

# Basic Writing Reform as an Opportunity to Rethink First-Year Composition: New Evidence from an Accelerated Learning Program

Rachel Ihara

*ABSTRACT:* This article argues that the national trend to replace developmental writing programs with mainstreaming and corequisite courses presents an important opportunity to reconsider writing goals and assessment practices for all students. This insight emerges in part from data collected over several semesters at one community college, which showed that mainstreamed students in an accelerated learning program often outperform non-developmental students when assessed by the same measure. These results raise questions about placement but also about prior assessment practices that had required developmental students to undergo more rigorous writing assessments than students deemed “prepared” for college-level writing. By offering a history of shifting assessment practices at one institution, this article aims to show how blurring the line between “developmental” and “regular” writers, as a result of recent mainstreaming efforts, can lead to a productive reevaluation of writing assessment for all students.

*KEYWORDS:* accelerated learning program; developmental writing; first-year composition; writing assessment; writing program administration; writing program assessment

Defining “basic writers” and determining how best to serve students deemed “underprepared” for “college-level writing” have been fraught issues since the field’s inception (Otte and Mlynarczyk); however, critiques of Basic Writing became more pronounced in the 1990s, when early proponents began to challenge the entire enterprise—both the mechanisms by which students were labeled as remedial or developmental and the practices that resulted from such classification (Shor; Bartholomae). At the heart of this debate is a tricky question: does providing students with additional time to acquire “college-level literacy skills” through required non-credit-bearing, remedial coursework help them to succeed in their future writing endeavors (Sternglass; Long; Attewell and Lavin)? Or, do prerequisite, zero-credit courses

---

**Rachel Ihara** is Associate Professor of English and one of the coordinators of Composition at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. Her work on community college readers and writers has appeared in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and *Across the Disciplines*.

© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 39, No.2 2020

function as a barrier, particularly for Black and Hispanic students, with deleterious effects on motivation, persistence, and timely progress toward degree (Hodara and Jaggars; Mlynarczyk and Molloy; Poe, Nastal and Elliot; Nastal)? In recent years, institutions nation-wide have moved toward the latter position (sometimes with an eye to cost-cutting), dismantling or replacing remedial writing programs in favor of curricular models designed to move students more quickly through required composition courses, including studio courses, stretch models, and co-requisite courses (Adams et al.; Glau; Rigolino and Freel). While these reforms have largely been successful with regard to the students they were intended to serve, I would like to suggest that by unsettling the boundary between “remedial” and “regular” college writers, mainstreaming programs ultimately challenge us to rethink the goals of college writing writ large. To put it bluntly, if developmental writing no longer serves as a gatekeeper to full college access, does that mean First-Year Composition (FYC) ought to assume this function, adopting a premise of Basic Writing that students need these courses to succeed in college and/or to demonstrate writing competence? Or, do the results of these curricular experiments underscore equity issues that have troubled basic writing from the beginning, signaling a need to reevaluate our aims and purposes in all required writing courses?

For me, these questions emerged within a particular institutional context and are informed by data from our local mainstreaming program—an Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) in which students previously designated as “developmental” and required to take and pass at least one prerequisite writing class before entering FYC were given permission to enroll in FYC with additional instructional support. Over the past seven years that it has been in existence, this program has achieved the intended result of enabling more “basic writers” to take and pass FYC in order to move on more quickly. Its success could be used to argue that these kinds of programs are needed to provide greater access, in a responsible and supportive way, to students previously excluded from credit-bearing, required writing classes, results that replicate the success of ALP programs documented in a growing body of research (Adams, Gearheart, Miller and Roberts; Coleman; Jenkins et al.; Hern and Snell).

However, here I am more interested in some of the peculiar patterns that emerged as a result of collecting program data, patterns with implications for students beyond those directly enrolled in the ALP program. While most research on ALP, and on FYC, considers those courses and programs

in isolation, on our campus the structure of the ALP program, and the data that emerged, raised unanticipated questions about writing instruction that transcended these categories, calling into question the mechanisms by which students are determined to need additional support and pointing to a need to rethink the goals and purpose of FYC, for *all* students. Our findings, while local and specific, also point to a potential new source of investigation, as corequisite courses disrupt established divisions between “remedial” and “regular” writing courses.

To make this argument for the unsettling potential of corequisite courses, I first offer a local history of writing instruction on my home campus, an environment in which, historically, students’ placement in “developmental” or in “regular” writing had a significant effect on students’ experience of writing instruction and assessment, and on instructors’ understanding of their writing needs. In brief, while the developmental sequence was characterized by a rigorous set of assessment measures designed to gauge students’ preparedness for college-level work, there was no real effort to standardize assessment within the regular composition sequence—a situation that inspired a few instructors to develop a small collaborative portfolio assessment practice as a means of fostering greater instructional coherence and community. Having established this local context, I then describe our implementation of a small ALP program in the spring semester of 2013, a program that expanded and evolved but consistently met its goal of mainstreaming “developmental” students, many of whom passed FYC with the additional instructional support. At this point, I zoom out to consider the more surprising outcomes that emerged from our program data from the last five semesters, namely our findings that 1) ALP students tend to pass at higher rates than “regular” students in the same sections; and 2) non-ALP students in ALP sections, currently assessed via portfolio within faculty cohorts, consistently pass at lower rates than students in regular, non-ALP sections, sections in which the classroom instructor assigns grades independently. These outcomes, I argue, compel us to pause and take stock, to review the mechanisms used to classify students as “remedial” or needing supplementary support and to consider the effects of such classification systems on both teachers and students, but also to seriously rethink the goals and objectives of FYC.

