Is a Writing Sample Necessary for "Accurate Placement"?

By Patrick Sullivan and David Nielsen

ABSTRACT: ***The scholarship about assessment for placement is extensive and notoriously ambiguous. Foremost among the questions that continue to be unresolved in this scholarship is this one: Is a writing sample necessary for "accurate placement"? Using a robust data sample of student assessment essays and ACCUPLACER test scores, we put this question to the test. For practical, theoretical, and conceptual reasons, our conclusion is that a writing sample is not necessary for "accurate placement." Furthermore our work on this project has shown us that the concept of accurate placement itself is slippery and problematic.***

Definitive answers about assessment practices are hard to come by.

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In 2004, the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) established a formal research committee, the TYCA Research Initiative Committee, which recently designed and completed the first national survey of teaching conditions at 2-year colleges (Sullivan, 2008). The primary goal of this survey was to gather data from 2-year college English teachers about four major areas of professional concern: assessment, the use of technology in the classroom, teaching conditions, and institutionally designated Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines programs. This survey gathered responses from 338 colleges nationwide and from all 50 states.

The single most important unresolved question related to assessment identified in the survey was this: Is a writing sample necessary for "accurate placement"? (Sullivan, 2008, pp. 13-15). This is a question that concerns teachers of English across a wide range of educational sites, including 2-year colleges and 4-year public and private institutions. The question has also been central to the scholarship on assessment and placement for many years. The issue has important professional implications, especially in terms of how assessment should be conducted to promote student success.

We have attempted to engage this question about writing samples using a robust data archive of institutional research from a large, 2-year college in the northeast. The question is a complex one, and it needs to be addressed with care and patience; this study has shown that the concept of accurate placement is complex.

Review of Research

The scholarship about assessment for placement is extensive and notoriously ambiguous. Space limitations preclude a detailed examination of that history here, but even a cursory overview of this work shows that definitive answers about assessment practices are hard to come by. The process of designing effective assessment practices has been complicated greatly by the conflicting nature of this research. McLeod, Horn, and Haswell (2005) characterize the state of this research quite well: "Assessment, as Ed White has long reminded us, is a polarizing issue in American education, involving complex arguments and a lack of clear-cut answers to important questions" (p. 556).

There is research that supports the use of holistically scored writing samples for placement (Matzen & Hoyt, 2004). There is other work that argues that writing samples are not necessary for accurate placement (Saunders, 2000). There is also research that criticizes the use of "one-shot, high-stakes" writing samples (Albertson & Marwitz, 2001). There is even work that questions whether it is possible to produce reliable or valid results from holistic writing samples (Belanoff, 1991; Elbow, 1996; Huot, 1990).

Additionally, the use of standardized assessment tools without a writing sample is reported in the literature (Armstrong, 2000; College of the Canyons, 1994; Hodges, 1990; Smittle, 1995) as well as work arguing against such a practice (Behrman, 2000; Drechsel, 1999; Gabe, 1989; Hillocks, 2002; Sacks, 1999; Whitcomb, 2002). There has even been research supporting "directed" or "informed" self-placement (Blakesley, 2002; Elbow, 2003; Royer & Gilles, 1998; Royer & Gilles, 2003) and work that argues against such a practice (Matzen & Hoyt, 2004). Clearly, this is a question in need of clarity and resolution.

Methodology

Participants, Institutional Site, & Background

The college serves a demographically diverse student population and enrolls over 15,000 students in credit and credit-free classes each year. For the Fall 2009 semester, the college enrolled 7,366 stu-

dents in credit-bearing classes, a full-time equivalent of 4,605. The institution is located in a small city in the northeast, and it draws students from suburban as well as urban districts. The average student age is 25, 54% of students are female, and 48.5% of students attend full time (system average: 35%). Approximately 33% of students enrolled in credit-bearing classes self-report as minorities (i.e., 15% African American, 14% Latino, and 4% Asian American/Pacific Islander in Fall 2009).

For many years, the English Department used a locally-designed, holistically graded writing sample to place students. Students were given an hour to read two short, thematically-linked passages and then construct a multiparagraph essay in response to these readings. Instructors graded these essays using a locally-developed rubric with six levels, modeled after the rubric developed for the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test (Results, 1985) and subsequently modified substantially over the last 20 years. Based on these scores students were placed into a variety of courses: (a) one of three courses in the basic writing sequence, (b) one of four courses in the ESL sequence, or (c) the first-year composition course. As enrollment grew, however, this practice became increasingly difficult to manage. In 2005, for example, faculty evaluated over 1500 placement essays. For much of this time, departmental policy required that each essay be evaluated by at least two different readers, and a few essays had as many as five different readers. Despite the care and attention devoted to this process, there continued to be "misplaced" students once they arrived in the classroom.

