Chapter 7. Tracking the Racial Consequences of Placement by Probability: A Case Study at Kingsborough Community College

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Abstract: Any placement decision is a gamble on the validity of the mechanism used. The better the placement mechanism matches the actual proficiencies required for success in a future, real-life context, the more accurately it will place students into the best classes for them and the more valid it will prove to be. But what happens if the most obvious, commonsensical approaches to placement that would appear to have the strongest validity—writing tests for placement into writing classes—prove unreliable? Rather than accurately placing students into the "right" class for them, we now know that writing placement tests frequently result in the underplacement of students into developmental courses that are not truly necessary for their success as college writers. Further, writing assessments used for the purposes of incoming college writing placement are part of this pattern and have produced racially inequitable placement patterns for uncountable numbers of students in higher education, including two-year colleges (TYCs). This chapter presents an analysis of racially disaggregated placement data for Kingsborough Community College, part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, which recently revised its protocol for English placement in an attempt to increase accuracy and racial equity in placement into credit-bearing first-year composition (FYC). The CUNY system shifted from a practice of writing placement via a locally designed and scored timed writing test to an algorithmic placement mechanism—the "Proficiency Index"—that relies heavily on high school GPA. Given the complexities of multiple measures placement for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students, we're encouraged to see that the new CUNY policy has resulted in a greater percentage of BIPOC students placing directly into our FYC courses.

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prove unreliable? Rather than accurately placing students into the "right" class for them, we now know that writing placement tests frequently result in the underplacement of students into developmental courses that are not truly necessary for their success as college writers. In addition, as readers of this collection well know, writing assessments used for the purposes of incoming college writing placement are part of this pattern and have produced racially inequitable placement patterns for uncountable numbers of students in higher education, including two-year colleges (TYCs).

Our own TYC, Kingsborough Community College, is part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, which recently revised its protocol for English placement across all campuses in an attempt to increase accuracy and racial equity in placement into credit-bearing first-year composition (FYC). CUNY shifted from a system of writing placement via a locally designed and scored timed writing test to an algorithmic placement mechanism—the "Proficiency Index"—that relies heavily on high school GPA, an approach that, in other institutions, has been linked to higher placement rates into FYC for Black, Hispanic, and Pell-eligible students (CAPR, 2020). This chapter takes a close look at racially disaggregated data on placement into FYC at our TYC from the first year (two semesters) using the new CUNY algorithm in order to better understand how the new placement is recalibrating the racial makeup of students in FYC. Given the complexities of multiple measures placement for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students, we're encouraged to see that, from the limited data we have so far, the new CUNY policy has resulted in a greater percentage of BIPOC students placing directly into our FYC courses. While using a mechanism that relies heavily on high school GPA for writing placement in a TYC isn't without its complexities (Koretz & Langi, 2018), it seems that, in our case, it has resulted in greater racial equity in writing placement for our students.

Context

Kingsborough Community College (KCC) is part of the CUNY system, a 25-campus system spread across all five boroughs of New York City serving 275,000 students per year. CUNY was founded in 1847 as the nation's very first free public institution of higher education and now comprises 11 senior colleges, seven community colleges, and seven graduate, honors, and professional schools. CUNY is headed by a chancellor who acts as the chief executive officer of the system. The chancellor's authority is checked by the Board of Trustees, a governance body that establishes academic policies for the entire system. While CUNY is highly centralized on some policies, on others campuses are allowed some, or a lot of, flexibility, and the Board of Trustees makes those judgements.

Kingsborough is the only community college in the borough of Brooklyn, which, itself, has a population of 2.6 million. KCC is a large community college,

with an enrollment hovering around 15,500, serving a diverse student body. According to 2019 institutional research data, KCC students identified as 55 percent female and 45 percent male; 60.1 percent were under 22 years old, 23.8 percent are between 23 and 29, with the remaining 16.1 percent over 30; in 2019, student ethnicity broke down as follows: 29.1 percent Black, non-Hispanic, 36.4 percent White, non-Hispanic, 17.6 percent Hispanic, and 16.6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. More than a third, 35.6 percent, of Kingsborough students were foreign born, and at least 30 percent spoke a language other than English at home, although this number very likely underrepresents the reality of our students' language diversity. Although tuition costs are quite low—$5,252 for a full-time state resident—75 percent of first-year students received financial aid.

While roughly half of Kingsborough students are enrolled in the associate's program in liberal arts, pursuing one of a number of different concentrations in that degree, the remaining students are enrolled in a range of different degree programs, the five most popular being business, criminal justice, biology, mental health, and accounting. KCC has two large and successful dual enrollment programs that, together, in Fall 2019 comprised fully 31 percent of enrolled students. The "College Now" program trains New York City high school teachers to teach college-level, credit-bearing courses to qualifying NYC high school students as part of their regular course load. The "Early College Initiative" is similar but brings qualifying NYC high school students to the KCC campus for courses taught by college faculty; students in this program attend classes alongside other KCC students. Eighty-five percent of degree-seeking students at KCC are enrolled in transfer programs, with the remainder enrolled in career or terminal certificate programs ("credit students by degree type"). KCC tracks degree completion by collecting three-year graduation rates, which, in 2016, was 33.2 percent of students enrolled in degree programs (Kingsborough Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2019a). Post-graduation transfer rates from 2016–2019 hovered between 56.2 and 72 percent of total graduates.

