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# **First-Year Composition Placement at Open-Admission, Two-Year Campuses: Changing Campus Culture, Institutional Practice, and Student Success**

*Placement testing is most students' first contact with the theory and practice of first-year writing programs, and we would do well to make that first contact as inviting and theoretically sound as possible. To do so, we need to think less about placement as a mechanism and more about placement as an opportunity to communicate. Placement is perhaps the first part of our programs that communicates to students.(Harrington 12)*

**AT TWO-YEAR, OPEN-ADMISSION UNIVERSITIES MORE THAN ANY** other higher education setting, placement testing is a critical piece of positioning students for academic success. However, much of the existing research on writing assessment and placement testing focuses primarily on traditional students within four-year academic environments or specifically on students in developmental and basic writing courses (See Matzen and Hoyt; Moore, O'Neil, and Huot; Peckham "Online"). In this essay, we describe successful revisions to the placement process at our open access, two-year campus, including related changes to placement testing, advising, and our first-year writing program curriculum. We argue for a multiple measures approach to assessing the readiness of students who are at-risk (in conventional and unconventional ways) of not succeeding academically (which can include probation, suspension, or dropping out of higher education) during the first year of college. Our experience illustrates the critical importance for open-admission campuses of developing locally situated placement measures that are effectively aligned with a writing program's learning outcomes and with the unique needs of the specific student populations that an institution serves.

## **Approaches to Placement**

Institutions can take a range of very different approaches to determining student readiness for college writing and achievement in first-year composition. A typical approach empha-

sizes skill areas that can easily be assessed and quantified through objective, standardized tests: sentence correction, reading comprehension, construction shift, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, usage, verb formation/agreement, relationships of clauses, vocabulary, areas measured by popular standardized placement instruments like the COMPASS or ACCUPLACER test. The Community College Research Center notes that of the 92% of community colleges using some form of placement exam, 62% use ACCUPLACER, while another 46% use COMPASS (sometimes in combination with one another) (Hughes and Scott-Clayton 8-9). The "NCTE/WPA Outcomes for First-Year Writing" document suggests another way to assess readiness for college composition that reflects a disciplinary understanding of the goals of first-year college writing courses: *rhetorical knowledge; knowledge of conventions; critical reading, writing, and thinking*. In contrast to the focus of standardized tests, this second set of emphases is much more closely aligned with the learning outcomes of many first-year writing courses. Additionally, increasing numbers of institutions are using multiple measures methods such as directed self-placement (see Royer and Gilles), inclusion of a writing sample or portfolio, and online challenge methods to provide a more nuanced picture of students' readiness for college-level reading, writing, and thinking (see Peckham "Online").

For many two-year and open-admission campuses, however, standardized tests measuring reading comprehension and sentence correction skills remain the primary method of assessing student readiness for first-year composition courses. They may take the form of the ACT or SAT (standardized tests used more frequently for college admission); ACCUPLACER, used at over 1000 institutions in North America (James 2); the COMPASS test, which consists of a sentence skills test, reading, and a writing test assessed by "a powerful scoring engine via the Internet" that "provide[s] an instantaneous evaluation of a student's writing skills using either a 2-8 or 2-12 score scale" (ACT's Compass); or multiple choice tests that are unique to a particular institution. Although this standardized testing approach focuses on arguably important basic skills (primarily at the sentence level), we contend, as have many scholars in the last several decades (Huot: Isaacs and Malloy; Peckham "Online"; White) that as an assessment measure, it does not reflect the complex demands of academic discourse in the first college year. For example, the ability (or lack of ability) to recognize and edit sentence-level issues in someone else's writing does not necessarily indicate whether a student is ready to compose a well-organized college essay that takes and supports a position on a topic or even to construct such sentences. As a standalone placement measure, a standardized test can evaluate only a small part of what students need to be able to do as college readers and writers.

Consequently, the areas of emphasis assessed through this type of placement measure are usually disconnected from many (or even most) learning outcomes for college writ-

ing programs. In other words, students are often placed into first-year composition or developmental courses according to their achievement on exams that don't adequately demonstrate their readiness for developing proficiency in specific writing courses and that provide only an incomplete--or sometimes even distorted--representation of their ability to do college-level work. As an independent assessment tool, then, standardized tests are not a good match for determining students' readiness for the learning tasks that writing programs and instructors expect them to do in first-year composition, and we argue that this is particularly true for the diverse populations at open-admission and two-year campuses.

## **Writing and Assessment**

If standardized tests, widely relied upon by many budget-conscious, public, two-year institutions, do not fully assess student readiness for college, then what are the alternatives? Of course, among scholars of writing and rhetoric, there are competing theories about how to approach the assessment of a student's ability to produce a text for a particular purpose. As far back as 1982, Betty Bramberg argued that "Holistically scored essays should . . . play a leading role in assessments of writing programs and writing competence" (106). This assertion is called into question by Pat Belanoff's 1991 article on the purposes of writing assessment titled, "The Myths of Assessment," questioning the notion that in assessing writing (whether through a standardized test or a holistic essay) we "know what we're testing for; we know what we're testing; . . . we can agree on whether individual papers meet those criteria; . . . that it's possible to have an absolute standard and apply it uniformly" (55). Ultimately, Belanoff arrives at the conclusion that "there are two sorts of valid judgments [about writing quality]--the totally personal and the totally communal--but it has to be a community which is engaged in conversation about teaching and standards all the time, not just during grading sessions and not in the abstract" (63). For many multi-campus institutions like ours, agreeing on a communal set of values that approaches the ideal is particularly challenging when working across campus cultures and geographical distance, even when those campuses may make up a single system or institution.

Later, Brian Huot's foundational work, epitomized by his 1996 CCC essay "Toward a New Theory of Assessment," has sought to question underlying assumptions about the assessment of writing quality, particularly within institutional contexts. In that essay, he advocated, like Belanoff, for a "site-based, practical" approach to writing assessment that acknowledged "context, rhetoric, and other characteristics integral to a specific purpose and institution" (552). More recently, Moore, O'Neill, and Huot have also confirmed that "good assessments are those that are designed locally, for the needs of specific institutions, faculty, and students" (W109) and have supported the well-established disciplinary maxim that writ-

ing "is one of those intellectual activities that cannot be adequately documented through standardized tests" (W118), echoing Haswell and Wyche-Smith's 1994 claim that "writing teachers should be leery of assessment tools made by others . . . they should, and can, make their own" (221). The placement process we describe in this essay aims to create such a site-specific model that responds to the very real and distinct needs of open-admission institutions that may have budget constraints, widely varied student preparation and academic profiles, and a lack of institutional infrastructure for framing writing assessment within the best practice models offered by contemporary assessment and writing scholars like Huot.<sup>2</sup>

Though we know our argument may on the surface run contrary to some recent scholarship, such as Emily Isaacs and Sean Molloy's May 2010 essay, "Texts of Our Institutional Lives: SATs for Writing Placements: A Critique and Counterproposal," we see our work as sharing similar values but different contexts to current disciplinary discussions on placement. For example, Isaacs and Molloy argue that the "SAT placement system has poorly served and even harmed" the students at their institution (518), and they are critical of institutional adoption of assessment measures like the SAT timed writing exercise, which students have "written quickly, without social mediation or opportunity for engaging in various intellectual processes" (519). The multiple measures approach we are advocating includes timed writing, though in contrast with the SAT-W or other standardized tests that include a writing portion graded by either computers or anonymous readers who are reading quickly,<sup>3</sup> the writing sample we suggest is locally-generated, aligned with course-specific learning outcomes, and assessed by faculty in the discipline who teach the courses into which students are being placed.

