

# Chapter 2. From ACCUPLACER to Informed Self-Placement at Whatcom Community College: Equitable Placement as an Evolving Practice

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WHATCOM COMMUNITY COLLEGE

**Abstract:** This article traces the development of Whatcom Community College's placement reform efforts. From relying solely on the ACCUPLACER sentence-skills test, Whatcom developed a modified multiple-measures process on the way to the full implementation of an adapted and fully online directed self-placement process, what we call informed self-placement (ISP). Data on student placement and success in first-year writing, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, is offered for each placement process and innovation. The data show that Whatcom's placement process progressed from being among the most restrictive in the state of Washington, with only approximately one-third of all students and fewer Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BI-POC) students placing directly into first-year writing, to among the most open in the state, with over 95 percent of all new students placing directly into first-year writing with close to no equity gap among BIPOC students in this data set. At the same time, and likely reflecting results of pedagogical and curricular efforts of departmental faculty, the data show that success rates in first-year writing rose for all but Latinx/Hispanic students, and equity gaps for Black/African American and Native American students were closed. The theoretical and research bases for each of the reform efforts are provided, as is an explanation of the larger equity issues that framed the entire effort.

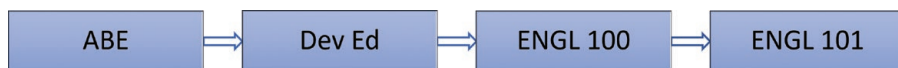
## Prologue

For nearly two decades, Whatcom Community College used ACCUPLACER to place students into a long sequence of developmental English courses leading to first-year writing, English 101. The sequence began in Adult Basic Education (ABE) (Figure 2.1<sup>1</sup>), moved through three levels of developmental English, then into a

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1. Included in Adult Basic Education courses are courses in the English Language Learner (ELL) program that serves students who are learning English as a second language at a relatively basic level; these students are often recent immigrants. ELL is distinct from the academic ESL program that serves international students preparing for full enrollment in Whatcom's academic programs.

“bridge” course (English 100), and finally into English 101. As a consequence, a student placed into the lowest level of Developmental English, ENGL92, would be required to take three to four English classes before reaching English 101.



*Figure 2.1. Pipeline for students placed into pre-college English.*

Peter Adams and his colleagues (2009) coined the term “pipeline” to refer to this kind of course sequence to evoke the image of a “leaky” pipeline system. From the beginning to the end of any course, some students would “leak away”; thus, we’d have at best a 20 percent failure or attrition rate and often worse. In between courses, more students would “leak away,” roughly another 20 percent. And with each additional course in the sequence, we’d lose more students.

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 . . . etc. Ultimately, only around 22 percent of students who began in English 92 completed English 101 within three years (and likely forever). For students placed below that into Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses, their fate was worse, the equivalent of an academic death sentence. In the ten or so years we collected data prior to changing our placement process, no student from ABE ever completed first-year writing, a zero-percent success rate.

But as is sometimes said, nothing is as bad as it could be. So let’s add race to the mix of placement and course sequencing. Research we conducted internally as part of our Achieving the Dream grant showed that prior to placement reform, students of color were twice as likely to be placed into developmental English or ABE than White students, a finding in keeping with Mya Poe and colleagues’ (2014) disparate impact analysis. In essence, the pipeline phenomenon was heightened due to equity gaps in placement rates.

And if we really wish to make matters worse—and why not?—prior to Washington state community and technical colleges establishing placement reciprocity agreements in 2016, placement standards were developed in isolation, and our college had settled on the highest ACCUPLACER cut-off score in the state for placement into first-year writing. We suspect this decision was informed by a belief in the importance of “college-readiness” without consideration (awareness?) of the punitive and inequitable consequences such “standards” actually engendered. In fact, only around 30 percent of all incoming students entered English 101 directly in 2011; the rest (and disproportionately students of color) found themselves somewhere down the pipeline with no recourse but to swim or leak away.

It’s not hard to see that our placement process contributed to, and was emblematic of, the kind of systemic racism that many of us are committed to ending

(see Klausman et al., 2016). But until around 2012, we were unaware even of placement as a problem nationally; instead, we were focused on updating curriculum and improving our classroom assessment of writing. But the research coming out of the Community College Research Center (CCRC; see Scott-Clayton, 2012) and the popularization of the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) (Adams et al., 2009) awakened us to the harm a placement process can do, and we set about changing things, first through adjusting cut-off scores, and then revamping the placement process and sequence of courses.

## Whatcom Community College

### Institutional Context

Whatcom Community College (WCC) is a mid-sized community college serving 11,000 students annually (around 4,000 full-time equivalents [FTEs]), located in Bellingham, Washington, a city with a population of approximately 90,000. WCC offers Associate in Arts and Science and Associate in Arts (AAS and AA) degrees, numerous professional certificates, and two BAS degrees. Because Bellingham is also home to Bellingham Technical College, which offers many of the vocational programs associated with two-year colleges, WCC students are predominantly transfer-degree seeking (79%); of those pursuing a professional or technical degree or certificate, many graduate from the highly successful RN program or other health-science related programs or the nationally recognized cybersecurity program (Whatcom Community College, 2021).

WCC students are relatively young, with 68 percent between the ages of 16 and 34; about half attend full-time (53%); and roughly 10% are current high school students taking classes at WCC's campus in Washington state's dual-credit Running Start program.<sup>2</sup> International students account for roughly eight percent of the FTE. WCC students are also majority White and first generation (63% for both figures); 37 percent are students of color, with the largest demographic groups being Asian at six percent and Latinx/Hispanic at three percent, while 20 percent identify as "two or more groups" (Whatcom 2020-21 WCC Student Headcount and FTE, n.d.).

Like college students everywhere, a significant number of WCC students face personal challenges. During the fall of 2019, 42 percent experienced food insecurity.

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2. In Washington, Running Start is a very successful program in which high school juniors and seniors attend classes at local community colleges earning dual-credit; about half of Running Start students at Whatcom attend full-time and take few if any high school courses, seeking to earn both an associate's degree and high school diploma simultaneously. The rest of the Running Start students take one or two classes per quarter at Whatcom while taking classes at their high school. Running Start accounts for about 10-14 percent of our FTE annually; because state funds transfer with them from the high school to the college, Running Start enrollment is an important revenue source.

rity in the prior 30 days (compared to 42 percent statewide for two-year colleges); 53 percent experienced housing insecurity in the previous year (compared to 51 percent statewide for two-year colleges); 22 percent experienced homelessness in the previous year (compared to 19 percent statewide for two-year colleges) (2019 #RealCollege Survey Results, 2020; Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey, 2020). Overall, Whatcom students are as vulnerable—if not more so—to the kind of life issues that negatively affect success for other two-year college students.

