

Chapter 4. Welcome/Not Welcome: From Discouragement to Empowerment in the Writing Placement Process at Central Oregon Community College

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Abstract: At Central Oregon Community College, we have redesigned placement and our developmental literacy curriculum to enable students of diverse backgrounds to achieve their college and career goals. Our purpose was to help students achieve success in college writing while reducing time and money spent on coursework that did not count toward a degree. To achieve that, we focused on placing students at the highest level at which they could succeed and providing the curriculum and support they need to progress quickly yet effectively through first-year composition (FYC). Our target population was students placing below college-level writing—a group of mostly first-generation students who were “welcomed” to college with a high-stakes placement exam. We shifted to a multiple-measures placement tool, redesigned developmental literacy course outcomes and curriculum to better align with FYC, and created a corequisite support course for FYC for students whose placement information indicated they were likely to be successful in FYC with additional help and resources. The changes required significant funding and support from stakeholders across campus. This chapter explores the process, challenges, and successes of our redesign, and offers advice for those programs who are at the start of their redesign phase.

Until recently, like most community colleges in Oregon, Central Oregon Community College (COCC) relied on a standardized, multiple-choice grammar and reading comprehension test in order to place students into an initial writing course. After submitting their application to college, this was a student’s first encounter with the campus: a test that effectively told up to 60 percent of new—often first-generation—college students, *Welcome to COCC; however, you are not “college material.”* This welcome/not welcome messaging was a key factor in motivating the change in our writing (and math) placement process from single measure ACCUPLACER to what we are calling multiple measures directed self-placement.

Central Oregon Community College, whose main campus is in Bend, Oregon, serves a 10,000 square mile district that is mostly rural and covers all

or portions of six counties. Our mission statement focuses our work on promoting student success in transfer and career and technical education (CTE) and providing community enrichment opportunities through our credit and non-credit programs (Figure 4.1). Fifty-nine percent of COCC students enroll in transfer coursework, and just under half of our graduates in 2020 earned a transfer degree.

OUR MISSION

Central Oregon Community College promotes student success and community enrichment by providing quality, accessible, lifelong educational opportunities.

OUR VISION

To achieve student success and community enrichment, COCC fosters student completion of academic goals, prepares students for employment, assists regional employers and promotes equitable achievement for the diverse students and communities we serve.

Figure 4.1. Central Oregon Community College mission and vision.

While transfer coursework garners the majority of our enrollment, CTE and developmental education are critical components of our mission. Regional industry needs drive much of our work in CTE, which comprises about 28 percent of our enrollment. Health care, natural and industrial resources, and hospitality services are the broad areas that employ many of our CTE graduates. Adult basic education at COCC served approximately three percent of our students in 2019–2020 in the areas of English language learning, essentials of math, and essentials of communication. Developmental education (math and integrated reading/writing) comprised 11 percent of our course offerings in 2019.

Central Oregon Community College went from a small rural college to a multicampus, medium-sized college as a result of the 2008 economic downturn, and while a stronger economy and the COVID-19 pandemic have flattened growth in enrollment, we are still the most affordable college choice for local residents. Based on data from 2019–2020, we have over 7700 credit students, average age 25.1, with a slight majority of female students (52%). Sixty-five percent identify as White; however, enrollment among students of color is growing. Latinx students comprise the largest group to self-identify by ethnicity, at 11.7 percent. Almost four percent identify as Native American or Alaska Natives; 4.5 percent as Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander; and 1.6 percent as Black or African American. Students self-identifying as “other” comprise 13.5 percent of students.

Our faculty, both in writing and collegewide, do not reflect the diversity of our students, and, as at most community colleges, the majority of our faculty are part-time, with only 52 percent of our credit courses taught by full-time facul-

ty.¹ In the humanities department (where developmental literacy, composition, literature, creative writing, and film are housed), we have 12 full-time faculty members (a number that has remained consistent for decades) and 12 part-time faculty members (a number that continues to decrease since enrollment is trending downward). The majority hold M.A. or Ph.D. degrees in English (including M.F.A.s). Of the faculty with Ph.D.s, only two have degrees specific to writing and developmental education. One faculty member holds an M.A.T. Currently, our colleague with the degree in developmental literacy oversees, supports, and facilitates instruction of developmental literacy courses taught by a mix of full- and part-time faculty. As to ethnicity, among writing faculty, the majority of whom are women, one identifies as Black and one identifies as Latinx; all others are White. Among all faculty at COCC, less than ten percent self-identify as Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, or Black/African American.² These numbers are consistent with classified staff and administrators as well, but among temporary workers, up to 15 percent self-identify as Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, or Black/African American.³

Placement and Developmental Literacy Redesign

The first assessment most community college students encounter is a single-measure instrument designed to assess reading, writing, and math skills. Because the majority of community college students have not taken the ACT or SAT, these “placement tests” (as they have come to be called) compare student scores “to a normative group of students representing a random sample of potential test takers” (Boylan & Saxon, 2012, p. 32). A number of reports and articles have questioned community colleges’ historic reliance on standardized tests, pointing out their limitations (Barnet et al., 2018; Barnett & Reddy, 2017; Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). When addressing the impact of relying on standardized tests for placement, Christie Toth (2018) pointed out that the “high-stakes standardized tests used for placement at most community colleges were ‘under-placing’ large numbers of students into developmental courses” (p. 138). Additionally, concerns with cultural bias have pushed many colleges—especially those involved in developmental redesign—to consider alternatives to relying primarily on standardized tests for placement. Jeffrey Klausman et al. (2016) even raise the question of legal implications which may be linked to issues such as racism, white supremacy, and sexism.