At the same time, Moore, O'Neill, and Huot's recommendations for implementing widespread institutional change to assessment practices match ours but are dependent upon the status of the WPA within the institution (and seem to assume that most institutions have a writing program administrator who oversees or coordinates first-year writing courses). However, such recommendations overlook that many open-admission, two-year campuses, most of which are multi-campus and geographically decentralized, do not have a dedicated Writing Program Administrator position.<sup>4</sup> For example, the official Council of Writing Program

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2. Certainly, research prior to ours has confirmed the value of a writing sample as a method of directly assessing a student's likelihood of success in a class that requires writing. For example, Matzen, and Hoyt have determined that "an essay exam is valuable for placement purposes," and that an argument that Ed White has also forcefully made in the past. More recent work by Irv Peckham and by Brian Huot, Cindy Moore, and Peggy O'Neil has also examined this issue and made a case for locally-determined placement assessment measures beyond or in addition to standardized tests.

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3. See Peckham 2010 for a discussion of the rating conditions of the ACT-Writing portion.

Administrators' 2009 survey of WPA identity and demographics replicating Linda Peterson's 1986 survey showed that 3% of the WPAs who participated in the survey in 1986 worked at two-year campuses while in 2009, 5% of respondents did (120). This lack of a WPA at most two-year campuses can make implementing large-scale institutional changes described by Moore, O'Neill, and Huot even more challenging: "creating local cultures that support meaningful assessment hinges on an understanding of how, when considered together, relevant historical trends, theoretical tenants [sic], and contextual factors can influence assessment practice in truly transformative ways" (W110). What we describe here is a placement model that has worked for us in several ways--providing a fuller picture of our students' readiness as well as the specific needs of our institution's student population; involving the people who actually teach the courses into which students are placed in the process of assessing their readiness (thus informing our curriculum and instruction), and helping our institution develop a stronger understanding of our assessment tool leading to other placement, curricular, and instructional changes.

## **The Changing Shape of Placement at UW Colleges**

In the University of Wisconsin System, where we (Holly and Joanne) teach, nearly all of the 26 two- and four-year campuses rely on the Wisconsin English Placement Test (WEPT), a multiple-choice standardized test that measures sentence correction, usage, and reading comprehension. This single exam places students into the first-year writing sequence, which, depending on the selectivity of the institution, can range from a developmental course to special sections of first-year writing for English language learners to a research-intensive, second-semester writing course (or beyond, in the form of exemption from the general education composition requirement).<sup>5</sup> The comprehensive and doctoral institutions with competitive admissions use the same test score placement process as most of the open-access two-year liberal arts colleges.

Prior to 2007 at our campus, UW-Marathon, students were placed into first-year writing courses based entirely on the English score (measuring sentence correction and usage) of the Wisconsin English Placement Test, even though a reading score was also available. This means of assessing student readiness for college writing was contrary to the National Council of Teachers of English-Writing Program Administrators' "White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities," which asserts that "Writing assessment should use

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4. See Peckham 2010 for a discussion of the rating conditions of the ACT-Writing portion.

5. We should also note that cut-scores for course placement differ between institutions because each one has its own curriculum reflecting the needs of the student population served by that program.

multiple measures and engage multiple perspectives. . . . A single off-the-shelf or standardized test should never be used to make important decisions about students, teachers, and curriculum" (scr. 2). Partially as a result of this incomplete measurement process, the retake rate (students receiving a C- or lower) in the second-semester, transfer-level, research-intensive composition course required for the Associate's degree and for the core writing requirement at most four-year institutions ranged from 35% for students in the lower-end of the cut-score range (416-469 out of a total English score possibility of 850) to 25% for students at the high end (above 500). A student is required to earn at least a "C" in this course in order to have fulfilled the degree writing requirement. The retake rate for English 101, the first-semester composition course that focuses on introducing students to principles and features of academic writing and argumentation, hovered between 20% and 30%, depending on the semester and year. A student also needs to earn a C or higher in this introductory course in order to move from English 101 to English 102.

Beginning in 2007, we began to involve the English Department in composition and literacy support placement and phased in a multiple measures approach to assessing student readiness through collaboration with our campus Student Services staff, who had previously been entirely responsible for placing students into first-year composition courses, a process that involved administering the standardized sentence-correction and usage test, transferring results to student files, and registering students for the courses they had placed into. We began our initial shift by incorporating a brief, thirty-minute writing sample based on the newly developing First-Year Composition Learning Outcomes that our campus had begun to employ; students took this portion after the standardized Wisconsin English Placement Test.<sup>6</sup> Though it is administered at the same time as the standardized test, the writing prompt itself is designed each year by local English instructors who teach across the spectrum of courses into which students will be placed. We develop each prompt and accompanying rubric to align assessment of the writing sample with the learning outcomes for our composition program (see Appendix A for one year's example).

We were also initially provided with the student's other test score data (usually the ACT), high school grades, high school English curriculum, class rank, and occasionally information suggestive of a nontraditional educational background—a GED or HSED, home schooling, or a gap in education. Our first efforts concentrated on the student populations we would

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6. We acknowledge Ed White's canonical essay in the 1995 *CCC*, "An Apologia for the Timed Impromptu Essay Test," which supports (though not without controversy) the changes we made simply in his advancement of the "most important argument for an essay test: it is not a multiple choice test" (White 34). He acknowledges as do we that the timed essay does not allow for the process-oriented goals that are the cornerstone of the WPA's and NCTE's recommended best practices or even our department's learning outcomes.

conventionally define as "at-risk" for not successfully passing first-semester, degree-credit courses, including students placing into the developmental writing course in our sequence, English 098. We also included students who placed into the first-semester writing course, English 101, largely because our previous research suggested that this is a group who may on the surface be minimally ready for college but who are often are not well-prepared for the demands of college-level critical reading and writing (see Hassel and Giordano).