## Curricular Context

The writing program at Whatcom is housed in the English department and offers two levels of college-level composition: first-year writing (English 101), which nearly every student in every program has to complete, and a second composition course required of nearly all of the associate's degrees. Prior to 2016, we offered a second composition course for transfer students, English 102, which was replaced with an offering of three courses: English 201: Advanced Composition, which faculty are free to design as they wish to meet the learning outcomes; English 202: Writing about Literature, which is probably exactly what you think it is; and English 230-235: Technical Writing (three-credit or five-credit version). All the composition courses are coordinated through parallel learning outcomes and a shared, though not mandated, recommended "learning for transfer" curriculum (see Yancey et al., 2014). A dedicated writing program administrator, with one course of reassign time and a small budget, facilitates program development, which includes facilitating our placement process.<sup>3</sup>

We have 11 full-time, tenure-line faculty, all of whom teach composition regularly, and 20 to 25 contingent faculty, nearly all of whom have been teaching with us for years, sometimes for more than 20. We're an active writing program, with recent tenure-track hires (three) trained mainly in composition rather than literature or creative writing. Many of us are active in the Two-Year College English Association of the Pacific Northwest (TYCA-PNW) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). At the 2017 CCCC in Portland, for example, we had nine faculty attend; at the CCCC the following year in Kansas City, six of our faculty attended, including two contingent faculty. Our current administration is committed to equity and social justice and tends to

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3. Historically, placement has been overseen by the English department in collaboration with Developmental Education and ABE faculty, but the placement process took place in the Testing and Placement Office, which administered the ACCUPLACER test; later, when multiple measures were implemented using the "Placement Scorecard," the placement decisions were made at various offices around campus. Also, Signee worked hard to coordinate all the different stakeholders, from faculty to advisors.

be very supportive of writing program reform. Our department has requested three new faculty of color for our English department since currently only one faculty member identifies as a person of color (and she's a new contingent faculty member) and one (Jeff) identifies as mixed race. This faculty racial and ethnicity mix does not match the student body, which is over one-third students of color as noted previously.

Finally, one notable factor of our writing program is what we call "comp rate," which is used to calculate our annual workload. A five-credit composition course, with an enrollment of 19 or higher, is calculated as 6.25 credits toward a full-time quarterly load of 15 credit hours. This means a full-time faculty member can teach seven five-credit composition courses in a year as an equivalent to the nine five-credit non-composition courses of a full-time load. Since we're on a quarter system, a full-time composition load, then, could consist of a 3-2-2 course schedule. This workload allows faculty at Whatcom to work with students and respond to their writing in ways promoted by the discipline and avoid the burnout that is common to the field. Moreover, the more manageable workload allows for the professional development that faculty at other colleges regret having little time for (see Klausman, Roberts, & Snyder, 2020; Suh, Tino-co, Toth, & Edgel, 2020).

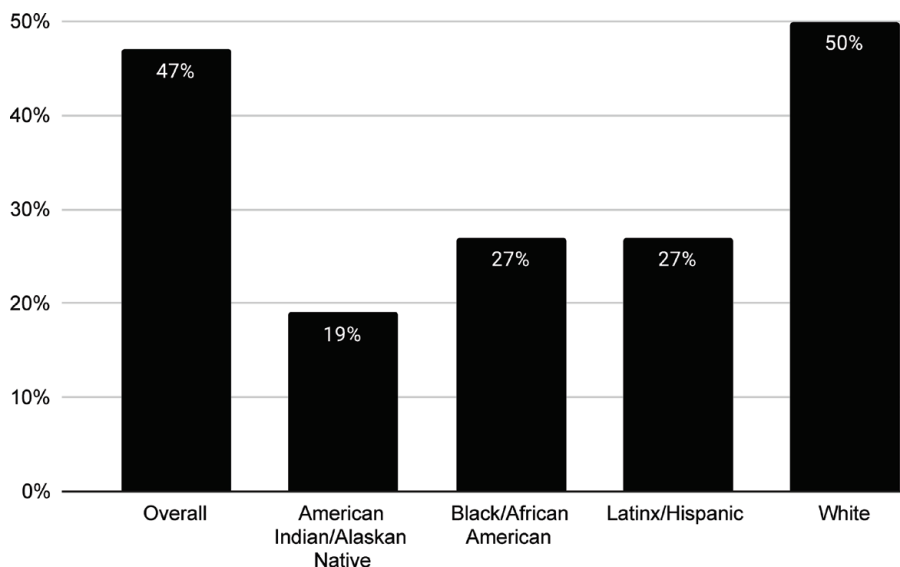
## ACCUPLACER

As mentioned previously, around 2012, when CCRC studies appeared showing the inadequacy of standardized tests as placement tools (Scott-Clayton, 2012) and suggesting the disparate impact of such practices (Poe et al., 2014), we looked closely at our use of ACCUPLACER and quickly saw the unfairness—almost meanness—of the practice.

In addition to having the highest cut-off score in the state, we also tested students in both reading and sentence skills but used only the score on the sentence-skill test for placement. This practice resulted in less than one-third of all new students placing into English 101 (30%), a bit more than a third placing into English 100 (35%), and about a quarter placing into Developmental English, ABE, or one of our English language learner programs (25%).

Because our reliance on the ACCUPLACER sentence-skills test created "disparate impact" in almost a classic way (see Poe et al., 2014), students of color disproportionately placed into lower-level or pre-college classes compared to White students. Consequently, students of color completed college-level English (101 or higher) in their first year at disproportionately lower rates. For the 2011–2012 academic year, 47 percent of all students completed college-level English in their first year, but this number was far smaller for students of color (Figure 2.2).

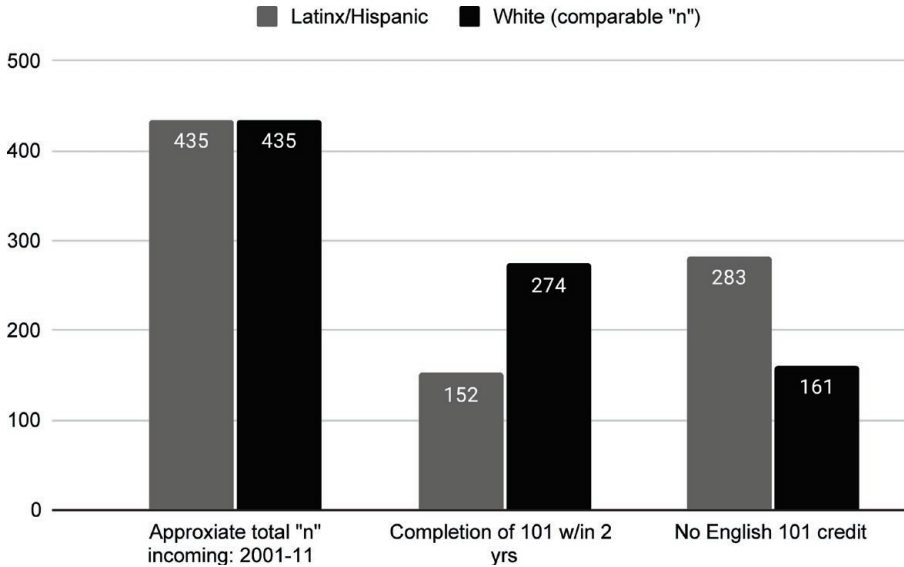
While these numbers are stark, we'd like to consider an extended scenario to make clear the exigence we felt when we first became aware of the impact of our placement process.



