Revising FYW Placement and Curriculum to Increase Degree Completion**

In California, state lawmakers have taken up concerns about mediocre completion rates by passing Assembly Bill (AB) 705, signed into effect by the governor in 2017. Intended to reform developmental education in English and Mathematics, AB 705 is prompting much discussion about the role of college-level English composition, or FYW courses, in helping students access the support and resources they need to take them beyond the first year of college. Likewise, the California State University (CSU) system also recently initiated placement and curricular reforms for FYW across the system’s twenty-three campuses. Community college districts and CSU campuses are now required to maximize the statewide goal for all students to complete FYW within one year, a goal that is facilitated by eliminating reliance on computer-based scores (such as those generated by Accuplacer, the SAT, the ACT, and the CSU’s own English Placement Test) to place students into FYW. These computer-based testing measures are used to identify students for remedial writing placement, using a skills deficiency model that focuses on error identification within a standardized usage of English. Such assessments have been critiqued as inconsistent and unfair measures for FYW placement, as they do not directly evaluate student writing, and thus do not provide an accurate picture of how well a student will do in a FYW course (Elliot,

Deess, Rudniy, & Joshi; Isaacs and Keohane; Isaacs and Molloy). As a result, many students are unnecessarily placed into developmental writing courses, which in turn delays their progress towards their degree completion. To revise these unfair placement practices, the state's community colleges and CSU campuses are now required to implement a multiple measures approach to placement, which uses one or more data points--such as high school coursework, high school grades, and high school grade point average--to indicate a student's readiness for college-level writing (AB 705; "Executive Order 1110").

The CSU has also eliminated developmental writing prerequisites, while community colleges have greatly reduced these courses so that more students have better chances of completing their FYW requirement within one year. Accelerated learning options, such as mainstreaming, offer alternatives to multi-course developmental writing prerequisites, reducing the time students need to complete developmental coursework, usually with co-curricular support (Bunch and Kibler 23 - 25; Hern and Snell 31). One accelerated model enrolls students into a co-curricular writing studio, typically a one-unit course for students who place into developmental writing, but who are mainstreamed into FYW. Rather than focusing on "fixing" perceived academic deficiencies, writing studios use an assets-based mindset to aid in college transition, offer college-level courses for faster degree completion, and promote positive self-efficacy toward academic success.

Writing assessment researchers have long proposed fairer, more meaningful assessment for placement by considering how practices serve the best interests of student populations within local contexts (Huot; O'Neill). Recent assessment scholarship extends this argument by considering the impact of assessment on access, retention, and degree completion of historically underserved student populations, specifically low-income students and students of color (Inoue; Inoue and Poe; Kelly-Riley). For example, some propose that a more accurate and fairer approach to FYW placement involves the use of multiple measures, such as combining holistic evaluation of timed essays to state-mandated test scores. A multiple measures approach, some contend, results in more accurate placement for under-represented students (Brunk-Chavez and Frederickson; Matzen and Hoyt). This direction of writing assessment scholarship has deepened efforts in the field to examine the relationship among race, class, and writing assessment in FYW programs, encouraging more focused research on specific types of institutions, and on how those programs can best support students' degree completion.

These reforms pay attention to the connection between student success in FYW courses and graduation rates, particularly among under-represented minority

students. Research shows how students who take multiple semesters of developmental writing are more likely to drop out, in comparison to students with fewer required developmental writing courses. Students who took fewer developmental writing courses increased their overall GPA and successfully completed their required writing courses at higher rates (Hern and Snell 31; Razfar and Simon 620). At the time of writing, the CSU released preliminary data that show positive results from the first semester: 82% of students passed the FYW requirement during fall 2018, the first semester after reforms (California State University).<sup>4</sup> In summary, the state system's skills deficiency model of FYW placement was replaced with a multiple measures approach, one that acknowledges students' high school achievements as the basis of their knowledge and placement into FYW. California community colleges and the CSU use data collection to apply an assets-based mindset to placement, shifting notions of access from enrolling more students, to making available to all students a viable pathway to degree completion. Such developments in FYW placement and curricula in public higher education systems echo similar developments and discussions taking place, at a much smaller scale, at some private universities, including this essay's study site.

