Chapter 3. A Path to Equity, Agency, and Access: Self-Directed Placement at the Community College of Baltimore County

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Abstract: This case study looks back over three years of research, struggles to pilot self-directed placement, hurdles to jump through, and deeply important lessons that were hard learned. Placement hits nerves all around by directly addressing who is "prepared" for college, what it means to be "prepared" for college, what linguistic standards and practices determine that and why, what students desire out of their education, and what we feel we should give them, as well as beliefs about who students are and what they need. This case study details the use of a truly self-directed model of placement and shows promising trends on which we hope to be able to continue building.

Where We Started

Over several years, English faculty teaching in the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) noticed a disturbing trend: Students of color were a majority of the population in the developmental sections of our courses.[1] Despite being a majority minority institution, we noticed that a disproportionate number of students in our credit sections were White and the students in our smaller "developmental" sections were largely non-White.[2]

While these observations were anecdotal, a small group of faculty members decided to examine the data in more detail. We discovered that, in 2016, more than two thirds of all African American students who registered at the Community College of Baltimore County were required to take at least one developmental class, while fewer than half of the White students who registered were. That stark inequity presented by that data was the impetus for change.

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1. ALP is a nationally recognized corequisite model in which students who have been deemed "developmental" can take a credit class along with a smaller support class in the same semester (see Adams et al., 2009).

2. CCBC is a large, multi-campus community college in Baltimore County, Maryland. We are a majority minority institution. Forty-five percent of our students are White; 35 percent are Black; seven percent are Hispanic or Latino; six percent are Asian; three percent are multi-racial; and five percent are unknown.

We identified placement as the first volley in what we hope will be a progressive pattern of change. Placement exists at a pivotal point in the relationship between students and the institution. We see placement as an opportunity to truly open the door. Once intelligent, complex, and confident members of our community are entering classrooms by their choice, it is our belief that deficit mindsets will be ameliorated and pedagogical practices will shift in profound ways. We are starting to see these shifts—as discussions around self-direction, curriculum, and systematic barriers have started to occur regularly at CCBC. While many mindsets remain static, the dust that our placement shifts have kicked up is forcing greater reflection on our systems and practices.

In 2017, English and Academic Literacy faculty from CCBC who attended the Conference on Acceleration in Developmental Education (CADE) were struck by Myra Snell's contention, during her keynote, that "placement is destiny." Snell made a powerful argument that students are systemically underserved by placement. She noted that "A study of three California community colleges estimates that 50-60% of racial inequities in degree completion and transfer-readiness is explained by initial placement." The major takeaway from Snell's presentation was

> A test with very weak predictive validity is being used to place the majority of our Black and Brown students into remedial pipelines where it is guaranteed (due to inevitable attrition in the pipeline) that they will not achieve early milestones to transfer.[3]

Inspired by studies published by the Community College Research Center showing that GPA was more predictive of success than standardized tests, CCBC had already started working toward using multiple options for placement, mostly by relying on the GPA of incoming students. Initially, our college accepted a high school GPA for English placement from students who had graduated within the previous two years, and an official transcript was needed to corroborate the placement. [4] Data from the initial GPA pilot was positive, and the college successively reshaped GPA placement bands, lowering our credit-level GPA placement cutoff from 3.0 into credit level to 2.75 and then to 2.5.

Following CADE 2017, a faculty committee was formed to talk about placement reform generally. We became committed to following through with the multiple measures reforms already underway, but also became interested in

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3.   National data about placement trends into development education bear this out. A 2016 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, for instance, found that "At public 2-year institutions, 78 percent of Black students and 75 percent of Hispanic students (vs. 64 percent of White students) and 76 percent of students who were in the lowest income group (vs. 59 percent of those in the highest) took remedial courses" (Chen & Simone, 2016).

4.   We eventually expanded GPA placement for students who had graduated within a five-year timeframe.

self-placement as a practice that had promise for our student population and was well-matched to our curriculum, which focuses on issues of relevance to students' lives and leveraging student experience in the classroom. Informed by the *TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform* (Klaussman et al., 2016), we wanted to enhance our multiple measures.

Struck by how our college's moment of first contact with students is "an inflection point" (Stroman, 2019), we worked to use the language of belonging throughout our processes to leverage student success. As research from the Mindset Scholars Network indicates,

> Students are particularly sensitive to these signals at certain points, such as moments of transition, difficulty, or setbacks. The cues students receive in these moments, if they do not affirm students' sense of belonging, can set in motion negative, self-reinforcing cycles that can adversely affect long-term outcomes. (Stroman, 2019)

Recent research published in the field of educational psychology suggests that there are important connections between a student's sense of belonging and their success in higher education. As Mickaël Jury et al. (2017) recognized, "Higher education is far from being a culturally neutral environment for low SES students, notably because the system is 'built and organized according to taken for granted, middle- and upper-class cultural norms, unwritten codes, or 'rules of the game'" (p. 18).

As the average age of our students is 29, we needed to identify alternative forms of placement that would serve older, first-generation, or returning college students. Our returning student population is routinely overlooked—regardless of race. Given the history of Baltimore as a highly segregated city and the county as a nexus of outmigration, the neighborhoods that surround our campuses range from highly affluent to resource-deprived, immigrant communities to White and Black working-class areas—race was a pivot point, but class and age needed to also shape our practices.