Mainstreaming reforms, like the one I discuss here, thus mark a potential turning point, an opportunity to reassess college writing more broadly, given the insights gained in the process of blurring the boundaries between writers formerly classified as either “basic” or “prepared.” As Sean Molloy,

Silvester Fonville, and Abdus Salam demonstrate in their discussion of Basic Writing's history at one institution, entrenched views about students' writing "needs" rooted in local "lore" may persist within an institutional ecosystem, impeding real change in how we think about how to best serve new college writers (15). Therefore, we need to resist the temptation to simply transplant ideas about "basic writers" into our new programmatic contexts, instead taking the best of what we have learned from decades of research on basic writing pedagogy, while being mindful of the social justice issues that have troubled the field from the beginning. Understanding the history of assessment within a given program may be the first step to creating a more equitable and socially just approach to writing instruction. As Banks et al. assert in their collaborative statement on social justice and writing assessment, "With attention to contextualization, histories of writing assessment bring to light empirical practices that are themselves value laden and reveal the need for socially just educative processes" (379). Thus, tracing the history of writing instruction in one setting and attending to the data on student performance gathered during a period of programmatic change, may serve as a catalyst to revise our understandings of what college writing courses can and should be.

### **A Tale of Two Writing Programs: A Local History**

In 2008, when I began teaching at Kingsborough Community College (KCC), the community college where I currently help to administer the composition program, I entered a department that essentially had two writing programs in place: a non-credit-bearing developmental writing sequence and a credit-bearing composition sequence. Both programs were housed within the English Department, but these programs were managed by different administrators. Although some faculty taught exclusively in one program, for the most part developmental writing courses and composition courses were taught by the same part-time and full-time instructors, a large faculty pool composed of approximately 100 instructors, evenly divided between part-time and full-time faculty.

To provide some broader context, this community college is one of several within a city-wide, CUNY system of two-year, four-year, and comprehensive schools. In 2008, it served approximately 15,700 students, including 2,386 first-time freshmen. Of these students, 70% qualified for financial aid, 60% were from households earning less than \$30,000 annually and approximately 52% of whom were foreign born ("KCC Fall 2008 at

a Glance”; “Household Income”). Many of these students were directed to remedial courses upon enrollment. According to institutional data, in 2008, over half of the entering first-semester students placed into a sequence of non-credit-bearing developmental courses as determined by their scores on the entrance reading and writing tests (“Pass Rate”). In 2008, 65.2% of incoming students failed the reading placement test and 47.9% failed the writing test, meaning that at least 65.2% of the incoming freshman class, or more than 1,556 students, were directed into a course in a multi-level developmental writing sequence.

These students who placed into developmental writing entered a program in which portfolio assessment, and other assessment measures, played a central role in determining progress through the program and into credit-bearing courses. The main courses in the developmental writing sequence included three levels of non-credit-bearing courses, with the lowest two levels meeting for six hours a week, and the highest level (the one just below the regular required writing course) meeting for four hours per week. Progress through these courses was determined by a student’s overall performance in day-to-day classwork, performance on a cross-marked course portfolio, and, eventually, scores on the university-wide, timed placement exam. In order to be eligible to submit a portfolio, students needed to keep up with the regular coursework and meet attendance criteria. Then, at the end of the semester, students faced some version of portfolio assessment, which varied by course level but always involved cross-reading by faculty across sections of student portfolios that included some combination of the following: drafted essays with feedback culminating in final drafts; a department-created reading exam; a department-created, timed writing exam; and some self-reflection writing. Students who passed the portfolio assessment also needed to retake and pass the same 90-minute, university-wide, standardized writing test initially used for placement. Students who passed the portfolio assessment but failed the placement test were directed to other non-credit-bearing, developmental courses, which targeted reading or writing and were more explicitly geared to test prep.

In contrast, entering students who passed the reading and writing tests and placed into the first of a two-course required writing sequence found themselves in a composition program that was much more loosely structured, particularly when it came to assessment. There were lists of learning outcomes for both courses and instructors were offered a recommended curriculum. For instance, the first course in the freshman-year sequence suggested that instructors select course readings centered around a theme and

assign three text-based, thesis-driven essays, in multiple drafts. There was, for some time, a department-provided final exam prompt, a timed essay in which students advanced an argument based on two non-fiction texts on the same topic. However, when I began teaching this course in 2008, assessment of student work, including the “common” departmental exam, was entirely at the discretion of the individual instructors. There was no cross-marking of student writing and no other structure in place for fostering communication around goals and expectations for student writing.

This system of placing students on one of these two paths on the basis of a single timed test is clearly problematic from an equity standpoint, although it is hard to say which students were getting the best, or the worst, deal. The developmental students were afforded a demanding and comprehensive set of literacy experiences and assessments designed by teachers working collaboratively. They were held to high standards and compelled to prove that they could meet varied literacy expectations, with an emphasis on text-based, academic essay writing. Some students cycled repeatedly through these remedial courses or dropped out, but others met these various writing challenges and succeeded. The success of these students, the ones who passed out of developmental writing and moved on, led to a general sense that the rigor of the developmental writing sequence prepared them for subsequent writing courses and for college more generally, but this is difficult to prove. Perhaps the students who made it through the developmental sequence would have been fine in FYC without the prerequisite writing courses. Perhaps the students who failed developmental writing or dropped out along the way did so partly because of the stigma of being classified as remedial, the burden of paying for non-credit-bearing courses, and the opportunity costs of completing these additional requirements. Indeed, research has shown that the longer the developmental writing pipeline, the more students fail to persist in college and even those who complete the remedial classes do not always enroll in the credit-bearing course (Hern).

In contrast, the students who placed directly into composition were subject to the luck of the draw in terms of the type and difficulty level of instruction they received: they might have “harder” or “easier” teachers, encounter more or less challenging texts, and face different kinds of writing assignments and revision requirements; and they were graded according to the values of instructors designing their assessment measures independently. However, in the absence of information about the literacy demands placed upon students across the many sections of composition and the relationship between what students did in composition and the writing challenges they

faced in other educational contexts, it is impossible to determine how students were affected by being placed directly into composition, as compared to those who were subjected to the more structured set of expectations that characterized the developmental writing sequence.