### **Recognizing HSI Institutional Diversity, Supporting Latinx Student Success**

Writing program administrators need more research describing institutional characteristics, resources, and activities within the diversity of HSIs in order to understand the role of writing programs in increasing graduation rates for Latinx students, and for all students served by HSIs. Student populations at HSIs differ linguistically and culturally from one geographic location to another. As such, Latinx students represent a diverse range of instructional needs (Kirklighter, Cárdenas, and Wolff Murphy 9). Yet, much of the research on writing programs at HSIs focuses on community colleges, which in 2016 - 2017 represented almost half of all HSIs across the nation. In the same year, 135 private nonprofit four-year universities and 120 public four-year universities were also classified as HSIs (Excelencia in Education "Latinos in Higher Education"). Studies of community colleges are informative and valuable yet writing program administrators at small private universities or at larger public Research One or comprehensive universities are likely to have other institutional factors influencing the revision of placement and curricula. Likewise,

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<sup>4</sup> Placement and curricular reforms at the community college level are scheduled for fall 2019, so the impact is yet unknown.

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more studies are needed that recognize the diversity of writing programs across the range of HSIs. Research that elucidates the distinctive diversity of HSIs is important to understanding the various student populations that these campuses serve, and what works in helping them persist and succeed through FYW and beyond.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of different placement practices, in combination with different curricular structures, on students in FYW courses at a private, nonprofit four-year HSI. I evaluate “impact” by examining eight years of FYW placement data gathered in this study, disaggregated by race and income level, to determine which groups are placed into developmental writing. I determine how placement practices impact students by examining completion rates of FYW as an area of measurable success. FYW courses are core general education requirements that are also prerequisites for upper-division courses in the major for most four-year colleges. Therefore, FYW completion rates are important indicators of successful completion of an undergraduate degree. This study presents one writing program’s efforts to revise assessment for placement and corresponding FYW curricula to provide first-year students with access to viable pathways toward degree completion. Furthermore, I disaggregate the collected data by race and income level in order to evaluate the impact of revised placement and curricula on specific student populations to determine needed resources and support.

### **Study Site and Population**

The study site is the main campus of a four-year, private comprehensive university, enrolling 2,798 undergraduates. This university is located within a small suburban city (population of 31,000) of Los Angeles County (City of La Verne). The university’s enrollment size and suburban location fit the description that Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo offer as a “small communities” four-year HSI (77). Unlike the more common urban community college HSIs and the “big systems” four-year HSIs, such as several of the CSU campuses, small communities four-year HSIs are typically private nonprofit institutions. According to institutional data, 44% of first-year students at the study site are first-generation college goers. In 2013, a year for which data was collected for this study, 51.9% of first-year students identified as “Hispanic/Latino,” while 27.2% identified as White. Throughout the eight years for which data was collected, the study site qualified as an HSI. The six-year graduation rate is 67% (Moore).

Notably, this graduation rate is 8% higher than the California State University graduation rate. Additionally, a 2016 Department of Education report identified the study site as one of 13 private nonprofit four-year institutions that “appear to excel in both the enrollment and completion of Pell grant recipients,” Pell recipients accounting for 46% of students enrolled in the 2013-2014 academic year (U.S. Department of Education 8).

Participants are cohorts of first-year students enrolled in developmental writing courses for every fall semester of the eight years that I collected data. The prerequisite courses, now discontinued, were described in the catalog as “*pre-college*” courses for students with “*deficient*” or “*mildly deficient*” skills in writing, reading, and language use (emphases added). Students were required to pass these prerequisites in order to move on to a two-semester sequence of FYW courses, requiring some students to take four semesters (two years) of writing courses in order to satisfy their general education written communication requirements. At the time, the writing program used a single measure--a computer-based, multiple choice exam--for FYW placement, before being revised into a multiple measures process. During the last year that the exam was used, 60% of all incoming first-year students placed into a developmental writing course, providing the exigence for this study (see “Year Four” on Figure 2).