COCC had similar concerns and began exploring alternatives and learned that the change would not be simple or quick. As noted by Ashley Stich (2019),

1. Note that by Winter 2021, with a drop in enrollment expected to exceed 13 percent, this number will go down as more sections are taught by full-time faculty.

2. The authors of this chapter all self-identify as White.

3. Respondents were able to choose multiple categories when reporting ethnicity.

replacing one single measure (ACCUPLACER) with another (high school GPA) is no more successful at accurately placing students. Although the case can be made that high school GPA is in itself a type of multiple measure because it is an accumulation of assessed assignments, combining multiple measures by *including* high school GPA (HSGPA) produces a “rich predictive placement algorithm” that is more predictive of future success in college coursework (Scott-Clayton, 2012b, p. 33). HSGPA has been shown to be a much better predictive measure than standardized tests, which a visit to Highline Community College in Washington confirmed. However, we wanted to create an assessment that provided the best possible measure for placement for our students, which continued to point to multiple measures that included but were not limited to HSGPA.

Even what researchers call multiple single-measure placement, or privileging certain single measures, puts expediency over a more holistic and accurate assessment, focusing again on an indirect rather than a direct measure of writing ability (Toth, 2018). Research points to a number of other problems with standardized tests used for single-measure placement, such as construct validity (whether a test measures what it claims to be testing) and consequential validity (the social consequences of a test), which makes them a poor predictor of student success in a course (Toth, 2018; Poe & Inoue, 2016). Finally, concerns about revising assessment as a form of social justice, as discussed by Mya Poe and Asao B. Inoue (2016), and Toth (2018), pushed us to consider how we might attempt to “undertake validation for social justice” through the creation of our own writing assessment (Toth, 2018, p. 145). Wary of replacing one flawed system with another, we looked to research but also knew that change would require large-scale effort and energy on behalf of multiple areas of the college. Alexandros Goudas (2019) discussed current trends in redesign, pointing out that a “thoughtful, well-supported and holistic system for admissions and placement” requires “a significant investment of time, staffing, software, and money” (“Goal of Multiple measures”). Although we did not yet have sufficient funding in 2016, (a state grant for redesigning developmental education allowed us to pilot a small placement redesign, but not to scale up), we began to discuss how to use multiple measures for placement as our first step.

Our work on placement took place alongside our work on developmental redesign, so it is worth a brief segue to address that work and its larger context. The need to bridge the gap between high school and college is not a recent phenomenon. Ellen Brier (1984) provided an overview of the history of developmental education in the United States, noting that access to higher education for underprepared students “has been an integral part of the development of higher education” for hundreds of years (p. 2). Hunter R. Boylan and W. G. White (1987) also pointed out that from its inception in 1636, Harvard has provided tutoring that “may rightly be regarded” as the “earliest antecedent of developmental education in American higher education” (p. 4). The belief that developmental coursework appeared as a byproduct of the 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, the Civil

Rights movement, or the advent of the open-door policy at community colleges in the 1960s is an apocryphal myth that persists today, especially in regard to developmental redesign. Colleges like the University of Wisconsin, Cornell, and Vassar have a long history of helping underprepared, admitted students gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college-level coursework (Brier, 1984).

Efforts to improve developmental coursework have become a hot topic in the last ten years, with critics characterizing it as a “trap” and a “bridge to nowhere” (Barshay, 2018; Complete College America, 2012). While critique of developmental education is sporadic and often insufficiently supported, it is important to note that the debate over the legitimacy of stand-alone developmental coursework and accelerated and/or compressed models is ongoing (Goudas & Boylan, 2012; Goudas, 2020a). An important part of this work has been culturally responsive teaching, which views the “underprepared student” and their rich life experiences as an asset, rather than a deficit. We have seen how social inequality and unequal access have allowed some of our students to be better prepared for college than others. Students from more rural areas often struggle with reliable access to high-speed internet, while some first-generation students do not have the same access to institutional knowledge and family support as their peers. In 2019, The Hope Center’s #RealCollege Survey found that among community college students in Oregon, 41 percent of respondents were food insecure in the past 30 days, 52 percent were housing insecure, and 20 percent were unhoused in the previous year (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019, p. 2). Other factors like employment, childcare, and transportation also create significant obstacles for many of our students. Finally, anxiety about writing and writing trauma, or negative writing experiences from the past, can interfere with some students’ ability to achieve their writing goals. In order to meet these needs, we offer both stand-alone developmental coursework and, most recently, accelerated course models.