During this time, students were placed primarily by their placement essay scores, but students were also required to complete the ACCUPLACER Reading Comprehension and Sentence Skills tests, as mandated by state law. These scores were part of a multiple-measures approach, but the institutional emphasis in terms of placement was always on the quality of the student's writing sample.

Procedure

In an attempt to find a viable, research-based solution to an increasingly untenable assessment process, researchers examined institutional data to determine if there was any correspondence between the standardized test scores and the locally graded writing sample. There was, indeed, a statistically significant positive correlation between them (0.62 for 3, 735 ACCUPLACER Sentence Skills scores vs. local essay scores; and 0.69 for 4,501 ACCUPLACER Reading Comprehension scores vs. local essay scores). Generally speaking, students who wrote stronger essays had higher ACCUPLACER scores. Or to put it a different way: Higher essay scores were generally found among students with higher ACCUPLACER scores.

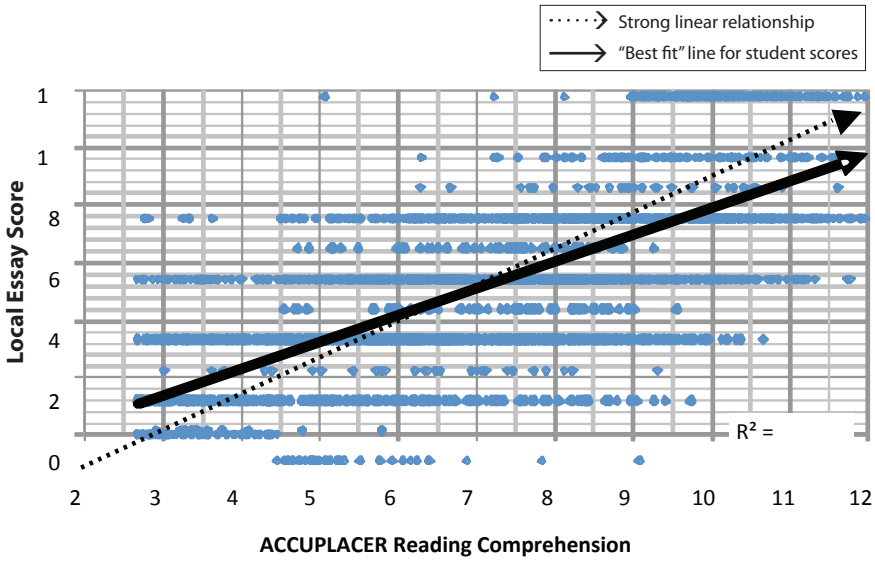


Figure 1. ACCUPLACER Reading Comprehension score vs. Local Essay score for new students Fall 2001-Fall 2005.

Placement becomes a question of how to match the skills measured by the assessment instruments with the curriculum.

Figure 1 provides a graphical display of this data by showing students' scores on the ACCUPLACER Reading Comprehension test and their institutional writing sample. Each point on this scatter plot graph represents a single student, and its position in the field is aligned with the student's essay score along the vertical axis and ACCUPLACER reading comprehension score along the horizontal axis. Many data points clustered around a line running from lower left to upper right–one like the dotted line in Figure 1–reflect a strong linear relationship between reading scores and writing sample scores. Such a strong positive linear correlation suggests that, in general, for each increase in an ACCUPLACER score there should be a corresponding increase in an essay score. This is, in fact, what the study's data shows. The "best fit" line for students' scores is represented by the dark line in Figure 1.

A correlation is a common statistic used to measure the relationship between two variables. Correlation coefficients range from -1 to +1. A correlation coefficient of zero suggests there is no linear relationship between the variables of interest; knowing what a student scored on the ACCUPLACER would give us no indication of how they would score on the writing sample. A correlation of +1 suggests that students with low ACCUPLACER scores would also have low writing sample scores, and students with higher ACCUPLACER scores would have high writing sample scores. A negative correlation would suggest that students with high scores on one test would have low scores on the other.