*Figure 2.2. English 101 completion in first year (2011–2012)*

Because Whatcom is a relatively small college, and because Latinx/Hispanic students account for only approximately three percent of new students, the *n* for Latinx/Hispanic students excluded from success in first-year writing in any given year is relatively small. But what if we multiply those numbers over ten years? This would give us a better picture of the impact of our placement process over time and on our community: In our view, this impact is part of how generational poverty persists, if we grant that higher education improves income and quality of life (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016).

If we take 2011–2012 as an average year (which it is, compared with the next three), we know that only 29 percent of Latinx/Hispanic students were successful in college-level English within one year, and only 35 percent were successful in college-level English within two years. (The comparable figures for White students are 54 percent and 63 percent.) Over ten years, then, we can see that out of approximately 14,500 total students placed using ACCUPLACER, 435 would likely have identified as Latinx/Hispanic. Of those 435, only 152 (35%) would have been successful in college-level English in two years. This means that 283 people who identified as Latinx/Hispanic would have left Whatcom without credit in college-level English. By contrast, over that same time period, 63 percent of White students were successful in college-level English within two years. For a similar *n*, this means that of 435 White students, 274 students earned college-level English credits while 161 White students left Whatcom without such credits earned (Figure 2.3).



*Figure 2.3. Effect of disparate impact: Latinx/Hispanic v. White students extrapolated over 10 years.*

We have no way of knowing if the Latinx/Hispanic students transferred to another college or returned later; we do know that a student who does not complete English 101 at Whatcom does not complete a certificate or degree at Whatcom. The results of ACCUPLACER seem to indicate that Whatcom's placement process disproportionately and unfairly (for reasons we discuss below and suggest above) barred historically marginalized students, such as Latinx/Hispanic, from higher education and, to some degree, the better life that such an education promises.

Once we saw the problem with ACCUPLACER, Jeff related the system to the then recent CCRC study on standardized test scores and placement. He contrasted the scores on the sentence-skills test with scores on the reading-skills test (which students completed but which was not considered in placement, for unknown reasons) and found no correlation whatsoever. For example, Jeff found that students with a sentence-skills score of 88, which was the cut-off for English 100, our bridge course, had reading-skills test scores that ranked from the 3rd percentile to the 97th percentile.

There was no explanation for that huge variation, whether the reading scores actually said something about some or all of the test-takers' reading abilities or whether some or all of the test-takers knew the score didn't count and so expended effort as they wished. However, considering that the CCRC provided some evidence supporting the validity of the reading-skills test, and that there existed models in our state for using the reading-skills test only for placement (Bellevue College had instituted such a policy a few years before), we shifted our placement to using reading skills only and lowering the cut-off scores. We aimed for more



students placed directly in English 101 and so simply lowered the cut-off score to achieve the number we wanted: Everyone in the 60th percentile and up got into English 101. Simple. The placement distribution from 2013–2015 reflects that change: More students entered English 101; however, those placed along the pipeline, though fewer, faced the same potential leakage points.

## Moving to Multiple Measures via the “Placement Scorecard”

As we were wrestling with our unfair placement system, we were also facing pressure from the state of Washington to change our course offerings. The transfer agreement we operate under between two- and four-year colleges is managed through the Inter-Collegiate Relations Council (ICRC). The ICRC determined long ago that the first college-level English composition course must be English 101. No composition course below that could carry college-level credit and so must be numbered below 100.

At Whatcom, English 100 was offered as a bridge course to English 101. In fact, we were proud of our “modified stretch program,” designed after Arizona State University’s (ASU) stretch-model, which gave students a slower and more in-depth introduction to college-level writing. Its quarterly all-department assessment meeting was central to our writing program as it served both to norm our teaching and to develop ourselves professionally. Also, it reflected our “more writing is better” belief. Many of us saw it as our most valuable and important class because it gave students yet one more class to improve as writers and offered a safer introduction to college writing venues since it was only offered pass-fail. At one point, almost 40 percent of all new students placed into English 100, which in the fall quarter had the most sections of any English class; this naturally meant employment for many contingent faculty.

When the ICRC insisted, finally, that we renumber English 100 to below 100, we faced a conundrum. If we numbered the course below 100, we would be making it a Developmental English (DE) course. At Whatcom, DE courses are housed in a different department and even in a different division; they are taught by DE faculty. Our English faculty could not teach those classes. People’s jobs were on the line.

After lengthy and at times heated discussion, we eliminated English 100 and, via a separate conversation about integrating reading and writing in DE, we helped DE collapse their sequence to essentially one class: English 95. At the same time, the DE faculty revised their college-level study skills class (English 174), and we in English recommended introductory literature classes as “bridge” courses into English 101 for students who felt they needed a softer landing into college-level writing instruction, under the assumption that lit classes required less writing but were still taught by English faculty who could shepherd wary students through a college-level writing process at least once. We had other plans as



well, which included the creation of Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) courses<sup>4</sup> and a new, fairer placement process (Figure 2.7.)

To facilitate these changes, our administration secured an Achieving the Dream grant to support faculty to create an ALP English 101 course, team-taught by DE and English composition faculty. Based on CCRC research that found that high school GPA was the best predictor of success in first-year writing (Bailey, 2012), Jeff created a “Placement Scorecard” in the spring of 2014 which allowed students to use any one of a number of measures for placement: cumulative high school GPA, AP English grade or test score, SAT/ACT, college GPA, or—barring access to any of those—ACCUPLACER reading-skills score.<sup>5</sup>

Even here, however, we see evidence of our gate-keeping mentality. While we opened the door to multiple options for placement, we limited the scope. The high school GPA had to be from within two years (later extended to five) and required an official transcript—two limitations that very likely (and based on anecdotal evidence) disproportionately affected older and non-traditional students, including veterans, but which did not affect younger White students, those still in high school, or new graduates. Also, the GPA requirement discriminated against students who had not done well in high school but came to the college more motivated. Similarly, the other test scores—SAT, ACT, AP—

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4. The ALP model we developed deviates from the traditional model developed at the Community College of Baltimore County. Due to various constraints—employment of Developmental Education faculty, for instance—along with the prevalent belief at the time that “Developmental Education students” were a distinct population with unique needs—that is, we still were under the impression that our former placement methods and other markers actually identified a difference in students who in the past were placed into developmental courses—and so needed special curriculum and pedagogy which our English faculty were not trained in, we created a ten-credit team-taught linked course of English 101 and English 95; students were placed into the ten-credit class, team taught by an English department faculty member and a Developmental Education faculty member. The faculty were compensated for both classes, thus making the arrangement highly costly for the college. When the Achieving the Dream funding ran out, and the college could no longer afford the team-taught compensation model, Developmental Education faculty resisted the un-coupling of the compensation from the linked course model (in essence, Developmental Education faculty were unwilling to team teach and be paid only for one five-credit class). The ALP model was disbanded and a hodge-podge of options has since replaced it; creating “support” courses remains on the college’s agenda, with a recent introduction of IBest courses—again, linked and team taught but funded by a Washington state program; however, the deficit-model thinking that grounds many of these initiatives is troubling to us (Jeff and Signee), and we have not been invited to participate in their development.