Exigence: One Barrier Gone; Time to Knock Down the Next One

In the fall of 2017, two and a half years prior to the eventual implementation of the new Proficiency Index (PI) for placement, CUNY changed its method of assessing exit from remediation, a change that, in retrospect, foreshadowed the eventual change in placement. Prior to 2017, students could only exit remediation in writing by passing the same timed writing test that placed them into remediation in the first place—the locally designed and scored CUNY Assessment Test of Writing (CATW)—thus creating a bookend structure of placement and advancement for students. (See also Charissa Che's chapter in this collection.) For several years, the CUNY-wide Writing Discipline Council (WDC)—a body made up of writing program administrators (WPAs) from

across all 18 CUNY community and senior colleges—had been lobbying the CUNY Central administration to discontinue the use of the CATW as an exit measure due to the WDC members' growing sense, based on greater access to disaggregated outcomes data, that it perpetuated racist and inequitable patterns in the population of students who were forced to repeat remedial courses. Fall 2017 marked the very first semester that students exited remedial writing courses on the sole basis of their earned grades in the course. This was a watershed moment for our corequisite writing course, as we watched a much more racially balanced population of students pass through the course, gaining real college credits in FYC and gaining vital momentum in progress toward their degree. Overall, an increase in about five percentage points of students in our corequisite course passed based on the new exit measures, but those changes in pass rates were not allocated equally across racial/ethnic groups. Table 7.1 compares pass rates via the CATW for a typical fall semester with those via course grades. This table shows the difference in disaggregated percentages of students exiting the top-level developmental writing course via re-taking the timed CATW vs. via their grades in the course.

Table 7.1. Exit from Remediation Comparison

	Fall 2016 | CATW	Fall 2018 | Course Grades
Black Students	56%	61.9%
Hispanic Students	31.3%	63%
Asian Students	68.8%	69.8%
White Students	83.9%	73.3%

Once exit from remediation had been reformed in 2017, all eyes turned toward CUNY's placement practices.

CUNY's recent shift to a new placement protocol (described in detail below in "Unclogging the Pipeline" and "The Proficiency Index for Placement") is part of a much larger national trend in two-year college placement reform away from single standardized tests and toward placement via multiple measures. Over the last several years, many researchers, scholars, and teacher-activists have argued that placement testing not only placed more BIPOC students into remedial courses but also resulted in the underplacement into remediation of a significant percentage of students (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). Whether because students don't fully comprehend the function and importance of placement testing and therefore do not perform at their true ability level or because placement tests aren't valid measures of the complex collection of abilities, habits, and resources necessary to succeed in college writing, placement tests are not reliable predictors of which students will and will not succeed in passing FYC.

As the problems with placement testing became more and more apparent, states and municipalities began to call for changes in their own local systems, perhaps the most well-known being California. In response to Governor Jerry Brown signing AB 705 into law, the California community college system shifted to a variety of placement protocols based on an index of multiple factors from students' educational histories, the most heavily weighed of which is high school GPA because it has been found to be the factor most predictive of students' ability to succeed in English (and math) coursework in college (Bahr et al., 2019). California's shift in placement in response to state-level reform initiatives followed similar legislation in Texas, Minnesota, Tennessee, Oregon, Florida, Connecticut, and Washington state. CUNY's own development of a new placement protocol for its 18 community and senior colleges was set in the context of this national sea change in placement policy and practice.

Unclogging the Pipeline

Amending placement practices and policies at CUNY was a momentous task as remediation had been fundamental to a CUNY education for decades. Since 1999, students who did not place into college-level English and math were required to pass developmental courses at one of CUNY's six community colleges before they could continue their education at the four-year institutions (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011, p. 2). Placement into these courses was determined by two exams. As of October 2010, students took the locally developed CATW, a 90-minute written response to a 250 to 300-word reading passage that was meant to measure students' ability "to do college-level writing in English" (CUNY, Office of Assessment/Office of Academic Affairs, 2012, p. 1). A multiple-choice, computer-adaptive reading test was also required: The COMPASS was administered until it was phased out in 2015, replaced by the shorter ACCUPLACER through 2019. As reforms to remedial education were implemented across the nation, CUNY began to restructure these placement processes and developmental educational pathways, particularly when plans to add a seventh community college, now Guttman, were underway (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011, p. 3).[1] These efforts culminated in the implementation of the PI as the standard placement mechanism in Spring 2020 and the concurrent dissolution of remedial courses.

Stand-alone developmental classes functioned as both a gatekeeper to maintain standards and a means to equip underprepared students for the academy, a view put forth since at least the late 1970s with Mina Shaugnessy's (1977) *Errors and Expectations* and its focus on mechanical competence in CUNY students' writing.

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1.   Notably, Guttman holds the largest endowment of all CUNY community colleges, currently estimated at $15 million, thanks to an endowment from the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation, highlighting the trend of large philanthropies influencing educational reform.