The correlation coefficients representing the linear relationship between ACCUPLACER scores and writing sample scores at our college were surprisingly strong and positive (see Figure 2, p. 4). It appears that the skill sets ACCUPLACER claims to measure in these two tests approximate the rubrics articulated for evaluating the locally-designed holistic essay, at least in a statistical sense. Therefore, placement becomes a question of how to match the skills measured by the assessment instruments with the curriculum and the skills faculty identified in the rubrics used to evaluate holistically scored essays. (Establishing cut-off scores, especially for placement into different levels of our basic writing program, required careful research, field-testing, and study on our campus.)

Discussion

Critical Thinking

Are the reported findings simply a matter of serendipity, or do writing samples, reading comprehension tests, and sentence skills tests have anything in common? We argue here that they each have the crucial element of critical thinking in common, and that each of these tests measure roughly the same thing: a student's cognitive ability.

After reviewing ACCUPLACER's own descriptions of the reading and sentence skills tests, we found that much of what they seek to measure is critical thinking and logic. The reading test, for example, asks students to identify "main ideas," recognize the difference between "direct statements and secondary ideas," make "inferences" and "applications" from material they have read, and understand "sentence relationships" (College Board, 2003, p. A-17). Even the sentence skills test, which is often dismissed simply as a "punctuation test," in fact really seeks to measure a student's ability to understand relationships between and among ideas. It asks students to recognize complete sentences, distinguish between "coordination" and "subordination," and identify "clear sentence logic" (College Board, p. A-19; for a broad-ranging discussion of standardized tests, see Achieve, Inc., 2004; Achieve, Inc., 2008).

It's probably important to mention here that it appears to be common practice among assessment scholars and college English department personnel to discuss standardized tests that they have not taken themselves. After taking the ACCUPLACER reading and sentence skills tests, a number of English department members no longer identify the sentence skills section of ACCUPLACER as a "punctuation test." It is not an easy test to do well on, and it does indeed appear to measure the kind of critical thinking skills that ACCUPLACER claims it does. This study focuses on ACCUPLACER because it is familiar as the institution's standardized assessment mechanism and has been adopted in the state-wide system. Other standardized assessment instruments might yield similar results, but research would be needed to confirm this.

Both the reading and the sentence-skills tests require students to recognize, understand, and assess relationships between ideas. We would argue that this is precisely what a writing sample is designed to measure. Although one test is a "direct measure" of writing ability and the other two are "indirect" measures, they each seek to measure substantially the same thing: a student's ability to make careful and subtle distinctions among ideas. Although standardized reading and sentence skills tests do not test writing ability directly, they do test a student's thinking ability, and this may, in fact, be effectively and practically the same thing.

The implications here are important. Because human and financial resources are typically in short supply on most campuses, it is important to make careful and thoughtful choices about how and where to expend them. The data reported in this study suggest that we do not need writing samples to place students, and moving to less expensive assessment practices could save colleges a great deal of time and money. My colleagues, for example, typically spent at least 5-10 minutes assessing each student placement essay, and there were other "costs" involved as well, including work done on developing prompts, norming readers, and managing logistics and paperwork. Our data suggest that it would be possible to shift those resources elsewhere, preferably to supporting policies and practices that help students once they arrive in our classrooms. This is a policy change that could significantly affect student learning.

Writing Samples Come with Their Own Set of Problems

Although this "rough equivalency" may be off-putting to some, it is important to remember that writing samples come with their own set of problems. There are certain things we have come to understand and accept about assessing writing in any kind of assessment situation: for placement, for proficiency, and for class work. Peter Elbow (1996) has argued, for example, that "we cannot get a trustworthy picture of someone's writing ability or skill if we see only one piece of writing–especially if it is written in test conditions. Even if we are only testing for a narrow subskill such as sentence clarity, one sample can be completely misleading" (p. 84; see alsoWhite, 1993). Richard Haswell (2004) has argued, furthermore, that the process of holistic grading–a common practice in placement and proficiency assessment–is itself highly problematic, idiosyncratic, and dependent on a variety of subtle, nontransferable factors:

> Studies of local evaluation of placement essays show the process too complex to be reduced to directly transportable schemes, with teacher-raters unconsciously applying elaborate networks of dozens of criteria (Broad, 2003), using fluid, overlapping categorizations (Haswell, 1998), and grounding decisions on singular curricular experience (Barritt, Stock, & Clark, 1986). (p. 4)