Fifteen years ago, we offered six developmental classes (three for reading, three for writing) at COCC. Over time, this has been reduced to two courses of integrated reading and writing. Within the past five years, we became eager to engage in redesign but did not want to completely eliminate developmental education as some states have done because we know that not all of our students are prepared for first-year composition. Calls for redesigning (or eliminating) developmental education are cyclical and often ebb and flow in response to poor persistence and retention rates, especially at community colleges. Paco Martorrell and Isaac McFarlin’s (2007) report for the Rand Corporation drew erroneous conclusions that developmental education has failed because students completing developmental coursework seemed to do no better than students who did not take these classes (Calcagno & Long, 2008; Pretlow & Wathington, 2012). Complete College America’s (2012) *Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere* introduced the idea of “exit ramps,” or opportunities for failure, which they said increased when students began in developmental coursework. As low-hanging fruit, developmental coursework is often

characterized as the only thing standing between students and success. This is a charge that oversimplifies a complex problem much more symptomatic of social inequality, educational hegemony (or linguistic and cultural privileging that rewards students in possession of behaviors and knowledge that are institutionally legitimized), a lack of professionalization of the field, or institutional greed (Boylan, 1995; Goudas & Boylan, 2012; Lundell & Higbee, 2002). Our own experience in developmental classrooms told us that some students benefited from these courses and persisted into college-level coursework, so we set our sights on redesigning placement so that the students who would benefit the most from these classes were enrolling. Then we redesigned the developmental literacy curriculum to align better with first-year composition and to follow the current best practices in the field (Figure 4.2).

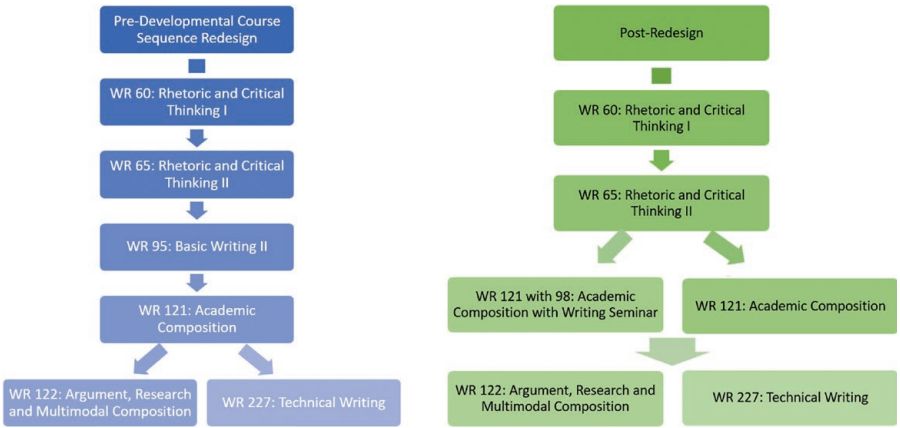


Figure 4.2. Pre-developmental course sequence redesign (left) and post redesign (right) course sequences.

Two alternatives that we considered for placement were multiple measures and guided self-placement (GSP) or one of the many forms of directed self-placement (DSP). Research demonstrates that multiple measures (which include but are not limited to considerations such as non-cognitive factors, high school GPA, and high school transcripts) are more effective than single measures for placement (Klausman et al., 2016; Scott-Clayton et al., 2015; Stich, 2019; Toth, 2019). Supported by this research, community colleges continue to move away from single-measure placement to better identify students who can succeed in credit-bearing coursework with targeted support (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012b). Often, directed self-placement utilizes a combination of tools for assessment (e.g., survey, writing prompts, reflective questions). This more holistic assessment guides placement by using a matrix determined by what is known about the particular student population at an institution. Ultimately, the result of DSP—or in our case an adaptation of DSP—is a course recommendation used to

place students into a first-year writing course. In our case, this resulted in “placement zones” instead of cut scores—a compromise reached between administration, placement, and writing faculty⁴.

While it could be argued that providing agency trumps all else, we do not agree with the conclusion that students who overplace themselves and fail will learn the hard way that “college education is a serious endeavor” or that students *should* be able to accurately estimate their own abilities (Royer & Gilles, 1998, p. 70). This seems to speak from a point of privilege which fails to take into account the impact a lack of institutional knowledge can have on first-generation and marginalized students. Instead, we hope to mitigate this by avoiding mistakes made at other institutions/initiatives, believing that “equality and efficiency need not always be opposing goals” (Nix et al., 2020). For more on this, see research by Rebecka Sare (2017); Holly Larson (2020); Amanda Nix, Tamara Bertrand Jones, Rebecca Brower, Shouping Hu (2020); and Elizabeth Rutschow and Emily Schneider (2012). Toth (2019) pointed out that “DSP is not a single procedure, product or algorithm, but rather a set of principles grounded in student choice that can be implemented in a variety of ways” (p. 2). We agree and believe that it is essential that institutions adapt and implement placement and curriculum redesign that takes into account equity, diversity, students, and resources. In short, no two programs should look alike. At COCC, although students are free to select a lower course placement, they cannot self-select to enroll in a course above the level into which they place through a multiple-measures assessment; however, they can challenge their placement by taking the ACCUPLACER test in reading. This decision was influenced by preliminary research from states like Florida that have instituted self-placement policies (S.B. 1720) that have made developmental coursework optional, and the restraints of compromising with administration, who were already skeptical about DSP (Park et al., 2016).