Two decades later, Marilyn Sternglass' (1997) *Time to Know Them* affirmed this perspective with a longitudinal examination of CUNY basic writers that attests to the power of remediation. These well-known texts were countered by calls against basic writing at CUNY that arose in the 1990s in works like James Traub's (1994) *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College*. Standardized exams appeared to provide an efficient and consistent measure to place developmental students while still allowing for local interpretation to account for the unique needs of individual programs. By 2011, however, prompted by national trends assessing the efficacy of remediation, CUNY worked with the CCRC to examine placement mechanisms and their effect on student progress. Four years later, the interim chancellor set up the CUNY Task Force on Developmental Education to review research and reimagine remedial placement policies (CUNY Task Force, 2016, p. 2).

Though CUNY's guidelines clearly delineated the boundary between placement into developmental, non-credit courses and college-level, credit-bearing ones, each college had great latitude to structure their remedial educational policies. As such, the length of the developmental sequence varied across campuses as did policies regarding placement and exemption from these courses (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011, pp. 11-12). While some schools used the writing exam for placement, others relied on the reading exam (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011, p. 14). KCC used a combination of reading and writing exam scores along with grades in previous developmental classes and sometimes instructor referral to create a complex placement web for its long developmental sequence (Figure 7.1). The student's knowledge of the sequence, guidance from advisors, and course availability could all affect the number of courses students took.
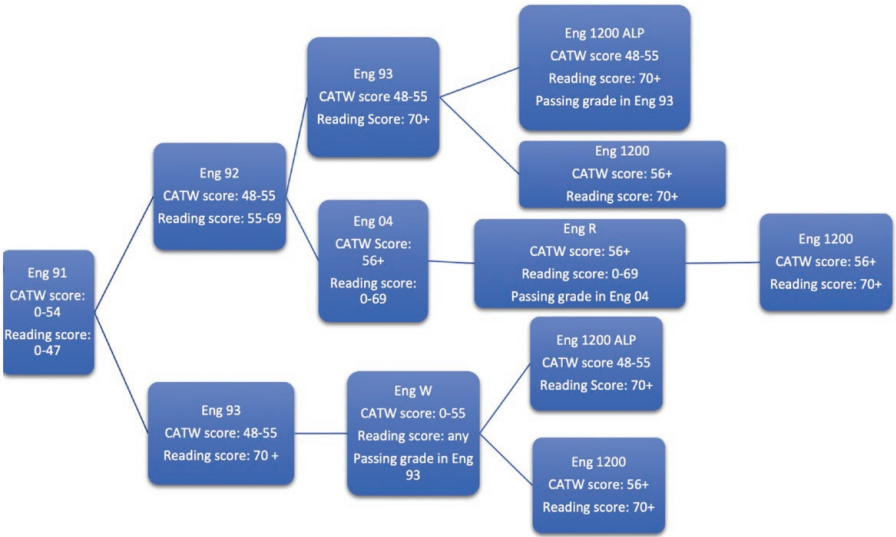

Figure 7.1. Placement pathways and course entrance requirements before implementation of the PI.

To add to the confusion, entering students were unaware of the great bearing entrance examinations and placement policies could have on their educational plans. For example, on one hand, low placement scores could jeopardize their educational progress as longer pathways to enter credit-bearing courses correlated with greater student attrition (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011, p. 41). On the other hand, students had an equal or even greater chance of passing required, credit-bearing classes if their developmental course sequence was shorter (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011 p. 44). For students entering in Spring 2020, the reading and writing exams were no longer required, and the PI became the standard placement mechanism as more research called attention to the specious validity of placement tests. To help explain the shift to the PI, CUNY Central cited one study that determined that students were far more likely to be misplaced into remediation than into credit-bearing classes. More than a third of students who placed into developmental English classes could have passed the gateway English course with a B or higher while still others could have passed with grades lower than B (Scott-Clayton et al., 2014, pp. 381-382).

At KCC, the English developmental program did not separate reading and writing into separate departments as is the case at other CUNY campuses, though students still had to pass through multiple levels of remediation before they could register for the credit-bearing FYC. Excluding ESL, students with low scores on the placement exams might end up taking seven different remedial English courses, repeating some of these multiple times. As mentioned earlier, CUNY's unusual practice of requiring students to pass the reading and writing entrance exams in order to exit the developmental sequence led to more test-prep and intersession bridge courses, making the barriers out of remediation even higher. The effect of these barriers becomes clearer when examining exactly how placement reform affected students' educational progress. In the semesters before the Proficiency Index was instituted, nearly 40 percent of incoming first-year students placed into an upper-level developmental class; this percentage dropped to about ten percent after changes to placement took effect in Spring 2020. In Fall 2017, for example, approximately 880 students were enrolled in one of the many developmental levels of English while approximately 2,300 students were enrolled in FYC or corequisite FYC.

Figure 7.2. Simplified placement pathway and course entrance requirements after implementation of the PI. Students with a PI of 50-64 could also opt to take a pre-semester workshop through KCC's immersion program that would allow them to place directly into English 1200.