Leaving aside the question of which approach is “better,” what strikes me most about this entrenched practice of dividing and classifying students, which has been the norm at many institutions, is the way the categories are fundamentally interdependent. We, both instructors and administrators, needed the division to justify rigorous, standardized assessment practices for one population but also, I think, to feel comfortable not giving as much attention to the “regular” students. The developmental writing program owed its existence to a problem, one exposed (and perhaps partly created) by the placement test, namely “underprepared” students (Bartholomae). But, by a similar logic, the creation of these two categories of students—underprepared and prepared—undermined the notion that there could be benefits to a similar programmatic approach to assessing writing in composition. Indeed, when it was proposed at one point that the first course in the composition sequence might benefit from the implementation of some limited collaborative assessment moment, such as cross-marking a single assignment, this was met with substantial faculty resistance. Partly, this was due to exhaustion, I imagine. Faculty who taught in both programs recognized the labor that went into the intensive assessment practices of the developmental sequence and were, understandably, reluctant to take on a similar burden in composition. But the tradition of separating out “underprepared” students and assessing them differently probably also influenced instructors’ ideas about when programmatic assessment processes were necessary and for whom.

### **On the Margins: Piloting Portfolio Assessment in Composition**

Despite this tradition of very different approaches to assessment in developmental courses and composition, there were a few composition faculty, including the director of the program and myself, who felt that our teaching could benefit from a greater level of collaboration around assessment. This led, in 2009, to a small group of six faculty coming together to develop a different way of assessing their first-semester composition students collaboratively, a process that might be more manageable and streamlined than the assessment processes in the developmental writing sequence but that would still provide a framework for faculty to work together to clarify values around writing and support one another in assessing student work.

Led by a program director with a background in writing assessment, funded by the department, and inspired by the work of Bob Broad, this self-selected cohort of six faculty members began with a dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) project to develop a set of assessment criteria from the ground up (*What We Really Value*). Rather than start with a list of abstract qualities of “good writing,” faculty read multiple samples of student work from previous semesters, carefully recording all observations, in order to determine, as precisely and concretely as possible, the aspects or qualities of writing that they valued the most in student writing.

This initial meeting and mapping exercise resulted in an “Assessment Criteria” document, as well as other communally generated portfolio materials (see Appendix). Faculty developed a feedback form for failing portfolios aligned with the “Assessment Criteria” and a common “Self-Assessment Essay Assignment,” also based on the “Assessment Criteria” and inspired by Ed White’s argument that reflective, meta-cognitive writing can play a more central role in portfolio assessment. Whereas student reflective writing in the developmental sequence typically took the form of a cover letter or narrative of the student’s class experience, the “Self-Assessment Assignment” asked each student to produce a fully-developed “essay” demonstrating how their portfolio met the criteria or course outcomes by explicitly citing their own writing as evidence.

These curricular materials were used in a streamlined version of portfolio assessment, which was open to all instructors who elected to take part. Those opting into CPA met once at mid-semester in cohorts of three or four instructors to share their approaches to teaching composition and to review and discuss the assessment criteria. At the end of the semester, students in these sections were required to submit portfolios that included all drafts of two (out of three) essays and a self-assessment essay. Then, at the end of the semester, faculty exchanged portfolios within their cohort in order to determine which portfolios were passing and which were not, results that could be appealed within the cohort at a final wrap up. For portfolios that passed, the classroom instructor would assign letter grades. This was similar to portfolio assessment processes in the different courses in the developmental sequence, with a few key exceptions: as noted earlier, the self-assessment essay was more explicitly tied to the criteria; portfolios in composition did not include any timed writing or exams; students were not assigned a level (such as high-pass or low-pass, with a corresponding grade range) but only assessed as pass/fail; and cohorts were not directed by “cohort leaders” but were entirely self-managed.



## Basic Writing Reform as an Opportunity to Rethink First-Year Composition

For nearly a decade (from 2009 to 2017), this version of CPA in composition remained a boutique endeavor. It was supported by the department and the composition program, in that participating instructors were compensated for the extra time commitment required to cross read portfolios, but it remained small scale, with the number of people opting in hovering at around 8-10 (in a department of over 100 full- and part-time faculty). New teachers were required to participate during their first semester teaching composition, as a form of professional development at a time when the department was expanding, but for the most part they did not choose to continue after the semester when CPA was required. It may be that these new instructors, who were both part-time and full-time, felt overly burdened by the additional work of meeting and cross-marking. Moreover, because a robust cross-marking system remained the trademark of the developmental sequence, those who taught in both programs might have felt one collaborative assessment experience per semester was enough.

As someone who took part in CPA from its inception, and began teaching composition exclusively, I found it to be a welcome relief from the isolation that had previously characterized teaching composition, but without the intensity of assessment characteristic of developmental courses. By cross-reading student portfolios from other sections, I was able to see what other teachers were assigning and how they guided students in the revision process. Collaborative assessment made me more aware of my patterns in evaluating student work and gave me a broader perspective on my students' performance. There wasn't complete consensus among instructors, something scholars of communal assessment have questioned as either possible or desirable (Colombini and McBride). But there was a high level of mutual respect among this self-selected cohort, a real opportunity for "multiperspectival, dialogic exchange," and it felt like we were part of a collective project, one we'd built from the ground up, to help ensure that students passing composition (at least those in our sections) had demonstrated they had met the course goals (Broad, "Pulling Your Hair Out" 249).

### **ALP: A Program Expands and Evolves**

While this small group of faculty teaching composition remained dedicated to CPA on an opt-in basis, the long-standing divide between developmental writing and composition remained in place when the department launched a small-scale Accelerated Learning Program in spring 2013. At first, ALP was a modest endeavor made up of just five sections of ALP and

modeled on Peter Adam's approach to ALP at the Community College of Baltimore County. In our iteration, ALP students, who would have previously been classified as "remedial," were allowed to enroll in integrated sections of composition, composed of approximately seventeen "regular" students and eight "ALP" students. These sections were indistinguishable from other sections of composition; the only difference was that the eight ALP students received additional support in the form of a one-hour corequisite course, and ALP students, unlike their non-ALP counterparts in the same class, had to retake and pass the placement exam by the end of the semester in order to earn a passing grade.