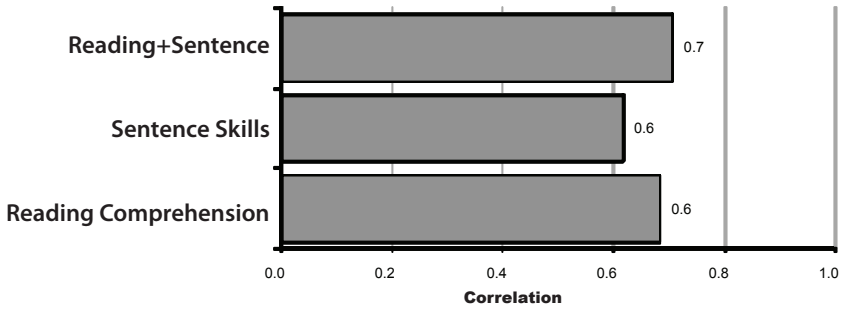
Karen Greenberg (1992) has also noted that teachers will often assess the same piece of writing very differently:

> Readers will always differ in their judgments of the quality of a piece of writing; there is no one "right" or "true" judgment of a person's writing ability. If we accept that writing is a multidimensional, situational construct that fluctuates across a wide variety of contexts, then we must also respect the complexity of teaching and testing it. (p. 18)

Davida Charney (1984) makes a similar point in her important survey of assessment scholarship: "Under normal reading conditions, even experienced teachers of writing will disagree strongly over whether a given piece of writing is good or not, or which of two writing samples is better" (p. 67). There is even considerable disagreement about what exactly constitutes "college-level" writing (Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006).

Moreover, as Ed White (1995) has argued, a single writing sample does not always accurately reflect a student's writing ability:

> An essay test is essentially a one-question test. If a student cannot answer one question on a test with many questions, that is no problem; but if he or she is stumped (or delighted) by the only question available, scores will plummet (or soar). . . . The essence of reliability findings from the last two decades of research is that no single essay test will yield highly reliable results, no matter how careful the testing and scoring apparatus. If the essay test is to be used for important or irreversible decisions about students, a minimum of two separate writing samples must be obtained–or some other kind of measurement must be combined with the single writing score. (p. 41)



Base size varies, as they include only new first time college students who had a valid Essay score and ACCUPLACER score; Reading Comprehension, *n*=4,501; Sentence Skills, *n*=3,735; Sum of *n*=3,734. Coefficients represent relationships using Pearson Coorelation.

Figure 2. Correlations between ACCUPLACER and Local Essay for new first time college students Fall 2001-Fall 2005.

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Clearly, writing samples alone come with their own set of problems, and they do not necessarily guarantee "accurate" placement. Keeping all this in mind, we would now like to turn our attention to perhaps the most problematic theoretical question about assessment for placement, and the idea that drives so much thinking and decision-making about placement practices, the concept of "accurate placement."

What Is "Accurate Placement"?

The term "accurate placement" is frequently used in assessment literature and in informal discussions about placement practices. However, the term has been very hard to define, and it may ultimately be impossible to measure.

Much of the literature examining the effectiveness of various placement tests is based on research that ties placement scores to class performance or grades. Accurate placement, in these studies, is operationally defined by grades earned. If a student passes the course, it is assumed that they were accurately placed.

However, other studies have identified several factors that are better predictors of student grades than placement test scores. These include the following:

- ✓ a student's precollege performance, including High School GPA, grade in last high school English class, and number of English classes taken in high school (Hoyt & Sorensen, 2001, p. 28; Armstrong, 2000, p. 688);
- ✓ a student's college performance in first term, including assignment completion, presence of adverse events, and usage of skill labs (i.e., tutoring, writing center, etc.; Matzen & Hoyt, 2004, p. 6);
- ✓ the nonacademic influences at play in a student's life, including hours spent working and caring for dependents and students' "motivation" (see Armstrong, 2000, p. 685-686);
- ✓ and, finally, "between class variations," including the grading and curriculum differences between instructors (Armstrong, 2000, pp. 689-694).

How do we know if a student has been "accurately" placed when so many factors contribute to an individual student's success in a given course? Does appropriate placement advice lead to success or is it other, perhaps more important, factors like quality of teaching, a student's work ethic and attitude, the number of courses a student is taking, the number of hours a student is working, or even asymmetrical events like family emergencies and changes in work schedules?