By Fall 2020, when enrollment was down due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the PI was used for placement for the second time, just about 200 students were registered for the one remaining developmental-level class while more than 2,400 students were registered for FYC or corequisite FYC. This difference, discussed in detail in the "Outcomes" section, represents a significant increase in students for whom the PI and corequisite instruction would provide opportunities to earn credit for FYC and eliminate non-credit, remedial coursework that would lengthen the educational path. Figures 7.1 and 7.2 further illustrate how the PI simplified students' educational journeys and laid out a more direct path to earning college credit. Figure 7.1 represents just some of the developmental pathways students could have followed. Note that entering students could begin this sequence at English 91, English 92, or English 93, based on their test scores. They would exit remediation only after passing the reading and writing exams that initially placed them into developmental education.

CUNY's new placement policies relied on robust corequisite course offerings that would replace the developmental sequence. KCC established its own corequisite course, the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP), for FYC in Spring 2013, long before the PI was developed, following a visit from Peter Adams, who popularized the method at the Community College of Baltimore County. The program began as a small pilot, just five sections that did not even appear on the school's scheduling platform. For several years, only students who narrowly missed entrance to the credit-bearing FYC were placed into the course. These students were mainstreamed into designated sections of FYC and also received an additional hour of instruction with their professor each week; within a few years, supplemental instruction was increased to two hours. In these first semesters, corequisite students could only exit by passing the CATW. After CUNY recognized that it was not legally feasible to mandate different exit requirements from students in the same course, they retroactively passed those who had failed due to their score on the CATW. KCC took this change in CUNY policy as an opportunity to amend assessment practices of the corequisite sections of FYC and began to evaluate students by portfolio assessment in Fall 2017, which, based on a few years of student outcomes data, appears to favor White students less than the exam had.

The Proficiency Index for Placement: Medical Discourse in the Name of Equity

Although the data made clear that English placement needed to be reformed, it would take extensive outreach and communication to explain these new policies to the many affected programs throughout CUNY. After the CUNY Task Force on Developmental Education—comprised of chairs of the discipline councils, administrators from two- and four-year CUNY colleges, and members of the Office of Academic Affairs (OAA)—had established placement recommendations,

the OAA was charged with implementing these changes by establishing the PI (CUNY, 2019). As local campuses were not involved in crafting the algorithm, information about the PI trickled to campuses by way of memos from CUNY Central and information shared by members of the CUNY Writing Discipline Council. This communication was supplemented with the CUNY English Summit in October 2018, a day-long event where representatives from CUNY Central, including the interim chancellor, The Community College Resource Center (CCRC), corequisite scholars, and CUNY faculty, explained the new policies, their potential benefits to students, and new pedagogical models, all with the celebratory air of embarking on a new era.

CUNY administration gave the new policies a medical frame, explaining at the summit that "our new placement practices aim to assign each student to the minimum effective dose of developmental supports" (CUNY, 2018). These "doses" were to be administered via "the Proficiency Index" (PI) algorithm. Like new multiple measures placement indexes in other states and municipalities, the PI would draw on multiple measures from a student's educational record to generate placement based on predictive probability, calculating students' chances of success by weighing high school GPA, scores on the statewide Regents exam, and, if available, SAT scores. Based on this formula—established by studying years of data on students' performance in developmental, corequisite, and credit-bearing courses—students with approximately a 65 percent chance of scoring C- or higher would be placed in FYC. Students who needed some "light developmental support" based on their range on the PI would be placed in corequisite, credit-bearing courses. Students with the lowest PI would not register for CUNY classes but instead a special, stand-alone program called "CUNY Start"; though the semester-long program is not covered by financial aid, the current cost of $75 is meant to make it accessible to most students. The full-time program includes both reading/writing and math and meets for 25 hours a week, while the part-time version includes either reading/writing or math and meets for 12 hours a week. While campuses were encouraged to experiment with different corequisite models, the PI itself would not be discussed, piloted, or adapted but rather uniformly applied as of Spring 2020 to all incoming students at CUNY's campuses. Along with this change, schools were given explicit instructions to end all stand-alone developmental course offerings, which KCC has slowly phased out through the Fall 2021 semester.

To explain the all-encompassing nature of the reform, CUNY continued the medical metaphor at the 2018 summit: "Students who fail remediation are most likely to drop out of college. Failing English is not about English. It is not the disease. It is the symptom" (CUNY, 2018). Throughout the day, administrators adapted the very medical ideology that Mike Rose had long ago critiqued in discussions of remediation, a term he urged universities to abandon to avoid the peculiar system of providing students "entrance to the academy while, in various symbolic ways, denying them full participation" (Rose, 1985, p. 357). More than

three decades later, this jargon was invoked more in a therapeutic sense than a pathologizing one to dismantle developmental education and so launch a more just form of placement. Though administrators at the summit repeatedly emphasized that the changes were not to be top-down or free from discussion, it was clear that the disease they had diagnosed—remediation and long pathways to enter credit-bearing courses—could only be cured with system-wide placement reform and corequisite models of education rather than a constellation of different reforms enacted at different colleges in the system.