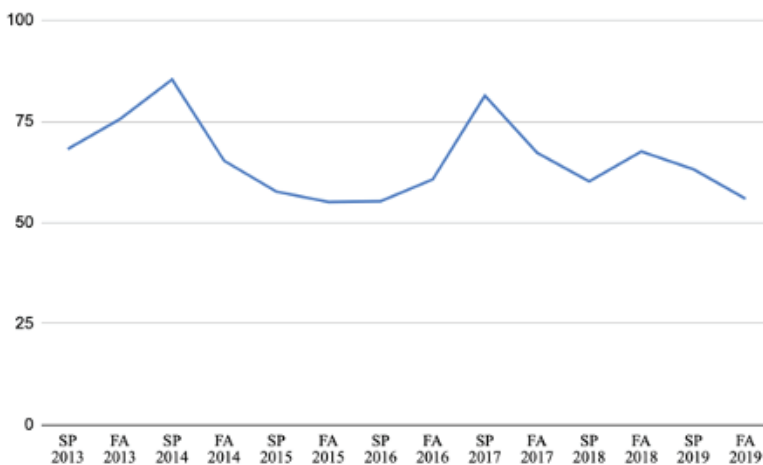
Over the next four years (from 2013-2017), the basic structure of ALP remained the same, although the requirements for entry were tweaked several times and the number of sections of ALP increased (to ten sections in fall of 2014 and to twenty-two in fall of 2017). A more substantial change came in fall 2017, in response to a top-down, system-wide decision to discontinue the placement exam as an exit measure for students enrolled in corequisite courses. This university-wide decision offered an opportunity to rethink exit measures for ALP students, and the CPA process described above, which had been functioning smoothly on the sidelines for several years, offered an obvious alternative to the timed writing exam. The rationale for making the switch to CPA was that ALP students had always had an additional check (beyond their course performance) to determine their readiness to move on in the composition sequence. It made sense to us, as directors of the program, and to faculty accustomed to standardized assessment of developmental students, that ALP students would continue to face some additional assessment measure to determine their readiness to move on. A key difference, of course, was that this new assessment measure would affect other students in ALP sections as well. Since instructors could not very well teach and assess via portfolio for only a subset of students within a given class, implementing portfolio assessment meant that the entire class would have to be assessed in this way, without any distinction drawn between ALP students and their non-ALP counterparts. This, to us, seemed fair. After all, if ALP was really about mainstreaming students, all students in the integrated sections should be held to the same standard.

This change in assessment was accompanied by two other developments: another jump in ALP's enrollment and the addition of a second hour to the corequisite course. Yet, despite these various modifications to the program, the overall trajectory of ALP between 2013 and 2019 has been one of ongoing expansion and persistent student success. As can be seen in

## Basic Writing Reform as an Opportunity to Rethink First-Year Composition

Table 1, pass rates for ALP students have mostly held steady during this six-year period, with over half of all ALP students, and sometimes significantly more, completing the requirements of the course and passing any additional assessments. These are students who would previously have been obliged to take at least one prerequisite course—typically a four-hour, non-credit-bearing, semester-long class—before being allowed to attempt composition. This is, to me, clearly an argument for the value of ALP as an alternative to required prerequisite writing courses. In keeping with findings at other institutions, our results show that when “remedial” students are allowed to attempt college-level work, and provided with academic support, more often than not they succeed (Adams, Gearheart, Miller and Roberts; Glau, Gregory; Coleman; Jenkins et al.; Hern and Snell).

**Table 1.** Percentage of ALP Students Passing Composition 1



### Zooming Out: ALP and Non-ALP Students

If the ALP Program I have been describing can be seen as a success from the perspective of the students it explicitly serves, its broader effects are more complicated. As noted above, fall 2017 marked a transition in the program, characterized by the elimination of the timed essay exam as an exit requirement for ALP students and the implementation of CPA for all students in ALP sections. For ALP students, the new assessment measure did have some impact, resulting in slightly lower pass rates. On average, 62.8% of ALP students passed in the five semesters during which portfolio assessment was in place, as compared to an average pass rate of 67.1% during the

previous nine semesters, when ALP students were required to retake and pass the timed placement test in addition to passing the course. (It should be noted that entrance requirements for ALP students were not consistent over these six years, with the cut-off scores on the standardized reading and writing exams varying slightly just about every semester.)

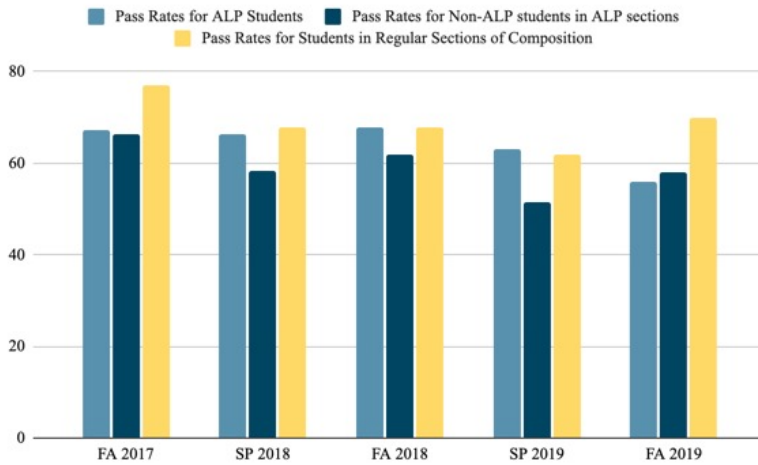
However, the more surprising finding is that the “regular” students enrolled in integrated ALP sections, those who had *not* been classified as “needing remediation” tended to do a bit worse than the ALP students, passing at lower rates in four out of five semesters for which we have data. As Table 2 illustrates, these students, who happened to be enrolled in ALP sections and, as a result, were assessed via course portfolio beginning in fall 2017, tended to pass at a slightly lower rate than the ALP students enrolled in the same course. The largest gap was in spring 2019, when only 51.5% of non-ALP students passed FYC, while 63.2% of ALP students passed, although the gap disappeared the following semester when fewer ALP students passed compared to their “prepared” counterparts (55.9% versus 57.9%). In all, over the five semesters during which CPA was the common assessment for all students in ALP sections, non-ALP students passed at a rate of 59.2% on average, compared to ALP students who passed at a rate of 64.1%, a difference of 4.9%.