We know from a local research study, for example, that student success at our community college is contingent on all sorts of "external" factors. Students who are placed on academic probation or suspension and who wish to continue their studies are required to submit to our Dean of Students a written explanation of the problems and obstacles they encountered and how they intend to overcome them. A content analysis of over 750 of these written explanations collected over the course of 3 years revealed a common core of issues that put students at risk. What was most surprising was that the majority of these obstacles were nonacademic.

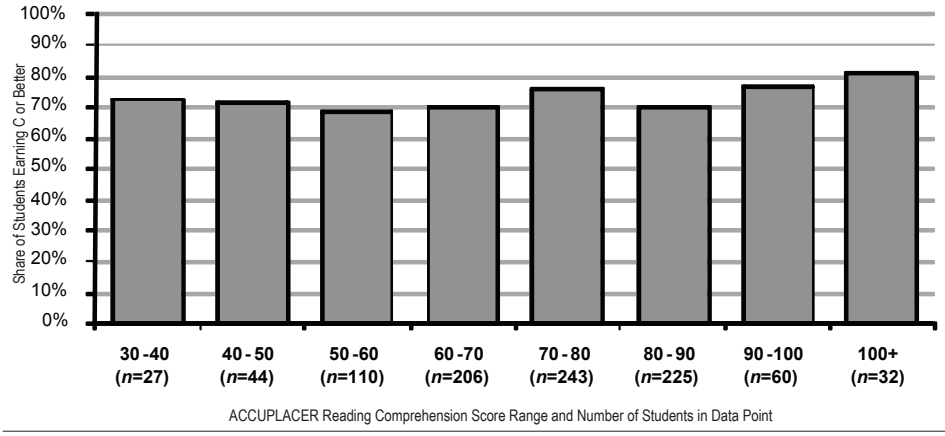

Figure 3. New students placed into upper- level Developmental English Fall 2001- Fall 2005, pass rate by ACCUPLACER Reading Comprehension scores.

Effectiveness of various placement tests is based on research that ties placement scores to class performance.

Most students reported getting into trouble academically for a variety of what can be described as "personal" or "environmental" reasons. The largest single reason for students being placed on probation (44%) was "Issues in Private Life." This category included personal problems, illness, or injury; family illness; problems with childcare; or the death of a family member or friend. The second most common reason was "Working Too Many Hours" (22%). "Lack of Motivation/Unfocused" was the third most common reason listed (9%). "Difficulties with Transportation" was fifth (5%). Surprisingly, "Academic Problems" (6%) and being "Unprepared for College" (4%) rated a distant 4th and 6th respectively (Sullivan, 2005, p. 150).

In sum, then, it seems clear that placement is only one of many factors that influence a student's performance in their first-semester English classes. A vitally important question emerges from these studies: Can course grades determine whether placement advice has, indeed, been "accurate"?

Correlations Between Test Scores and Grades

To test the possible relationship between "accurate placement" and grades earned, we examined a robust sample of over 3,000 student records to see if their test scores had a linear relationship with grades earned in basic/developmental English and college-level composition classes. We expected to find improved pass rates as placement scores increased. However, that is not what we found.

Figure 3 displays the course pass rates of students placed into English 093, the final basic writing class in the three-course basic writing sequence. This particular data set illustrates a general pattern found throughout the writing curriculum on campus. This particular data set is used because this is the course in the curriculum where students make the transition from basic writing to college-level work. Each column on the graph represents students' ACCUPLACER Reading scores summed into a given 10-point range (i.e., 50-60, 60-70, etc.). The height of each bar represents the share of students with scores falling in a given range who earned a C or better in English 093.

For the data collected for this particular cohort of students enrolled in the final class of a basic writing sequence, test scores do not have a strong positive relationship with grades. There is, in fact, a weak positive linear correlation between test scores and final grades earned (using a 4-point scale for grades that includes decimal

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values between the whole-number values). In numeric terms, the data produces correlation coefficients in the 0.10 to 0.30 range for most course grade to placement test score relationships. This appears to be similar to what other institutions find (see James, 2006, pp. 2-3). Further complicating the question of "accurate placement" is the inability to know how a student might have performed had they placed into a different class with more or less difficult material. Clearly, "accurate placement" is a problematic concept and one that may ultimately be impossible to validate.