The third course is a one-unit Writing studio course that emphasizes small group and individual tutoring for students concurrently enrolled in the first semester of the two-course FYW sequence. Writing studio is capped at seven students and taught by writing faculty who also teach the FYW course. Students meet in small groups once a week to discuss reading, note-taking, and writing strategies common to their FYW course. Every other week, they alternate between meeting with the instructor and with a peer tutor in the writing center to discuss individual drafts and focus on language conventions or revision. Other course goals include spoken language practice, active collaboration with peers, and metacognitive reflection on literacy, as well as learning essential resources such as the writing center, faculty office hours, and peer networks. Grades are Credit/No Credit and are based on attendance and active class participation. Beginning the fall semester of the seventh year of data collection, writing studio replaces the prerequisite developmental writing courses, without the deficit language from previous years.



## Method

This study compares pass rate data of students placed into FYW courses, examining the impact of placement assessment and the related curriculum on the completion of FYW by Latino/a and White students across income levels, some of whom identify as first-generation students. Students in the first four years placed into prerequisite developmental writing courses one or two levels below FYW after taking a computer-based, multiple choice placement exam. Students in the subsequent two years of the study placed into developmental writing using a multiple measures approach. For this cohort, students placed in developmental writing were required to take only one prerequisite course before FYW. Lastly, a third group of students that placed in developmental writing in the last two years of the study was mainstreamed into FYW courses. Students in this latter group were also required to take a corequisite one-unit writing studio course in order to complete FYW.

During all eight years of the study, I disaggregate data by race (American Indian/Alaska Native, Black or African American, White, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Other, Two or more races, International/Non-Resident Alien).<sup>5</sup> However, with the exception of White and Latinx students, all groups yield data that cannot be analyzed for statistical significance. Therefore, this study focuses on data reported for only Latinx and White students, who comprise the majority of students enrolled in developmental writing for the eight years that I collected data. I also disaggregate data by first generation status and low-income status, as determined by Pell grant eligibility (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Lastly, I analyze de-identified course evaluations of the writing studio, coding for recurring patterns in participant responses to understand the impact of the writing studio model at this study site.

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<sup>5</sup> Categories described in the 2009-2013 Fact Book, Office of Institutional Research, of the study site.

<sup>6</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Education, the Federal Pell Grant Program provides need-based grants to low income undergraduate students to “promote access to post-secondary education” (“Federal Pell Grant Program”).

**Findings**

**Students Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds Placed in Developmental Writing**

Figure 1 provides a demographic of the students enrolled in developmental writing at the study site. Data show that students across socioeconomic backgrounds placed into developmental writing, before and after we revised FYW placement to a multiple measures approach during the fifth year of data collection. After all students were mainstreamed into FYW, students across socioeconomic backgrounds continued to place into developmental writing and reading. After we revised the placement, Pell grant eligible students accounted for just slightly more than half of all students enrolled in developmental writing. Approximately an equal number of students who were not from low-income families also placed into developmental writing.