Moreover, these students (the non-ALP students enrolled in ALP sections) performed even worse when compared to students who had happened to be placed into regular, non-ALP sections of composition, sections in which instructors did not use CPA. These students, who were identical in terms of having placed directly into composition, did not intentionally sign up for an integrated ALP section or a “regular” section; they did not know which approach to assessment they would encounter. But, consistently over five semesters, “regular” students in ALP sections were significantly less likely to pass composition—meaning they either failed to submit a passing portfolio or withdrew—than students similarly designated as not needing remediation who had happened to enroll in other sections of composition. Over the five semesters for which we have data, the pass rate of non-ALP students in ALP sections was 59.2%, as compared to a pass rate of 68.9% for students in regular sections of composition, or about 9.7% lower.

### **Implications: An Opportunity for Reflection**

There are really two sets of comparisons to consider. The first question is why non-ALP students in the integrated sections were less likely to pass than

**Table 2.** Pass rates for different populations.



the ALP students despite being deemed better prepared. It could be simply a sign that the supplemental instruction was working; students benefited so much from the additional time with their instructors that they outperformed their “prepared” peers. Alternatively, this finding might point to flaws in the mechanism by which students were originally classified as needing remediation. In our local context, it’s quite possible that performance on a 90-minute writing test, in which students compose an essay in response to a 250-300 word passage, is not well correlated to their ability to achieve the very different literacy goals of a 12-week writing course assessed via portfolio, a situation requiring them to read considerably longer texts, to write about multiple texts, and to use instructor and peer feedback to revise and produce multiple drafts. For instance, a non-native speaker might be determined to be a weak writer when asked to produce a short essay in a timed environment but excel in a classroom setting when given substantial time to revise and ongoing instructor support. Or, hypothetically, a writer able to meet the demands of a timed test might not have the necessary drive or buy-in to persist in a writing course emphasizing drafting and revision. In essence, if the mechanism dividing “underprepared” and “prepared” students is flawed to begin with, *and* the former is given access to additional instruction, it makes sense that the “underprepared” students would do better.

If the gap in performance between the ALP and non-ALP students is due to flaws in the initial placement mechanism, then the nation-wide trend away from timed writing tests and toward alternative methods of placement is a positive development. My own institution recently replaced the timed

placement exam with a system of multiple measures, an approach endorsed by a 2016 “TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform.” Since spring of 2020, student placement into ALP has been determined by an algorithm making use of students’ high school transcripts as well as their scores on national and state standardized tests like the New York Regents Exams and the SAT. This change in policy draws upon important national findings about placement. According to research by Clive Belfield and Peter Crosta, data from high school transcripts, including GPA and courses taken, offer a more reliable method for placing students appropriately when compared to writing placement tests. In another report, Belfield concluded that only 4-8% of students are misplaced when high school transcripts were used, while “between one quarter and one third of tested students are severely misplaced based on their scores on [traditional] placement tests” (Belfield 2).

Given this research on placement, it will be interesting to see whether or not our revised placement process reduces the performance gap between ALP and non-ALP students in the integrated, ALP sections of composition. If placement is more accurate, then supplemental instruction should have the intended leveling effect, resulting in closer pass rate for the two populations. However, it could be that there are other factors at play. For instance, it could be that designating certain students as needing supplemental instruction subtly alters instructors’ behavior with regard to ALP students and/or influences these students’ perceptions of themselves as writers, in ways that actually have a positive impact on pass rates. After all, instructors are told that the ALP students have been determined to be weaker writers, which could lead to lowered expectations, but might instead occasion a higher level of scrutiny, compassion, and encouragement (as Cheryl Hogue Smith and Maya Jiménez found in their study of identical remedial and mainstream linked classes). From the student’s perspective, being labeled “not quite ready” or “just below college level” could certainly have negative effects—on sense of belonging, on motivation, and on self-esteem—but the designation might also serve as an impetus to work harder, something hinted at in a recent article by former developmental writing students in which one recalls using the “fear and anger of never measuring up” as motivation “to do my absolute best to prove them wrong” (Galindo et al. 7). This is not to discount the potential damage done by categorizing and labeling student writers but rather to suggest that it is worth continuing to explore the complicated and varied effects of labels and placement decisions on teachers and students. For instance, research on students’ perceptions of remedial designation showed that students were most upset by the time they lost when they were required

### Basic Writing Reform as an Opportunity to Rethink First-Year Composition

to take non-credit-bearing, prerequisite courses, something corequisite courses circumvent (Venezia, Bracco, and Nodine). It could be that reframing the additional course hours as supplemental “support” helps to address the stigma and reduced motivation associated with the remedial label when it also functioned as a barrier to regular college courses.