5. Note that we distinguish between “multiple options” for placement, which allows students to use any one of multiple options for placement, and “multiple measures” for placement, as is traditionally understood to use a combination of two or more measurements to determine placement.

discriminated in favor of traditional, White students. The result was that the ACCUPLACER option very likely (again, based on anecdotal evidence from advisors) was utilized disproportionately by non-traditional students, many of whom were students of color.

Nonetheless, the shift to the Placement Scorecard and to using the lower ACCUPLACER reading-skills cut-off score (equal to the average cut-off score of colleges in the state, which Jeff researched) resulted in immediate increase in placement into first-year writing. In the 2015–2016 academic year, the results were dramatic (Figure 2.4).

As Figure 2.4 shows, 79 percent of new students placed into English 101. This means that far more students were placed directly into and therefore completing English 101 rather than courses lower in the sequence. College-level placement for key demographic groups showed significant improvement as well. Students of color benefited greatly, with 66 percent of Latinx/Hispanic students placing into English 101 as opposed to 29 percent before, and 73 percent of Black/African American students placing into English 101, up from 27 percent during the worst of the ACCUPLACER days.

As a consequence of students being placed into first-year writing at a higher rate, the completion rates—the percentage of students completing English 101 or higher within one year of enrolling—increased significantly. This milestone is used to measure the college’s success, since completion of first-year writing in the first year correlates positively with retention and graduation (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2020). Our local data show that our retention rates into the fourth quarter after enrolling rose only slightly (from 57% in 2015–2016 to 62% in 2018–2019); however, retention and graduation rates, no doubt, are affected by many factors.

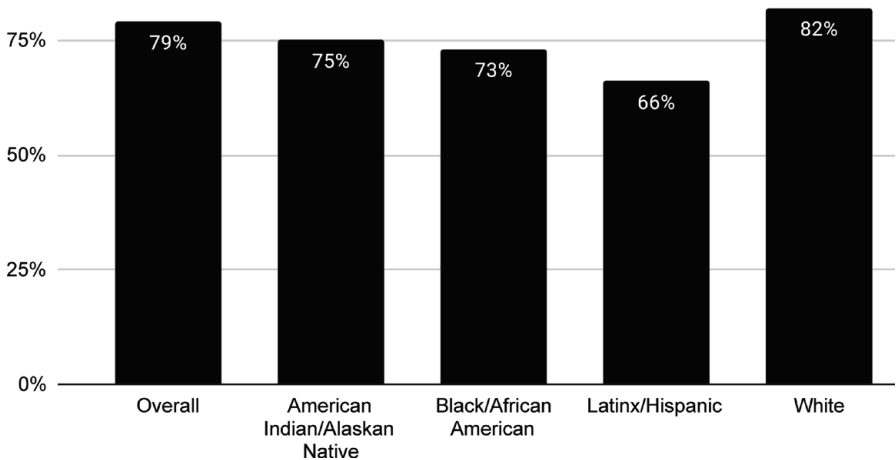


Figure 2.4. Placement into English 101: Multiple measures, 2015–2016.

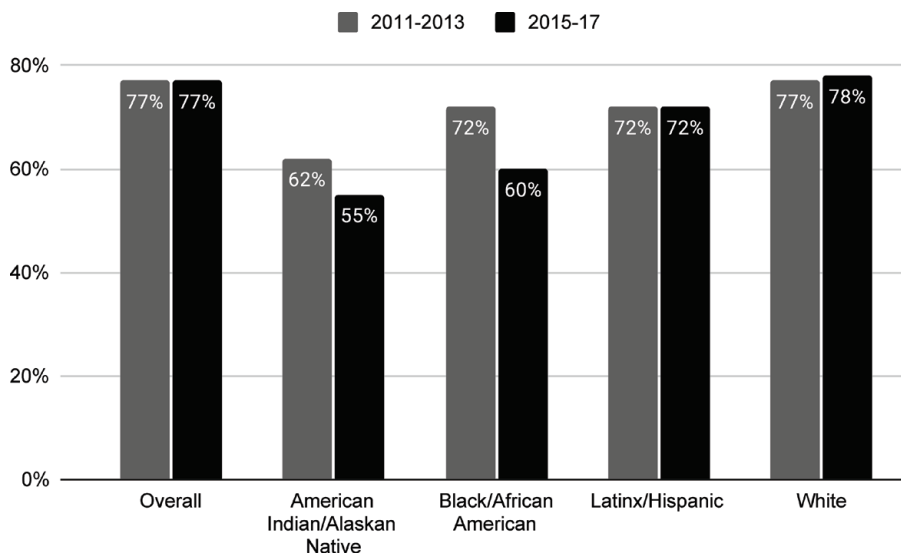


Figure 2.5. English 101 success rates: 2011–2012 v. 2015–2017.

Though the numbers of students placed directly into English 101 increased dramatically, thus side-stepping the preparatory “pipeline courses,” the success rates in English 101 remained essentially the same, at around 77 percent. For most students of color, the success rates decreased somewhat, as Figure 2.5 shows, with the exception of Latinx/Hispanic students, who were successful at the same 72 percent. However, since more of all students of color placed directly into English 101, rather than further down the pipeline, a significantly greater aggregate number were successful in English 101 than before (e.g., since 73% of all Black/African American students placed directly into English 101 using multiple measures rather than 73% placing *below* English 101 using ACCUPLACER, as shown in Figure 2.1, 60% of the 73% were successful as opposed to 72% of a much smaller number).<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the move to the Placement Scorecard, offering students multiple options to demonstrate readiness for first-year writing, had a positive effect as did the truncating of the pipeline of developmental courses. But the reliance upon standardized-test scores and high school GPA, especially as we delimited those scores, still acted as a gatekeeper for many students. We had adopted the Placement Scorecard and program redesign out of necessity and efficiency: The sequence revision required a tremendous amount of collaboration across campus, but the move to multiple measures was a relatively easy adjustment to make, requiring relatively little structural changes to the entry-and-advising process that students followed. But we recognized the move as a temporary stop-gap measure, not one designed

6. Figure 2.3 uses data from two academic years for each data point in order to ensure a large enough *n* for each population group.

with fairness in mind, which Mya Poe and John Aloysius Cogan Jr. (2016), in “Civil Rights and Writing Assessment,” cited as “the central tenet” of placement.

## Reframing Placement as an Equity Issue

Shortly after we enacted our reforms, statewide developments provided additional context for more authentically addressing equity issues in placement. ACT’s COMPASS, the purported writing skills test still widely used for placement across the state, had recently been discontinued due to questionable validity (Fain, 2015), providing an incentive for colleges to reassess their placement approaches. With support from our State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), administrators and faculty from many of the 34 two-year colleges met at Highline College, south of Seattle, for a series of workshops on directed self-placement (DSP), featuring keynote speakers Christie Toth and Asao Inoue and opportunities to share DSP models that Highline College and other early adopters were developing. Thanks to a convergence of these statewide conversations, our own federal grant funding, and the access to data afforded us by our office of Assessment and Institutional Research, we were able to hit the ground running in planning our next iteration of placement design around data-informed principles and a deliberate effort to promote equity.