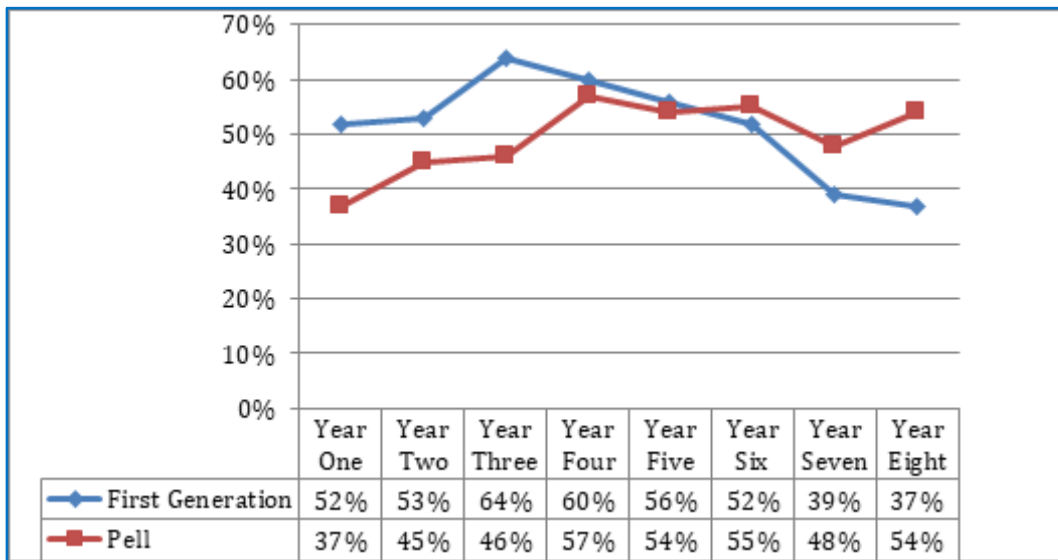


Fig. 1. First-Generation Status and Low-Income (Pell Grant) Eligibility of First-Year Students Enrolled in Developmental Writing Year 1 - 8.

The data also show that after we revised the placement method to include multiple measures, and after we mainstreamed all students into FYW, the percentage of developmental writing students who identified as first-generation college students dropped significantly by the last year of the study (Fig. 1). Although first generation students comprised the slight majority of students in developmental writing for the

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first six years of the study, this percentage drops to below 40% in the last two years, indicating that most students placed into developmental writing at the study site came from college-educated parents (Fig. 1). Students from at least middle-income families also placed into developmental writing at near-equal rates as low-income students.

### **Multiple Measures Placement Results in Fewer Developmental Writing Students**

Another important finding shows that the revised FYW assessment resulted in fewer Latinx and White students, and fewer first-year students overall, placing into developmental writing (Fig. 2). For the first four years of the study, when students placed into FYW using the computer-based single measure, enrollment in developmental writing for Latinx students, White students, and all first-year students overall climbed until peaking in the last year that we used the single measure for placement. At the height of developmental writing placement, 58% of all Latinx students, 78% of all White students, and 60% of all first-year students placed into developmental writing (Fig. 2). Beginning in the sixth year of data collection, when we began to use multiple measures for FYW placement, developmental writing placement dropped significantly for both Latinx and White students, and for all first-year students overall. In the third year of the multiple measures' placement, only 24% of White students were placed into developmental writing, lower than the previous six years. For Latinx students, this downward trend continued until the last year of the study, when only 16% of all Latinx students were placed in developmental writing.

In summary, after placement revision, low-income Pell grant-eligible students continued to represent approximately half of students placed in developmental writing. However, fewer first-generation college students placed into developmental writing after placement revision (Fig. 1). In addition, fewer Latinx and White students, and fewer first-year students of all racial backgrounds, placed into developmental writing. Notably, after placement revision, Latinx students had the lowest placement into developmental writing (Fig. 2).

