Afterword. Placement, Equity, and the Promise of Democratic Open-Access Education

Darin L. Jensen and Joanne Baird Giordano

Salt Lake Community College

For many two-year college faculty, the central ethos of the community college is its promise of open-access education. The concept of local public open-access education centers on the assurance of free and unrestricted entrance to opportunities for learning and literacy development for an entire local population. This type of education is a community good and an essential ingredient in a democratic society that values its citizens. The possibilities that effective community college programs provide to students individually and collectively are predicated on the notion that more access to education is better and fairer in comparison to the restrictive gateways that limit who can participate in learning at other types of institutions.

We have been teaching at community colleges for many years. We self-identify as scholars who are expert practitioners. Both of us have been immersed in developmental education reform, placement, and program (re)design. We intentionally use the term literacy programs here instead of writing programs. Literacy programs take up the entire breadth of literacy work at two-year colleges, including reading, integrated reading and writing, English for speakers of other languages, corequisite support, writing and learning centers, and writing studies courses. Placement affects all of these areas, and curriculum, assessment, and teaching in these spaces largely determines student success. Moreover, as noted in the Conference on College Composition and Communication's 2021 position statement on reading and in Patrick Sullivan et al.'s 2017 book *Deep Reading*, reading has become more of a central feature in composition classrooms over the last decade. Therefore, literacy programs are central to the literacy ecology of an institution and community. English placement is an essential component of that ecology.

This volume, with its attention to the equity of placement in two-year college writing, is at the heart of that democratic work. As is made clear in chapter after chapter, equity in placement can help achieve the central goal of democracy and open-access literacy education. What is equity? The term is often placed with diversity and inclusion or in some combination reduced to initialisms like DEI or JEDI. However, considering what equity means in higher education is essential for both two-year college program change work (including placement reforms) and the mission of community colleges. We define equity in postsecondary ed-

ucation as equal opportunities, fair treatment, equal access to resources, and fair processes within our institutions. Equity efforts in higher education must acknowledge that some students have been structurally disadvantaged by inequities in society. Many community college students have experienced unequal access to educational resources and social power before enrolling in college, and many continue to experience those inequities. As this collection and other recent research (Gilman et al., 2019) have pointed out, placement is a site where two-year colleges' pursuit of equity has fallen short. Some methods of placement (especially high-stakes standardized tests used without other measures), which concentrate on nebulous ideas of "college-readiness," can create levels of unnecessary coursework and serve as gatekeepers that often steadily reduce access for students. In this volume, Jeffrey Klausman and Signee Lynch tellingly examine such a program that illustrates how placement processes can reduce access to higher education and limit students' progress toward a postsecondary credential:

> So of 100 students placed into English 92: Developmental Reading, only about 78 would finish the course; of those 78, only about 62 would start the next class, English 95; of those, only about 48 would finish that class . . . . Ultimately, only around 22 percent of students who began in English 92 completed English 101 within three years (and likely forever).

The authors of this collection address placement mechanisms that sort students as a way of intervening in policies where they are decontextualized into a score on a placement test rather than their lived experiences. As community colleges and literacy practitioners move away from arbitrary placement measures, we will hopefully create conditions where students can be educated in accordance with principles of justice. But from where will these principles come? The teacher-scholar-activists of this volume offer answers and an auspicious beginning to moving two-year colleges toward their mission of achieving equity for the communities they serve. For example, Charissa Che's examination of the "monolithic assumptions of what makes an 'ESL student'" as a heuristic for reexamining placement practices which track multilingual students or Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt and Travis Margoni's work to see placement reform as a beginning to systemic reform which might lead to an antiracist local writing ecology. Both point to direct application of theory to enact a more just approach to writing studies (see Griffiths, 2022).

As most readers of this volume probably know, the struggle for open-access education can be traced back to the civil rights movement. For decades, community, junior, technical, and two-year colleges have been attempting to provide increased access to more people in a wider selection of technical and transfer coursework. Most of the public dialogue around community colleges aims squarely at defining our institutions as places for students to receive training for employment so that they can enter the economy. Community colleges are judged

by their completion and success rates, although as pointed out in the introduction to this volume, such measures are dubious and problematic at best. An emphasis on job training is not necessarily open access. Further, access is not the same as equity. Mere job training and access do not create equity or a more democratic society.