The following year, we expanded our student population from the traditionally underprepared (as designated by standardized test scores) to the group placing directly into English 102 (the second-semester, transfer-level writing course), which revealed what became important specifically for our institution but may have implications for other programs. We found, like Irvin Peckham in his accounts of implementing an Online Challenge system at Louisiana State University, that "the border between 1001 first-semester composition and 1002 second-semester composition is improperly drawn" (Peckham, "Turning" 72). Blending the use of standardized test scores (which of course, some research has shown, do have predictive validity for student success in first-year writing courses)<sup>7</sup> with the more direct measurement of students' writing ability, a writing sample, was valuable in helping us assess students' academic readiness for college, but because our student populations have complex educational backgrounds, each year we undertook the multiple measures process, we found ourselves wanting to know more about what students brought with them to their first year of college.

In the subsequent year, we added two additional placement measures that modestly include elements of Royer and Gillies' notion of directed self-placement, a student survey that asks students to self-assess their readiness for difficult reading and writing courses and to indicate whether they would prefer a slower start to college, in addition to a free-answer question asking them to assess how effectively and accurately their test scores and grades reflect their academic abilities. Inclusion of the brief survey also gave students the opportunity to provide us with more complete information about their educational background, high school curriculum, and home language. We also revised our essay prompt to focus on a question that specifically asked students to assess their own preparation for college learning in response to a brief text (See Appendix A).

We identify this process as "locally designed" because it a) emerges from the faculty who teach first-year writing courses on our campus, b) responds to the specific needs of our student populations, and c) matches the learning outcomes for our first-year writing sequence. The first point is important because the process of evaluation is conducted by

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7. See Matzen and Hoyt.

instructors who teach composition and learning support courses; they are in the best position to assess whether a student has the skills, preparation, and motivation to succeed in our writing program. Second, we are able to adapt and add to the placement process as we learn more about incoming students or as the needs of our student population shift. For example, we added a student survey because our placement process had no mechanism for identifying English-language learners or Generation 1.5 students (students with home languages other than English who receive most or all of their education in the US). The survey also provides us with information about students' senior-year English curriculum from which we gain additional information about their preparation for academic writing. We continue to refine our survey questions as student needs change, especially as our adult learner population increases. Lastly, because we are using learning outcomes for each specific course in the writing program sequence, we are able to design a writing prompt and rubric that specifically requires students to demonstrate skills in rhetorical knowledge; critical reading, writing, and thinking; conventions; and, to a limited degree, processes. Even though we are required by the statewide system to use the standardized test produced by our flagship institution's testing office, our approach permits us to adapt it more usefully to the student populations we serve.

## **The Value of Multiple Measures for the Placement Process**

The multiple pieces of data we look at from individual students each offer specific benefits to us as a placement team in our ability to assess a student's readiness for the first-year composition sequence as well as identify literacy support needs such as critical reading coursework, learning skills classes, or writing center tutorials. In this section, we outline the value of those measures and highlight some of the limitations of each, particularly for open-admission campuses.

### ***Standardized Test Results***

Our multiple measures approach to placement uses the reading and English scores from both the ACT and our statewide placement test. Although we believe that standardized test scores have a limited usefulness as a standalone placement measure, the introduction of the ACT reading and English scores to the campus placement process help us identify students who are significantly underprepared for college reading and writing in comparison to their peers both locally and nationally. Further, because most degree-credit college courses require students to take comprehensive, timed final and midterm exams, students on our campus who have difficulty taking high stakes standardized tests almost always require some type of



learning support to help them make a successful transition to college learning.

In assessing our placement process and tracking the success rates of students across the first-year, we have discovered that the ACT, especially the reading test, is useful for identifying students who are underprepared for reading-intensive courses and our core transfer-level composition course, which requires students to independently read and analyze academic sources. A significant number of our students have ACT scores that would suggest a significant lack of readiness for college reading. On average, about two-thirds of our student population has met the ACT benchmark score of 18 for the English test (that is, the score that suggests a student has a 50% likelihood of earning an B or higher or a 75% to 80% likelihood of earning a C) for first-semester English composition.<sup>8</sup> However, students who achieve this benchmark score and enroll in an introductory composition course on our campus are usually not prepared for most degree-credit reading and writing-intensive courses. For most years, less than half (between 47 and 50%) of our first-year students meet the reading benchmark score of 21, which suggests a readiness for reading-intensive social science courses. This implies that, based on the ACT alone, nearly a third of our students place into developmental composition although a much lower percentage than that actually enroll in it on our campus. Using the ACT as a placement indicator, about half of our students are not ready for college reading, and even fewer of them are ready for critical analysis and other types of independent reading required in our core transfer-level writing class. Furthermore, each academic year, our campus enrolls several dozen recent high school graduates with ACT reading and/or writing scores of 13 or lower, suggesting (at least based on standardized test scores) that they are significantly underprepared even for our developmental reading and writing program. We also enroll an equal number of

“This profile of our student population is complicated by the less tangible material dimensions of our students' lives, including college readiness factors that are much more complex than a student's ability to take a standardized test.”

8. Another 10% of our incoming first-year students have ACT scores of 13 or lower in reading or English, suggesting significant underpreparation for college-level reading and writing tasks.

returning adult learners or students from nontraditional educational backgrounds who have had little or no recent experience with academic reading and writing.

This profile of our student population is complicated by the less tangible material dimensions of our students' lives, including college readiness factors that are much more complex than a student's ability to take a standardized test.<sup>9</sup> For example, research collected from the UW Colleges (our statewide two-year institution) and UW-Madison (a research institution with competitive admission) shows that UWC students whose Wisconsin English Placement Test scores place them into the core, degree-credit composition course are 20-30 times more likely to need to retake the course than students with the same placement test scores in the equivalent course at UW-Madison. On average, about 1-3% of the students at Madison taking the English 102 equivalent received grades of DWFI, failing to fulfill the general education requirements. By contrast, students at the UW Colleges who scored in the same range on the same test received grades of C-, DWFI at the rate of 25%-35%, depending on the score (35% of students in the lower end of the range, for example, retook the course vs. 25% of students in the higher end of the range).

Clearly, this verifies that a single standardized test score that attempts to capture students' linguistic and rhetorical abilities is inadequate to the task of accounting for overall preparation, motivation, and material circumstances. What this shows is that standardized tests measure certain, somewhat important but insufficiently predictive qualities that can tell us something about a student's academic abilities; for example, a student's score on the WEPT or ACT indicates something about that student's academic literacy skills—to read quickly, eliminate multiple choice responses, and solve problems, all of which are probably best categorized as test-taking skills. Test scores are useful for looking at patterns across student populations, but they cannot tell us about a student's preparation within a specific discipline, and they are not direct measurements of a student's ability to produce writing that responds to a particular context, purpose, audience, and task—all critical skills for success in first-year writing and other degree-credit college courses.