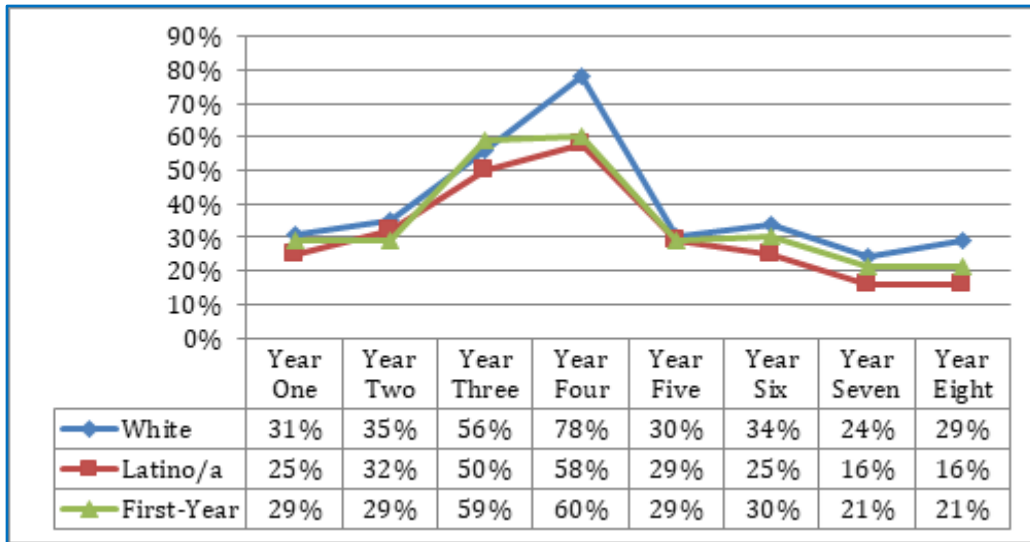


Fig. 2. Developmental Writing Enrollment for Whites, Latinos/as, and all First-Year Students (Percentage of Total Number Enrolled from Each Group)

\*Years 1 - 4: Placement by Single Measure (Computer-Based Test)

\*\*Years 5 - 8: Placement by Multiple Measures

### Writing Studio: Assets-Based Resource for FYW Success

I analyzed anonymous course evaluations for 42 sections of writing studio, using open coding of qualitative remarks to identify several themes from student responses. The majority of students value how writing studio aligns with the learning outcomes of their FYW course. Students especially value the writing studio as an additional resource for learning strategies for grammar, revision, thesis, idea development, and organization. Many students also report positive experiences collaborating with peers, as one student shares: “The most satisfactory aspects were speaking to our peers about our writing and how it can be improved. It gave us a different perspective and made me feel comfortable [...]”

Additionally, students overwhelmingly describe individual meetings with their instructor as the most useful resource, particularly for discussing drafts and receiving feedback. One student wrote: “I personally enjoyed one on one meetings. Receiving feedback on my essay was really helpful for my Writing 110 class.” A third student describes his/her positive interaction with the studio instructor: “[The instructor] wouldn’t just write on my papers, he would verbally show me and walk me through the areas I strongly needed help in.” When asked to identify the most satisfactory

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teaching attribute of the studio instructor, students most frequently cited “patience.” Students use other descriptors such as “encouraging,” “helpful,” “caring,” and “respectful” to describe the studio instructor. These positive affective characteristics of the instructor create an environment in which students feel like their voices are encouraged and respected, as one student reports: “I could just be relaxed and have a conversation with [the instructor].”

When the instructor creates a positive and encouraging environment, the studio helps students see themselves and their academic capabilities in a positive way, employing an assets-based mindset. The students concur. Their descriptions of the most valued outcomes for the course include: improvement in their writing, followed by improved grades, and increased comprehension of their assignments. Students also describe metacognitive benefits, including an increased sense of ownership and self-efficacy, as illustrated by a student who identifies the most satisfying outcome as “being able to criticize my own essays and understand how to correct my problems.” Students commonly described gaining confidence, as illustrated by one student who wrote that the instructor helped them “become a very confident and better writer.” Another student reports: “I learned how to write more effectively and strongly. [Writing studio] also helped me get organized for college life.” These representative comments illustrate students connecting their efforts in writing studio to an increased sense of effectiveness as writers and as students. Overall, students value focusing on FYW learning outcomes, getting help on their WRT 110 assignments, and receiving feedback on their writing during group meetings and individual meetings with the studio instructor.