Similarly, students' mere presence in a credit-bearing first-year writing course does not mean that a placement process is equitable and inclusive. Equity in a literacy program means that students have equal access to educational opportunities and resources to support their development as readers and writers regardless of their educational, cultural, social, linguistic, racial, or economic backgrounds—and regardless of their mental and physical (dis)abilities. Successful efforts to address inequities in writing courses and the other types of literacy programs offered at community colleges must acknowledge that some students experience structural inequities, bias, and discrimination that create barriers to learning. Disproportionate numbers of students who experience intersectional inequalities access higher education through community colleges. To create an equitable postsecondary literacy program and placement process, faculty and administrators at open-access institutions must actively seek to make it possible for students to achieve their individual educational goals, complete degree requirements, stay in college, maintain academic standing and access to financial aid, and receive an associate degree (or other credential) or successfully transfer to a four-year institution. Kris Messer, Jamey Gallagher, and Elizabeth Hart illustrate this point as they examine their self-directed placement program, noting that collaboration across the college must continue so that the program "is given a chance to be studied, shaped, and institutionalized." The authors realize their own limited faculty agency and that a local literacy ecosystem's success is predicated on comprehensive involvement across the college.

Beyond quantifiable measures of success that focus on grades and retention, equitable placement processes and the literacy courses in which students are placed must create conditions for learning that support students' development as readers and writers both collectively and individually. Inclusive placement processes don't just merely allow a student to enroll in a particular course and occupy a seat in a room or space in an online course. For most community college students, placement processes must provide access to carefully designed courses, learning activities, feedback, and effective resources that meet their individual needs and allow them to do their best learning in classrooms or online course communities in which they feel welcomed, valued, and supported. For students who would be excluded from higher education at most institutions, inclusive open-access literacy programs help develop the sense that they belong in college and that they are capable of growth as readers, writers, and learners. The experiences in the classroom which follow placement help create an academic identity. The realities of teaching and learning at a community college mean that the promise of equitable and inclusive open-access literacy education can't be met

through changes to placement processes without labor-intensive, challenging work to transform curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices and align them with the changing needs of students in courses that accompany adjustments to placement.

The work of developing, piloting, implementing, and assessing placement changes can also create inequities for faculty and program coordinators, especially when changes are imposed on a program without funding. Effective placement changes require ongoing work that can result in an unfair workload for English faculty in comparison to their peers in other disciplines if they aren't compensated for their time through stipends, dedicated and funded coordinator positions, or reassigned time. Similarly, new placement processes require instructors both on and off the tenure track to engage in time-consuming work to create equitable and inclusive conditions for learning to support students whose placements are changed while also revising courses and programs to reflect new realities and populations in their local communities. A placement process that creates more equitable access to first-year writing courses for students is still inherently inequitable if it places an unfair and uncompensated workload on faculty, especially adjunct instructors who are already underpaid for their work. Locally situated conditions for teaching and learning always determine the extent to which placement changes and accompanying transformative program work are equitable.

Throughout this volume, the editors and contributors make clear that the work of placement is part of the ecology of writing—that is, writing placement and students exist in a relationship with the school and society around them. A local placement context is more than the structure of programs; it is the all-encompassing environment in which students, placement, writing courses, and faculty exist. As others in this book have pointed out, this ecology is frequently racist and classist—and as we pay more attention and learn more, we know it is ableist, too. The principles equity-minded literacy educators and program administrators seek are ones that challenge the racist, classist, and ableist ecologies in which our students, faculty, writing courses, placement instruments, and institutions exist. Moreover, the principles we seek must resist deficit ideologies that have plagued education and manifest themselves in academic and literacy crises.

The solutions—that is, the methods and processes to deal with inequitable placement—presented in this volume are case studies. What's compelling about these studies is not that they each provide a road map—although they do—but rather that they are examples of located agency in a local literacy ecology. Located agency is "action or intervention within a particular place or context meant to produce a particular effect" (Jensen & Suh, 2020). The discussion of writing ecologies is, for us, best understood as a local context within the lived environment of a literacy program, the college within which the program is situated, and the community within which both are situated. There is no one writing ecology writ large in theory; rather, there are micro ecologies which have specific contexts and which evolve over time in practice. Calhoon-Dillahunt and Margoni's essay in

this volume is an excellent example, as it looks at the evolving local demographics of their college.

Demographics, legislative fiats, administrative whims, shared governance, and more affect local conditions, thus shaping local ecologies. The case studies in this book locate their agency in interventions and reforms of placement practices in order to affect greater equity for students. We laud the work in these local contexts; at the same time, we want to frame the strategies the chapters provide for other teacher-scholar-practitioners working in both similar or widely different contexts. We must consider questions about how to adapt practices and models from this book to other programs. As seen in this volume, two-year college faculty and program administrators need to look at the constellation of ingredients that make up a literacy education ecology as they address placement as a local intervention.