We were encouraged by the white paper's extended discussion on directed self-placement (DSP), and we believed it could be a useful complement to our existing placement options, which could help us first make strides in access. In 2018, part-time African American and White students were more than twice as likely to be placed into developmental English as their full-time counterparts; Asian students were four times more likely to be placed into developmental English if they were part-time. Returning and part-time students of all races have routinely been treated as if their substantial life experiences do not matter, and their critical thinking has been veiled by the misconception that a lack of knowledge about the college's terminology and systems equates to lack of commitment to school or a lack of intelligence.

The model we developed was informed by how our college's onboarding protocol reinforces the status quo and, by holding onto White norms of linguistic

standards and social performativity, ultimately contributes to the discrepancies regarding African American and first-generation students being disproportionately placed into developmental coursework. We wanted to create an initial interaction between students and the institution that was built on actualizing the experiences and strengths of returning students and students with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to let them know those strengths were needed here—a move that would offer them confidence and allow them to leverage their strengths. When access increases it is our hope that these students—full of experiences and ideas—will transform these spaces, fostering curricular and pedagogical adjustments that will erode paternalistic attitudes and help to close the racialized achievement gap we see across our institutions' highly enrolled general education classes.[5]

Theorizing and Designing Self-Placement

Flexibility, agency, and control over content are too often the domain of privileged educational settings; they are given to students who can "handle" them. While it is argued that the students in our classrooms need to be taught behaviors to guarantee career or "college readiness," students in other economically or socially privileged settings are offered exploratory vistas. If we see the idea of choice and agency as endangering a student's ability to progress in a program of study and slow their time to completion, instead of creating systems that strive to accelerate people into career patterns, we should reflect on (and change) a culture that has placed so many people into a precarious relationship with upward mobility and survival.

As we designed our instrument and processes, we were struck by the idea that—for the students being most underserved by our current placement policies—leveraging self-reflection and experience was central to how they saw themselves in relation to our curriculum and the institutional setting. We developed a way of articulating our approach through pairing the components of DSP articulated by Dan Royer and Roger Gilles (1998) with work on agency and self-efficacy, as "extensive research has shown an integral relationship between self-efficacy and student success in college. . . . Self-efficacy refers to one's confidence in their ability to control their emotions, behaviors, and actions in order to actualize desired objectives (Bandura, 1977, 1986)" (Wood et al., 2015, p. 3). For ease of conveyance to colleagues across the college, we termed the intertwining of these ideas an "agency-information-reflection" cycle, or AIR. Through our process, we sought to foreground the idea of the self as the deciding factor, believing that, in the end, agency is the cornerstone of any *self*-place-

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5.   Our local data shows that from Fall 2018 to Fall 2020 there is a 10 to 16 percentage point difference in pass rates between White and African American students in College Composition I and II (ENGL 101, ENGL 102).

ment practice; therefore, we chose to call our particular process *self*-directed placement (SDP). Wanting to focus on the *self* in self-directed placement, we were adamant on not including any kind of weighting system or "score" that would be artificially and arbitrarily created.

As self-agency was the theoretical heart of the practice, offering adults the opportunity to reflect and make their own decisions cannot be followed by a score that might undercut what they believe about themselves and their abilities. Given many students' individual histories with educational settings, generating a score would not foster agency and might not leverage the kind of self-reflexivity we believe is the core of self-placement. Scores can be based on factors that may be deeply racialized or biased. Without extensive research—and even with it—these recommendations can work to cast doubt on students' choices for themselves.[6] A score does not leverage real choice and is often generated by an institutional and societal set of standards that can be arbitrary at best and supremacist at worst. This is still placement determined by a system, not actualized by a person. These recommendations could easily reinscribe negative interactions with educational spaces and undermine belonging and confidence—two things students making an often difficult decision in returning to school need. Additionally, such recommendations can easily serve as a default mechanism for advisors, faculty, and others to encourage students to register for lower levels based on their own opinions and biases. Our design was largely influenced by Mya Poe and Asao B. Inoue's (2016) features of socially just writing assessment: "creation of opportunity structures, avoidance of value dualisms, and self-evaluation" (p. 123).

It is in taking back the active role in one's educational choices that the practice of self-placement has promise and finds power. It is our contention that placement shifts should call us to examine what we are asking of whom and why. Who gets to shape the space? Who gets freedom? Who gets the choice? Instead of asking *if* students are capable of moving through our programs, maybe, as a system, we could ask what we are doing to promote equitable choices in careers and intellectual exploration? What are we doing to provide every member of our society the right to exercise their critical consciousness?