### **Data-Driven Placement and Curricular Reform Best Supports FYW Retention and Completion**

The last set of findings for this study examine the completion of FYW as an area of measurable success. At the study site, students who complete the two-course sequence have fulfilled the general education requirements in written communication. I analyze the impact of placement and curriculum on each group of students by examining the pass rates of the exit course for the two-course FYW sequence. In my analysis, I focus on all students across racial formations, income, and first-generation college student status. I compare three sets of data, organized by placement process and developmental writing structure. I then analyze data sets using a T test to measure statistically significant difference. Only one comparison of data sets shows a significant difference: students placed into the two-semester sequence of developmental writing

based on a single measure (the computer-based exam), as compared with students mainstreamed into FYW with a co-curricular writing studio, based on multiple measures ( $p$  value = 0.007366). Neither revising *only* the placement process nor revising *only* the developmental curricular structure of FYW has a significant impact on FYW pass rates. The multiple measures placement revision *in combination* with the mainstreamed co-curricular writing studio revision results in the most significant increase of students passing the FYW requirement.

Overall, the writing studio model combined with multiple measures placement supports students across racial backgrounds, across income levels, and across family educational backgrounds in persisting and completing the FYW sequence within two semesters. As students at the study site must complete FYW as a prerequisite for upper-division courses in the major, increased FYW pass rates also support more students in their paths toward degree completion.

## Discussion

Several of the findings that I discuss in this case study correspond with characteristics of HSIs that fit the description of a small community's four-year university. Who places into developmental writing at this type of HSI? The data collected for this case study clarify the student population enrolled in the developmental writing courses over a recent eight-year period. One finding shows that regardless of placement method, many students placing in developmental writing were from college-educated families; by the last two years of the study, over 60% of students in the writing studios were *not* the first in their families to attend college. While the literature supports that generally, many students at HSIs have less academic preparation than their peers at non-HSIs, the findings from this case study challenge the unsupported assumptions about the academic preparation of students at *all* HSIs. Given the suburban location of the study site, small communities four-years tend to be "located in areas with the highest levels of educational attainment" (Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo 71). Furthermore, although Pell grant eligibility was a more consistent factor throughout the eight years of data collection, students from at least middle-income families--those that did not receive a Pell grant--also placed into developmental writing at near-equal rates as low-income students. These findings dispel assumptions of the socioeconomic background of students who place into developmental writing at this study site, specifically, and at HSIs overall. First-generation status or family income level do not reliably predict which students need supplemental support in FYW at this HSI.

Another key understanding of the developmental writing population at the study site, drawn from the data, is that throughout most of the eight years, the majority of first year Latinx students did not place into developmental writing. Data collected from the study site further challenges unsupported deficiency narratives surrounding Latinx students. The characteristics of a small communities four-year HSI helps to explain this. First, as previously discussed, these types of HSIs tend to be in suburban areas where more residents have degrees beyond high school. The study site's population reflects this trend, as more than half of all students (56%) come from college-educated families (as a reminder, more than half of all students at the study site also identify as Hispanic/Latino). These findings contrast with existing research of HSIs, that describes Latinx students at HSIs as "more likely to have parents with lower educational backgrounds" and to have "lower levels of academic capital than their peers who enroll elsewhere" (Cuellar 102). The findings of this study show that at this small communities four-year HSI, one that is a private nonprofit, Latinx students are just as likely as their peers to come from college-educated families and to have as much academic capital. Writing program administrators at small communities HSIs might further investigate placement and curricula that best meets the needs of the student population at their campus, as supported by data. For example, these findings may provide reasonable support for allocating more resources, including professional development, toward curricular development beyond FYW, such as courses in multidisciplinary research writing, writing for public advocacy, writing in the disciplines, or technical and professional writing. The data presented here show that first-year students at this study site are prepared for higher-level writing instruction at this HSI.