Attempts to reframe placement as an equity issue, rather than within its traditional function of providing a mechanism for “ensuring success,” were not without initial controversy at our campus. Efforts to question the predictive reliability and gatekeeping function of placement were met with a degree of skepticism. Traditional placement measures had long been viewed as measures of student readiness, preventing students who “needed help” from failing in first year writing, gateway courses, and the many courses in which placement in English 101 is a prerequisite. Despite the research challenging the validity and efficacy of traditional placement measures, the long-held assumption that placement “worked” (or should) was hard to abandon: Students took placement exams or earned certain GPAs, and the numbers meant something, went the rationale; the process was benign, if not beneficent, designed to support students in their success. These were all assumptions faculty and staff had to work through and abandon.

At the same time, English and DE faculty were grappling with existing and anticipated losses, including the retirement of English 100 and potential further decline in enrollments in pre-college courses. Putting aside these threats to personal lost income and programmatic identity, a belief that “more writing is better” had long been a shared core value, as mentioned above. Moreover, the DE faculty expressed concern that self-placement was simply the newest iteration of the “right to fail” paradigm and that students (and faculty) deserved better. And better meant opportunities for more support and more preparation for the rigors of college writing.

In hindsight, a possible explanation for this resistance was that we were still grappling with an assimilationist mindset—a belief that students need help doing

what we think is important. We were only beginning to deliberately apply an equity framework to decision-making, with the larger systemically racist implications of our placement practices and curriculum still barely on our radar.

Ultimately, the research and the statewide conversation offered legitimacy to directed self-placement, and our own internal course success data revealed the capricious gatekeeping role of traditional placement measures. Faculty either supported or no longer openly opposed our reform efforts, and student services staff lent their support to make the many changes to the onboarding processes our college had in place.

## Moving to Informed Self-Placement

In 2016–2017, while conducting our initial literature review and attending statewide meetings of colleges interested in DSP, we did not realize we would ultimately reject many of the traditional DSP practices. In fact, we originally set out to replicate early DSP efforts, for the benefit of traditionally marginalized groups of students, relying on surveys to provide us with the information necessary to direct students to the best English course for them. We considered reading and writing prompts as sources of information, and a possible reliance on English faculty advisors to guide students in need of additional direction (Blakesley, 2002; Reynolds, 2003; Royer & Gilles, 1998).

Because we set out with an ambitious aim—a fully online placement tool to be used by nearly all students<sup>7</sup>—we quickly realized traditional DSP methods would likely not permit us to meet our local goals. We were intrigued by the shift in perspective and practice that an *informed self-placement* (ISP) model might afford (Bedore & Rossen-Knill, 2004). We realized placement in its most equitable form might offer up a “teachable moment,” in which students would rely entirely on information about course options and success strategies in order to make independent placement decisions. This was the only justification we could offer for having a placement process at all (see Nastal, 2019, who proposed the idea that “an admitted student is an already-qualified student,” even at an open-door institution). As we considered each traditional element—surveys, reading samples, writing prompts, course recommendations—we asked, “Why? Is there any empirical evidence or compelling rationale to argue for inclusion?” If not, we did not include them, believing they would act only as unnecessary barriers, especially to historically disadvantaged groups (Elliot, 2016).

Granted, we did not come to these decisions lightly or quickly. We pored over survey question options. We spent a number of weeks considering various types of reading prompts and writing samples as potential sources of useful information about classes students might take. In the end, we realized that student lives

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7. At WCC, English as a Second Language Academic (ESLA) students are admitted and placed through a separate process, with oversight by a different department.

and experiences were difficult to capture even with the most thoughtful of surveys. And because reading and writing samples would be alienated from a supportive classroom environment, we determined such mechanisms would actually risk misinforming students who could successfully navigate those same passages and prompts within the interactive environment of a well-taught college course.

Without entirely discounting concerns about student preparation or a “right to fail” paradigm, we decided to hold first to a commitment to removing barriers and fostering agency as the primary informing principles of our ISP design. The information we now share with students focuses on the importance of student agency and the value of their lived experiences, like military service or graduating from high school, and contextualizes “readiness” in everyday reading and communication experiences and “success” in the workload expectations and the support systems within and outside of the college.

Students self-select the placement information they wish to explore and choose from categories of course options rather than a single either-or choice between English 101 and something “less than” that. Figure 2.6 presents a diagram of the four possible paths a new student may follow. Following any of the paths, such as “College Writing” or “Alternate Paths,” takes them to an introductory video and some written text describing what happens in each pathway, with details about the courses housed on our college website. Students then return to the main page and view another selection or move on. In this way, students inform themselves rather than being shunted through a predetermined sequence of activities.

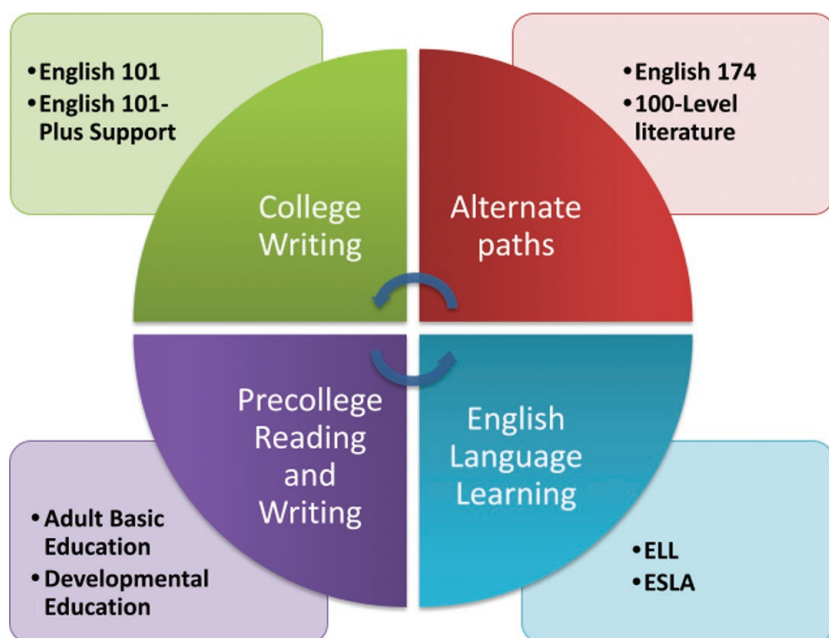


Figure 2.6. Placement options visual.

A perennial problem for budget-strapped colleges considering self-placement is the actual placement platform. We considered a variety of options, including instruments designed at Boise State, Portland State, Highline Community College, and Lower Columbia College. Lower Columbia, at one of our state DSP meetings, presented an online platform created with an iPhone camera and Google Forms—a compellingly simple combination of technologies we regrettably could not convince our IT department to approve. Eventually, we settled on Canvas, the learning management system for Washington State colleges—a familiar platform which we knew we would have control over, allowing for easy editing and updates.