Reactions to the Proficiency Index

The separate but related issues of placement reform and the resulting reduction of developmental course offerings caused varying degrees of distress among faculty. Updates about placement reform and the new Proficiency Index were regularly discussed at department meetings, where instructors expressed some concern that standards would be lowered or would become unreliable without standardized tests to determine placement. Moreover, while the implementation of the PI caused some friction, the reduction and eventual elimination of the well-established developmental sequence had more direct bearing on faculty labor.

The phasing out of stand-alone developmental courses ran against the experience of instructors who spent years working closely with students enrolled in developmental English courses. These instructors well understood the findings that informed CUNY's decision to amend placement: Many students who ended up in developmental English did not continue in their studies. However, they argued, students' "weak literacy skills" were justification that the courses were necessary, not that they should be abandoned. If many struggled or failed after a semester, the idea of dropping them into the credit-bearing FYC course seemed reckless and even unethical, instructors argued. The shift in placement policies, thus, countered the oft-expressed local wisdom that those students who made it through the developmental sequence and finally enrolled in FYC were the most prepared. These former developmental education students' strengths in FYC were taken as tangible proof of the success and validity of developmental education. Figure 7.3 shows the percentages of students from each English background who passed through our FYC 1 course in Fall 2018.

Of course, the success in FYC of students who had persisted and made it through KCC's prodigious dev ed sequence was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Few faculty in our department openly voiced the critique that, since our dev ed English courses were often run as prep courses to our FYC and since a significant percentage of students cooled out in that sequence, it was truly unsurprising that those students who actually passed through the dev ed machine might easily pass FYC. Very few asked aloud whether those students might have passed FYC to begin with. Instead, to many instructors, shortening the educational pathway felt like a neoliberal justification to cut costs.
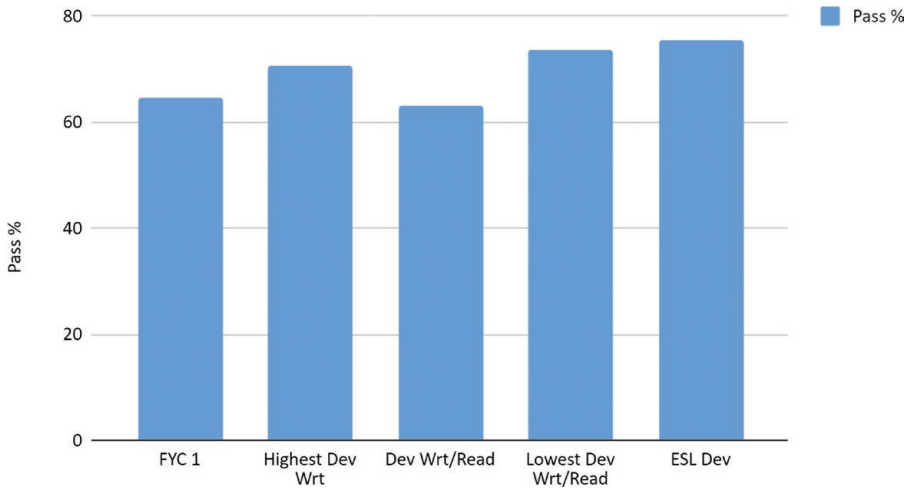
Figure 7.3. FYC pass rates by first English course.

   Dire predictions and contradicting rumors ensued. The idea that the PI was the administration's plan to rid CUNY of the most unprepared students ran alongside the fear that faculty would be pressured to pass all students through a form of college-level social promotion, a capitulation to an empty form of the now popular term "student success." Another continuing concern was that FYC would devolve into a remedial-level course since, prior to implementation of the PI, KCC had reserved the corequisite model for high-scoring developmental students. Even if some found it counterintuitive to abandon placement tests and developmental courses, there was little faculty recourse except to request a teaching schedule that did not include FYC or the corequisite form of the course. The CUNY-wide changes would no longer be subject to local adaptations. Individual CUNY campuses would no longer have the authority to devise their own system for interpreting placement based on the PI, nor would campuses be allowed to generate their own versions of the PI. Because CUNY is a centralized system in which students often take classes on different campuses throughout their educational careers, the PI benefits students by standardizing placement determinations that had historically varied widely at the developmental level. Because placement via the PI is consistent across campuses, CUNY has not been part of national experiments in directed self-placement, as the new system does not allow for local interpretations by faculty or by students.
   In contrast to the very practical concerns of the faculty in our college who teach developmental and FYC courses, members of the CUNY-wide WDC (Writing Discipline Council) focused on the potential for PI placement to create a more socially just FYC ecosystem for CUNY students. At the monthly meetings of the 18-member body—composed of WPAs and course coordinators from across the system—most attendees expressed relief that the complex and expensive internal

CUNY mechanisms for testing incoming students' writing ability via the CATW test would fade away and be replaced with a new approach to placement. A strong percentage of the WDC was familiar with changes to placement already afoot in other parts of the country and was excited that this change was coming to our system and understood, and believed, what research demonstrated about the racist, oppressive patterns perpetuated by placement via testing. Perhaps the difference in perspective between WDC members and the community of FYC teachers at KCC can be attributed to the fact that, as is true at many TYCs nationally, the majority of faculty who teach writing at KCC do not have professional disciplinary identities in a writing studies field (Del Principe, 2020). While they have spent most of their careers teaching writing, they identify as literary scholars or creative writers in the professional work they produce outside the classroom. While WDC members were generally in favor of the shift to placement via the PI, they recognized that major changes in placement would result in major changes in the administration and structure of FYC programs and anticipated the significant work that would be necessary to grow, redesign, and eliminate various different parts of their campus' writing sequence.