Collectively, multiple measures and DSP allow colleges to look more closely at direct evidence of student learning in order to more accurately place students at levels where they can be successful but also feel challenged as they move toward first-year composition. DSP also provides students a greater degree of agency in their placement into writing and math coursework, “a recognition of students’ right to make an informed choice about their own education”—or what Royer and Gilles (1998) refer to as a matter of ‘rightness’” (Toth, 2018). Emerging research demonstrates that students who are engaged in the placement process are more invested and satisfied with their placement overall (Kuh et al., 2006; Toth, 2018). For the most part, we have found this to be true with the students who have been placed using multiple measures and DSP during the past two years of our redesign. Additionally, data from our first few years (detailed in the Data

4. Please email writingplacement@cocc.edu for questions or information on our original placement questionnaire or placement process.

section) of using multiple measures and DSP demonstrate the success of this type of placement at our institution, where we've experienced improved rates of course completion and overall persistence (term to term), and higher rates of overall student satisfaction in developmental coursework.

Scaling up Directed Self-Placement

Our journey to redesign placement has taken many years, has been supported by state and federal grants, and has required a significant time investment by many faculty and staff members. Beginning in 2013–2014, a statewide team of educators representing Oregon's 17 (independently governed) community colleges began meeting regularly to consider recommendations for improving developmental education practices and to address growing critique about the efficacy of developmental math and writing coursework. For over a year, the Developmental Education Redesign Workgroup, under the enthusiastic facilitation of Elizabeth Cox Brand, who is currently the executive director of the Oregon Student Success Center—a subgroup of the Oregon Community College Association—met with national educational leaders to begin to address problems with success and persistence. A \$30,000 grant from Oregon Community College Association (OCCA) helped COCC develop a pilot program to rethink placement (math and writing) and move from strict cut scores to placement zones that also considered other measures for placement.

The timing for this change in placement seemed ideal. In 2015, ACT phased out COMPASS, and in 2016, the College Board introduced ACCUPLACER Next Gen. No longer were we tasked with defending the need for change, since change was now inevitable. Instead, the conversation quickly switched away from the decades-long reliance on test scores for placement to multiple measures and directed self-placement.

Prior to that, in 2012, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) released two studies that described the failure of standardized placement exams, taking aim at the tests' most notable claim: predictive validity, or a correlation between test scores and subsequent course grades (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012b). As Goudas (2019) pointed out, in addition to poking holes in this long-standing claim, the studies also discovered that combining a placement exam with high school GPA (HSGPA) was much more successful in predicting success in college-level coursework. As a result, in 2015–2016, the humanities department participated in two distinct placement pilots, designed to determine which measures might better predict student success:

- using Smarter Balanced (a statewide competency exam) scores of 3 or higher, or college-ready level ACT score of 18 in English taken in a student's junior year, to count as automatic placement into first-year composition, and/or

- using multiple measures, such as high school GPA, grade in last English class, and student self-reporting on reading and writing skills, to adjust placement after students took ACCUPLACER.

Ultimately, the second pilot proved more effective, since some faculty and advising staff were still wedded to the requirement for students to take ACCUPLACER before registering for classes. Additionally, our online registration system was structured to require a placement score; thus, the tail was wagging the proverbial dog. Our earliest attempt at using multiple measures was based on information gathered from statewide meetings about using multiple measures like high school GPA, last grade in a composition or English course, and familiarity with conventions like MLA format and academic essays. Supported with course load release and a summer stipend from the state grant, writing faculty members interviewed those students whose ACCUPLACER scores indicated a high achievement in reading (an 81 cut score, or college ready) and slightly lower achievement in sentence skills (at 85–94, where 95 was the college-ready score) to discuss whether they might qualify for placement into WR 121 (our first-year composition course). We asked students about their high school GPA, their most recent writing classes and assignments, as well as their reading habits and comfort level with academic writing. Based on their responses, the faculty member and student decided together whether the student should enroll in WR 95 (an upper-level developmental “review” course) or WR 121. We tracked students who opted for WR 121 throughout the term and collected data to see whether those students were successful.