Recommendations for Practice

Assessment for Placement Is Not an Exact Science

It seems quite clear that we have much to gain from acknowledging that assessment for placement is not an exact science and that a rigid focus on accurate placement may be self-defeating. The process, after all, attempts to assess a complex and interrelated combination of skills that include reading, writing, and thinking. This is no doubt why teachers have historically preferred "grade in class" to any kind of "one-shot, high stakes" proficiency or "exit" assessment (Albertson & Marwitz, 2001). Grade in class is typically arrived at longitudinally over the course of several months, and it allows students every chance to demonstrate competency, often in a variety of ways designed to accommodate different kinds of learning styles and student preferences. It also provides teachers with the opportunity to be responsive to each student's unique talents, skills, and academic needs. "Grade earned" also reflects student dispositional characteristics, such as motivation and work ethic, which are essential to student success and often operate independently of other kinds of skills (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

Keeping all this in mind, consider what individual final grades might suggest about placement. One could make the argument, for example, that students earning excellent grades in a writing class (B+, A-, A) were misplaced, that the course was too easy for them, and that they could have benefited from being placed into a more challenging class. One might also argue, conversely, using precisely these same final grades, that these students were perfectly placed, that they encountered precisely the right level of challenge, and that they met this challenge in exemplary ways.

One could also look at lower grades and make a similar argument: Students who earned grades in the C-/D+/D/D- range were not well placed because such grades suggest that these students struggled with the course content. Conversely, one could also argue about this same cohort of students that the challenge was appropriate because they did pass the class, after all, although admittedly with a less than average grade. Perhaps the only students that might be said to be "accurately placed" were those who earned grades in the C/C+/B-/B range, suggesting that the course was neither too easy nor too difficult. Obviously, using final grades to assess placement accuracy is highly problematic. Students fail courses for all sorts of reasons, and they succeed in courses for all sorts of reasons as well.

Teacher Variability

Accurate placement also assumes that there will always and invariably be a perfect curricular and pedagogical match for each student, despite the fact that most English departments have large staffs with many different teachers teaching the same course. Invariably and perhaps inevitably, these teachers use a variety of different approaches, theoretical models, and grading rubrics to teach the same class. Although courses carry identical numbers and course titles and are presented to students as different sections of the same course, they are, in fact, seldom identical (Armstrong, 2000). Problems related to determining and validating accurate placement multiply exponentially as one thinks of the many variables at play here. As Armstrong (2000) has noted, the "amount of variance contributed by the instructor characteristics was generally 15%-20% of the amount of variance in final grade. This suggested a relatively high degree of variation in the grading practices of instructors" (p. 689).

"Grade earned" also reflects student dispositional characteristics...which are essential to student success and often operate independently of other kinds of skills.

One "Correct" Placement Score

Achieving accurate placement also assumes that there is only one correct score or placement advice for each student and that this assessment can be objectively determined with the right placement protocol. The job of assessment professionals, then, is to find each student's single, correct placement score. This is often deemed especially crucial for students who place into basic writing classes because there is concern that such students will be required to postpone and attenuate their academic careers by spending extra time in English classes before they will be able to enroll in college-level, credit-bearing courses.

But perhaps rather than assume the need to determine a single, valid placement score for each student, it would be better to theorize the possibility of multiple placement options for students that would each offer important (if somewhat different) learning opportunities. This may be especially important for basic writers, who often need as much time on task and as much classroom instruction as they can get (Sternglass, 1997; Traub, 1994; Traub, 2000). Furthermore, there are almost always ways for making adjustments for students who are egregiously misplaced (moving them up to a more appropriate course at the beginning of the semester, or skipping a level in a basic writing sequence based on excellent work, for example).

Obviously, assessing students for placement is a complex endeavor, and, for better or worse, it seems clear that educators must accept that fact. As Ed White (1995) has noted, "the fact is that all measurement of complex ability is approximate, open to question, and difficult to accomplish. . . . To state that both reliability and validity are problems for portfolios and essay tests is to state an inevitable fact about all assessment. We should do the best we can in an imperfect world" (p. 43).

Economic and Human Resources

Two other crucial variables to consider in seeking to develop effective, sustainable assessment practices are related directly to local, pragmatic conditions: (a) administrative support and (b) faculty and staff workload. Recent statements from professional organizations like the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the National Council of Teachers of English, for example, provide scholarly guidance regarding exactly how to design assessment practices should it be possible to construct them under ideal conditions (Conference, 2006; Elbow, 1996; Elliot, 2005; Huot, 2002; National, 2004). There seems to be little debate about what such practices would look like given ideal conditions. Such an assessment protocol for placement, for example, would consider a variety of measures, including the following: (a) standardized test scores and perhaps also a timed, impromptu essay; (b) a portfolio of the student's writing; (c) the student's high school transcripts;

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(d) recommendations from high school teachers and counselors; (e) a personal interview with a college counselor and a college English professor; and (f) the opportunity for the student to do some self-assessment and self-advocating in terms of placement.