Outcomes

From our current perspective one year into the transition to CUNY's new placement mechanism, we have begun to see some promising changes for students as a whole and for certain groups of students in particular. Figure 7.4 shows the percentage of incoming students placing into either the highest level of developmental writing or into credit-bearing FYC. In Fall 2017–Fall 2019, on average per semester, 618 students placed into developmental courses and 1,333 students placed into FYC. In Spring–Fall 2020, with the new PI, on average per semester, 222 students placed into developmental courses and 1,936 placed into FYC.
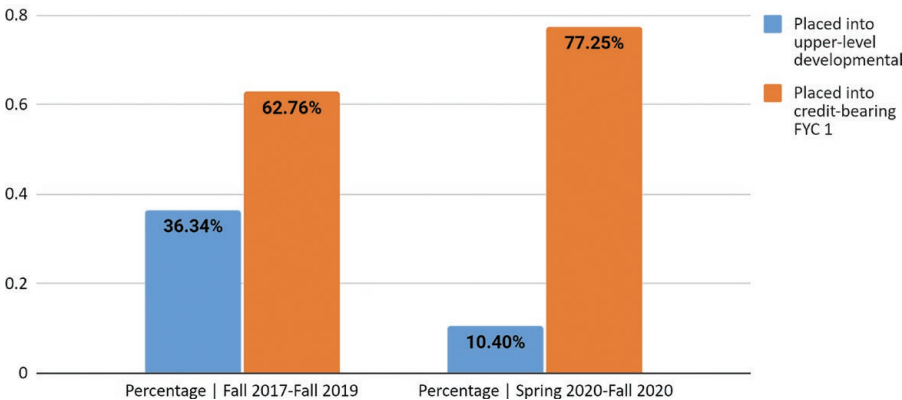

Figure 7.4. Placement pre- and post-Proficiency Index.

Looking more closely, we can see other trends. In comparing both the Spring and Fall 2020 placements (using the new PI) to those from 2018–2019 (using the former CATW & ACCUPLACER placement), we can see that many more incoming first-semester students are placing into a credit-bearing English course—either a corequisite or regular section of FYC—as a result of the new PI. The first semester the PI was used to determine placement in English—Spring 2020 (placement population *n*=646)—there was a slight jump in the percentage of students placing directly into FYC (from 50.2% to 52.5%), and there was a sizable increase in the percentage placing into our coreq/ALP course (from 4.95% to 16.7%). This resulted in an overall change in spring placement into credit-bearing English from 55.15% to 69.2%—a 14.05% increase—for incoming students and led to an explosion in sections of our coreq course offerings as this shift resulted in 80 more students placing into our coreq courses.

While the spring placement shift is certainly significant, the bulk of incoming students enter our college in fall semesters, and Fall 2020 (placement population *n*=1,744) is when we saw the true extent of the new PI's effect on placement into credit-bearing English courses. Even with the national decrease in enrollment in Fall 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we experienced a significant 17.6 percent overall increase in placement into FYC for incoming students in Fall 2020 as compared to Fall 2018/2019. Further, there was even more growth in the percentage of incoming students placing directly into FYC (from 64.2% in Fall 2018/2019 to 72.9% in Fall 2020) and a parallel jump in coreq placements (from 3.6% in Fall 2018/2019 to 12.4% in Fall 2020), resulting in even more relative growth for our coreq course.

While we know that more incoming students overall are now placing into FYC, are all student groups benefiting equally from this new placement mechanism? When we look closely at the disaggregated placement percentages from Spring and Fall 2020, we can see that several racial/ethnic groups appear to have benefitted from the PI. In particular, White, Black, and Asian students all had noticeably and similarly higher placement rates into FYC than those same groups had in the previous year. In Spring 2020, 21.8 percent more White students, 16.2 percent more Black students, and 12 percent more Asian students placed into FYC (Figure 7.5), and those increases in placement resulted in larger numbers of these students placing into FYC that semester (Figure 7.6). Figure 7.5 shows the rates at which different student groups placed into FYC in Spring 2019 and 2020. Figure 7.6 shows the total numbers of students in different groups placing into FYC in Spring 2019 and 2020.

The parallel statistics for Fall 2020 tell a somewhat similar story, with 22.7 percent more Asian students, 19.4 percent more Black students, and 15.8 percent more White students placing into FYC (Figure 7.7), which created a somewhat different demographic mix of students in credit-bearing English than in previous semesters (Figure 7.8). Hispanic students, too, have benefited from greater placement into FYC via the PI, but their placement percentage hasn't increased as much as other groups. The reality is that a relatively higher percentage of incoming Hispanic students had previously been placing into FYC via the former placement tests (Figures

7.5 and 7.7), and their more modest increases in placement via the PI bring their numbers into line with placement for other groups (Figure 7.8). Figure 7.7 shows the rates at which different student groups placed into FYC in Fall 2019 and 2020. Figure 7.8 shows the total numbers of students in different groups placing into FYC in Spring 2019 and 2020.