Toward a Pilot

A long process of pilot design and support-seeking for our self-directed placement pilot began in late 2017. That work grew out of a committee charged with tackling placement reform broadly. Two faculty members, Kris Messer and Liz Hart, took on the bulk of the work researching self-placement. We looked to oth-

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6.   Many institutions have transitioned to self-placement during the COVID-19 pandemic without significant study or the proper data analysis to generate meaningful recommendations that do not simply reinforce normative and paternalistic approaches.

er two-year colleges, as well as the extensive history of self-placement at four-year schools, in addition to disciplinary precedents. Our goal was to create an instrument and process based on educational psychology, so as to "align with DSP's theoretical underpinnings . . . to address important equity concerns" (Toth, 2019). Beyond studying the broader disciplinary context, we conducted extensive research into what had been implemented at other two-year colleges across the country. Messer and Hart reached out to nine institutions.[7] After that research, we began the design process. We modeled our tool on what we saw elsewhere, especially at Highline Community College. The design of the tool includes the following:[8]

- reading and writing experiences,
- reading passages modeled on our curriculum with reflective questions that aim to get at what the individual feels when they are performing tasks that would be performed in all of our classes,
- a writing prompt asking students to discuss how their life experiences have prepared them to be successful at CCBC,
- an image breaking down students' course choices,
- and two videos—one that details our three course options and one that seeks to leverage current students' excitement and advice.

We tried to keep the tone of the tool positive and let those taking it see that we value their experiences and perspectives, and know that they have much to offer CCBC.

We worked to develop content and built the tool in multiple iterations over the course of this process. Eventually, the placement tool was built in Microsoft Forms Pro (now Customer Voice).

One of the most important and intensive parts of the process was working on the videos that feature student discussion around course choices. We interviewed over 30 former and current students about their course experiences and worked with students and faculty in our digital media program to film and edit the material. At first, we planned to create three different videos, one for each level that students can place into. In the end, we opted to produce one video explaining all three options and one motivational video that offers thoughts from students about success, asking questions, and confronting obstacles, which students watch just prior to making their final selection. This video grew out of comments from the students we interviewed. We asked them what they would want to see in the videos and tools, and several offered that they would want advice and to see how

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7.   Highline, Moorpark, Whatcom, Salt Lake City, Shoreline College, Ozarks Technical College, Renton Technical College, Lower Columbia, Rhodes State College

8.   Practice SDP tool (as of 9/1/21) https://customervoice.microsoft.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=ACD6KiZ3IEmpVwOXwoD8PX8o1wCnorxIimby4erFrgpURDN-JWUM1SoJVVjdVSUNVMzNIODhIWEYyQi4u

others succeeded. Denise Parker, a faculty member who had been instrumental in the work leading up to the pilot, acted as the faculty voice connecting the three course options. We met with Professor Parker for one long day in a classroom, during which we hammered out the differences between the three options and how to explain each option in the clearest, most student friendly way—a process that helped us better understand how we think about the differences ourselves. The main differences between the three options seemed to be the amount of support a student would receive, and we designed the language in the videos and description within the SDP mechanism to reflect that idea. Although a lot of the concern we heard about the process from fellow faculty, administration, and enrollment staff was related to students over-placing themselves, we knew from the research that under-placement was a more common issue, and we worked hard to counteract that in the videos and other material.

Currently, our levels include English 101, in which students receive the support of the instructor, the other students in the class, and other institutional support such as the writing center and academic coaches; the Accelerated Learning Program, in which students have considerably more support from instructors through a three-credit corequisite developmental offering; and ACLT 052, a standalone five-credit[9] developmental class, designed for students who need the most support—this class focuses on preparing students for college. While some of us on the committee creating self-directed placement argued against including ACLT 052 as an option, since it has been shown how important it is for students to receive credit early, we could not make a large curricular change through the placement process. We had to include the course because it is an offering at our institution.[10]

Gaining the support of stakeholders was not an easy or simple process. We had multiple meetings with various members of the student services branch of our institution. We met separately with advisors, in small groups with Admissions and Advising, and with different combinations of Planning Research and Evaluation, Information Technology, Disability Services, and Administration. We invited Shannon Waits from Highline to visit and talk to deans, faculty, and staff members in March 2018. Following that, we had focus groups for all members of the school in fall of 2019, in which people could go through the SDP tool and give us feedback. We also presented on self-directed placement for the entire Enrollment and Student Services[11] staff in October of 2019 and had multiple meetings with various stakeholders from the testing, admissions, and advising

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9. Two of the five hours are dedicated to time in a "lab" in a computer-mediated classroom with an instructor to provide dedicated assistance.

10. As a result of placement changes, the CCBC will be revisiting whether the class will remain an offering and making recommendations for changes in 2022.

11. During the development and implementation of SDP, our Enrollment and Student Services moved under Instruction and is now called Student Development.

departments, as well as the department of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE). During those meetings, we worked to develop "frequently asked questions" and advisor training materials.

Resistance existed among the Enrollment and Student Services staff about all the many placement-related changes that had been made in the recent past. There was a sense that another big change might be a burden on staff already keeping up. There were logistical concerns as well. Because our school's student information system is Banner, the SDP tool was not able to communicate directly with Banner, so the placement had to be done manually. Staff was concerned that this would be a time-consuming and difficult process, but they agreed to do this work for the pilot. The hope was that, in the meantime, our IT department would be able to develop a "crosswalk" that would automate the data and thus make manual entry unnecessary.[12] The manual entry component, however, has proven to run smoothly throughout remote placement.