Unfortunately, most institutions cannot offer English departments the ideal conditions that a placement practice like this would require. In fact, most assessment procedures must be developed and employed under *less than ideal conditions*. Most colleges have limited human and financial resources to devote to assessment for placement, and assessment protocol will always be determined by constraints imposed by time, finances, and workload. Most colleges, in fact, must attempt to develop theoretically sound and sustainable assessment practices within very circumscribed parameters and under considerable financial constraints. This is an especially pressing issue for 2-year colleges because these colleges typically lack the resources common at 4-year institutions, which often have writing program directors and large assessment budgets.

A Different Way to Theorize Placement

Since assessment practices for placement are complicated by so many variables (including student dispositional, demographic, and situational characteristics as well as instructor variation, workload, and institutional support), we believe the profession has much to gain by moving away from a concept of assessment based on determining a "correct" or "accurate" placement score for each incoming student. Instead, we recommend conceptualizing placement in a very different way: as simply a way of grouping students together with similar ability levels. This could be accomplished in any number of ways, with or without a writing sample. The idea here is to use assessment tools only to make broad distinctions among students and their ability to be successful college-level readers, writers, and thinkers. This is how many assessment professionals appear to think they are currently being used, but the extensive and conflicted scholarship about assessment for placement (as well as anecdotal evidence that invariably seems to surface whenever English teachers discuss this subject) suggests otherwise. This conceptual shift has the potential to be liberating in a number of important ways. There may be much to gain by asking placement tools to simply group students together by broadly defined ability levels that match curricular offerings.

Such a conception of placement would allow us to dispense with the onerous and generally thankless task of chasing after that elusive, Platonically ideal placement score for every matriculating student, a practice which may, in the end, be chimerical. Such a conception of assessment would free educators from having to expend so much energy and worry on finding the one correct or accurate placement advice for each incoming student, and it would allow professionals the luxury of expending more energy on what should no doubt be the primary focus: What happens to students once they are in a classroom after receiving their placement advice.

We advocate a practice here that feels much less overwrought and girded by rigid boundaries and "high stakes" decisions. Instead, we support replacing this practice with one that is simply more willing to acknowledge and accept the many provisionalities and uncertainties that govern the practice of assessment. We believe such a conceptual shift would make the process of assessing incoming students less stressful, less contentious, and less time- and labor-intensive.

The practice of using a standardized assessment tool for placement may give colleges one practical way to proceed that is backed by research.

For all sorts of reasons, this seems like a conceptual shift worth pursuing.

Furthermore, we recommend an approach to assessment that acknowledges four simple facts:

1. Most likely, there will always be a need for some sort of assessment tool to assess incoming students.
2. All assessment tools are imperfect.
3. The only available option is to work with these assessment tools and the imperfections they bring with them.
4. Students with different "ability profiles" will inevitably test at the same "ability level" and be placed within the same class. Teachers and students will have to address these finer differences within ability profiles together within each course and class.

Such an approach would have many advantages, especially when one considers issues related to workload, thoughtful use of limited human and economic resources, and colleges with very large groups of incoming students to assess. The practice of using a standardized assessment tool for placement may give colleges one practical way to proceed that is backed by research. Resources once dedicated to administering and evaluating writing samples for placement could instead be devoted to curriculum development, assessment of outcomes, and student support.

Conclusion

We began this research project with a question that has been central to the scholarship on assessment and placement for many years: Is a writing sample necessary for accurate placement? It is our belief that we can now answer this question with considerable confidence: *A writing sample is not necessary for accurate placement.* This work supports and extends recent research and scholarship (Armstrong, 2000; Belanoff, 1991; Haswell, 2004; Sullivan, 2008; Saunders, 2000). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, our work indicates that the concept of accurate placement, which has long been routinely used in discussions of assessment, should be used with great caution, and then only with a full recognition of the many factors that complicate the ability to accurately predict and measure student achievement.

Finally, we support the recent Conference on College Composition and Communication (College Composition and CommunicationC) "Position Statement on Writing Assessment" (2006). We believe that local history and conditions must always be regarded as important factors whenever discussing assessment practices at individual institutions.

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