### ***Writing Sample***

Incorporating a writing sample into the campus placement process permits us to identify students with standardized test scores that would otherwise place them into a composition course that does not meet their learning needs nor reflect their readiness for college writing.

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9. Patrick Sullivan has usefully explored this distinction in the characteristics of student populations in his July 2008 essay "Measuring 'Success' at Open-Admission Institutions: Thinking Carefully about this Complex Question," focusing primarily on calling into question the use of graduation rates as a measure of success at open-admission campuses but also characterizing the diverse goals, backgrounds, and educational ambitions of students who attend such campuses.

Members of the English Department who teach composition and learning support courses assess students' writing samples based on our institution's learning outcomes for first-year composition courses. We recognize that a timed writing sample, like a standardized test, is not an infallible method for measuring an individual student's writing ability and that our discipline has long had a productive dialogue about the value of timed writing samples as indicators of a student's academic abilities. However, our experience with assessing students' placement files and teaching the corresponding courses on our campus suggests that a writing sample is a fairly reliable indicator of student readiness for degree-credit writing, especially if the corresponding assessment methods are aligned with a writing program's learning outcomes. In contrast, our statewide, multiple choice placement exam focuses on a narrow and relatively unimportant component of our writing program (sentence correction and usage). The writing sample allows us to assess a wider range of readiness issues, including a student's ability to understand a writing prompt, structure coherent sentences, state and develop a main point, use examples to support assertions, and organize an essay in a logical way.

A locally situated writing assessment permits us to enroll students in a higher level composition course if their writing samples indicate that they have already achieved many of the learning outcomes for a developmental or introductory course but their standardized test scores place them in the lower course. It also helps us identify students who would benefit from a reading course, writing tutorial class, or a composition course taught by an instructor with graduate training in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. More important, the writing sample seems to be a more effective measure of a student's preparation for college writing than standardized tests for students with gaps in their education or those who come from nontraditional educational backgrounds. For example, students have achieved scores on our statewide placement test or the ACT that would place them into our second semester research course even though they have had very few experiences with academic writing. We have even had students test into degree credit writing courses based on the multiple choice test even though they state in their placement materials that they have never written essays before enrolling at our institution.

Similarly, most of our returning adult learners have not had a recent academic reading or writing course, and many of them did not take college preparation courses even when they were in high school. Some of our nontraditional students test into the second semester research course based on the Wisconsin Placement Test, but most are not ready for the demands of a research-intensive course because some of the most basic features of academic writing (essay structure, paragraphing, formulating a thesis, incorporating sources beyond the writer, etc.) are unfamiliar to them. For these students, the writing sample is a more accurate indicator of their readiness for college writing than a standardized test score. The writ-

ing sample, therefore, is a useful tool in helping us identify students who are not yet ready to achieve the learning outcomes for our introductory or transfer-level composition courses—and for determining which students might succeed in a higher level composition course compared to the placement that they would receive based on their test scores.

A good example of the importance of placing students in composition courses based on their familiarity with academic writing comes from the experience of a nontraditional student on our campus whose English placement test scores would have enrolled him in our second-semester, research-intensive course. However, using the multiple measures approach, the placement team assessed the student's writing sample, considered his educational background, and then placed him into the first-semester course (English 101) to provide him with an introduction to academic writing at a college-level. In the middle of the semester, the student reflected on his placement in the introductory composition course and stated that "I feel it was just about where I should have been. Content was easy to understand, however I was rusty in my writing skills. 101 really helped me get a solid foundation to pursue my major." At our institution, students come from diverse educational backgrounds, and many of them don't have a "solid foundation" in academic writing and critical reading in comparison to students at competitive universities. This student identified English as his chosen major and graduate school as his ultimate educational goal, and he was more proficient in writing compared to many of his peers at our open-access institution. Even still, he benefited tremendously from English 101, which reintroduced him to the conventions of academic discourse before he enrolled in more advanced coursework. He probably could have earned a passing grade in the research course, but his needs as a writer were better met by a two-course composition sequence instead of a single class.

### ***High School Curriculum and Grades***

The writing sample and standardized tests are often sufficient for assessing the readiness of students who are clearly ready for advanced coursework or who need substantial support in making a successful transition to college writing. However, like many other open-access institutions, our campus enrolls many marginally prepared students whose placement is not immediately obvious from more traditional approaches to placement. As part of our multiple measures approach, we examine each student's high school grades and curriculum, which gives us additional information about that student's readiness for difficult college coursework. For example, the learning outcomes for our second semester research course require students to build on prior learning that they are unlikely to have achieved unless they have previously taken a college writing course or demanding writing-intensive courses during their senior year of high school. For our local high schools, this means courses in academic writ-

ing such as “Advanced Composition” or any AP-designated course that would introduce students to source-based writing and the principles of documentation. At the same time, we have also learned a great deal about the curriculum at local high schools, including courses that can be taken for English credit but that do very little to prepare students for first-year composition, such as film studies courses, Speech, or popular literature classes.

We also regularly assess placement files for students who test into a lower level composition course based on standardized test scores but who submit writing samples that would suggest that they might be prepared for more advanced coursework. For these students with borderline placement profiles, information about each student’s high school preparation helps us determine which college writing course would be most appropriate for the student’s learning needs.

### ***Survey and Student Self-Assessment***

Given that many students on our campus come from diverse and nontraditional educational backgrounds, students’ assessments of their own learning also play a crucial role in our multiple measures approach to placement. Students complete a survey about their preparation for college writing, including answering a question asking them to evaluate whether they feel ready for challenging reading and writing courses. The essay for the writing sample also asks them to assess their own preparation for college learning. These self-assessment measures provide us with valuable information for placing students in appropriate composition and support courses, especially for students who demonstrate marginal readiness for degree-credit composition or show promise on the writing sample despite other factors in their placement profiles that suggest they might benefit from a slower start to college learning. Both the survey and the writing prompt also help us identify students from nontraditional educational backgrounds (including homeschooling and alternative high school programs) who may need learning support courses or a slower start to college writing. One of our composition learning outcomes focuses on metacognitive learning, so this measure also helps us get an idea of a student’s capacity for self-assessment.