While this was time- and labor-intensive, we were pleased enough with the results of our initial attempt at placement redesign to continue. In Fall 2016, 33 students were eligible to bypass developmental coursework and take WR 121. Of this group, 29 passed WR 121 (two others dropped, only one failed), meaning that in this initial pilot, 88 percent of the students who bypassed developmental coursework were successful. Over the two previous years, the rate of success for students passing WR 121—all of whom would have placed via ACCUPLACER⁵—was 74 percent. From Fall 2016 through Fall 2017, 55 students successfully completed a regular section of WR 121 (most with As and Bs) without having to take WR 65 or WR95 first. Of that group, only 15 were not successful, meaning that 79 percent of the students who bypassed developmental coursework in this pilot year were successful, and while in previous years they would have had to complete developmental coursework in order to be “successful” in WR 121, five per-

5. One way to have further tested our results would have been to have compared our pilot students to students who placed with ACCUPLACER and whose scores were high in reading but low in sentence skills. While we have been given access to a lot of data, we were unable and are still unable to drill down into reading and sentence-level scores for comparison.

cent more of them passed than students that ACCUPLACER had placed into WR 121. The two senior writing faculty members who designed this pilot program had ultimate authority to bypass ACCUPLACER's placement, although they relied on our placement office to make the change in our registration system (Banner) allowing students to register for WR 121. This was, effectively, our initial attempt at testing directed self-placement on a small group of students.

Our data analysis shows that, with some exceptions, students who had earned a 3.0 high school GPA, no matter how many years in the past, tended to succeed in WR 121 even though ACCUPLACER had placed them into WR 95 (then, our highest-level developmental writing course). Analysis of both pilots also showed that Hispanic last names dominated the list of students placed into developmental coursework, which indicated something about the inequity of relying solely on ACCUPLACER. The "writing" portion of ACCUPLACER is a multiple-choice grammar test, one that penalizes students who may not know the prescribed rules of grammar determined by the creators of the assessment. In June 2021, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) issued the *CCCC Statement on White Language Supremacy*, noting higher education's lack of recognition of linguistic diversity, which limits academic discourse by "shap[ing] aesthetics, epistemologies, attitudes, [and] ideologies . . . that reinforce white power structures to the detriment of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] and minoritized people." Again, our experience highlighted and punctuated problems with relying on standardized tests for placement, which often deny students' right to their own language, especially for linguistically oppressed groups.

The process of individually interviewing students to determine placement was time-consuming and unsustainable. In addition, students were still required to take ACCUPLACER in order to register for any writing course, thus limiting our pool of students to those who scored in a higher reading range. However, these interviews gave us enough information to begin choosing measures for consideration in our revised placement process. We knew from consultation with other colleges, and the research told us, that we should scale up quickly in order to mitigate challenges such as logistical problems (having too many different types of developmental pathways), instructional buy-in (we think this might work, but we're not ready to commit), and coordinating with other departments (labor-intensive practices like different types of placement, hand-scoring placement, assessing efficacy), and on and on. We also needed to look at other areas that can affect student persistence and success, such as professional development of faculty, course redesign, and acceleration (Edgecombe et al., 2013).

We consulted with five other community colleges involved in placement and developmental course redesign (in Oregon and Washington) and followed another recommendation by the statewide Developmental Redesign group: allowing some students who placed into developmental reading/writing to take college composition with a support course (the corequisite model). Findings suggest that corequisite students tend to continue their college education at a higher rate than

students who start in developmental coursework (Daugherty et al., 2018; Hassel et al., 2015). We developed the curriculum for what we called WR 98 Writing Seminar, a two-credit co-enrolled course with our first-year composition course, WR 121. We started with one or two sections of this course per term, and by Fall 2020, we were offering seven sections of corequisite first-year composition, all fully enrolled with waiting lists. As you can see, from the start, we followed the recommendation we received from our tour of colleges who were already ahead of us in developmental redesign: that redesigning curriculum and course structure should coincide with redesigning placement.

Challenges

Our path to developing the new placement measures included several challenges and opportunities. Originally not successful in our bid for a federal Strengthening Institutions Title III grant,⁶ we began a small-scale redesign in developmental literacy and math on our own. One year later, the college learned we were awarded a \$2.5 million grant, which focused on three areas: developmental literacy, developmental math, and first-year experience. The delay meant that our redesign efforts were beginning at different places rather than happening within a coordinated effort across the college. While this issue is perhaps unique to COCC and the circumstances of the grant, we would argue that having a clear timeline of activities early in the process would have led to fewer frustrations.

Another challenge involved the number of departments and areas involved in implementing the projects needed to accomplish the goals of the grant—a challenge that cannot be overstated. The three areas of the grant are housed in two different branches within the college organizational structure: Student/Enrollment Services and Instruction. Each of these branches are led by different administrators: the Vice President for Instruction and the Vice President of Student Affairs. Also, the redesign of developmental math and developmental literacy required assistance from other departments housed in these two branches. Unfortunately, not all of these departments were included in the original language of the grant, which limited the compensation that could be provided for the extra work needed to accomplish stated goals, most notably placement. We were able to secure release time or stipends for writing and math faculty working on the changes under the terms of the grant, and we also were able to expand our placement testing coordinator's position to full time.