Then there is the issue of the even higher discrepancy in pass rates between the non-ALP students in the integrated sections and students in regular sections of composition. On a basic level, this finding simply suggests that collaborative portfolio assessment is tougher than traditional grading. When students are asked to engage in a drafting process and to produce a certain quantity of work to be assessed as pass/fail by an outside reader, they are more likely to fail, whether by withdrawing from the course, failing to complete the work required to pass, or failing to demonstrate minimum levels of writing competence. When assessed by a teacher grading independently, the “same” students (according to current placement mechanisms) are more likely to pass. This, too, is an equity issue, and one that we, as a program, will have to consider in moving forward. Unfortunately, at this point we really don’t know enough about what makes portfolio classes harder to pass than the classes not assessed via portfolio. Are the standards in portfolio sections simply higher and therefore it is more difficult for students to demonstrate proficiency? Are we too easy on our own students when assigning grades independently and without our colleagues’ scrutiny? Are we too tough when reading work by students we don’t know, particularly when we are aware that there are unidentified “developmental writers” in the mix? Or, do some students fail portfolio assessment because they have been so conditioned to receive grades on each assignment that they flounder when grading is deferred?

These questions go beyond the issue of how best to serve “basic writers” and require a rethinking of the purposes and goals of college writing instruction more generally. However, they were questions that were hidden, to a certain extent, by the division between developmental writing and composition prior to implementing ALP. Whereas the earlier approach, the one I first encountered in 2008, classified students as “developmental” and “prepared” and then taught and assessed these two groups differently on the basis of this classification, by merging these students in integrated ALP sections and applying the same assessment measure to both groups of students, patterns emerged that suggest a need to rethink our program goals, standards, and assessment practices in FYC.

## **What Next? Moving Forward as a Program**

The findings do not result in a neat set of conclusions or obvious path forward. Instead, they uncover some troublesome aspects of our program that had been submerged by a tradition of assessment in which an intense, collaborative approach to assessment was seen as necessary only for “developmental” students. The question, then, is: what to do with this information? How might we use it to move forward productively? One logical response, of course, is to try first to understand it better. There is still a lot we don’t know about how students are affected by different placement designations and assessment measures, which means we can do more to gather data and tease out meaning from the performance gaps we’ve encountered. Pass rates alone don’t tell us *why* students pass, or don’t pass, when assessed via portfolio. Nor do they tell us anything about students’ experiences of being assessed in different ways.

In an effort to better understand these issues, we have gathered data on the response forms instructors complete for failing portfolios, a grid for feedback that aligns with the “Assessment Criteria” (see Appendix), and we are currently in the process of surveying students in portfolio sections. So far, unfortunately, this has not yielded much insight. Tallying the results of the feedback forms submitted for failing portfolios suggested that faculty readers failed portfolios for a variety of reasons, including students’ failure to show “development and growth,” to demonstrate “evidence of analysis and critical thinking” and to achieve “basic mechanical correctness” (to name the top three categories marked for spring 2018 and fall 2018). At this time, we have yet to analyze the student survey data to see if it offers insight into things that prevent students from passing. Another angle of inquiry might be to try to determine if students’ ability to pass a portfolio course correlates with future academic success, although this approach may be complicated by research at our institution suggesting that reading, writing, and revision (the primary targets of portfolio assessment) make up a relatively small part of the coursework students face in subsequent classes (see Del Principe and Ihara; Ihara and Del Principe).

However, even as we continue to attempt to better understand what is behind these findings, we should accept that they do seem to show that the current assessment system may need to be improved or reimagined. It could be that a CPA process that originated with a small dedicated group of faculty discussing and identifying shared values around writing cannot easily be scaled up to work with a larger group of faculty. Faculty who were not



part of the original cohort that created the composition CPA process may be drawing upon prior experiences with cross-marking in the developmental program and approaching collaborative assessment somewhat differently as a result. At any rate, these findings suggest that we, as program directors, need to think more critically about the new division, and inequity, created by the decision to require that only ALP sections be assessed via CPA. In effect, it appears that we have replicated the divide between “remedial” and “regular” writing classes that was characteristic of our department for many years, although the inequity is more obvious now that the divide is between the “same” students in different types of sections *within* composition.

This places us at a crossroads, requiring us to answer tough questions about whether the composition program can or should become more like our original version of developmental writing—committed to high standards for student writing based on traditional notions of academic literacy and with programmatic structures in place to promote faculty collaboration around assessment and encourage consistency across sections—or persist as a collection of required writing classes loosely organized around abstract learning goals interpreted differently by instructors operating with a large degree of autonomy. In other words, should the movement to mainstream students previously classified as “developmental” result in a composition program that is more like the dissolved “basic writing” program—with both its strengths, such as faculty collaboration around assessment, and its failings, with regard to equity and access—or might it lead us to imagine alternative approaches to curriculum and assessment that retain the communal spirit of “basic writing” without importing its more damaging elements?

For instance, these unsettling findings may indicate that it is time to reassess our traditional emphasis on introductory writing classes as initiation into “academic discourse.” Perhaps this moment offers an opportunity to consider other pedagogical goals, such as putting more emphasis on fostering students’ rhetorical awareness, as many have argued for (see Downs and Wardle 2007; Yancey, Robertson and Taczac; Andrus, Mitchler and Tinberg) and as suggested by the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.” Similarly, these findings might provide an impetus to explore alternative assessment practices that emphasize students’ persistence and labor more than their ability to produce textual products that demonstrate they have met certain abstract benchmarks (as Asao Inoue proposes in offering a model of assessment based on grading contracts developed collectively by the teacher and student).

Regardless, in our particular local context, these fundamental ques-

tions about pedagogy, assessment, and the purpose of FYC, cannot be answered from some kind lofty position of authority, despite our roles as program directors. Faculty at our institution have considerable instructional freedom, and there is a long history of pedagogical autonomy, particularly with regard to composition, as I have discussed above, which means we would need to have considerable buy-in for any major programmatic changes in curriculum or assessment to occur in a meaningful way. That is why continuing to investigate the causes of the discrepancies in pass rates is ultimately less important than disseminating our findings and creating opportunities to discuss these issues with *all* faculty teaching composition, not only those who teach ALP sections but also those who do not. Instructors who have been teaching sections of composition in relative isolation, in particular, need to be made aware of the current performance gap between students assessed via collaborative portfolio assessment (CPA) and those graded by instructors assessing students independently.