Students’ ability to assess their own readiness continues beyond the writing program’s initial placement assessment to students’ first direct encounter with campus faculty and staff when they register for courses. At least one member of the placement team attends every campus registration session to meet individually with students who have questions or concerns about their placement. These registration sessions permit the English Department to meet face-to-face with students to explain the writing program and differences between courses. During these sessions, students with unusual educational backgrounds or borderline placements have the opportunity to provide the placement team with additional infor-

mation, and the English Department sometimes makes subsequent changes to a student's composition placement or recommends specific support programs (though we do not change the placement for students who are clearly not ready for a course).

When we first began attending registration sessions, we were initially surprised that students with borderline placements overwhelmingly chose a lower level writing course after we explained the differences between courses in our composition course sequence. Before that time, most advisors and instructors on our campus had assumed that, given a choice, students would prefer to skip the introductory English 101 course and enroll directly into the second semester research course. By permitting students to assess their own readiness for college writing, we learned that some students can identify gaps in their own readiness for college writing in ways that are not readily determined by standard placement measures or first-year advising. Further, when students are clearly unprepared for degree-credit reading and writing in ways that are identifiable through standard placement measures, conversations with the placement team at registration sessions helps those students better understand their placement and select appropriate support courses.

Because our campus placement process is flexible and local, we also have the ability to work outside the normal campus registration process and collaborate with advisors to adjust composition course placement for a very small number of students with borderline placements who assess their own academic abilities in relation to the learning outcomes for a specific course and then demonstrate that their learning needs would be effectively met in a different course.

For instance, a student<sup>10</sup> who had attended school both in Southeast Asia and in the United States was placed into and registered for a non-degree credit writing workshop course for multilingual students after the English Department's placement team assessed his writing sample and other information in his placement file (including an ACT English score of 17 and ACT reading score of 10, even though his WEPT score—420—placed him into the second-semester, research writing course, English 102) and determined that he would benefit from a writing course taught by an instructor with a TESOL background. After attending the first day of class and reading the syllabus, the student believed that he was adequately prepared for a more challenging degree-credit composition course. An advisor helped him contact the placement team, we reviewed his placement file, and then we met with the student to discuss his preparation for college writing. He provided us with additional information about his educational background, and we explained the differences between the two writing courses and

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10. The students described in this essay formally consented to participate in our research of students' transition to college writing. They represent many other students on our campus who have had similar experiences with placement and first-year writing.

presented the student with a detailed overview of the work that was required in the degree-credit class. As the student discussed his learning needs, we identified appropriate coursework that would support his development as a college reader and writer. We eventually gave him permission to enroll in the more advanced writing course but required him to enroll concurrently in a reading course and a one-on-one composition tutorial. With individualized instruction in the support courses, the student was able to complete both degree-credit courses in our first-year writing program sequence in a single academic year. Not surprisingly, he later reported that both writing courses required a substantial amount of difficult work, but he had made an informed decision to engage in challenging academic tasks when he chose the higher level course.

It is important to note that we do not change the placement for most students who ask us to review their composition course placement either because the student does not demonstrate preparation for more advanced coursework or because (more often) students select the lower level course after learning more about the writing program. Advisors frequently also work directly with students who self-select into lower level writing courses or non-degree credit support courses without consulting us. Although we review composition course placement for only a few students each year, this option helps us meet the academic needs of highly motivated students who come from complex educational backgrounds.

### ***Benefits for Students***

At the University of Wisconsin Colleges, the student population is diverse, as is the case for most open-admission institutions that serve their communities. Approximately 58% of our students are first-generation college students, with campuses like Marinette having numbers as high as 71% (Nettesheim). At our own campus, approximately 8% of students identify as Southeast Asian heritage, but almost all of them don't read or write proficiently in their home language (Hmong). Only a very small percentage of students (less than 10%) live in our on-campus residence hall. Nontraditional or returning students (defined as over the age of 22) make up 26% of the student body. A snapshot of a recent Fall semester (2010) showed that 11% of students were in the fourth quartile of their high school class, 31% in the third, 27% in the second, and 17% in the first quartile. Another 13% were unranked, either because they had some kind of nontraditional educational experience (such as conventional or online home schooling) or because they obtained a GED or HSED rather than a high school diploma. On our campus, students in this last category are often less prepared for college writing than many of their fourth quartile classmates. The average class rank ranges from the 39th to 42nd percentile, and the average ACT score in English for the incoming first-year class in the Fall of 2009 was a 19.7 in English and a 21.2 in reading (which are fairly average test

scores), but many of our underprepared students do not take the ACT because they are not recent high school graduates.<sup>11</sup>

The most compelling data collected that demonstrated the benefit of the multiple measures process was part of our campus assessment effort. The number of at-risk students who remained in good standing at the end of the fall semester significantly increased over the implementation of this approach. In fall 2006, 208 students who began their academic career in English 098 (the developmental writing course at our institution) or in English 101 (the first-semester college writing course that well-prepared students typically exempt out of) had an average high school GPA of 2.57 and an average class rank of 42.8 (in the bottom half). With an average ACT of 18.33, 59% of this student group remained in good academic standing in the fall of 2006; notably, of course, this means that 41% of those students were on probation or suspension, nearly twice the rate of the general student population of 18.5% on probation and 5.8% suspended. Over the subsequent three years, the percent of students in good standing within this group has risen to 73%, bringing the percent on probation or suspension closer to the numbers of the overall student population—27% for the at-risk group vs. 20% probation and 4% suspension for the overall student population. Though some of this difference may be accounted for by a slight increase in the academic profile of the students in the two courses (high school GPA of 2.78, class rank of 46.4, still in the bottom half), we believe the data suggest that most of dramatic increase comes from better placement, more cautious enrollment in reading and writing-intensive courses, and more aggressive recommendation and requirement of support courses.

A key finding from this work is that standardized test scores and every other stand-alone tool for assessing readiness for college reading and writing are not effective in identifying many students who need an introductory or basic writing course before enrolling in the core-transfer level composition course and other first-year courses. For example, we routinely encounter students with complex educational backgrounds that illustrate the inadvisability of relying solely on test scores for placement. For example, several student groups stand out to us each year:

- Students with high test scores and low high school grades—such as the students whose ACTs are in the low to mid-30s but whose high school grades are below average. We often discover by reading the student writing samples that issues like mental illness, substance abuse, family problems, or health issues that

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11. Perhaps because of direct transfer and collaborative degree programs with four-year institutions in our state, we also have an unusually high number of students with high ACT scores on our campus, which is another reason why our overall ACT scores are close to the national average even though we enroll many students who would not be admitted to most four-year institutions in our state.



negatively impacted their academic performance (and still other students do not account for gaps in their academic record even when given an opportunity to do so).