As faculty and program administrators consider the strategies in this book and plan for their local implementation, it will be useful to consider the following questions:

- What measures are used to place students into English literacy courses and programs? How were existing placement processes developed? What are the reasons for using those measures?
- Which literacy courses and programs need to be included in assessing the effectiveness and equity of existing placement process(es)? What are the purposes of those local programs in relation to the literacy and learning needs of the student communities that the institution serves?
- To what extent are placement measures consistently used across all English literacy programs (first-year writing, developmental writing, reading, ESOL, corequisite support, dual-credit high school programs, bridge programs, adult basic education, etc.)?
- What systematically collected evidence is available for assessing the effectiveness of existing placement measures in supporting college success for the student communities the institution serves?
- What systematically collected evidence is available for assessing students' experiences, outcomes, and literacy development in existing programs?
- When available placement and assessment data is disaggregated by student communities, what do they reveal about inequities in how students are placed into writing courses and available literacy programs?
- What do systematically collected data show about the need for change in placement processes?
- What do data show about why and how available courses and programs might change to support the literacy development and college success of the student communities those programs serve?

The authors of these chapters have done much of this work in their local contexts. As we consider next-generation writing placement reform, we want

to emphasize that writing programs are only part of the overall literacy effort at colleges. Literacy programs are transdisciplinary—that is, they take up work in multiple disciplines like writing studies, reading, linguistics, TESOL, and developmental education—and involve faculty and support staff from across disciplines (Suh & Jensen, 2020). Placement reform efforts at open-access institutions are part of literacy efforts that require multiple types of disciplinary expertise in a locally situated context.

Over the last two decades, many externally driven developmental education reforms have negatively impacted student success and have devastated developmental education, reading programs, and basic writing programs. It isn't enough to flatten placement or get rid of developmental education. Placement into first-year writing itself is not equity. Many community college students need appropriate academic and personal support, instructional scaffolding, and a well-conceived institution-wide literacy program. We do not wish to engage in deficit language or thinking. We believe in the potential of our students, but it is a fair assessment that many community college students need more support than they receive in a traditional first-year writing course. As placement has been reimagined and reformed at open-access institutions, that reform work does not diminish the need for intensive and sustained academic support structures across students' educational experiences. Vincent Tinto (2008) argued,

> it is clear that our nation will not be able to close the achievement gap unless we are able to effectively address student needs for academic support in ways that are consistent with their participation in higher education and do so in the community colleges.

He pointed to solutions like basic skills communities and supplemental instruction. We would add to that writing studies corequisite support programs, including the studio model and the well-documented work being done with Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP). This collection, with its emphasis on equity in writing placement, cannot be disentangled from larger postsecondary education reform efforts—many of which are informed by neoliberal ideologies and are driven by austerity.

To ensure that placement reforms at community colleges achieve the goals of equity, inclusion, and social justice, they must be part of a movement for justice-informed literacy work and teacher-scholar-activism aimed at achieving the democratic promise of open-access education. Importantly, for the context of our work, achieving equity through changes to placement processes requires writing program reform work—how we enact curriculum, program assessment and redesign work, and pedagogy as well as a reimagining of what it means to be a literacy educator in a two-year college. Placement reform is one part of evidence-based linguistically just writing program change work and one facet of creating an effective and just locally situated literacy ecology (Baker-Bell, 2020; Schreiber et al., 2022).

The placement case studies explored in this book offer hope to community colleges in meeting their democratic and open-access goals—and frankly, the goals of creating citizens with agency and access to powerful literacy. As the editors of this collection point out,

> placement into composition courses is still viewed *not* as a pivotal educational moment for introducing students to local pedagogical orientations and the valued construct of writing, but rather a mechanism for putting students in their "proper" seats quickly, easily, and inexpensively.

Moreover, the literacy ecology of each college and community needs holistic reforms to meet the equity goals sought in placement changes. Placement itself does not eliminate racist, classist, ableist moments in other parts of the curriculum, in the college, or from individual instructors.

As we read all the chapters in this book, we were heartened at the work groups of faculty undertook in changing the machinery of their institutions to better serve students in their particular local contexts. This volume sets the stage for the next steps. We know community colleges will need wide-scale long-term data collected at multiple institutions that systematically studies the literacy development and college success outcomes for large numbers of students. Writing studies and related literacy disciplines need research on placement methods from widely diverse communities, especially those who have been historically excluded from higher education and who continue to be excluded from writing programs outside of open-access institutions. We look forward to readers of this book who will engage in placement work and then systematically collect and analyze data on how reforms work in diverse local contexts. To achieve the promise of community colleges, we need a reimagining of literacy education.

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