Where we ran into constraints was with support staff who did not receive release time or shifted assignments in order to complete the technological changes needed to create a fully online directed self-placement system (including the instrument and the system to record placement levels on student accounts). Administrators and staff in these areas had to complete their part of the work

6. For more on Title III, visit <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iduestitle3a/index.html>

without the ability to shift their ongoing responsibilities to others, resulting in a heavier workload and creating an inequity in relation to faculty. Our advice here would be to clearly request much more support for staff members at the grant application stage.

The difficulty of bringing together the departments and personnel required for implementation of the grant cannot be overstated. For example, Developmental Literacy cannot redesign its course sequence (adding a corequisite, accelerated learning course) until there is more accurate placement; however, Placement Services (which consists of a single staff person at COCC) did not know how to implement multiple measures of placement, and due to personnel and software problems, the staff member was not compensated under the grant to make these changes. Additionally, once the Title III grant was awarded, Developmental Literacy and Developmental Math were more than a year ahead of everyone else involved in the redesign, and because of this, the faculty in these departments were often frustrated by how long it took to build buy-in. Math and writing faculty spent many hours in meetings trying to convince colleagues in other departments of the changes needed to support their work under the grant (e.g., collecting data on persistence and retention or entering corequisite classes in Banner, which is the school's student information system).

Related to our student information system is the issue of making changes to our directed self-placement tool, changes we feel are necessary as we continue to tweak our placement process to meet other challenges (such as students who forgot their GPA,⁷ or have earned a modified high school diploma,⁸ or current high school students). Making changes to the directed self-placement tool is cumbersome as it is controlled by instructional technology staff who are the most familiar with creating an effective Qualtrics survey. We have been told that any edits/changes can only be made once a year because such changes are time-consuming. Since the college has chosen to go with Qualtrics, we are committed to staying with that system for our survey tool despite the difficulty in easily editing the survey.

A related challenge is a communication issue with faculty outside of our department: with so many advisors (a mixture of full-time advisors and full-time faculty serving as advisors), and despite our best efforts, many faculty continue to be unclear about parameters of our directed self-placement, so we are often

7. Like many community colleges, we do not require newly admitted students to submit a high school transcript, and we do not have the staff to collect and evaluate them, thus we do not have their high school GPA or course grades in our system.

8. An Oregon modified high school diploma is designed for students with a disability who cannot pass regular high school coursework with support. Thus, students can earn a modified high school diploma, allowing them to bypass some coursework. Their cumulative GPAs, however, do not reflect the modification, thus they can have a 3.8 GPA based on coursework that did not prepare them for college-level work, so their placement on the DSP is inaccurate.

sent students (via our dedicated email, writingplacement@cocc.edu) who do not meet our minimum qualifications and are thus disappointed when they are not permitted to take WR 121, that is unless they score high enough on the challenge reading test in ACCUPLACER. While the majority of new students take the DSP, they do have agency in the process, namely that they may elect to place into a writing course via ACCUPLACER or they may challenge their DSP placement by taking ACCUPLACER. Because our college employs so many advisors, we have invested time in training faculty advisors and meeting with our advising director to minimize confusion. This training will need to continue as part of our annual advising training day.

Another challenge that must be anticipated with any long-term redesign is faculty burnout: Three full-time faculty members have been the primary figures researching and implementing placement redesign since 2014. Our department of 12 full-time faculty is small enough that there are not many who can relieve us. Placement redesign must be continuously assessed and tweaked, especially in these initial years of our DSP, and as we continue to assess whether the tool is accurately recommending the highest possible placement for all students, or if we need different placement tools for certain populations of students (e.g., students who have been out of school for over a decade, or who are still in high school and have yet to take junior or senior language arts classes). Yet our grant funding is spent, as are faculty who have been working on this process for six years.

Data

Despite the resistance we encountered—and we sometimes still encounter it—the data reflect the success of our changes while revealing other challenges. Nevertheless, the results of this switch from ACCUPLACER to the DSP were immediately apparent: More students were placing higher than with ACCUPLACER. Whereas 40 percent of students taking the standardized exam had placed into a first-year writing course, 84 percent of students taking the DSP placed into a first-year composition course. This group includes students who take first-year composition (WR 121) with a corequisite course (WR 98). Even when students who elected to place via ACCUPLACER are factored in, the overall percentage of those who place into college-level writing is 42 percent higher than in the 2014–2015 academic year (Figure 4.3).⁹

9. When gathering data, noticing the timing of students' choices has been important. For instance, we can track the time taken between writing courses and how successful students are when they take these courses in a shorter time frame, particularly developmental literacy courses. One thing we would have liked to have had access to was data on how long a student takes to enroll in a writing course once the DSP or ACCUPLACER has been taken; however, because this data exists on different technological platforms across various operational areas at the college, we have not been able to access it.