There was concern among some of our academic literacy faculty that students would place themselves into classes they wouldn't be ready for and would not have the reading skills necessary to succeed or to flourish in future classes. The academic literacy department grew out of what was originally the reading department at the college. Over a series of years, the department shifted from being strictly focused on reading and developmental classes, to being focused on integrated reading, writing, and critical thinking. There is overlap between the two departments, but they exist separately as of this writing. Many of the students' responses to the reading passages in the tool have helped to allay these fears about the reading skills that students bring with them into our classes after the first pilot responses came in.

During this time, we were presenting at various national conferences and every in-house professional development day. These presentations included the Council of Writing Program Administrators, Conference on College Composition and Communication, The Two Year College Association, and the Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Conference. The process of preparing for and presenting at those conferences helped us to refine our thinking. At most conferences we received thoughtful feedback that helped us develop how the course options were presented, as well as to come up with technological solutions to some of our issues with Microsoft Forms. It was gratifying to see that the work we were doing locally was being done by other institutions.

Notably, the group that received the change most favorably was our then current classes. We shared drafts of the tool with our students, some of whom were the same students who participated in filming the SDP videos. Students were enthusiastic and supportive of the tool, and many shared negative stories about their experiences with standardized testing. Students understand self-placement

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12. As we progressed, we learned that figuring out the IT on our own was crucial, as we were told IT could provide no work for our project before it was at full implementation.

perfectly: "We're the ones who know what we can do," one student said. In fact, students seemed to understand the process much more easily, and looked at it more favorably, than many administrators.

Finally, after many delays, in January of 2020, we ran a 20-day pilot in which 79 (as compared to a hoped-for 250) students placed themselves using self-directed placement. This was meant to be phase one of a two phase piloting process. Phase one was to be focused mostly on logistics—making sure that the process was as effective as it could be—while, in phase two, which was planned to run for placement into Fall 2020 classes, we hoped to get more data that could be disaggregated in meaningful ways.

Before we could finalize plans for or implement phase two of the piloting process, COVID-19 struck, necessitating a change in our plans. Before we had even received quantitative data or success rates from our pilot, we were asked to retool our process for "remote placement" and take the process—conducted previously in the testing center—completely remote, in a global pandemic in a matter of weeks. Subsequently, we have received data for students in the first cohort of remote placement.

Outcomes for Phase One Pilot

Phase One Pilot Data

Since the pilot was so small, including only 54 students who registered for classes out of 79 who took SDP, there is not much of significance we can say about the original data. We can say that students were placing themselves into credit classes at a higher rate than they have been placed into credit classes in the past through ACCUPLACER (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Student Placement Rates

Placement January 2021	English 101	ALP	ACLT 052
ACCUPLACER	66 (15%)	75 (17%)	46 (10%)
Self-Directed Placement	30 (38%)	16 (20%)	3 (4%)

Out of those students who took SDP, 69 percent were passing their classes at midterm, compared to 66 percent of students who placed via ACCUPLACER. At the end of the semester, after a very difficult transition to remote learning, the pass rates were about equal between the two groups. Considering the fact that more students were earning credit in their first semester by enrolling in ALP or English 101 (which also gave them the ability to enroll in other general education courses that are corequisite to English 101), if these numbers held true subsequently, we knew we would be having a significant impact on access and equity at our institution.

Remote Placement

In spring of 2020, once the pandemic had hit and ACCUPLACER was no longer available for placement, due to cost and prohibitive technological issues, there was less concern about over-placement. Something had to be done, and SDP was the only game in town. We were fortunate, unlike many colleagues at other institutions, that we had done two and a half years of research and had run a pilot, albeit a small one. We quickly revamped a process that had been used in testing centers for 20 days into a system-wide remote placement measure, working during the height of the pandemic.

Starting in May of 2020, the testing center began sending the link for the SDP tool to prospective students. Initially, only students without another measure were meant to receive the SDP tool, but as an increasing number of students had a difficult time finding their information or systems had a difficult time sending information to CCBC, an increasing number of students went through the SDP process. (For fall of 2020, 24 percent placed via SDP, while 21 percent placed via GPA; for spring of 2021, 26 percent placed via SDP and seven percent placed via GPA). From May until October 21, 2,140 students completed the SDP tool. Currently, more than 5,100 students have completed the tool.

Over the summer and to this date, we were responsible for any student questions in relation to SDP, as our colleagues in advising during the initial pilot process felt uncomfortable working with students who wanted to change their placement to a higher level after taking the SDP tool; therefore, those students who had questions about their placement were referred to our team via phone or email. This student-to-faculty contact proved to be a time-consuming endeavor, but an extremely beneficial experience that has framed our ongoing support work with students. We continue this practice to this day, and, as a result, we have been able to see and learn firsthand about students' struggles with our intake systems, as well as to discuss what students see as barriers in pursuing their education. We carried on these conversations in the broad support work we did with SDP in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021.