Given the complexities of multiple measures placement for BIPOC students, we're encouraged to see that, so far, the CUNY PI has resulted in a greater and more equitable and racially representative cohort of students in FYC. Because placement that relies heavily on high school GPA has been shown to have negative differential impact for Black students and because high school GPA is the factor most heavily weighed in the PI algorithm, we were concerned that we might see greater patterns of inequity in placement for these students (Scott-Clayton & Stacey, 2015). In our case, it seems that CUNY's inclusion of other factors in the PI and KCC's comparatively high rate of traditionally aged college students mitigated the problems caused in other systems by the dominant use of high school GPA as a placement indicator.
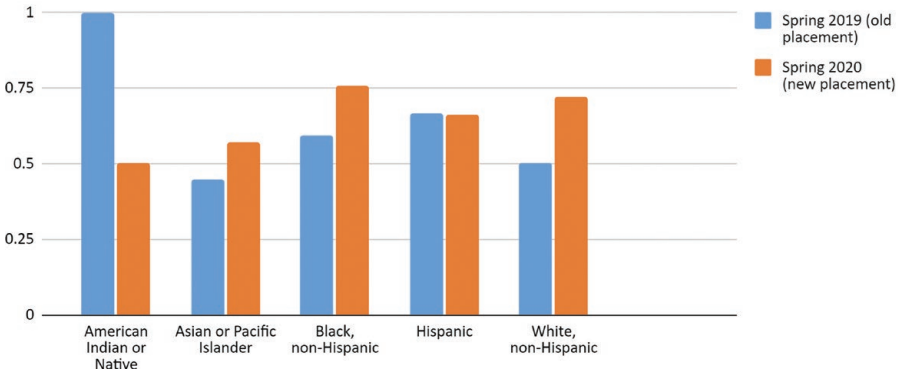

Figure 7.5. Spring placement into FYC, disaggregated percentages.
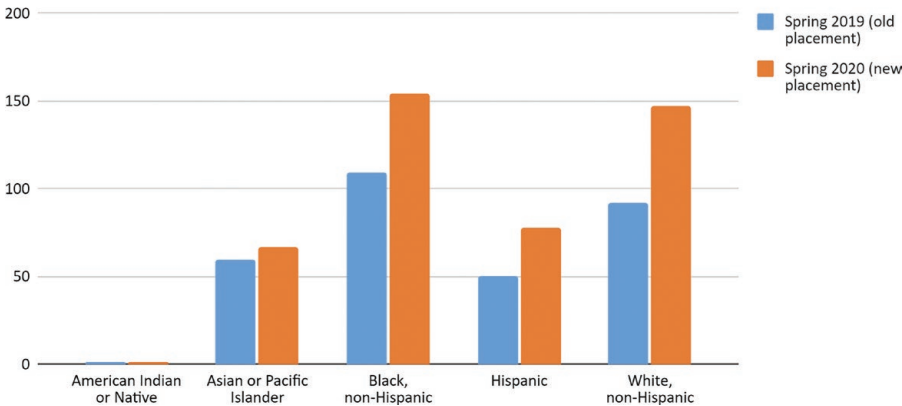

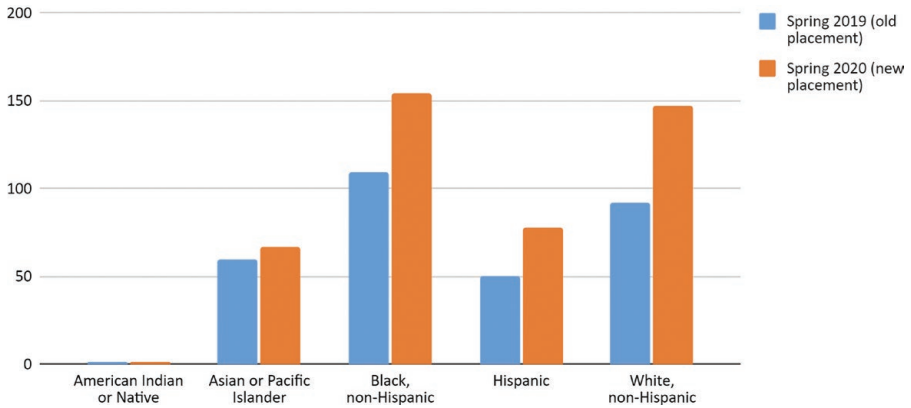Figure 7.6. Spring placement into FYC, disaggregated population totals.