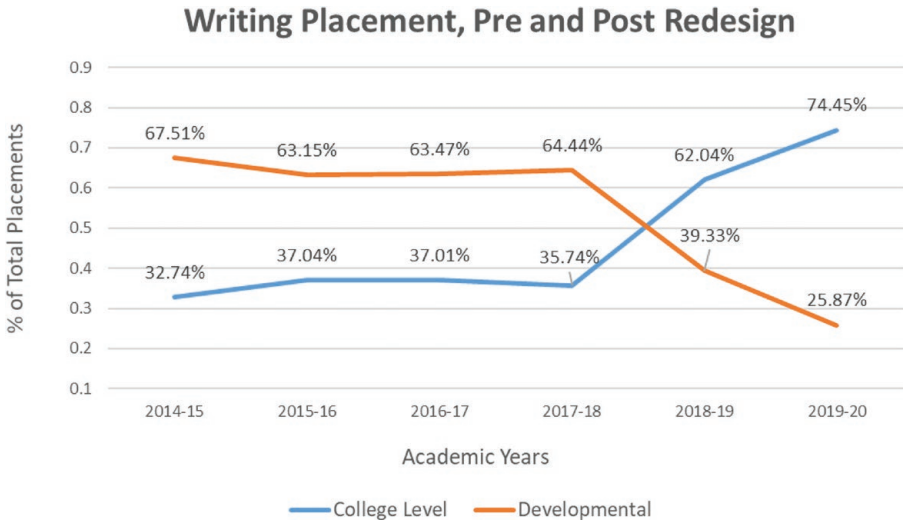


Figure 4.3. Writing placement (all methods), 2014–2020.¹⁰

Tracking students via the DSP has helped us gain a clearer picture of who our students are as writers. While the majority report having taken a writing course within the last year, the next most significant number of students report having taken a writing course five or more years ago. We have also found that while many students report earning As and Bs during high school, several respondents do not answer the question or claim that they do not remember. Students who were on a modified track in high school—for example, an Individualized Education Program designed for students with special needs and with fewer strict course and graduation requirements—may have As and Bs that are not equivalent to what we would traditionally associate with academic success; however, we are unable to ask that question on the DSP, and thus some students are, indeed, placed too high, as we have determined anecdotally from students who withdraw from our accelerated course WR 121 plus WR 98.

We expected that more students would place into college-level writing courses, and we expected that more of them would be successful in those courses. Indeed, we did observe higher pass rates and lower drop rates in the switch from the standardized exam to the DSP. For example, 2.6 percent fewer students drop their first writing class when they place via the DSP rather than ACCUPLACER. More significantly, 8.9 percent more of them complete that first course. Beyond the DSP, our Title III grant allowed us to make substantial improvements to our developmental literacy courses and classrooms.¹¹ Since

10. Orange represents students placing via test (e.g. ACCUPLACER) while blue represents revised and directed self-placement.

11. Full- and part-time faculty have received training in hybrid and online instruction, andragogy, universal design, Quality Matters, and English language learners (ELL),

that redesign and the launching of the DSP, six percent more of our students are successful in their developmental coursework (Table 4.1). Since the creation of our accelerated course WR 121 plus WR 98, 81.83 percent have completed the course with a C grade or above. This rate is 3.65 percent higher than students who take WR 121 alone.

Table 4.1. Course Success for Developmental Literacy Courses Pre- and Post-DSP

Course	Before Fall 2018	Since Fall 2018	Variance
WR 60	62.58%	69.17%	+6.59%
WR 65	63.63%	69.70%	+6.08%

Note. Course success is defined here by registered students who complete the course with an A, B, C, or P grade.

Before the introduction of the DSP and accelerated writing course, attrition rates for our developmental writing courses, WR 60 and WR 65, averaged 25.02 percent and 23.5 percent respectively. Since 2018–2019, the attrition rates for WR 60 have dropped 2.97 percent, while the rates for WR 65 have dropped 7.61 percent (Table 4.2). While these results are favorable, the COVID-19 pandemic has surely had a profound effect upon them, just as it has had on the lives of our students.¹² After eight terms of offering our accelerated course, the average attrition rate is 10.59 percent, but this rate has steadily fallen. After two terms of 2020–2021 (we have three terms per academic year, not including summers), only 5.1 percent of registered students have dropped the course.

Table 4.2. Attrition Rates for Developmental Literacy Courses Pre- and Post-DSP

Course	Before Fall 2018	Since Fall 2018	Variance
WR 60	25.02%	22.05%	-2.98%
WR 65	23.50%	15.89%	-7.60%

Note. Attrition rate is defined here as the percentage of students registered for a course who drop (before Week 7 of a 10-week course) or withdraw (drop with instructor permission after Week 7) from a course.

and 98 percent of our developmental and accelerated courses are taught in a computer classroom.

12. Our WR 60 courses often include our most vulnerable students. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were the students most likely to report a lack in access to technology and instability in housing, child care, and employment. This was likely a major contributing factor to the fact that 30 percent of these students dropped or withdrew from WR 60 in 2019–2020.