During this time, we shared our tool with three other community colleges, one of which developed their own institutional version of the tool for remote placement (we have shared our tool and processes many times since then). To this date, we continue to work on and advocate for *informed* revisions to these systems and to help students in the placement process while our reassigned time has been cut and the practice itself remains on insecure intuitional footing. We cannot get a commitment for any duration of time to support our work or to continue SDP and to enact needed revisions based on student responses, implementation, changing curriculum, or a radically reformed educational landscape. We are seeing some desire to reframe our work to a less agency-centered process and write faculty out of that change, allowing our Student Development colleagues to shape the process and the shape of the placement instrument with limited faculty

access or input. In fact, despite the positive data shown in the next section, as of September 2021, SDP has been "paused" for spring of 2022, with a promise of support from our vice president for fall of 2022. We have no word on how students who do not have a recent GPA or any other measure will be placed for the coming spring.

Data for Remote Placement

The first thing that was clear from the data we received from Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 was that students were struggling due to the pandemic. Many more students were either withdrawing and/or receiving an FX[13] than had historically been true at our institution. It will be hard to tease out the impact of COVID-19 from the outcomes of our move to self-directed placement. However because all students, regardless of placement measure—aside from those who are currently in high school and have a high GPA—were withdrawing at high rates, it seems clear that the issue was pandemic-related. Pass rates were down across the board, and fully 11 percent more first-time students at our institution withdrew or had an FX by midterm. This is a disturbing number that will require all of us to work to meet the needs of our most vulnerable students.

We are finding that our predictions about this method of placement have been borne out. There are many positives we can see in the data. These include:

- A ten percent increase in the number of students who register after taking SDP, as compared to ACCUPLACER. Fifty-five percent of students taking ACCUPLACER registered for a class, whereas 65 percent are registering after SDP.
- A huge rise in the number of African American students who place into stand-alone-credit English classes. Via ACCUPLACER, only 18 percent of African American students placed into credit-level English in 2019, whereas with SDP, that number has increased to 58 percent in 2020. Clearly, we are having a significant impact on access, which we believe is pivotal to shifting the dial on equity at our institution.

While we do see some positives in equity and access, it is clear that many of our students are struggling to stay in school. Our Fall 2020 midterm data shows the following:

- Twenty-five percent of SDP students in general withdrew or FXed. Twenty-nine percent of SDP students placing into ALP either withdrew or FXed. Twenty-eight percent of GPA students placing into ALP withdrew or FXed.
- In general, students in ALP are struggling. There was a 43 percent GPA pass rate/50 percent SDP pass rate. For both GPA and SDP rates, the per-

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13. An FX is a failure for non-attendance.

centages are similar for African American students, with a 50 percent GPA pass rate/48 percent SDP pass rate.
- While students who placed by GPA have a higher success rate at midterm, which is more consonant with pre-COVID semester rates, over 80 percent of those students are 17 and under and likely taking these courses for high school credit, while doing remote learning.

Importantly, in the Fall 2020 final data (Table 3.2), we found that older students were outperforming younger students, sometimes performing at close to pre-pandemic numbers.

Table 3.2. Fall 2020 Placement Results

	ALP			ENGL101			Total		
Age	Attempt	Pass	Pass Rate	Attempt	Pass	Pass Rate	Attempt	Pass	Pass Rate
18 or Younger	88	30	34%	318	108	34%	406	138	34%
19 - 20	30	9	30%	104	43	41%	134	52	39%
21 - 25	45	18	40%	124	64	52%	169	82	49%
26 - 30	31	19	61%	70	39	56%	101	58	57%
31 or Older	22	13	59%	97	57	59%	119	70	59%

These data hold true for Spring 2021 (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3. Spring 2021 Placement Results

	ALP			ENGL101		
Age	Attempt	Pass	Pass Rate	Attempt	Pass	Pass Rate
18 or Younger	11	6	55%	40	10	25%
19 - 20	16	3	19%	60	18	30%
21 - 25	19	6	32%	61	35	57%
26 - 30	19	9	47%	42	25	60%
31 or Older	40	20	50%	72	28	39%

The fact that the tool was designed specifically with those older students in mind suggests that it is successful for those students. Yet, despite our requests and inquiries, our systems for taking GPA seem to still route younger students through the SDP process.

Self-directed placement has shifted placement trends in general. In fall of 2019, students placed into classes via ACCUPLACER at the following rates: 24 percent into credit-level; 30 percent into ALP; 26 percent into ACLT 052. In fall of 2020, students placed into classes via SDP at the following rates: 58 percent into credit-level; 20 percent into ALP; three percent into ACLT 052 (Table 3.4). That means that there was a 34 percent increase in the number of students placed into stand-alone credit-level classes, and a 23 percent increase in the number of students placed into credit-level and corequisite classes.

Table 3.4. Placement Method Comparison

	English 101	ALP	ACLT 052
Fall 2019 (ACCUPLACER)	247 (24%)	308 (26%)	266 (26%)
Fall 2020 (Self-Directed Placement)	774 (58%)	255 (20%)	43 (3%)

We tracked how students felt about the self-directed placement process, asking them to share any feedback they might have in the tool itself. Of those students who responded (66%), 90 percent (1,272 out of 1,421) of them responded favorably, often in glowing terms. Seven percent (102 out of 1,421) responded in neutral ways. Of the neutral responses, some of them offered advice to future students or personal affirmations about how the student believed in themself; some gave us advice for how to revise the tool slightly; and some were simply neutral responses like "thanks." A small number of students (.08%) offered mixed reviews, offering some praise along with some constructive criticism. Only two percent (35 out of 1,421) responded negatively. Though we cannot say with certainty, we suspect these results are infinitely more positive than a similar rating of the old ACCUPLACER test, as students commonly reply to the feedback section with responses that affirm that they appreciate being given agency, being respected by the institution, and being offered an opportunity to reflect on their own skills and abilities.