Sharing this information, I suspect, may result in more disagreement than consensus, at least initially. I imagine there will be writing instructors who argue that the gap shows portfolio assessment to be overly punitive, or that pass rates are higher in the non-ALP sections because students “do better.” I can also imagine a critique that any kind of collaborative assessment process impedes instructor autonomy (although, as noted, faculty collaboration around assessment was never challenged when restricted to “developmental students”). Still, disseminating this information as a way of inviting faculty into a discussion and to shared decision-making is necessary if we are to think more deeply, and more collectively, about what we are asking students to achieve in composition. It could present an opportunity to persuade more faculty of the benefits of building consensus around course goals and establishing ethical collaborative assessment practices, not just for “developmental” students but for all students.

One way that this kind of conversation is currently being facilitated in our department is through the mechanism of a Curriculum Review Committee, a structure for programmatic decision-making launched by the Director of Composition in 2014. A rotating committee, made up of both part-time and full-time faculty who opt in on an annual basis and are paid for the time commitment involved, this group is currently in the beginning stages of revising the composition curriculum and will ultimately propose a new curriculum that will be brought to the English Department for a vote. As it works to revise course outcomes, the committee will also be compelled to consider issues of assessment, including a review of the current portfolio as-

essment practices in ALP sections of composition. This committee not only offers a model for fostering democratic decision-making within a program, its existence also is crucial at this moment when programs and assessment practices are being disrupted. It is my hope that the faculty taking part in this process will draw upon their prior experiences with writing assessment—in two very different writing programs—and see this moment of change as an opportunity to develop an improved approach to writing assessment, one that maintains the valuable aspects of a communal approach to assessment based on shared standards and goals, without importing the more punitive, gatekeeping aspects that characterized assessment in developmental writing.

Of course, precisely what form a new approach to assessment will take, and how faculty will respond to this moment of disruption, is a subject for a different article. My main argument here has been that the recent, national movement to dismantle developmental writing and introduce corequisite courses has had, on my home campus, the unintended, but ultimately positive, effect of unsettling the distinction between the “basic” and “regular” student writers these two programs were intended to serve, thereby raising important questions about writing instruction more generally. This situation, which is likely occurring in some form at other institutions, provides an important context for rethinking curriculum and assessment and an additional impetus for increased faculty involvement. An interesting outcome of implementing ALP on our campus, then, beyond its clear benefits to the students directly affected, is that it has inspired us to consider fundamental questions about goals and standards for *all* college writers, questions that were easier to ignore when flawed placement practices were used to maintain a tidy distinction between “unprepared” and “regular” students, who were then seen as requiring different kinds of assessment.

### Works Cited

- Adams, Peter, Sarah Gearheart, Robert Miller, and Ann Roberts. “The Accelerated Learning Program: Throwing Open the Gates.” *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2009, pp. 50-69.
- Andrus, Sonja, Sharon Mitchler, and Howard Tinberg. “Teaching for Writing Transfer: A Practical Guide for Teachers.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2019, pp. 76-89.
- Attewell, Paul, and David E. Lavin. *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off Across the Generations?* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007.

- Bailey, Thomas, Dong Wook Jeong, and Sung-Woo Cho. "Referral, Enrollment, and Completion in Developmental Education Sequences in Community Colleges." *CCRC Working Paper*, no. 15, Rev. 2009. [ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/referral-enrollment-completion-developmental-education.html](http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/referral-enrollment-completion-developmental-education.html).
- Banks, William P., Michael Sterling Burns, Nicole I. Caswell, Randall Cream, Timothy R. Dougherty, Norbert Elliot, Mathew Gomes, J. W. Hammond, Keith L. Harms, Asao B. Inoue, Josh Lederman, Sean Molloy, Casie Moreland, Karen S. Nulton, Irvin Peckham, Mya Poe, Kelly J. Sassi, Christie Toth, and Nicole Warwick. "The Braid of Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity: Eighteen Assertions on Writing Assessment with Commentary." *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity. Perspectives on Writing*, edited by Mya Poe, Asao B. Inoue, and Norbert Elliot, WAC Clearinghouse and UP of Colorado, 2018, pp. 379-425.
- Bartholomae, David. "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1993, pp. 4-21.
- Belfield, Clive R. *Improving Assessment and Placement at Your College: A Tool for Institutional Researchers*. Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center, 2014. [ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/improving-assessment-placement-institutional-research.pdf](http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/improving-assessment-placement-institutional-research.pdf).
- Belfield, Clive R., and Peter M. Crosta. "Predicting Success in College: The Importance of Placement Tests and High School Transcripts." *CCRC Working Paper*, no. 42, 2012. [ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/predicting-success-placement-tests-transcripts.html](http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/predicting-success-placement-tests-transcripts.html).
- Broad, Bob. "Pulling Your Hair Out: Crises of Standardization in Communal Writing Assessment." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2000, pp. 213-60.
- . *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*. Utah State U P, 2003.
- Coleman, Dawn. "Replicating the Accelerated Learning Program: Preliminary but Promising Findings." *Achieving the Dream*, 2014. [www.achievingthedream.org/resource/14911/replicating-the-accelerated-learning-program-preliminary-but-promising-findings](http://www.achievingthedream.org/resource/14911/replicating-the-accelerated-learning-program-preliminary-but-promising-findings).
- Colombini, Crystal Broch, and Maureen McBride. "Storming and Norming: Exploring the Value of Group Development Models in Addressing Conflict in Communal Writing Assessment." *Assessing Writing*. vol. 17, issue 4, 2012, pp. 191-207. *ScienceDirect*, [doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2012.05.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2012.05.002).