What has produced the most impressive gains has been what happens after students are recommended placement using our new placement process. Revising our placement tool allows students some self-determination in choosing their initial writing course. We believe that that choice contributes to persistence, but we have also noticed a tendency among a small group of students to question their placement and take a lower-numbered course when given a choice.¹³ More often than not, when a student disagrees with their placement after taking the DSP, they self-select a *lower*, not *higher*, placement. In these instances, we ask advisors to encourage students to enroll in the higher-level course while simultaneously taking advantage of support services (e.g., tutoring, disability services). Here, the difference between the two systems of placement was remarkable. When students took the DSP and elected to take a lower-numbered course than the one they placed into, only about seven percent of these students did not pass the course. Failure rates with the standardized exam were much higher, with some faculty reporting almost a third of the students not passing the course into which they were placed. In other words, students who self-selected to take a lower-level developmental course because of writing anxiety were generally accurate in doing so. The slower pace of the developmental course and the enhanced support tended to benefit these students, resulting in higher pass rates.

Overall, the results of these changes are positive; many more students are beginning their college careers enrolled in college-level writing and math classes, skipping the developmental courses that do not count toward their degrees or certificates. From 2018 to 2020, more than 2,000 students placed into accelerated writing courses rather than developmental literacy ones, saving them close to \$90,000 in tuition and fees. Student success in first-year courses has increased, partially due to curriculum and advising changes implemented along with the placement reform. While COCC faculty and staff are still assessing the results of the placement changes, refining the criteria used, and tracking the progress of students as they move through their college pathways, the data show that this has been a major success for students, saving them both time and money, which makes administration and students happier, and starting off their college careers on surer footing, which we argue is the key goal and our original intent.

Conclusion

We recognize that the necessary ingredients for any college attempting this overhaul include a grant that allows faculty release time to make the placement and curriculum changes, ongoing institutional investment, and the time to meet with faculty and staff for continuous discussion of goals, changes, and needs. We also recommend that faculty argue for flexibility for the first few years to make chang-

13. This has been a perplexing phenomenon that we have attributed to writing anxiety and writing trauma due to comments students have made that signal a lack of self-efficacy.

es annually in response to emerging information. Replacing one placement tool with another reveals that we need to consider different placement options for different populations of students.

Because of the two grants we received, we were able to address, at the same time, other necessary changes to boost student success. We revised the curriculum for our remaining developmental literacy courses, requesting that all instructors follow the same model (though they could select from a group of readings and assignment topics). This addressed one concern we had that different instructors were placing too much emphasis on research and citing sources, rather than in working with students on integrated reading and writing. We began offering a first-year composition class with a support course: This required specific workshops and mentoring for instructors wishing to teach the combined courses. We also, often in collaboration with developmental math faculty, held ongoing in-house professional development workshops for faculty, focusing on ways we can support student success and address non-cognitive concerns. For over a year, we held joint meetings with instructors (one per term), focusing on issues like technology in developmental classrooms (Winter 2019), social justice and the syllabus (Spring 2018), first-generation students and success (Spring 2018), and the art and science of teaching and learning (Winter 2018). We invited colleagues from other disciplines (human development, sociology) and areas of expertise (e.g., e-learning and disability services) to share knowledge that would enhance our instruction.¹⁴ Finally, we made ACCUPLACER a challenge tool instead of the initial placement tool for students, and we now only require the reading section: Research shows that the multiple-choice writing section did not assess students' ability to write. Ultimately, maintaining this test as a challenge option was another compromise we made with administration, who reluctantly agreed to placement redesign from the start, and our future plans call for reevaluating this challenge option once we get enough data (most students do not choose to challenge, currently). We strongly believe that it was the combination of all of these initiatives that has led to student successes: Changing placement alone would not have worked.

A recent article by Erik Armstrong et al. (2020) reminds us all to anticipate the inevitable backlash that will happen to changes in placement and the addition of the corequisite options, whether based on fiscal concerns, the mistaken belief that such changes are watering down standards and the ineffable "rigor" of composition courses, or conversely, the mistaken belief that all students should simply bypass developmental courses and be placed in the supported WR 121 course. The article details how California colleges used multiple measures for placement in the early 1990s, only to return to high-stakes testing for placement by the early 2000s. Today,

14. See the "Developmental Education Workshops" page on COCCs Dev Ed Digital Library for links to info from these sessions: <https://sites.google.com/view/coccdigital-library2017/home>

California Assembly Bill 705 requires colleges to return to multiple-measures placement, as did a 1988 lawsuit.¹⁵ The authors argued that we must continually tell stories of our students' successes with a fairer placement model and a more appropriate support system, to our colleagues, our administrators, and to the general public.

Another consideration that Armstrong et al. (2020) proposed is working statewide to develop a shared version of multiple-measures placement, as Idaho has done successfully, among community colleges and universities.¹⁶ While Oregon chose to encourage local options, the fact that our students regularly move among colleges requires either an expectation that placement at one college will be accepted at another college, or that colleges share similar placement instruments.

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15. Assembly Bill 705 also requires colleges to show evidence that their standalone developmental courses improve outcomes for students, thus diminishing the very real need for a standalone preparatory option for students before first-year composition. We disagree with that component of the bill. For more on this, see Gilman et al. (2019).

16. See Estrem et al. (2014)

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