We could share hundreds of positive responses students wrote, responses that suggest that students truly understand what we are trying to do with this shift in placement. For instance, one student wrote,

> This experience has made me feel more comfortable in choosing which class I think I would fit best in, hearing other people's experiences in the videos made me think of my own and where I would fit right in with. After watching the videos I now know that there is no judgement and it's a great place to grow.

Clearly this student had a sense of belonging and understood placement as a source of positive connection to the institution.

We see evidence of real engagement with the reading passages that students were asked to write about. One of the reading passages and student responses can be referenced in Appendices A and B. All responses are presented here and in the Appendices as students wrote them when they took the SDP instrument. These responses did allay some of our Academic Literacy colleagues' concerns about the reading and critical thinking skills students are bringing with them into the classroom. We also saw student excitement as they prepared to return to school, sometimes after significant spans of time. We saw comments like "My experiences have led me to grow into a better person and have helped me discover who I am. I am ready for a fresh start and I am excited to attend CCBC" and "So here I am now making my last attempt to complete at least one degree. I am ready. I am focused. I read better, I write better; with passion and maturity. I'm ready to be a successful student." These students are reflecting on their own level of readiness and their willingness to put in the necessary work. We saw responses like this over and over again.

Additionally, we were fortunate to be able to teach some of the students who placed themselves via SDP. We all teach both stand-alone English 101 classes and ALP classes. In the spring of 2020, we were able to informally discuss the placement experience with students in our classrooms. One student was able to explain and introduce the concept of corequisite remediation to the rest of the class because he had taken the SDP tool. This SDP experience allowed him to understand the expectations of the course and communicate them to his peers. We suspect that this type of engagement would not have occurred had this student taken ACCUPLACER; it is unlikely that a high-stakes placement test would connect to specific curricular circumstances and provide relevant information and the opportunity to perform the cognitive tasks associated with our curriculum. Being given a say in one's education inherently places one in a different relationship to their education. Those going through this process say it best: "Giving students the option to choose which would be best for them, gives them a chance to take control of starting their education, without making them feel less for how they may have placed otherwise." In other words, "I enjoy this because it did not feel like a 'test', it was more to understand where I am in life and what I am hoping to get out of my education. . . . This is a great tool to use because nobody wants to feel like they don't belong."

Consequences

There were a couple of unexpected outcomes/consequences of moving to self-directed placement. We have strengthened our ties with other General Education colleagues and Student Development, and, at the same time, we have recognized the existence of a significant barrier to our students. Currently, students who place into

ALP are not eligible for many of the classes that other students in English 101 are eligible for, due to a block with their prerequisites. Although they are in a credit-level English class, their placement is still considered "developmental." During the initial pilot, we came up with a place-up procedure for students who were unhappy with their placement. That procedure requires students who want to move out of their chosen placement to contact our team lead (Messer) to have a conversation about what their best options actually are. Many of these place-up conversations related to this prerequisite barrier. This issue has become so extreme that many students have difficulty filling a full-time schedule. Placement has pushed us to examine and work towards alleviating this problem for our students. We are working to remove this barrier through many institutional channels.

The second consequence is more positive. As part of the move to remote placement, senior staff stipulated that we provide supports for students who placed themselves into English 101 and other general education classes. We helped students contact their professors and find their syllabi, figure out which "modality" their class was held in, and connect SDP students to Success Navigators for computing and housing issues, as well as to access the process of hardship withdrawals, so they could have refunds when COVID impacted their lives. This was particularly important in a semester as unusual as Fall 2020. Through these supports, we have developed collaborations with General Education and Student Support colleagues that we hope to build on moving forward, making SDP a process that engages students in support structures beyond the moment of placement.

Discussion

The excitement and energy students bring to the responses they are writing are impressive and can be transformational. We have worked to wrap these responses into presentations on student potential at many in-house professional development days, as well as in SDP presentations at national conferences. These responses show a clear determination, drive, and desire that many faculty don't always perceive in their students when they enter the classroom. For instance,

> As I began to grow into a young woman, I, like most young adults, began to question everything about life and everything about myself. Questioning led me to journaling, journaling lead me to poetry and both modalities became a mental, and spiritual release of many layers of trauma and emotion gathered throughout my life.

This kind of writing is something that we might not have expected to be solicited from a simple question like "How have your life experiences prepared you to be successful at CCBC?"