The findings also provide greater understanding of how White students, the second largest student racial group on campus, were affected by placement and curricular revisions. In the last year that a single measure was used for placement, 78% of all White students placed into developmental writing. White students' placement into developmental writing drops to 29% after the writing program revises placement and curriculum by mainstreaming students into FYW and writing studio (see Fig. 2). Further studies at this site should disaggregate data by race and Pell grant eligibility to determine how low-income students of all racial backgrounds are placing into developmental writing. In the last year of data collection, which has the lowest enrollment into developmental writing, Latinx and White students combined comprise 45% of all first-year students in developmental writing, which begs the question: at what percentages do other races comprise the remaining 55% of students in developmental writing? Importantly, when disaggregated by race, the numbers for all

groups except for Latinx and White students were too low to analyze for statistical significance when comparing pass/completion rates for FYW. However, writing programs must identify the needs of all minority students at HSIs. A complete picture of how FYW placement and curricular revision impacts students at this site requires further investigation of the placement and pass/completion rates of students of American Indian/Alaska Native, Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, two or more races, and international/non-resident backgrounds. The findings from this case study call attention to the diversity of students at HSIs, which enroll “28% of Asian American, 16% of Black, 14% of American Indian and 10% of White students nationally” (Núñez, Hurtado, and Galdeano 5). This study calls for more research examining the FYW success of other under-represented groups, including linguistically diverse students and Black and Latinx males, at private four-year HSIs.

Overall, the revised placement process and curricular structure of developmental writing impacts students positively at this study site. After the writing program introduced the multiple measures and mainstreaming processes, placement into developmental writing for all students across racial and socioeconomic identities dropped. This finding reflects previous research on indirect measures of writing, generally, and on computer-based exams, specifically, as unreliable predictors of student success in FYW. However, revising the placement process from a single measure to multiple measures, by itself, did not create a statistically significant increase in the number of students who passed the FYW requirement. The major finding of this study shows that the combination of a multiple measures placement process and a mainstreamed-plus-co-curricular-writing studio structure most significantly increases the FYW pass rates for Latinx and White students across socioeconomic levels. Students placed into writing studio were affected most positively by the revised placement and curricular structure, with the highest completion rates of FYW out of the eight years of data collection.

By revising developmental writing, the writing program at this institution shifted to data-driven and assets-based practices of placement and curricular development. Given that I have analyzed the pass rate findings as statistically valid, these practices are proven to have increased student success and completion of FYW within four years after the writing program-initiated revisions. Regarding the type of institution featured in this case study, it is important to point out that only 9% of all HSIs fall under the small communities’ four-year institutions description (Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo 71). However, the implications of this case study for those peer institutions may be valuable for increasing student success and completion of FYW



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courses at those campuses and may also inform writing programs with similar goals at other types of HSIs.

## **Conclusion**

The majority of Latinx undergraduates enroll in public two- and four-year colleges and universities, and thus the bulk of research at HSIs reflects these institutions. However, private universities located in suburban cities with thriving Latinx communities are also committed to supporting Latinx students to degree completion. At this study site, students graduate at a higher rate, and in less time than those at public institutions with access to public funding. Furthermore, graduation rates at this site are also comparable to those of more elite private universities with large endowments and resources. It is also notable that data collection for this study was completed before AB705, the bill reforming placement and developmental writing (and math) curricula in California, was passed in 2017, and before similar reforms were mandated at the California State University in 2018. Despite institutional diversities, writing programs at HSIs may also share common interests, especially those sharing regional and community affiliations, and may benefit from developing networks through which to share research and practices.

Furthermore, the findings illustrate the important role of HSIs in enrolling and supporting low-income students and students of color. Even after placement was revised, low-income students continued to comprise at least half of all students in developmental writing at this study site. However, the number of students who identified as first-generation college students dropped. These findings suggest to me that we should be careful not to conflate low-income and first-generation status, and that writing programs can investigate ways to support low-income students in their first year. Additionally, writing programs at HSIs can further investigate how to support Latinx men and African American/Black students, groups with historically low rates of college completion, toward FYW success.

Lastly, writing programs at HSIs will benefit from getting to know their students through data collection, as data informs appropriate placement and curricular structure. Importantly, the revised multiple measures placement combined with the writing studio model supports students across racial backgrounds, income levels, and family educational backgrounds in completing FYW within two semesters. This study may help inform faculty and administrators as to how FYW programs support

pathways toward degree completion for Latinx students, and for all students, at private, nonprofit four-year Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

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