- Del Principe, Annie, and Rachel Ihara. "I Bought the Book and I Didn't Need It': What Reading Looks like at an Urban Community College." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp. 229-44.
- Downs, Douglas, and Elizabeth Wardle. "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning First year Composition as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2007, pp. 552-84.
- Galindo, Brisa, Sonia Casteneda, Esther Gutierrez, Arturo Tejada, Jr., and DeShonna Wallace. "Challenging Our Labels: Rejecting the Language of Remediation." *Young Scholars in Writing*, vol. 11, 2014, pp. 5-16.
- Glau, Gregory. "Stretch at 10: A Progress Report on Arizona State University's Stretch Program." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2007, pp. 4-50.
- Hern, Katie. Exponential Attrition and the Promise of Acceleration in Developmental English and Math, 2010. Career Ladders Project. [www.careerladdersproject.org/docs/Exponential%20Attrition.pdf](http://www.careerladdersproject.org/docs/Exponential%20Attrition.pdf).
- Hern, Katie, and Myra Snell. "The California Acceleration Project: Reforming Developmental Education to Increase Student Completion of College-Level Math and English." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 167, 2014, pp. 27-39.
- Hodara, Michelle, and Shanna Smith Jaggars. "An Examination of the Impact of Accelerating Community College Students' Progress Through Developmental Education." *Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 85, no. 2, 2014, pp. 246-76.
- "Household Income." Institutional Profiles, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. [www.kingsborough.edu/irap/Documents/Page8.pdf](http://www.kingsborough.edu/irap/Documents/Page8.pdf).
- Ihara, Rachel, and Annie Del Principe. "Writing on the Periphery: The Writing Landscape of a Two-Year College." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2020, pp. 215-38.
- Inoue, Asao B. *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. WAC Clearinghouse and UP of Colorado, 2019.
- Jenkins, David, Cecilia Speroni, Clive Belfield, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Nikki Edgecombe. "A Model for Accelerating Academic Success of Community College Remedial English Students: Is the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) Effective and Affordable?" *CCRC Working Paper*, No. 21, 2010. *ERIC*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512398.pdf>.
- "KCC Fall 2008 at a Glance." Institutional Profiles, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. [www.kingsborough.edu/irap/documents/2008\\_9\\_glance.pdf](http://www.kingsborough.edu/irap/documents/2008_9_glance.pdf). Accessed 13 Jan., 2020.

- Long, Bridget Terry. "The Remediation Debate: Are We Serving the Needs of Underprepared College Students?" *National Crosstalk*, 2005. [www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/ct0405/voices0405-long.shtml](http://www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/ct0405/voices0405-long.shtml).
- Molloy, Sean, Silvester Fonville, and Abdus Salam. "'Root and Branch': Resisting a Basic Writing Legacy System." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2020, pp. 5-35.
- Mlynarczyk, Rebecca Williams. "Rethinking Basic Writing: Reflections on Language, Education, and Opportunity." *Talking Back: Senior Scholars and Their Colleagues Deliberate the Past, Present, and Future of Writing Studies*, edited by Norbert Elliot and Alice Horning. Utah State UP, 2020, pp. 261-71.
- Nastal, Jessica. "Beyond Tradition: Writing Placement, Fairness, and Success at a Two-Year College." *Journal of Writing Assessment*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2019. [journalofwritingassessment.org/article.php?article=136](http://journalofwritingassessment.org/article.php?article=136)
- Otte, George, and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk. *Basic Writing*. Parlor Press/WAC Clearinghouse, 2010.
- "Pass Rate on CUNY Skills Test: First-Time Freshmen." Quick Facts and Trends, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. [www.kbcc.cuny.edu/irap/Documents/EnrollmentData/table10.pdf](http://www.kbcc.cuny.edu/irap/Documents/EnrollmentData/table10.pdf).
- Poe, Mya, Jessica Nastal, and Norbert Elliot. "Reflection. An Admitted Student is a Qualified Student: A Roadmap for Writing Placement in the Two-Year College." *Journal of Writing Assessment*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2019, [journalofwritingassessment.org/article.php?article=140](http://journalofwritingassessment.org/article.php?article=140).
- Rigolino, Rachel, and Penny Freel. "Re-Modeling Basic Writing." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2007, pp. 51-74.
- Shor, Ira. "Our Apartheid: Writing Instruction and Inequality." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1997, pp. 91-104.
- Smith, Cheryl Hogue, and Maya Jiménez. "Razing the Bar: Developmental Students Shatter Expectations in a First-Year Learning Community." *Teaching English at a Two-Year College*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2014, pp. 41-54.
- Sternglass, Marilyn S. "Students Deserve Enough Time to Prove They Can Succeed." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1999, pp. 3-20.
- TYCA Research Committee. "TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 44, no. 2, Dec. 2016, pp. 135-57. [secure.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Groups/TYCA/PlacementReform\\_Revised.pdf?\\_ga=2.243945733.1633179742.1579529109-2096887864.1577975224](http://secure.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Groups/TYCA/PlacementReform_Revised.pdf?_ga=2.243945733.1633179742.1579529109-2096887864.1577975224).
- Venezia, Andrea, Kathy Reeves Bracco, and Thad Nodine. "One-Shot Deal: Students' Perceptions of Assessment and Course Placement in Califor-

Basic Writing Reform as an Opportunity to Rethink First-Year Composition

nia's Community Colleges." *WestEd*, 2010. [www.wested.org/resources/one-shot-deal-students-perceptions-of-assessment-and-course-placement-in-californias-community-colleges](http://www.wested.org/resources/one-shot-deal-students-perceptions-of-assessment-and-course-placement-in-californias-community-colleges).

White, Ed. "The Scoring of Writing Portfolios, Phase 2." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2005, pp. 581-600.

"WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition 3.0. Approved July 17, 2014." Published 18 July, 2019. [wpacouncil.org/aws/CWPA/pt/sd/news\\_article/243055/\\_PARENT/layout\\_details/false](http://wpacouncil.org/aws/CWPA/pt/sd/news_article/243055/_PARENT/layout_details/false).

Yancey, Kathleen B., Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak. *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, Utah State UP, 2014.