The responses have made this crystalline: Our students are intelligent, driven, and linguistically sophisticated, and they bring a range of experiences that

can serve to strengthen our classrooms and our larger culture, if they are valued, recognized, and used to construct the parameters of our learning spaces. If flattened, homogenized, and standardized, that energy will dissipate. These responses have helped us show this drive and intellect to our colleagues and have changed some minds and practices. It is our hope that sharing responses will do more to shift the dial in favor of equity and access, as well as to force institutional reflection on words like "college-ready" or "developmental," creating a space for more direct conversations about our institutional and curricular assumptions. Because of this, we have come to see the need for training on anti-deficit work at all levels. We believe staff, faculty, and our administration could do more work to foster belonging and increase retention. In our top 25 most highly enrolled general education courses, only six have an equity gap of less than ten percent. Many have gaps of up to 20+ percent. This clearly shows that there is a need for training and development to shift our practices and perceptions.

We also recognize how SDP has the potential to be a catalyst for a shift in not just our pedagogy but our curriculum. The smaller course section in the Accelerated Learning Program (which we call ACLT 053) was originally conceived as a support class for those students who were not deemed "college ready" by standardized tests, but we are finding that what students really need is more confidence and a familiarity with the academic space. It is more a matter of confidence than competence. Since students are placing themselves into ALP, asking for more support, we think it's important to think about what that space looks like and modify our curriculum accordingly. We propose a move toward doing away with the standalone developmental class and replacing it with a model of ALP that we are thinking of as "1.5."[14]

Conclusion

On an institutional level, what we have learned from embarking on the long process of bringing self-directed placement to CCBC is that a change at this scale requires time, patience, doggedness, persistence, and institutional buy-in (which we are still in the process of securing). Institutional awareness and support is critical, and we spent a great deal of time meeting with other departments at the college, but it's important to note that waiting for institutional support is not going to get the job done. We were able to get where we are now by continuing to push for self-directed placement even when it did not receive institutional support.

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14. In this model, the support class would be geared toward advising students. The authors each spend a lot of time in their ALP sections helping students register, discussing educational goals, and connecting students to a community at the institution. We realize that once students have this, they are often confident enough to excel in the 101 classroom, and we would like to formalize this approach.

We believed in our students and believed that this was a more equitable means of placement. We are committed to continuing to collaborate across the college to make sure that SDP is given a chance to be studied, shaped, and institutionalized, but it is not an easy process. It is necessary for someone—beyond the faculty who developed it and the students who are impacted by it—to truly believe in self-directed placement to move it forward.

At this point, despite the "pause" in our work, we believe that SDP will be institutionalized, though it is already slipping out of the hands of faculty. We remain hopeful that the volume of *pro bono* work we have done will speak for itself and that we will be permitted to apply the data from remote placement to planning and revising SDP, in a manner consistent with its intention of offering agency. In practical terms, we need to know that SDP will continue, so that we can work to adapt the tool and processes in accordance with the registration timeline which runs a year out. We hope we will be able to have the opportunity to refine and strengthen our practices. To make change, we believe, you make a bold move like trusting students, and you back up that move with supported change at all levels. We hope to one day see that support.

As we look back over the last three years of research, struggles to pilot, hurdles to jump through, and deeply important lessons that were hard learned, it is important to note—especially in our setting, a community college surrounding a major city fraught with poverty and an intensely racialized history—that placement cuts to the core of things. It hits nerves all around by directly addressing: who is prepared for college, what it means to be prepared for college, what linguistic standards and practices determine that and why, what students desire out of their education, and what we feel we should give them, as well as beliefs about who students are and what they need. It sparks fear about change. It brings on worry about the stereotypes that will be perpetuated if students are let in and don't succeed. It opens doors to curricular and institutional blind spots. It shines a light into all corners of the institution—instructional spaces, classroom practices, and the beliefs of faculty and staff. If you try to change placement, you are going to see some stuff that you can't unsee or ignore, but, in the end, bringing all of it to the table and addressing what we find in ourselves is what we need to do to change not only access but success.

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Appendix A: Reading Passages from CCBC Self-Directed Placement Tool