- A second group of students common at open-admission campuses who are better served by the multiple measures model includes returning adult students with significant gaps in education. Prior to undertaking a revision to our placement and curriculum, such students were almost always directly placed into the second-semester, core course, with the assumption that these mature, responsible, motivated students were more likely to be successful there; however, many of these students lack the rhetorical and academic skills to move directly into a course that at our institution (as at most of the other campuses in our statewide system) presumes students possess relatively sophisticated reading, composing, and writing skills and are prepared to start the semester able to produce academic arguments using scholarly sources, something that cannot safely be assumed about students who have been out of school for several or even many years..
- A third group who is better served by this process is the high number of students noted above who do not meet the ACT benchmark score for first-semester college composition, an 18 in English. For our institution, this means nearly a third of students would place into developmental courses absent other measures that might indicate that they are otherwise prepared to do college-level work. Our new process helps us identify those students whose writing samples, high school grades, or other measure suggest that they have the skills necessary to achieve the learning outcomes in English 101 but whose quantitative test scores may not place them there. We are also better able to recommend those students take the first-semester course along with appropriate support (a reading or learning skills course, writing center tutorial, or limitations on other reading-and-writing intensive coursework that semester).

Though it could be argued that this more involved process subjects our students to a greater level of scrutiny than their counterparts at other institutions experience when it comes to assessing their preparation and readiness for degree-credit coursework, we suggest that this process reflects long overdue attention to our students' needs. First, the admissions processes at selective institutions already assess students' readiness for academic coursework—and their placement processes serve a much less critical “sorting” function because those institutions do not enroll the wide range of learners who begin college at open-access

colleges. In the Madison example, above, the test scores produce different results in predicting success compared to students enrolling at two-year campuses because the highly competitive admissions process (not to mention the radical difference in percentage of first-generation college students who attend each of the two institutions—19% at Madison vs. 60% at the UW Colleges) already scrutinizes students' preparation in ways that open-admissions campuses do not.

We have found it important that the expanded placement process involves both the professional evaluation of student preparation by teachers and a mechanism for student voices to self-assess. The survey fulfills this function, but the writing prompt—which asks students to describe their preparation—offers students a space for making their individual learning needs known and presents the institution with an opportunity to meet them.

An example from a recent fall semester illustrates how a multiple measures approach to placement can respond to students' individual preparation for college writing more effectively than standalone test scores or single placement measures. One student tested into degree-credit composition based on the Wisconsin English Placement test with a score that was well above the cut-score for non-degree credit composition. However, the information available to the placement team about her academic background (high school grades, curriculum, and her survey) suggested a lack of experience with academic learning, and her timed writing sample strongly indicated that she did not yet know how to structure a formal essay or edit her own sentence-level writing, even though she completed (with modest success) the standardized portion of the placement test that measures a student's ability to identify error in provided examples. The placement team recommended that she enroll in a non-degree credit writing class and a learning skills course. She followed the English Department's course recommendations, and the academic demands of our accelerated non-degree credit curriculum were quite challenging for her even though her placement test score was the highest of any student in the class. Self-assessment writing that she completed for a final writing course portfolio strongly supports this student's placement in the non-degree credit composition course: "At begin of the semester . . . I didn't know what a thesis statement was, how to make a main point in each of my paragraphs. I am somewhat unclear within my sentences. I still have that problem, but I have a better understand how to edit my papers." She eventually enrolled in English 101 and successfully completed it after receiving substantial support from a campus writing tutorial program. However, it was very apparent to the student and her first-year instructors that she had needed a more basic introduction to academic writing before taking degree-credit courses.

The experience of multilingual students on our campus further demonstrates the importance of making placement recommendations based on students' individual academic

needs. Each year, our campus enrolls many students who identify their home language as Hmong on the placement test. Because all of these students graduate from Wisconsin high schools, they are not required to submit TOEFL scores, and nothing in their admissions materials tells advisors which students would benefit from a course taught by an instructor with graduate training and experience in working with multilingual students. These multilingual students complete their secondary education in just a few local area high schools with similar course offerings, and yet they arrive on our campus with a wide range of educational and linguistic experiences. For example, more than twenty Hmong students from three separate academic years agreed to participate in our research of students' transition to college writing. A close analysis of both their placement profiles and first-year college writing reveals that students with similar placement test scores can have very different needs as readers and writers. From the group of Hmong students with test scores that placed them into non-degree credit reading and writing courses, several students completed writing samples that clearly indicated that they would benefit from our workshop class for multilingual writers. Others wrote essays that were indistinguishable from the writing produced by monolingual English speakers, and the most appropriate placement was obviously in our basic academic writing course. However, other students' placement profiles and essays suggested that they might feel comfortable in either of our non-degree credit composition classes, which both offer an accelerated introduction to critical reading and academic essay writing. After we gave them a choice of courses, some students selected the workshop for multilingual writers while others did not.

Perhaps a more important aspect of the multiple measures approach to placement is that some multilingual students can enroll in degree-credit writing classes even when their lack of experience in editing sentence-level writing makes it difficult for them to achieve a high score on the placement test. For example, one Hmong student had WEPT and ACT scores (mid-teens in ACT English and Reading) that would place him into non-degree credit courses at every institution in our state. However, he successfully completed academic English courses during his senior year in high school. His writing sample showed that he had already developed the writing skills necessary for achieving key learning outcomes for our developmental composition courses, including the ability to structure an essay around a clear main point and support it with specific evidence. The placement team recommended that he enroll in English 101 with a non-degree credit reading course. He completed both degree-credit courses in our writing program sequence within two semesters with solid grades.

The writing that this student completed over the course of his first college year confirmed the appropriateness of the placement team's recommendations. He continued to demonstrate an ability to write well-organized essays based on a thesis. However, academic

reading was challenging for him, and the most difficult assignments for both composition courses seemed to be essays that required him to write from sources. His introductory self-assessment for a first-semester reading class also revealed his lack of experience with academic reading: "As far as reading goes, I am a very slow reader. Due to lack of vocabulary and the way that some things are written, I always get confused or lost." This student benefited from an academic reading class that provided him with multiple opportunities to read, discuss, and write about difficult texts before he enrolled in the second semester course that required him to write about independently located research sources. At the same time, he would not have received the same benefits from enrolling in a non-degree credit writing class.

### ***Benefits to the Writing Program and Its Instructors***

The multiple measures approach to placement allows our local English Department to examine each student's individual learning needs based on their previous educational experiences and preparation for college reading and writing. Analyzing the placement profiles for most of our campus's incoming students has provided us with a clear picture of the learning needs of the student populations that our campus serves. Previously, composition and support course instructors focused primarily on the college readiness of individual students in their own course sections instead of having access to multiple pieces of evidence about the overall preparation and educational backgrounds of students on our campus. This new ability to assess the shifting needs of entire student populations at our institution has enabled us to

respond with appropriate program changes.