Over the nearly yearlong process of researching and designing our ISP, we enlisted the help of a team of stakeholders, including advisors, faculty, and administrators. In addition, in our roles as writing program administrator and department chair, with decades of combined teaching and administrative experience, we also had a good bit of autonomy and ethos in designing the ISP instrument.

To communicate information within Canvas, we rely on a few short informational videos—to avoid a heavily text-based experience—about the ISP process and course options. Students then take two very short “quizzes” (ungraded surveys) to record their self-placement decision, and Advising and Registration have access to student decisions to reference during advising sessions and to manually input for registration access. The entire process for students takes approximately 20 minutes, meeting another of our goals.

Using student feedback, we revised our placement materials about a year after implementation, prior to the fall of 2019, this time including student voices in the informational videos and applying Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) principles to make content more accessible, as well as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) elements. This revised version of ISP is in use today (though again being revised). Students complete the self-placement process independently from anywhere in the world; plus, the ISP course is fully accessible as measured by a built-in Canvas accessibility tool.

In large part due to early and frequent communication with all stakeholders, our initial ISP rollout received a largely positive reception. Approximately 1,200 students participated initially, with nearly all those who offered feedback expressing satisfaction. For example, one student wrote, “You guys did a great job explaining and helping me out. Thank you very much.” Another wrote, “Thanks for keeping it simple and easy while saving me time and money. Yay!” We believe student satisfaction with the process, such as expressed here, is important, as a placement process that is welcoming throughout is key to assuaging fears and preconceptions that historically marginalized students—students for whom the educational system in general has repulsed (see Zaretta Hammond’s (2015) *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and the Brain*)—likely bring to their first encounter with our college. Granted, the satisfaction assessment may not be empirically valid, but combined with focus group feedback, along with disaggregated placement data, we feel we at least have no reason to be alarmed.



Any residual resistance from English 101 faculty regarding student readiness and/or misplacement seemed to evaporate other than the occasional anecdotal complaint about “one student who . . .” We encountered a short-lived “second wave” of mild pushback from DE faculty in the form of renewed questioning about methodology and grumbling about declining enrollments attributed to the placement process, likely a result of the very real threat to DE faculty teaching loads. Because we offer our first-year writing courses with several support options, including an ALP model, which we discuss below (and in note 4 and Figure 2.7), we continue to navigate the inevitable tension of working across two departments in coming up with ways to serve and communicate information to students.

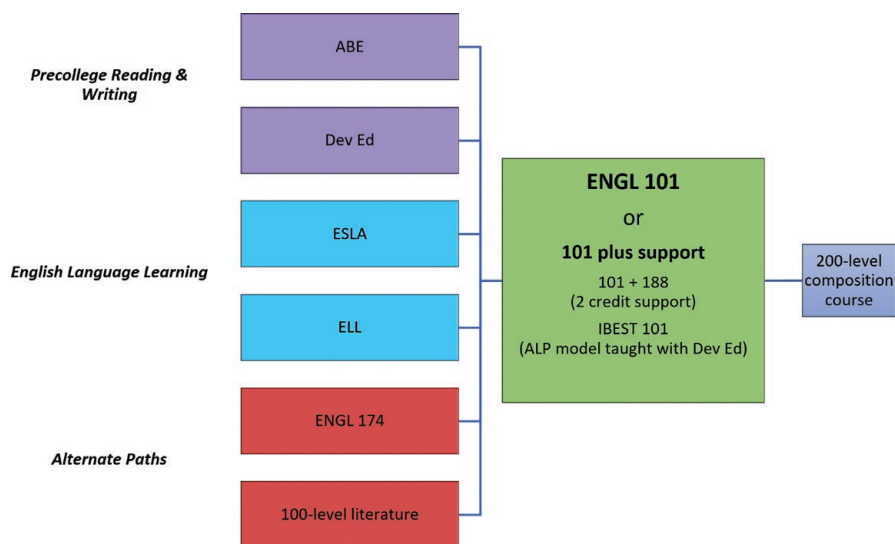


Figure 2.7. Current placement/Course progression options.

In training sessions with advisors, we learned they needed assurances that the move from gatekeeping to agency was, in fact, a priority. We originally envisioned ISP as a tool advisors would use in their conversations but have since learned Canvas is difficult for advisors to locate, possibly due to our college's byzantine website and the layers of administration that must be penetrated to revise it. Moreover, ISP is only one of many checkpoints advisors share in their conversations with incoming students; and, of course, many of our advisors are hired part-time and seasonally to respond to the largest new enrollment periods, and these temporary and sometimes new advisors have a lot to keep in mind. Similarly, data entry of the students' placement decisions has been burdensome—Canvas does not interact to our severely outmoded administrative software—and the task of downloading data in an Excel spreadsheet and then entering the placement code by hand has bounced around different student services departments, sometimes from intern to intern.

## Consequences of ISP

Placement reform is only one part of Whatcom's concerted effort to improve assessment of student learning. In 2008, a dedicated institutional researcher was hired, and the Assessment and Institutional Research (AIR) office was established. Thanks to the director there, and the research analyst hired in 2012, we now have access to Tableau dashboards that give us real-time access to placement data and course success data, which we can analyze in many different ways, disaggregating along demographic lines as well as delivery modes, etc. We can compare placement, success, retention, and graduation rates for all students and for any number of combinations. For example, we can determine the success rate in English 101 within one year for part-time students who identify as low income (Pell Grant receiving). We can identify success rates for Running Start students who identify as Latinx/Hispanic—in full or part. These dashboards are publicly available.<sup>8</sup>

Our ISP has been far more successful than we had anticipated. When we launched the ISP in the spring of 2018, for use by incoming students that fall, we had no idea how it would work, beyond what limited reassurance positive but very small student focus groups offered us. Moreover, we were uncertain of the effect on the makeup of the English classes. Would faculty notice a shift in student ability? Would there be other effects?

Even before the start of the 2018 Fall quarter, we recognized that about 95 percent of all incoming students who completed the ISP chose first-year college English as their placement, meaning English 101, a 100-level literature course, or the college-level study skills course. We surmised correctly that the vast majority of these students would enter English 101. We were scheduled to receive our first set of data on success rates in January of 2019, after the fall quarter ended, but even before then, as classes began in September, we received informal feedback from faculty on the makeup of their classes—feedback largely in the form of silence. We heard no complaints about radical differences to perceived readiness for English 101 among students sitting in classes across campus. We breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently, the wheels had not fallen off.