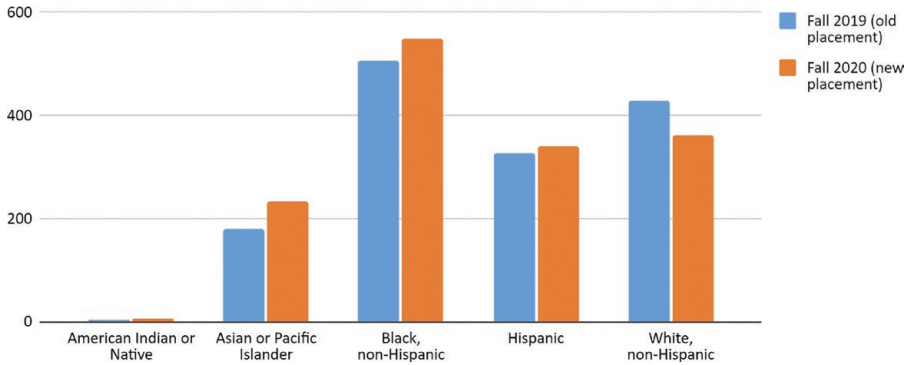Figure 7.7. Fall placement into FYC, disaggregated percentages.

Figure 7.8. Fall placement into FYC, disaggregated enrollment totals.

Consequences

CUNY's overhaul of placement policies radically altered the nature of the KCC English department by eliminating the long pipeline to reach credit-bearing FYC. In Spring 2013, when ALP was first piloted in our department, we offered seven different developmental-level courses, not including ESL offerings and the externally run CUNY Start program, amounting to over 100 sections of classes that enrolled close to 2,000 students. By the Spring 2021 semester, the first full year after the PI was instituted, only seven developmental sections of a single course remain, and CUNY is encouraging KCC to eliminate it completely. Instead of these developmental courses, roughly 30 sections of an ALP-style corequisite FYC course were offered, serving between 250 and 300 students. The new structure means that hundreds of students who would have placed into the lowest level of remediation will be moved to the pre-semester, intensive CUNY Start, providing students the opportunity to place into ALP or regular FYC during their first semester in college.

An unexpected outcome of the implementation of the PI and the vacuum of developmental courses has been a shift in administrative job responsibilities. Due to the awkward configuration of the corequisite ALP course on the school's scheduling system, the ALP coordinator's position had been filled with clerical tasks, drafting schedule spreadsheets, verifying course information was presented correctly, updating and collecting contracts from students, and distributing information to advisors. As the program grew and the course was administratively reconfigured, providing resources and workshops for new ALP faculty now comprise the bulk of the required labor. At the same time, as the number of developmental classes decreased, faculty who managed the hundreds of sections of developmental courses found their responsibilities distributed to other administrative duties in the department or reallocated to teaching a full load of courses.

Lessons

Like so many TYCs across the country, Kingsborough has learned that its previous approach to determining which students may enroll in FYC—giving them a writing test—resulted in much less racially equitable and less racially valid access to credit-bearing English. The previous direct testing approach, which seemed commonsensical to most faculty, served to hold decades of students, and a higher percentage of BIPOC students, back from making meaningful progress toward their degrees and served to segregate them into an educational holding pattern or limbo from which too few would ever successfully exit. Instead of evaluating qualities of students' writing as a means of placing them, relying on their past behavior patterns as high school students, as evidenced in their high school GPAs, among other factors, has created cohorts of students in our FYC classrooms that more closely resemble the demographic makeup of students who enroll in our school. While Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano (Gilman et al., 2019) were wise to warn of the dangers of relying on high school GPA for placement of returning adult students, the fact that KCC's entering first-year students tend to skew young, with 60.1 percent under 22 years old, means that the vast majority of our students attended high school in New York City and have local, relatively recent, educational records, making this placement approach a good match for our population.

CUNY's new approach to placement relies on the probability that the constellation of habits and behaviors that students used to succeed in high school will allow them to succeed as college writers, too, and this is one important result that we cannot yet evaluate. Because our institution's shift in placement policy overlapped with the nation's urgent shift into remote schooling due to the COVID pandemic, student grade outcomes data from Spring and Fall 2020 are hopelessly confounded. It is impossible to tease the "COVID effect" out of the pass and grade rates, for example, from those semesters to try to gauge how students placed by the PI fared in FYC because their performance was so utterly

influenced by the full shift to schooling and living from home while still working, caregiving, grieving, and attempting to stay healthy. As time moves forward and the COVID emergency recedes over the next few semesters, we will watch pass and performance rates in our FYC courses quite closely to see how students—on the whole, and BIPOC students in particular—are faring in the course.

Perhaps most interestingly, this shift in placement forces our English department and writing program to confront several key questions: What is good writing? What does success in a writing course look like? What should it look like, in order to be fair and valid? And are those the same things? Before the shift to the PI, our writing program had already begun to work with a large committee of faculty to rethink and redesign our courses in light of the sea change toward antiracist scholarship, pedagogy, and assessment in writing studies. This work had already started to inspire faculty to question many of their deeply held beliefs about what "good writing" in college might look like and what the structural function of a course like FYC might be in the larger educational and social justice ecosystem of a diverse TYC in a large urban center. By placing a larger percentage of BIPOC students directly into their FYC classes rather than filtering them through a complex mechanism of developmental courses, the PI has forced these faculty to recalibrate their own understandings of what they are trying to teach and assess in their classes and how that may, or may not, serve their students well. As our department and college absorb the shift from restrictive gatekeeping to gate-opening, the college itself must examine and revise the ways it assesses and supports student success for a more fair and just society.

Acknowledgments

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