For example, during the placement process, composition instructors assess each student's readiness for reading and writing-intensive coursework, focusing specifically on preparation for our institution's first-year writing program and general education curriculum. The placement team then makes recommendations for appropriate learning support courses. Previously, advisors recommended reading and learning skills classes to students based primarily on their standardized test scores and high school grades. A multiple measures placement process through the Eng-

"This new ability to assess the shifting needs of entire student populations at our institution has enabled us to respond with appropriate program changes."

lish Department means that learning support placement comes from instructors who teach first-year writing, reading, and other support courses. This process has resulted in several important changes to programs for underprepared and at-risk students on our campus and in our statewide two-year institution. Our campus offers six sections of reading each year in comparison to the one or two classes that we previously offered before the English Department assessed reading readiness as part of the campus placement process. We also added additional sections of learning skills courses and writing tutorial classes. Other campuses in our institution have also expanded their basic skills programs in response to the multiple measures approach to placement, which has provided clear evidence that many of the students who enroll in our open-access institution are not ready for college reading and writing without significant support—though this would not necessarily be apparent based solely on reviewing a student's standardized test scores.

An English Department placement process has also resulted in changes to the way that other campuses in our statewide institution place students into first-year courses, including those that continue to use the Wisconsin English Placement Test as the only placement measure. After assessing more than a thousand student placement files, we examined the WEPT cut-scores that our statewide institution uses to place students into first-year composition and non-degree credit English. As we evaluated the results of our campus placement process, we determined that our institution's cut-score for the core, transfer-level research course was unusually low based on the learning outcomes for the course. Using English scores for the Wisconsin test as a standalone measure, many students were skipping the first semester English 101 course and testing directly into the more difficult course—even when every other placement measure (ACT, writing sample, high school grades and curriculum) indicated that they needed an introduction to college-level academic reading and writing before enrolling in the much more difficult second semester course. We also determined that our cut-score was lower than most universities in our state that used the same test, even though our two-year institution has a larger number of underprepared students who are at-risk for probation or suspension. However, until faculty from the English Department became involved in the placement process, the cut-score and testing process remained relatively mysterious to our department because it was administered entirely through a Student Services office. The work on our campus resulted in changed cut-scores that more accurately reflect the learning outcomes for our writing program and the inclusion of a reading score, confirming the value of Brian Huot's observation that successful assessment practices are “sensitive to the purpose and criteria for successful communication in which student ability in writing becomes part of a community's search for value and meaning within a shared context” (563).

## *Benefits to the Institution*

Careful attention to placement by department members with background in writing studies has resulted in a number of dramatic program revisions and benefits to our institution as a whole, some department-specific, some campus-specific, and some with larger implications for our students beyond the first-year writing sequence.

First, careful review of the placement mechanism and its significance resulted in an ongoing paradigm shift within our department, one that required us to transform the way we thought about FYC and that was rooted in historical enrollment trends and institutional memory. As our admission policy crept in the last three decades toward open admission (rather than viewing the two-year transfer campuses as "extensions" of the flagship university), it became clear that the model used at our selected campuses—a single writing course focused on more advanced college writing and research skills for most students—was inappropriate for our student population. Recognition of this shift meant the English department had to undertake some self-scrutiny and structural changes to the first-year writing program, which resulted in more students taking a full year of composition to introduce them to academic writing and critical reading.

The formation of an ad hoc Composition Committee—rather than just a Curriculum Committee who had previously handled all curricular questions on literature, writing, developmental writing, creative writing, and beyond—was a first step toward tackling questions about structuring our courses as a program.<sup>12</sup> In the absence of a WPA, again, typical at many open-admission, two-year campuses, the Composition Committee worked with our previous course guides and course objectives to formulate a set of carefully sequenced learning outcomes based on our local needs and contextualized within recommendations by NCTE and WPA, specifically the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" (Council of Writing Program Administrators). This now-standing committee not only developed cohesive learning outcomes for our developmental, first-semester, and second-semester courses but also revised course guidelines including requirements and recommended texts in light of the new knowledge based on close examination of placement, new authority conferred by institutional structures, and an increased departmental emphasis on developing a writing program based on the student populations that our institution serves.

Secondary but still important outcomes for our institution (particularly at our campus but increasingly spreading to others as the other 12 campuses in the UW Colleges adopt

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12. Jeff Klausman has argued that "there is a difference between offering writing classes and a writing program. A program, I believe, is characterized by an explicitly expressed coherent curriculum with integrated faculty development and assessment (cf. Fulkerson 680). Lacking that, we have only classes loosely related by too often unspoken and, most likely, conflicting assumptions about aims, means, and purposes" (Klausman 239).

a multiple measures approach) are a better understanding of our students and their needs and strengthened relationship between advisors and the English Department. With more accurate knowledge on the part of the English faculty about student needs, we can make clearer and informed recommendations about student needs for support courses such as learning skills, a critical reading class, writing center tutorial/studio courses, but we also are able to communicate more effectively to advising staff who do not teach FYC courses about the reading and writing demands of the curriculum.

### ***Challenges***

The placement process itself over the last few years has come with some challenges on our own campus and as it has been adopted by other campuses that make up our statewide two-year institution. Because placement involves the cooperation of our Student Services office (a centralized unit responsible for admissions, registration, and advising), it was imperative that we collaborate across campus functional units. Since the standardized test is already administered by a proctor out of that office, we work with a Dean in Student Services to provide the writing prompt, survey materials, and instructions for administering it. This process also requires some coordination beyond the administration—pulling together a “placement file” (done by an employee from that office with access to student records) getting the files to the placement team (at least two members our campus English faculty), and working in a timely fashion between student placement testing and registration sessions. This sometimes requires a tight turnaround at busy points in the semester.

One major challenge was shifting the perspective of responsibility for student placement. We saw this manifested in the ways that some advisors had difficulty moving away from the (easy, empirical) placement we had previously been using—a single number on a standardized editing test—to recognizing and acknowledging the English department’s authority for pre-empting that number after assessing multiple pieces of evidence in a student’s file. Other campus English faculty reported this challenge as well—from advisors, Student Services administrators, and students themselves, who are highly comfortable with the easily quantifiable test score even though it is not correlated with any of the learning outcomes in our writing courses. We’ve responded to these challenges in several ways:

- a) We have created explanatory documents for various audiences (instructors, advisors, administrators, and students) to describe the process and outline placement criteria .
- b) Informational meetings and presentations have been critical in helping advisors and administrators understand the multiple measures process. For example, we gave formal presentations at annual statewide meetings for Uni-

versity of Wisconsin System advisors and for Student Services employees within our 13-campus, two-year institution. We initially conducted regular question-and-answer sessions with local campus advisors, and we continue to follow-up with meetings at least one or twice each year.