Then in January, the Tableau dashboards were updated and the data was available. We learned 96 percent of all students placed themselves into college-level English. For the year, students of color also placed themselves into college-level English at high rates. As Figure 2.8 shows, 94 percent of Black/African American students placed themselves into college-level English, compared with only

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8. While the Tableau dashboards offer real-time data on placement, success, retention, and graduation rates disaggregated in any number of ways, individual populations are not so easily defined. For example, a student may identify as Latinx/Hispanic as well as White and be included in both of those categories. Because of this, all data disaggregated along racial and ethnic identities are approximate. Links to Whatcom Community College's public Tableau dashboards can be found on this page: <http://faculty.whatcom.ctc.edu/InstResearch/IR/InstitutionalDataCollegeData/datatools/index.html>

73 percent using multiple measures and 32 percent using ACCUPLACER; for Latinx/Hispanic students, the numbers were higher but not as high: 87 percent self-placed into college-level English compared with 66 percent using multiple measures and 34 percent using ACCUPLACER.

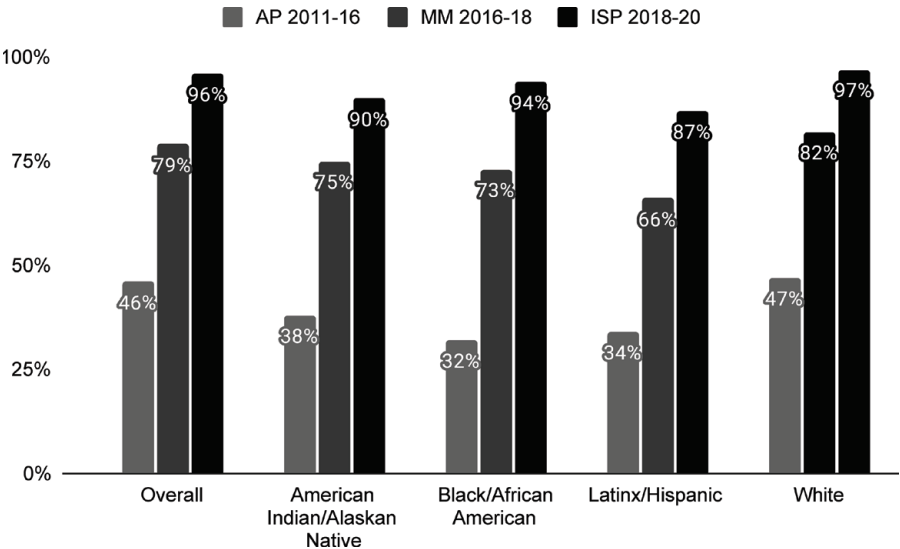


Figure 2.8. Placement in English 101: ACCUPLACER (AP) v. multiple measures (MM) v. informed self-placement (ISP).

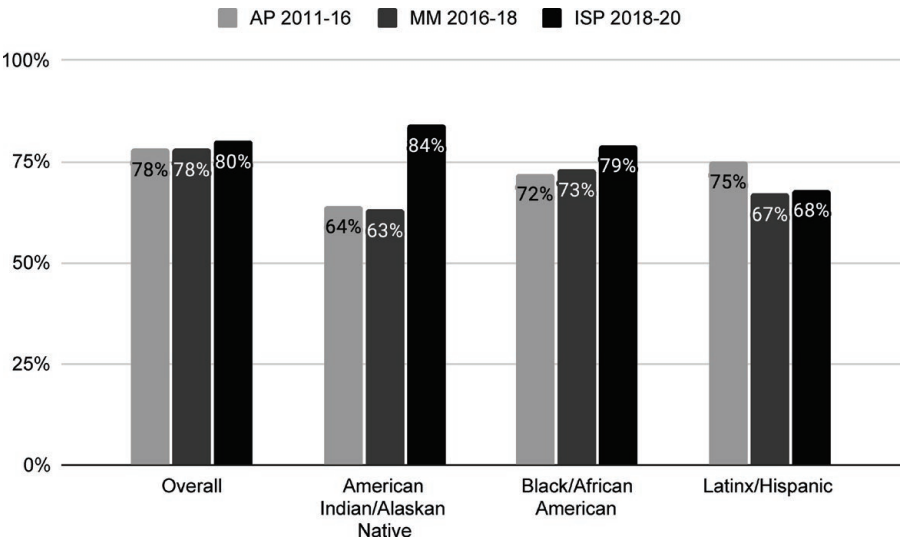


Figure 2.9. English 101: Success rates: ACCUPLACER (AP), multiple measures (MM), informed self-placement (ISP).

But were these students successful? If not, did that mean that the old placement process had some validity in identifying those students who were ready for college-level work and those who were not? The data allowed us to dismiss that worry. As Figure 2.9 shows, the success rates, for the most part, actually increased, with the exception of Latinx/Hispanic students.<sup>9</sup>

There are at least two ways to interpret this data. First, we can assume that nothing changed in the receptive environment—in other words, we were teaching the “same old English 101,” and the students prior to ISP simply had been barred from their chance to demonstrate what they could do, either directly by being denied access to the class or indirectly via the environment of exclusion they felt they had to fight through (i.e., the stigma that comes from being placed into a lower-level English class). Second, we can recognize that the entire college was working on equity issues and that the placement revision was just one part, albeit a major one, of the innovations we were implementing. Faculty were aware that they were likely to face a different kind of student in the fall of 2018. Whether they actually did or not, we have no way of knowing except anecdotally: We both taught English 101 that year and can attest that the student makeup was largely the same. We suspect that other faculty also did not notice a significant difference since we received no complaints about student readiness. In our estimation, both factors probably played a part. The students entering our English 101 classes in the fall of 2018 were likely of no discernible difference from the students placed into Developmental English in the fall of 2011, which means that our old gatekeeping placement processes were without warrant. At the same time, our faculty were made conscious of their need to modify their pedagogical and curricular practices, and many embraced the opportunity for such revision, changes which continue today with Whatcom’s equity efforts that touch every part of our campus.

The one exception to this is the decrease in success rates for Latinx/Hispanic students, from a high of 75 percent under the old ACCUPLACER placement method to 68 percent using ISP. As mentioned previously, the aggregate number of Latinx/Hispanic students successfully completing English 101 increased dramatically—simply because more students in this demographic had immediate access to the class. Nonetheless, the success rate dropped, and while the argument could be made that these students were “misplaced” or “underprepared,” we are not ready to accept that conclusion but instead want to focus our attention on

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9. Christie Toth (2018) reported in “Directed Self-Placement at ‘Democracy’s Open Door’: Writing Placement and Social Justice in Community Colleges” that completion rates at colleges that had implemented some form of DSP “remained the same or improved,” and that is certainly the case for us. Toth also stated that as of 2018, “no community colleges disaggregated DSP outcomes data to examine the consequences of DSP for different groups” (p. 139); our disaggregated data was just becoming available at the time Toth was publishing her chapter.

our readiness, as a writing program and as writing teachers, for all students, as we discuss in “next steps.”

As mentioned above, our ISP process has had a great benefit for incoming students of all races and ethnicities, as well as students with disabilities, low-income students, and other demographics.<sup>10</sup> Over 95 percent of new students self-place into college-level English, and most of them choose English 101 as their first course. Success rates have actually risen to 80 percent and continue to rise as faculty have embraced equity-minded pedagogical practices, such as “the 4 Connections,” first developed at Odessa College and adapted by Lake Washington Technical (Ames & Heilstedt, 2019). Far fewer students enroll in DE courses, while the number of students who enroll in ABE and ELL courses remains about the same, with students finding their ways to these programs through the various student-support services.