The following figures show screen captures from selected pages on CCBC Self-Directed Placement website.
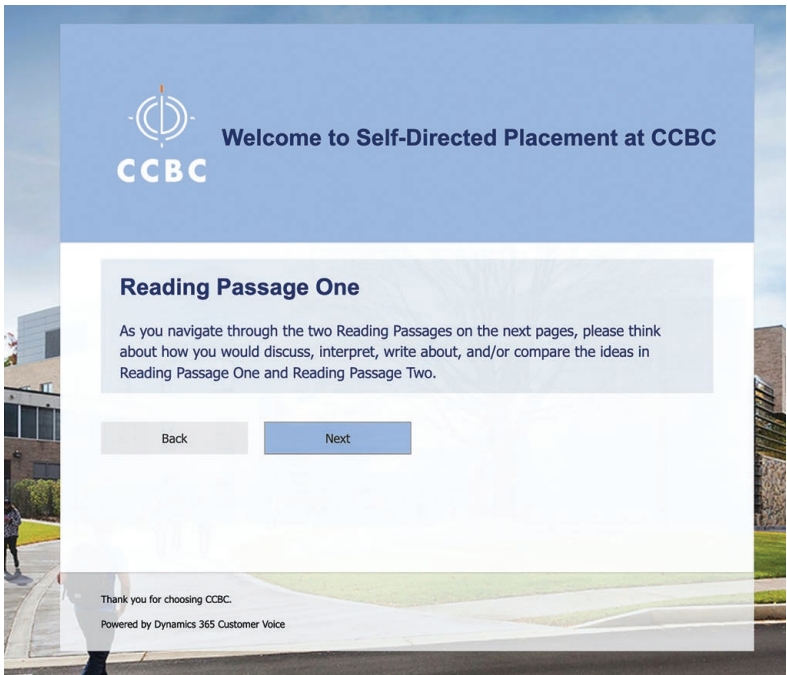
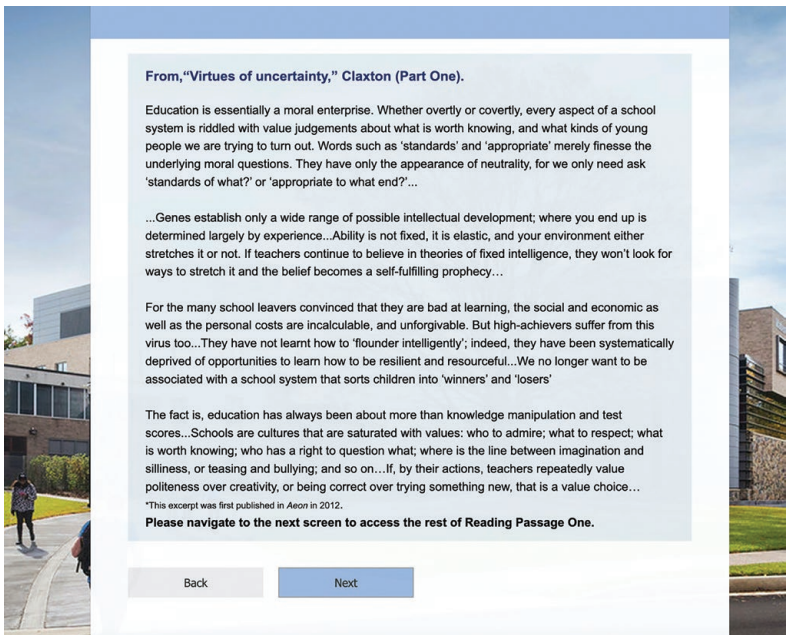*Figure 3.A1. Introductory Screen for Reading Passages.*

Figure 3.A2. Reading Passage One.

Figure 3.A3. Reading Passage Two with Question.

Appendix B: Sample Student Responses to Reading Passages

Response #1

The connection between the two articles in my opinion is the effect of the culmination of all our modern amenities on the child and student. Both articles in my opinion highlight what the lack of action causes in human development. When I say lack of action I mean it in a literal sense. In the last 20 years we have all created an online persona, this in essence is an alternate reality. This has led to most off society spending vast amounts of time thinking about their online persona in the now. It is impossible to be in two places at once. So this reality suffers from a lack of action because we are paralyzed trying to act in our own minds in a reality that doesn't exist. In the second article the play deficit could be directly tied to the monkey see monkey do theory. Little eyes are watching and learning the wrong processes basically. And you can see that cycle has already happened in the previous generations as the effects of the lack of play are highlighted in the first

Response #2

After reading passage one "Virtues of Uncertainty" and passage two "The Play Deficit" I have come to realize that in my perspective they are both correct about

the school systems and children's experiences. The passage that I mostly agree with though is passage one. The reason behind this is because the topic it discussed in paragraph #5 about teachers valuing politeness over creativity, or even trying a new method of learning the correct information, I have witnessed plenty of times in my days of high school. The student had discovered a new technique to solve the equation that was given correctly, as the teacher proceeded to telling the student that it was incorrect which lead the student to stop participating in class discussions due to the fact the individual thought they were incapable to answer any other problems. In the last paragraph is states "when students are helped to become more confident....they do better, not worse, on the test", I personally agree with this because Ive had a teacher spend extra time to help me understand a topic I needed for a state test which lead me to pass with a good grade.

Response #3

The two passages are very interesting and talks on things that I can relate to. I don't feel that it hits deep enough though. I think we should talk on why we have these mental issues? Why do we struggle on test or feel like we are not smart enough? When will school cater to people that have different learning styles. Yes, I believe we have the basics we need in life like math, how to read and spell but not everyone learns the same. Shouldn't play be educational too, learning strategies, having fun and not having to worry about who beats who or if there's a prize in the end because in reality life don't come with prizes. The only prizes you get in life are the things you work towards and the things you value most in life…

Response #4

There's a huge gap between today's youth and the youth 50 years ago regarding how social skills are (were) developed. Due to societal differences in the way children spend their time (i.e. outside socializing vs. the over-usage of technology while isolated indoors), today's youth struggle in comparison to their elders with regard to developing social interaction and coping skills, and building psychological resilience to life's normal (common) challenges.

Response #5

In modern times, there is an unrealistic expectation for children to function essentially as adults, without adequate guidance or nurturing from their adult support systems. Individuality is often discouraged in order to fulfill rigid educational standards, while individualism is preached over community. These conflicting ideals serve to isolate, and stunt mental and emotional growth among children.