- c) We have also raised awareness of changes to the placement process through e-mail updates to instructors, advisors, campus administrators, and student services coordinators.
- d) Each of our thirteen campuses has a “Campus Assessment Coordinator” position, and one of the co-authors served in that position each year as we were moving away from the single-score placement model. As a result, we designed annual campus assessment projects to evaluate the effectiveness of the changes (through measuring performance in particular courses affected by the change in recommendations for enrolling in particular, reading and writing-intensive courses; monitoring changes to the probation and suspension rate; and conducting a survey of writing students about their perception of the appropriateness of their placement). This assessment process was able to provide specific evidence of the value of the change to placement in the face of concerns that periodically arose from our campus and other campuses as they implemented the new approach.
- e) We also conducted more formal research to study the relationship between placement and students’ progress toward achieving writing program learning outcomes. We received funding from a statewide grant agency supporting research that investigates student learning. We designed a large-scale SoTL project to assess the effectiveness of the process more extensively during the 2010 to 2011 academic year.
- f) Finally, we have given presentations, conducted workshops, and organized training sessions for members of the English Department for our statewide institution. This included developing placement assessment tools and guidelines that other campuses could revise and adapt according to their own local needs without having to create new placement materials from scratch. Our meetings with faculty and adjunct instructors assisted other campuses in developing their own campus placement processes while also providing us with crucial feedback on our work. These discussions also helped our 13-campus English Department to reach consensus on placement measures that apply to all campuses (including revised cut-scores for the state test and recommendations for placing students into remedial support courses).



All of these steps have been important parts of changing the culture of our institution to recognize the value of multiple measures placement assessment and the importance of involving the instructors from the English department in that process.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear to us that replicating our multiple measures placement model at much larger institutions than ours (we have a student headcount at our campus of 1400 students, and 14,000 students total across our 13 campuses) would require a significant investment of time and energy by English faculty as well as a coordinated, long-term effort for implementation. In order to implement this process, we have worked carefully with our Student Services staff and with the approval and encouragement of the department chair and campus Dean. We also implemented the process incrementally, beginning with those students most likely to be characterized as “at-risk” for probation or suspension and eventually moving to a review of all incoming, first-year and transfer students. Our budget already accounted for a Student Orientation fee and a small additional charge gave Student Services the resources to pay a modest but sufficient hourly wage to instructors reviewing student files.

Our own work on this project continues this academic year with a large-scale, targeted assessment that tracks student outcomes for two academic years—identifying the placement information with specific students, our course enrollment recommendations (both first-year writing and support or learning resource courses), and the outcomes for those students. Gathering additional data such as reports from students themselves about their first-year experience will provide us with a richer sense of the impact of placement changes on our campus.

We want to close this essay by making a strong statement in favor of assessment of student readiness at two-year, open-access institutions that reflects the complex academic and personal backgrounds they bring to the higher education experience. This placement process must account for the distinct learning needs of students at open-admission campuses and, in order to be most effective, must be administered by faculty from the English department who actually teach the courses into which students are being placed. Though we recognize the demands that such a process places on both the fiscal and human resources of an institution, the substantial value to students, to the institution, and to programs is worth the investment of time and money. Further, in our case, budgets allotted to placement are typically relatively stable and can be reapportioned to accommodate the comparatively small amount it costs to remunerate faculty readers/ placement teams, especially when considering the human and financial costs of poor placement for faculty workload and student success.

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## Appendix A

# English Placement Writing Sample

## UW-Marathon County

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

An article in the October 10, 2008, edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education entitled “Connecting Schools and Colleges: More Rhetoric Than Reality” by Michael Kirst reported that

*College completion rates are stagnant for recent high-school graduates. In California, only 24 percent of community-college students receive a vocational certificate or an associate degree — or transfer to a four-year institution within six years. At community colleges nationwide, more than 60 percent of students who enroll after high school end up taking at least one remedial course. In the California State University system, 56 percent of entering freshmen are in remediation.*

*Clearly, the connections between high schools and higher-education institutions are still not what they should be to help students prepare for college.*

In a short essay, use the statistics and claims above to assess your own high school education. In what ways has your high school curriculum prepared you to be successful in college-level courses? In what areas do you wish you were better prepared?

### **Some recommendations:**

- Use standard academic essay structure (introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion)
- Use the conventions of standard written English including formal academic tone
- Assert a thesis statement (make your position clear)
- Select appropriate and specific examples to support your points

## New First-Year Student Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

High School Attended: \_\_\_\_\_

- What English courses, if any, did you take your senior year of high school?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Have you taken Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate courses *in any subject*? If so, which courses?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- How long has it been since you took an English course?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What is your home language? If English isn't your native language, do you read and write in your primary language?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Have you had a college English course before? If so, what, and where did you take it?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel that your high school grades and ACT test scores accurately reflect your academic abilities? Explain your assessment (use back of sheet if necessary).  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Check any that apply:

- \_\_\_\_\_ I would prefer a slower start to college with a limited number of difficult classes the first semester.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I believe I am ready for difficult reading and writing courses my first semester.

### Optional:

Did you have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in high school for a physical or learning disability? If so, would you like to speak with someone on how to receive accommodations for your college courses?

**Rubric for Placement Exam  
UW-Marathon County**

<p><b>Organization</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essay lacks coherence or a single controlling idea or ideas are not logically arranged</li> <li>• May or may not use standard essay structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essay is coherent and focuses on a main point. Ideas are arranged logically</li> <li>• Uses standard essay structure of introduction, body, conclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write and support a clear, focused, and appropriately placed thesis</li> <li>• Supports a coherent and cohesive essay using transitions within and between paragraphs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Content</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not clearly address the text</li> <li>• Thesis offers a self-assessment</li> <li>• Does not use examples to support claims</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refers to text</li> <li>• Essay self-assesses at least one of the two areas (prepared vs. not prepared)</li> <li>• Uses a few examples to support claims</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicitly addresses text</li> <li>• Thesis indicates self-assessment of preparation and lack of preparation</li> <li>• Uses adequate examples to support claims</li> </ul>
<p><b>Conventions of standard written English</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essay does not demonstrate understanding of how sentences work and are constructed</li> <li>• Mechanical problems interfere with the reader's comprehension of essay meaning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essay contains structurally sound sentences using appropriate syntax and adhering to grammar and usage conventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essay demonstrates mastery of usage, mechanics, and diction appropriate for an academic essay.</li> </ul>



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