Most importantly, the course sequence which saw a majority of students placed into classes below English 101 “leak away” has largely been eliminated. Our DE faculty, our ESL-Academic faculty, and our ABE faculty all have developed short-cuts from their programs directly into English 101 for some of their students. No longer are students disempowered by a standardized test, placed at the beginning of a long sequence of often disconnected courses, and then left with no recourse to opt out. The system we have now is not perfect—the gap between different demographic groups in self-placement in college-level English gives us pause—but it is far, far better than what we had. Most importantly, it recognizes and supports student agency.

An unexpected positive development we found is that as the placement process evolved from ACCUPLACER through multiple measures to ISP, more students ended up enrolling in classes. As Table 2.1 shows, 77 percent of students using the old ACCUPLACER model enrolled at WCC within four quarters; that number moved up to 84 percent with multiple measures and went up again with ISP to 87 percent. Of course, correlation does not mean causation, and class enrollment is affected by many factors. But we believe it is safe to say that the revision of the placement process did not prove to be a deterrent and likely helped.

A less data-driven consequence is the shift that is occurring in our faculty attitudes and beliefs about readiness and about what English composition itself means. This shift is not the consequence of ISP solely; ISP is part of a larger shift toward an emphasis on social justice—a central concept in the college’s strate-

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10. Forty-four percent of students with disabilities completed English 101 in their first year under the ACCUPLACER placement process, 53 percent using multiple measures, and 60 percent using ISP. Forty-one percent of low-income students (Pell Grant awarded) completed English 101 in their first year using ACCUPLACER, 63 percent using multiple measures, and 65 percent using ISP. Some of this data seems to respond to Toth’s (2018) call for “more research that examines the consequences of various approaches to DSP for different groups” (p. 138).

gic plan revised and adopted in 2019—and a burgeoning movement to revamp our program as an antiracist writing program, which is being fostered on multiple fronts—through campuswide Equity Project initiatives, for example, and a statewide Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecology Initiative, in which Whatcom faculty are currently participating, led partly by Asao Inoue and based on his scholarship (Inoue, 2015).

**Table 2.1. Percentage of Students who Completed English Placement Processes and Ultimately Enrolled at WCC**

Method/Period	Enrolled Within 4 Quarters of Placement	Enrolled Any Time After Placement
ACCUPLACER Summer 2011–Spring 2015	77%	84%
Multiple measures Summer 2015–Spring 2018	84%	88%
ISP Summer 2018–Spring 2020	87%	88%

Nonetheless, when ISP was first implemented and faculty saw that students were essentially the same, they were forced to question their assumptions about readiness. At the same time, given the growing awareness of inequity in the system of higher education and the growing diversity of our students, faculty have doubled down on training to prepare themselves for these more diverse students. And finally, faculty have begun to question traditional notions of writing, moving toward multiple Englishes, for example. We believe the move from ACCUPLACER to multiple measures and to ISP has helped faculty be more open to question and modify their traditional practices.

Another positive consequence is the greater involvement of our DE faculty as co-developers and co-teachers in our ALP model English 101 course, which has been replaced recently by a modified IBest version. And even further, with all the revisions, faculty from the different programs—ESL-Academic, ELL, ABE, DE, and English composition—have been in better communication, collaboratively designing new courses and curriculum, including pathways directly from their programs into English 101.

However, there have been some drawbacks from these rapid shifts. The departmental divide between “lit people” and “comp people,” which had been growing for some years, may have deepened. With ALP and ISP and new ideas about what constitutes writing, including culturally responsive teaching, the demands on faculty to participate in professional development dedicated to teaching composition have increased and have not been universally welcome. Remnants of highly traditional views of writing persist, lingering perhaps just under the surface, but arising in

deficit-minded comments about student readiness or student writing: “They don’t know what a sentence is.”<sup>11</sup> We sense that the undoubted success of ISP and other reforms mitigates many concerns of equity-minded faculty though they leave untouched a perhaps nostalgic fondness for traditional, belletristic writing and “traditional” (read: White, middle-class) students. It’s evident that a shift in something as simple as a placement process can have repercussions that are far reaching, touching even the sense of identity that writing faculty hold for themselves.

## Lessons From ISP and Next Steps

We’ve come a long way in just under six years, from living with a grossly discriminatory placement process and the highest ACCUPLACER cut-off scores in the state, to revising an already successful but far from perfect informed self-placement process. Along the way, from the very early stages of moving through a multiple-measures approach, through the wave of revitalized DSP implementation, to assessing our own ISP results, we’ve learned a lot about how such self-placement instruments can be designed and implemented to enhance student agency and success. These are some of the key takeaways:

- Ensure institutional commitment to equity and antiracist efforts, and tie these movements to state and national movements.
- Obtain and anticipate both initial and ongoing funding.
- Recruit key stakeholders.
- Use data to inform planning and decision making.
- Map out placement “mechanics” (platform, data management, advisor training, etc.).
- Deliberately (re)design courses into which students place themselves.

Ideally, the last two recommendations inform placement design from the outset. An effective ISP process relies on the English department’s (and institution’s) ability to (re)envision and communicate what students encounter and benefit from in specific courses. Equitable placement is conditioned by the classes into which students place. To this end, developing a shared vision among faculty is essential. At WCC, placement has been informed by the principle that first-year writing courses can and should be ready for all students who determine for themselves that they have “good enough” language and reading proficiency and time management skills. However, we are now questioning the potential deficit mindset and white supremacist views implicit in even this language.

Locally, our faculty are coming to terms with the nuanced and multilayered ways in which higher education is, in fact, systemically racist, and in conversations about curriculum redesign, many have been questioning their own expertise as ed-

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11. See Allia Abdullah-Matta (2020) for a discussion of faculty exercising autonomy contrary to programmatic intents or legislative injunctions.



ucators (Inoue, 2015). This is a good problem to have and one that has implications for placement. Contextualizing placement within conversations about equitable/antiracist curriculum allows one to inform the other. By resisting the temptation to use placement as an early “filter,” used to identify “unprepared” students, and instead focusing on what students will encounter and what they need—not on what we have traditionally thought we need to tell them—we improve our chances of becoming what T.B. McNair et al. (2016) called a “student-ready” campus.

Our ISP program was awarded the Diana Hacker Outstanding Program in English Awards for Two-Year Colleges from TYCA for 2020. Nonetheless, four years on and with more self-placement examples to draw upon, we’ve come to recognize that our program is still informed by assimilationist ideas that may prime students to adopt a conditioned deficit mindset, especially students from historically marginalized groups.

Fortunately, we obtained grant funding to revise our ISP this year (2021). Our goal will be to integrate what we’ve learned from antiracist writing assessment work to create an antiracist placement experience for all incoming students, which we feel is a step beyond the open gateway experience we were aiming for originally and which, we feel, better expresses the original intent of community colleges to make education accessible to all (Strohl, 2015).

## Acknowledgments

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